RELATING WOMEN:
LESBIAN EXPERIENCE OF FRIENDSHIP

Submitted by
Tania Lienert
BA (Hons.) Deakin

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Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

La Trobe University
Bundoora, Victoria, 3086
Australia

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In memory of

Thelma Solomon
Annette Pollock
Christine McCarthy
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Friends are of crucial importance to lesbians’ lives, their significance heightened due to lack of acceptance from blood family, work colleagues and society. Despite a proliferation of literature on lesbians’ love relationships, lesbians’ friendships remain understudied. In the light of theorising about widespread shifts in intimacy patterns in modern industrial societies, this thesis examines the role of friendship for contemporary lesbians. It takes an interdisciplinary approach, using lesbian feminist, feminist psychological and mainstream sociological theories to interpret lesbians’ negotiations of their friendships and preoccupations with their own continually developing sense of self.

The study finds that firstly, the most significant issue in negotiating friendships is deciding on a lesbian identity despite socialisation to ‘compulsory heterosexuality’. Friends are expected to be accepting and supportive or they are lost. Discrimination, the fact that the lover is the ‘best friend’, struggles with difference in lesbian communities, time constraints and a more general shift to individualism mean that community and family contacts are replaced by small, supportive and affirming friendship networks. These meet needs and within them lesbians negotiate a sense of self, but for the most part with no template of political consciousness. Secondly, while friendships are important, they are also difficult. The fluidity of the friendship relationship, blurred boundaries between friends and lovers, and women’s moral ‘imperative to care’ all provide barriers to communication. Thirdly, while lesbians value ‘the relational self’, a confident sense of self is challenged when close-connected relationships sit at odds both with mainstream, heterocentric culture, and with traditional models of psychology which promote independence and separateness.

Lesbians who are confident communicators, who have access to alternative feminist discourses which value relatedness, and who, together with their friends, are open to change, are able to negotiate satisfactory friendships and relationships. The study demonstrates lesbians’ complex subjectivities as changing selves are
negotiated through friendships, love relationships and communities, particularly through experiences of loss.
STATEMENT OF AUTHORSHIP

Except where reference is made in the text of the thesis, this thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis or any other degree or diploma.

No other person’s work has been used without due acknowledgement in the main text of the thesis.

This thesis has not been submitted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

All research procedures reported in the thesis were approved by the Deakin University Ethics Committee and the La Trobe University Human Ethics Committee.

Tania Lienert .................................................. Date .................................
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INTRODUCTION

Ellen I wish I could live with you always. I begin to cling to you more fondly than ever I did. If we had but a cottage and a competency of our own, I do think we might live and love on till Death without being dependent on any third person for happiness.

What shall I do without you? How long are we likely to be separated? Why are we to be denied each other's society – I long to be with you. Why are we to be divided? Surely, Ellen, it must be because we are in danger of loving each other too well – of losing sight of the Creator in idolatry of the creature.

Letters from Charlotte Bronte to Ellen Nussey, 1836 and 1837
(cited in Miller, 1993: 35-36)

It was a very very intense emotional relationship. Very very, at some stages (pause) um. It was like we were going out together, but we just weren’t having sex, or being sexual with each other ...she’d write that she really wanted to strengthen the relationship and um all these amazing things in the letter about (pause) don't know how to explain it, but it was actually quite intense ... I mean where does the line stop? Yeah and that’s what’s really bizarre like I don’t think it does, it’s really hard to draw lines with those sort of friendships, at times apart from at sex.

Interview with Lucy, a lesbian aged 26, about her friend Daniela, 1997

One hundred and sixty years separate these two reflections of women’s intense friendships. They differ in language, context and circumstance, yet the voices speak clearly of the importance of women’s friendship and the challenges of maintaining them in the context of personal and social censure.

This thesis is concerned with how friendship is experienced by lesbians in the context of the social changes of the late twentieth century. It examines the significance of friendship for 40 contemporary lesbians in rural, regional and metropolitan Victoria, Australia, using qualitative data from 40 questionnaires and 25 interviews. Like most work in women’s studies, it is interdisciplinary. It
combines lesbian feminist, feminist psychological and mainstream sociological approaches to provide both a critical feminist analysis of lesbians’ friendships, and a contribution to theorising about suggested widespread shifts in intimacy patterns in modern industrial societies.

Three quarters of the lesbians studied are of Anglo-Australian descent, and one-quarter from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds. They come from a mixture of working class and middle class backgrounds. Most are aged between 30 and 60, and are focused on relationships, careers, study, and children. More than half have children, mostly from former heterosexual relationships, although for two-thirds of these, their children are now grown. They identify as feminists, but not with lesbian feminist politics. Although they are aware of feminist and lesbian and gay activism and politics and it informs their lives, most are not politically active.

The identities and friendship practices discussed in this thesis demonstrate the impact of four distinct historically shaped discourses on contemporary lesbians: passionate or ‘best’ friendships with their lovers and others (nineteenth century romantic friendships); identities based on sexual relationships with their lovers (a continuous pattern heightened by the sexual politics of the 1980s and 1990s); equal, mutual and friendship-based relationships with their lovers (the second-wave feminist and lesbian-feminist ideal that is part of a posited ‘transformation of intimacy’ (Giddens, 1992) in late capitalism); and the postmodern project of self-development that is part of a more widespread shift to individualism in the contemporary west. Yet lesbian identities and practices have not developed in a linear, progressive way. This thesis explores how lesbians draw on these historical and modern discourses, sometimes unconsciously, and how they weave them together and lay them across each other as they attempt to make sense of their friendship experiences.

Given that lesbians and other sexual minorities have fought for and won a limited measure of acceptance or tolerance in western liberal democracies in recent decades, yet continue to be marginalised, it is not surprising that their experiences of friendships and love sit at odds with mainstream culture. In particular, the
The women in this thesis are on a journey of self-discovery, but it is not the isolated, individuated, angst-ridden journey experienced by male postmodernists, such as those described by Elliott (2001). Nor is it experienced in the company of large numbers of others, such as in the consciousness-raising groups that were common in the women’s movement of the 1970s. Rather the women negotiate a sense of self through the establishment and development of and changes in their close-connected friendships and relationships. The results confirm the research of a small but influential group of feminist psychologists who argue that, as Janet Surrey puts it, ‘identity and relationships develop in synchrony’ (1991: 63). This study puts the processes of lesbians’ friendships under the microscope, looking for how these personal relationships are played out in different contexts, and what this means for the lesbians studied.

Origins of the study

My aims and directions reflect my own position and interests. I am an educated, white Australian woman who chose a lesbian path in the late 1980s. I ‘came out’ into a vibrant lesbian feminist community in Adelaide in my early 20s. There were similar communities in most Australian cities, the members of which I met at annual summer holiday camps, festivals and conferences. As I travelled around Australia and overseas and moved interstate, I felt part of a national and international lesbian feminist community. As a Women’s Studies student at a university with strong anti-discrimination laws and feminist and lesbian staff, I was free to study lesbian issues without comment.

My interest in studying friendship in general arose because, at the time I began the thesis, at the age of 29, I had been single for more time than I had been in relationships. I had been embraced and supported by a network of friends, was active in my community, and felt secure in my identity as a single woman. Writers
on friendship argue that social research has tended to downgrade friendship as an important aspect of life (Lopata, 1981; Derlega and Winstead, 1986; Hynes, 1989; O’Connor, 1992; Hamson, 1995). When my early surveying of the literature revealed gaps in the study of lesbians and friendship it became clear that there was a need for such studies by lesbians such as myself, and I shifted my focus to this area. My reading uncovered not just the ‘resolutely heterosexist’ (Kitzinger, 1996a: 295) studies of women’s friendships Frances Doughty (1982), Celia Kitzinger (1996a) and Suzanna Rose (2000) comment on (eg. Johnson and Aries, 1983; Bell, 1981; Brown, 1981; Bankoff, 1983; Roberts and Scott, 1984; Fox et al, 1985; Gouldner and Strong, 1987; Aukett et al, 1988; Berkman, 1996), but also ones that stringently denied lesbian relationships (Faber, 1980) or were blatantly homophobic and pathologised lesbians (Wolff, 1971).

My intention was to achieve what Jeanne Stanley calls a ‘non-pathological perspective’: moving away from homophobia, past moderate acceptance, towards the affirmation of lesbian lives (1993: 115-116). (See Chapter Two for a discussion of ‘insider’ research).

Beginning with a radical feminist framework, I was inspired by texts on friendship as political by lesbian and feminist ethicists, philosophers and theologians from the US and UK (Hoagland, 1988; Heyward, 1989; Hynes, 1989; Jeffreys, 1990; Raymond, 1991a; 1991b; Hunt, 1992; Lugones, 1992; and Mohin, 1996). My questionnaires and interviews were designed to test their theories with Australian lesbians. I also hoped to make a contribution towards what Mary Hunt (1992) describes as a society that celebrates all kinds of friendships as important, not just couple relationships. Following Raymond (1991a) and Hunt (1992), I aimed to come up with models for social change. However, participants’ varied and complex stories, my own shift from being single to partnered, and a change of universities saw me broadening and changing my approach. I considered insights from feminist post-structuralist, psychological and psychoanalytic theories (eg. Scott, 1992; Flax, 1978; 1993a; 1993b), as well as from sociologists who have suggested and charted widespread shifts in intimacy patterns in recent decades in both heterosexual and lesbian populations (eg. Giddens, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Stein,
1997). I am not an objective researcher: my analysis both reflects and is informed by this journey.

Only a few studies of contemporary lesbians’ friendships emerge from an interdisciplinary literature search (eg. Raphael and Robinson, 1984; Nardi, 1992; Nardi and Sherrod, 1994; Stanley, 1993; Stanley, 1996; Hall and Rose, 1996; O’Boyle and Thomas, 1996). All are from the US and the UK, and most are small qualitative studies. Other accounts of lesbians’ friendships have to be sifted from amongst wider fields. Most relevant research comes from the discipline of psychology, but it only studies friendship in relation to love relationships. It tends to be based on small clinical samples, individual cases, or large-scale studies of couples, and is analysed within a therapeutic framework (therapists writing about solutions to problems). Accounts of lesbians’ friendships can also be found amongst lesbian feminist writings in women’s studies, history, philosophy and theology; in collections of personal testimonies and ‘coming out stories’; fiction, plays and songs; and in large sociological surveys of lesbians and gay men that tend to collapse the experiences of the two groups together, sometimes inappropriately. The literature falls into four main topic areas that roughly parallel the discourses mentioned earlier: friendship and intimacy (passionate friendships); friendship and community (identities based on sexual relationships); friends as family (the ‘transformation of intimacy’); and ‘coming out’ (the ‘project of self’).

My initial research identified a number of gaps in knowledge about lesbians’ friendships. While some feminist and lesbian feminist writings have drawn attention to the importance of friendship in women’s lives, often drawing on historical or activist communities, they have not done empirical work on friendship processes: how contemporary women (including lesbians) choose, establish, maintain, resolve conflict, manage inequality and/or end these crucial relationships, and the implications for lesbian subjectivity. There is relatively little work on lesbianism in the personal relationships tradition, so the similarities and differences between lesbianism and friendship remain virtually unexplored, in particular, what happens when romantic or sexual feelings arise between friends (O’Connor, 1992; Stanley, 1993; Peplau and Spalding, 2000). In addition, researchers suggest more
needs to be known about why some friendships do not survive the disclosure that one friend is a lesbian, and the benefits of friendship between lesbian and heterosexual women (O’Boyle and Thomas, 1996). There is a need for investigations of the impact of changing legal recognition of same-sex relationships; and of the impact of prejudice and discrimination on lesbians, including how they cope and create supportive social networks (Peplau and Spalding, 2000). And because lesbians and gay men tend to move to cities, country lesbians are neglected (Weeks et al, 2001). The need for a qualitative study of lesbians’ friendships on their own terms, in a contemporary Australian social context, was apparent.

This study attempts to fill some of these gaps, researching lesbians’ personal relationships with other women at all levels, as friends and/or lovers (and acknowledging the often blurred boundaries between the two) and in social networks and communities, in rural, regional and urban locations. It finds that lovers fulfil many functions of the ‘best friend’ commonly identified by heterosexual women, and reduce the felt need for a larger network of friends or for community involvement. In addition, many relationships arise out of friendship, and after sexual relationships end, they continue as friendships. Vetere (1982) has suggested that friends and lover relationships appear to be two ends of a single continuum rather than oppositional categories. With such crossovers between sexual relationships and friendship, it became impossible, as Cecilia Solano warns (1986), to imagine studying any one relational mode in isolation.

Even more crucially, a strong feature of this study is that most (three quarters) of the participants have left heterosexual relationships and chosen lesbian relationships instead. Because I asked for stories of continuous friendships and ones that had ended, many are also narratives of transition from a heterosexual to a lesbian identity. Participants’ transitions follow a very similar pattern for most: they simply ‘fall in love’ with another woman they meet, usually at work or in an educational setting, act on these feelings, and deal with the often negative fallout from family and friends. Engaged on the late modern quest for what Giddens calls
'emotional democracy’ (1992) and Jamieson calls ‘disclosing intimacy’ (1998), the women value the mutuality and reciprocity in their relationships with other women.

This method of coming to a lesbian identity is commented on by Gramick (1984), Faderman (1991) and Orbach and Eichenbaum (1994). Our era, through the legacy of Freud and all his spiritual offspring, is hyper-sophisticated concerning sex, Faderman argues. So two women passionately attached today, whether lesbian or not, must at least think about sexual attraction and decide whether to act. This was not so in the past (Faderman, 1991: 4). It would seem that many of the women in the study thought about their attraction and, with the increased visibility of lesbians giving them points of reference, and work giving them economic power, decided to follow ‘the lesbian path’ (Cruikshank, 1985). Their relationships are fully embodied: only one wrote about meeting friends and lovers through a personal ad and none of the participants mentioned meeting friends or lovers on the internet.

As Ponse (1978) and Stein (1997) observe in their research, some participants ‘recast the past’ to claim they had always been essentially lesbian, just misled by what Rich (1981) calls ‘compulsory heterosexuality’. About a quarter have always identified as lesbian. Others are clearer about having made a choice to be with a female partner. Amongst this latter group, despite uncertainty for some about a lesbian identity, if their current relationship ended, they would seek a female partner again. This thesis acknowledges both what participants and other studies of lesbians describe as essential or ‘core’ lesbian identities, and lesbian choices (Raphael and Robinson, 1984; Kitzinger, 1987; Charbonneau and Lander, 1991).

Participants’ preoccupation with this momentous change and the implications for their sense of self prompted me to shift away from a thematic discussion of lesbian friendship processes to an analysis of their stories through a sociological lens. This meant examining theories of the self and society and the meanings that individuals give to their experience (see Chapter One).
Discourses influencing lesbian identities and practices

As discussed earlier, in this thesis narratives of lesbian friendship, and hence of the self, reveal the influences of four distinct historically shaped discourses. These underpin the theoretical framework for the study.

The discourse of ‘romantic friends’, which originated in the nineteenth century, has clearly had an impact on heterosexual and lesbian women’s friendships today. Because the sexual mores of the nineteenth century and earlier times forbade active sexuality in women, it is difficult to separate what constitutes ‘lesbianism’ and what constitutes ‘women’s friendship’, and recent feminist literature on romantic friendships very often ties them both together. Seeking a history and literature which they claim has been denied, ignored and erased by men, feminist and lesbian scholars have uncovered rich stories of how nineteenth-century women in the US, Europe and China lived together in pairs and shared their lives. The reasons for this ranged from necessity to a positive choice (Woolf, 1974; Smith-Rosenberg, 1975; Faderman, 1981; Rich, 1981; Lindsey, 1981; Mavor, 1981; Faderman, 1983, Nestor, 1985; Vicinus, 1985; Whitbread, 1988; Byatt, 1989; Raymond, 1991a; Miller, 1993; Auchmuty, 1993a; Jeffreys, 1997). Partnerships were usually between middle-class career women or those who were financially independent.

Women who were forced to marry, such as Charlotte Bronte, often wished they had the choice to live forever together with their women friends (Miller, 1993). Letters demonstrate how women in passionate friendships were unrestrained in expressing their physical love for one another (Smith-Rosenberg, 1975). With no concrete evidence of genital sexual relations, scholars debate whether some of these women were ‘lesbians’ in the contemporary sense of the word (Smith Rosenberg, 1975; Faderman, 1981; 1983; Lesbian History Group, 1993). Liz Stanley comments on the desire of lesbian scholars, including herself, to build a lesbian history and identity and thus to claim passionate friends as lesbians (cited in Hamson, 1995). Whatever the nature of the relationships between these women was, there is more agreement among scholars that in the 1890s, as women gained more economic and political power and status through the feminist and suffragette movements, their
friendships and couplings became more suspicious in the minds of powerful men, and began to be labelled deviant. The sexologists’ description of the female homosexual as one who disdained the trappings of femininity also cast all feminists and ‘new women’ as lesbians. The sexologists effectively divided these women from each other, and brought a long tradition of unselfconscious passionate friendships to an end (Auchmuty; 1992; 1993b; Lesbian History Group, 1993; Koppelman, 1994).

While friendships between heterosexual women today can be close and intense, passionate, romantic friendships persist more often between lesbians or between lesbians and heterosexual women (eg. Hunt, 1992; Rothblum and Brehony, 1993; Weinstock and Rothblum, 1996; Daly, 1996). Despite psychologists in western liberal democracies today agreeing that homosexuality is not a mental illness, the taboos remain and many heterosexual women censor or deny affection for fear of being labelled lesbians (Palladino and Stephenson, 1990; Daly, 1996).

There is another side to the historical events at the turn of the century, which introduces the second discourse that influences lesbians today: the discourse of lesbian identity as overtly sexual. By the 1920s, the categories developed by the sexologists, and by Sigmund Freud and other psychoanalysts, were taken up by European lesbians, who organised around them, using the suggestion that lesbians were born ‘congenital invert’ to plead for societal tolerance. Radclyffe Hall’s famous 1928 novel The Well of Loneliness is one such example. But because lesbianism was portrayed as deviant, most lesbians went underground until the women’s liberation and gay liberation movements of the late 1960s and 70s.

The discourse of lesbian identity as overtly sexual re-emerged as salient in the 1980s and 90s in response to attempts by lesbian feminists to claim lesbianism as a political position. Throughout the 1970s, women in western liberal democracies, including Australia, who felt they had been ‘born lesbians’ and taken great risks to live lesbian lives, often clashed with women who ‘found lesbianism’ along with feminism (Martin and Lyons, 1972; Bradstock and Wakeling, 1987; Nestle, 1987; Faderman, 1992; Stein, 1997). Yet the feminist movement gave them visibility,
legitimacy and a voice (Cruikshank, 1985; Penelope, 1990). In particular, some lesbians protested lesbian feminist calls for ‘political lesbianism’: that any woman could – and should – identify as a lesbian, without necessarily having to have sex with women (Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group, 1981; Rich, 1981; Pitman 1981; Gregory, 1981; Doughty, 1982; Votere, 1982; Darty and Potter, 1984; Johnson, 1990; Raymond, 1991b). The alleged ‘desexualisation’ of lesbianism was one of the topics contested in debates popularly known as the ‘sex wars’ in feminism in the 1980s (Snitow et al, 1983; Vance, 1984; Jeffreys, 1993b; 1997a), and in queer politics in the 1990s (Lienert, 1993; Jagose, 1996; Seidman, 1996).

The third discourse – that of equal relationships – comes from the women’s liberation movement’s protests of inequality in heterosexual relationships (eg. Miller, 1976; Chodorow, 1989; Hite, 1989), lesbians’ celebrations of the absence of gendered power differences in their relationships (Wolf, 1980; Sang, 1984; Hoagland, 1988; Jeffreys, 1990; Mohin, 1996; Dunne, 1997; Stuart, 1997; Weeks et al, 2001) and heterosexual feminists’ subsequent stories of work to build more equal relationships with men (eg. Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 1993; Harris, 1998). As a result of the women’s liberation movement, the nuclear family is falling apart on issues of emancipation and equal rights, argue Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (1995). Women expect ‘emotional democracy’ (Giddens, 1992) or ‘disclosing intimacy’ (Jamieson, 1998) in relationships, and if they do not get it, they tend to leave and seek it in another relationship. Giddens suggests lesbians, more easily able to achieve equal relationships, are the vanguard of a desired ‘transformation of intimacy’ that heterosexual couples struggle with (1992).

The fourth discourse lesbians in this study subscribe to, individualism, is an increasing trend in recent times across western liberal democracies (Beck, 1994; 1996; Cox, 1995). Theorists suggest the economic pressures of late capitalism such as the need to find and keep a job, and the withdrawal of social services, are leading to a more profound individualism than has been the case in the past, with people being more concerned for themselves than for extended family and community life. As a part of this shift, Giddens’ (1992) concept of individual
preoccupation with self-development and personal growth – the ‘project of self’ – is relevant to this study.

For lesbians and gay men, a shift to a more profound individualism is also linked to the gains won in the activism of recent decades. These have removed the necessity of banding together and activism for survival, so lesbians are freer to pursue a ‘project of self’ with a new confidence. Lesbianism is illegal in many countries across the world, and lesbians face social ostracism, loss of family and employment, and even the death penalty (Reinfelder, 1996; Draper and Hall, 1999). But in western liberal democracies such as Australia, campaigns for lesbian and gay rights in the 1970s, 80s and 90s gained results. The category of homosexuality as a mental disorder was removed from the American Psychological Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* in 1973 (Morin and Rothblum, 1991), which paved the way for reforms elsewhere. By the late 1990s in Australia, although same-sex relationships did not have equal status with heterosexual relationships, most lesbians had the right to work, study, and receive services free from discrimination (Millbank, 1997; 1998; Stewart, 2001; Women’s Electoral Lobby, 2001; Small, 2002). At the same time, it was less likely that lesbian parents would lose custody of their children for being unfit parents, a common finding in the 1970s (Hanscombe and Forster, 1981), and despite self-insemination being illegal, lesbians were not prosecuted for starting their own families this way.

With lesbianism being ‘resexualised’ (Raymond, 1991b; Richardson, 1992) in the queer 1990s, it also became individualised. With many lesbians changing their style away from the androgyny of the 1970s to become more glamorous and feminine, lesbianism became less political and therefore less of a threat to men. It even became ‘chic’ or fashionable for heterosexual women to explore (Daly, 1996). Elaine d’Esterre (2002) has observed that this may have something to do with the

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1 In 2001 the Victorian Labour Government passed the Statute Law Amendment (Relationships) Act, which gave same sex couples in Victoria the same rights and obligations as heterosexual couples in areas such as property, wills, finance and health. Self-insemination remains illegal and lesbians are still denied adoption rights and access to reproductive technology.
economy: lesbians today, a majority of whom are workers without dependent children, fit neatly into the male culture of economic rationalism.

Despite changes in the language used to describe friendships between women, as this study will show, the connections between lesbianism and friendship endure, albeit in a very distinctive late twentieth century form. Lesbians today draw on the legacy of this past and the language of romantic friendships and lesbian identity as a sexual identity, using these debates in constructing their own identity and practices, and weaving them together with the feminist and lesbian-feminist discourse of equal relationships, and the more profound individualism that is a notable feature of late capitalism.

This thesis argues that despite a societal push to individualism and the ‘project of self’, the women in this study are searching for a ‘self-in-relation’ as opposed to an individualistic self, and that living as a lesbian means this is played out in very distinctive ways. We can see from the ways the women talk about their friendships that their perspectives on relatedness are influenced by discourses of romantic friendship and equal relationships. As ‘relational selves’ with an ‘imperative to care’ for others, the women differ from men who are socialised as and promote the view that they are more separate and independent (note that this view masks men’s actual dependence on women and each other). Consequently, they are also different from heterosexual women, where the gender difference between partners means a strong amount of closeness between the couple is not always valued (Stanley, 1993: 4; see also Gilligan, 1982: 154; Mencher, 1997). By contrast, being a ‘relational self’ – and with relatedness heightened with other women – is a positive, yet challenging, feature of their lives.

This study provides insights into complex subjectivities that broaden our understandings about the changing nature of intimacy in the contemporary period. The results suggest that theorists of the ‘transformation of intimacy’ and of the self need to take more account of the importance of relatedness for women, including lesbians.
Chapter outline

Chapter One explores the contemporary preoccupation with questions of identity and the self and the growth of a ‘therapy culture’ to provide a framework for analysing participants’ concerns with self-development. This preoccupation is set amidst debates on the changing nature of intimacy in developed western economies such as Australia. Feminist criticisms of traditional models of psychology, and feminist and lesbian alternatives, help frame participants as ‘relational selves’ with an ‘imperative to care’ for their lovers and others. Reviewing the literature on lesbian friendship, Chapter One then finds that many studies fail to consider changing notions of intimacy and the self in a late modern social and political context, while others are only just beginning to do so.

The choosing of questions and the conducting of the questionnaires and interviews using feminist research methodology is documented in Chapter Two. This chapter provides a critical reflection on feminist prescriptions for interviewing in the light of most participants not wanting to ‘share power’, but rather to tell their stories.

Chapter Three examines how lesbians establish, develop and maintain friendships. Most meet friends and lovers at work or while studying, reflecting the nature of the sample – new lesbians – as well as the greater integration of lesbians in mainstream society. Shared intense or life-changing experiences forge strong bonds which means friendships are often self-maintaining.

The crucial importance of friendship to lesbians’ lives, in the light of widespread lack of acceptance from family, work colleagues and society, is the focus of Chapter Four. However the stated significance of friendships sits at odds with actual practice for a number of reasons. Friendships between lesbians, and between lesbians and heterosexual or bisexual women, can be complex and intense, with boundaries blurring between friends and lovers.

Chapter Five examines the ‘best friends’ model of lesbian relationships. As with their close friendships, in lover relationships lesbians are ‘relational selves’,
encouraged by female socialisation and choice towards a moral ‘imperative to
care’. The women value their close-connected, reciprocal relationships. Although
not free of power struggles, these are still at odds with mainstream, heterosexual
culture, especially with the dominant psychological discourse of independence and
separateness.

The relevance to lesbians of the widely noted decline in community contacts in late
capitalism, and the shift towards negotiated rather than obligated kin relationships,
is addressed in Chapter Six. It examines the challenges to and changes in
definitions and expectations of lesbian communities through the 1970s, 1980s and
1990s, in particular, struggles with difference. Lesbian communities today provide
support and friendship rather than politics, and activism takes place at home.

Chapter Seven explores the self-development that takes place in weathering
conflict and change in friendships and relationships. Most participants are reflective
about their lives, loves and choices, and most have had professional counselling.
The most momentous change that affects their personal relationships and
subjectivity is the transition to a lesbian identity. Participants’ generally low
tolerance for conflict and change demonstrates on the one hand, how problematic
conflict resolution can be for women, and on the other hand, how choices around
friendship help define and redefine the changing self.

When asked to reflect on their experiences of friendship and to offer visions for the
future, most lesbians in this study emphasise personal change. Chapter Eight
demonstrates the preoccupation of the women in this study with self-development
over and above social change. However, the self with which lesbians are
preoccupied is not an isolated, individuated, ‘selfish’ one, but a self that is
connected and bonded to others.

The Conclusion situates the women’s experiences of lesbian identity in late
modernity, where the demands of work, relationships, children and/or other family
members means the time available for friends is necessarily lessened. In this
context, the ‘project of self’, which is always a ‘relational self’, is more able to be
accomplished in small networks that include lovers, ex-lovers, close friends and selected kin, than in larger lesbian communities or through political activism.
CHAPTER ONE: READING LESBIAN FRIENDSHIP, READING THE SELF

Studies of lesbian friendship and theorists of the self to date have not produced a comprehensive account of lesbian subjectivity in a late modern social and political context. Participants’ journeys of self-discovery through friendship call for such an account, and thus it is this task with which this thesis is concerned. In their narratives, several threads weave together to construct a very distinctive contemporary lesbian experience, one that is not without internal conflicts. In busy lives, friends, families and communities take a back seat to partners and/or a small group of intimates that affirm a changing self. Participants appreciate close, intimate, mostly equal friendships and relationships with other women. Their collective preoccupation with self-development and personal growth, and their immersion in a ‘therapy culture’, revealed by their almost universal use of the language of (heterosexual) self-help literature, suggests their absorption of the ‘profusion of reflexive resources’ (Giddens, 1992) available in late modernity to help in making sense of changes in their lives. While this can be an individualistic trend, their caring for friends and lovers, sometimes at the expense of the self, indicates an enmeshment with others that goes well beyond individualism.

Debates about intimacy and the self are therefore critical to situating my analysis of lesbian friendships. This chapter asks a number of questions of the literature in this field. What is the impact of wider societal changes on relationships and subjectivity? How have notions of love and intimacy changed? What is the nature of intimacy in lesbian friendships? And how is lesbian subjectivity constituted? The first section finds sociological and psychological theorists of the self are pertinent to this study, but for the most part they fail to consider lesbians. The second section reveals how little of the literature on lesbian friendships considers theories of the self or widespread social changes that might affect intimacy patterns. This chapter argues for a more complex account of lesbian subjectivity, one that takes account of both the individualistic ‘project of self’ of late modernity, and women’s preferences for relatedness with others, and that demonstrates that the mostly female milieu in which lesbians live shapes a particular kind of lesbian ‘relational self’.
The words ‘self’, ‘selfhood’, ‘subjectivity’ and ‘identity’ have been so extensively written about that they have a multiplicity of meanings in different contexts and academic disciplines. For the purpose of this thesis I distinguish concerns about the self and subjectivity from concerns about identity.

I use identity to refer to public, political self-labels such as ‘feminist’, ‘heterosexual’, ‘bisexual’ and ‘lesbian’ that individuals use to describe themselves but that may not necessarily be consistent with an internal sense of self or with behaviour. It is important to distinguish between lesbian ‘identities’ and ‘practices’. As the conventions of the nineteenth century and earlier in western liberal democracies forbade active sexuality in women, a lesbian ‘identity’ – lesbianism as a quality of the woman herself – is a relatively recent social construction (D’Emilio, 1983; Browning, 1984; Kitzinger, 1987). Gay identity is also a recent phenomenon for men. However, as the poetry of Sappho from the fourth century BC demonstrates, lesbian ‘practices’ have probably always occurred between women, and continue to occur without women necessarily saying ‘I am a lesbian’. Some lesbians of colour, for example, love women without claiming a lesbian identity because race and culture are at the forefront of their identity (Hepburn, 1988: 203). Other women experience changes in sexual preference and refuse to be categorised. ‘Identity politics rarely coincide with the complexities of the lives we live’, suggests Meg Daly (1996: 12). ‘We love and feel attraction to many people in many different ways’. Terms such as ‘feminist’ and ‘lesbian’ are also contested and have multiple meanings (Rich, 1979; Wittig, 1992; Tong, 1998), but for the sake of communication with others, and for political activism, they are convenient.

The most often used context for ‘identity’ in this thesis is in the discussions of participants’ transition from a heterosexual to a lesbian identity, a process that some psychologists have discussed as a shift from one fixed and stable identity to another fixed and stable identity (Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1989). However like Daly (1996), contemporary queer theorists argue sexual identity is continually in flux (Martin, 1992; Jagose, 1996). Still others assert lesbians and gays are born that way (De Cecco and Parker, 1995; PFLAG, 2001), and lesbian feminists insist that lesbianism can be a choice for political purposes (Leeds Revolutionary Feminist
Group, 1981). All of these various positions are claimed by a range of lesbian and gay individuals and groups as ‘real’ for them, and all can serve various political causes such as feminism, gay rights and queer politics.

By contrast, the term ‘self’ is used to describe a much more internal, private sense of ‘who one is’ in the world. I adopt participants’ term ‘a sense of self’ to describe attempts to attain a coherent perception of who and what they are for themselves, what poststructuralists and psychoanalysts have called ‘subjectivity’. Subjectivity includes ‘individuality and self-awareness’ (Henriques et al, 1984: 3) constituted through both social and individual factors (Frosh, 1987: 12) such as language, discourse, politics, bodily experience, relations with others (intersubjectivity), and ‘conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions’ (Weedon, 1987: 3; see also Meehan, 1995a; Hollway, 1996). As Jane Flax argues, in the modern west, being a self and having subjectivity are inseparable. Subjectivity in other cultures might be constituted through kinship or one’s relationship to God or the natural world, but modern western understandings of subjectivity are rooted in the idea of self we adopt (1993a: 95). ‘The way our subjectivity is constituted is crucial to the way we are treated and perceived by others, and the way spaces are freed up or closed off for us to express ourselves’, according to Kelley Johnson, (2003), an observation pertinent to marginal groups such as lesbians.

Since Freud’s critiques of the unitary, fixed, rational individual of Enlightenment philosophy, theorists of the self have come to argue that the self is multiple, fluid and changing (Chodorow, 1989; Flax, 1990; Benhabib, 1992; Flax, 1993a; Weir, 1995; Fulbrook and Fulbrook, 1998), a work in process, consciously constituted as a ‘project’ (Giddens, 1992). It is to theorists of the ‘project of self’ that I now turn.

READING THE SELF

In this first section, I examine contemporary sociological and psychological concepts of the self in order to establish a framework with which to interrogate and explain the concerns of the participants in this study. I begin with theories of a suggested ‘project of self’ that goes hand in hand with a widespread shift to a
deeper individualism in recent times. This ‘project of self’ sits in the context of a posited ‘transformation of intimacy’ in late modernity. However, these theorists do not consider lesbian subjectivity in any depth, in fact some completely ignore it. In theorising the self, neither do they consider earlier feminist psychological theories of the ‘relational self’. The idea of the ‘relational self’ sheds light on women’s caring in friendships and relationships, but for the most part, theorists also fail to consider lesbians. This thesis argues that the concepts of the ‘project of self’, the ‘transformation of intimacy’ and the ‘relational self’ can fruitfully be combined to throw light on lesbian experience in friendship. These concepts can also be informed by lesbian experience to contribute to theorising the constitution of a distinctive lesbian subjectivity in the contemporary period.

The ‘project of self’

My attempts to understand and analyse participants’ preoccupations with their own continually developing sense of self led me to examine the concept of the ‘project of self’ in recent sociological literature. Participants’ identities and subjectivities evolved through friendships and relationships, and the language they used when talking about these relationships demonstrated that this evolution was assisted by counsellors and ‘popular’ or ‘pop’ psychology. Most theorists of late modernity agree that social changes have led to a greater concern with individualism and with individual identity in the contemporary period. There are several suggested reasons for this. Late modernity is characterised by a post-industrial order, capitalism, increases in surveillance of populations, and the likelihood of mass destruction through nuclear war and other modern weaponry. It has produced the nation-state, in contrast to most types of traditional order (Lasch, 1984; Giddens, 1991). In the most recent or contemporary period, technological development has led to the need for individuals and institutions to balance opportunities and hazards in what German sociologist Ulrich Beck calls the ‘risk society’ (1994). This new modernity is therefore ‘a reflexive modernity’; and, in addition, is one in which both men and

1 Debates are still happening over whether we have crossed over into a new era, ‘post-modernity’. See for example Hall et al, 1992.
women are engaged in what UK sociologist Anthony Giddens (1992) calls ‘the reflexive project of self’.

Love and sexuality today connect with issues of reflexivity and self-identity more than they have in the past, Giddens (1992) argues, because large areas of a person’s life are no longer set by pre-existing patterns and habits. Individuals in traditional societies could not pick and choose how to live their lives, but at the same time they had no obligation to ‘discover’ themselves in their actions and habits. Today, individuals have increased mobility and exposure to the mass media. They need to continually negotiate lifestyle options constitutive of who the person ‘is’: the reflexive narrative of self. In a post-traditional order, this narrative has to be continually reworked and lifestyles brought in line for personal autonomy and ontological security. Giddens suggests the ‘project of self’ is carried on amid a profusion of reflexive resources: therapy and self-help manuals of all kinds, television programs, magazine articles (1992). UK sociologist Ray Pahl adds that most sociological studies of friendship patterns find that as family and work patterns change, identities are formed more now through friendship than through family or work (1998). People are ‘inner-world pilgrims’ (Bauman, 1996), their ‘identity projects’ affected by a contemporary spirit of ‘enterprise culture’ which incites them to live in particular ways so as to maximise the worth of their existence to themselves (Rose, 1996).

The very abundance of choices to which people are exposed in late modernity is one explanation for what Lasch calls ‘the malaise of modern man’ (sic) (1984: 36), who now looks to psychiatry as a substitute for religion, as it promises ‘the traditional consolations of personal mastery, spiritual peace and emotional security’ (p. 208). Under pressure of change and threats to the person, Lasch argues, ‘the self contracts to a defensive core’ (1984: 15) and disengages emotionally (p. 57). Anthony Elliott (2001) also cites a long list of post-modern male writers concerned with the negativity, isolation, alienation, fragmentation and apathy of the self, and an identity so disconnected and discontinuous that it seems there is little point in living. While I question whether this is a universal response to stress or a male one, Giddens goes on to argue that processes of self-actualisation in late modernity are
often partial and confined, and it is not surprising that, given the lack of control over their futures, individuals experience wide-ranging addictions (1992). Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim discuss an article from Boston in the US which argues that by 1990 millions of Americans ‘had formed associations based on their addictions the way their ancestors had come together by ethnic origin’ (1995: 200). It is likely that, as Beck and Beck-Gernsheim note, ‘the therapists are raking it in’ (1995: 12). More optimistically than Lasch, Giddens argues that the increasing role of counsellors in late modernity reflects the increased reflexivity of the self, and that individualism and a focus on the ‘project of self’ are adaptive mechanisms in the contemporary period (1992).

In their discussions of the ‘project of self’, Giddens and other theorists lay themselves open to the criticism that they fail to take account of a male-dominated society, which limits many women’s opportunities for self-development and growth outside relationships. Relationships, argues Carmen Braun Williams, are a primary source of identity for both women and men (1993: 35). Nancy Chodorow argues that many artists and writers have celebrated and romanticised the concept of a fragmented self and fail to consider a ‘relational self’ (1989: 155). While I have reservations about the gender blindness of Giddens and other theorists of the ‘project of self’, which are taken up later in this section in my discussion of the ‘relational self’, this concept remains of importance to my thesis. Participants’ collective preoccupation with self-development and personal growth, and their immersion in a ‘therapy culture’, indicate that they are indeed embarked on a ‘project of self’ similar to that which Giddens describes. Their almost universal use of the language of (heterosexual) self-help literature when talking about and reflecting on issues and problems in their relationships with other women suggests their absorption of the profusion of reflexive resources (Giddens, 1992) available to help in making sense of changes in their lives. Moreover, the literature on the ‘project of self’ illuminates the implications of a shift to a deeper individualism for lesbian friendships. This shift sits together with a suggested ‘transformation of intimacy’ in the contemporary period, where the impact of wider social changes on relationships and subjectivity is also debated.
Discussions of how notions of love and intimacy have changed in recent years are critical to this study because, I argue, more than lesbian feminism, they provide a social context for the choices of many participants to leave husbands for a female partner, with whom they enjoy more reciprocity, and to reflect on the meaning of this change for their sense of self. After years of unidirectional caring of men and children, the contrast most formerly married participants draw with the equality and reciprocal caring they enjoy with women is striking. They appreciate close, intimate relationships with other women in love relationships and small friendship networks. Networks also reveal only selected kin relationships and a lack of time and interest in wider community involvement. Theorists of a ‘transformation of intimacy’ throw important new light on women’s choices of female partners, and the dilemmas of lesbian friendships and communities in the late 1990s.

Debates on the changing nature of intimacy in modernity and high or late modernity, a period defined as ranging from post-feudal or post-traditional times in Europe to our present day world, have been lively. A transformation of intimacy began, Giddens argues, with the change over the past two centuries from romantic love – in which people began to marry for love rather than economic or family reasons, and in which marriage was for life and partners had set roles – to what he calls ‘confluent’ or contingent love, and the concept of the ‘pure relationship’ (1992). A pure relationship is one ‘which is entered into for its own sake … and which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfactions for each individual to stay within it’ (1992: 58). The pure relationship became more possible after the introduction of modern methods of contraception after World War 1. A further shift occurred with sexuality: instead of being a natural condition tied to reproduction, it could be a ‘property’ of the individual, part of a ‘reflexive project of self’. With reproductive technologies artificially producing conception, sexuality became ‘at last fully autonomous’ (1992: 27). As a result, today women seek equality and ‘disclosing intimacy’ (Jamieson, 1998) in relationships, and if male partners resist, women are usually the first to initiate separation, subsequently embarking on a quest for personal growth and equal
relationships (Miller, 1976; Rowland, 1988; Giddens, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). New partners are not necessarily heterosexual (Giddens, 1992).

Giddens (1992) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) are influenced by the discourse of equal relationships arising from the women’s movement, as discussed in the Introduction. Rather than engaging with the impact of the women’s movement and decades of feminist work on ‘the family’, however, Giddens takes it as a basic tenet that women are active agents who have brought about change and are seeking further change (Smart and Neale, 1999: 9). He sidesteps discussion of ‘the family’ and the notion of ‘love’, moving to concepts such as intimacy, child-parent relationships, sexuality and the body (Jamieson, 1998; Smart and Neale, 1999; Weeks et al, 2001). Thus one of the major achievements of his work, according to UK feminist sociologists Carol Smart and Bren Neale, is that it permits us always to see the individual as imbued with history, culture, language and the social, while the social is always the product of human agency … what was once defined as the private sphere now has no boundaries to define it separately from the public sphere (1999: 7-8).

Another UK feminist sociologist, Lynn Jamieson, suggests the historic shift from the ‘good family’ to the ‘good relationship’ as the site of intimacy is the story of a growing emphasis on the couple relationship (1998: 136). It is important to consider if similar forces are impacting on lesbian relationships.

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) add to Giddens’ work with their discussion of how the shifts from traditional societies, where everyone knew their place and choices were limited, to modern industrial societies in the western world, where everything in life, including sexuality, is perceived as a matter of choice, has had massive implications for close relationships. Individualisation is the key feature of western industrialised societies. Although they ignore lesbian and gay relationships, their work, like that of Giddens, suggests a context for contemporary women’s decision-making around relationships. Education and access to employment have freed women from the necessity of marriage, and time-honoured norms about how the sexes behave are fading. Men and women are now both in the labour market, which demands a completely mobile individual prepared to disregard social
commitments. This labour market imperative, and highly valued individual, personal freedoms, conflict with love, family and friends. Yet children become ‘anchors’ for their parents’ lives in a complex and changing world.

For Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, relationships are interchangeable, but at the same time, ‘love is the new centre around which our detraditionalised life revolves (p. 172), and ‘person-related stability based on romantic love’ has acquired ‘a new significance as the very heart of our lives’ in the modern period (pp. 49-50). This description is consistent with recent health and mental health literature suggesting a person needs social support – it may only be one other person as a close confidant – to maintain health and well-being (Fleming and Baum, 1986; Wilkinson and Marmot, 1998; Orbach, 1998). But looking so much to one person, rather than being supported by families, friends and communities as well, puts pressure on relationships (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Pahl, 1998).

At the same time as arguing that relationships are interchangeable, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim observe that the difficulties partners have in separating are qualitatively different from those of earlier generations. This is not due solely to the ‘symbiotic entanglement’ that psychologists blame, nor to chance, genetics or nature: problems ‘are rather an expression and reflection of the contradictions which have come about in the course of individualisation in late modernity: while love is more important, it is also more difficult than ever’ (1995: 70).

Giddens (1992) focuses more on evidence of ‘the democratisation of daily life’ or ‘emotional democracy’ (1992: 94-95) he finds in the self-help literature, or popular psychology, of the US, and women’s paths to autonomy. Self-help books are important, he suggests, not because they offer accurate accounts of changes in personal life, but because they are expressions of processes of reflexivity which they chart out and help shape. Many, he argues, are also emancipatory, pointing towards changes that might release individuals from influences that block their autonomous development. For example, instead of supporting an obsession with finding ‘someone to love’, one self-help book puts ‘development of self as a first priority’. While Giddens insists he is critical of this literature, his criticism is
meagre. He has been further criticised by Lynn Jamieson for failing to provide actual evidence of democratisation in heterosexual relationships (1998). By contrast, Jamieson documents studies of relationships unequal because of men’s reluctance to give up power. She argues that due to the desire for equality, inequalities are ‘papered over’ (1998: 174).

In postulating a ‘transformation of intimacy’ in the contemporary period, sociologists have also turned their attention to (mostly heterosexual) family and kin relationships, community participation and friendships. Sociological work on friendship patterns has documented shifts in family and community life consistent with the trends in intimate relationships. Contacts with relatives have decreased in the past decade and there has been a move towards friends as ‘family of choice’ (Pahl, 1998; Smart and Neale, 1999). Friends provide much of the social support that families used to, and the instability of marriage, family and work means some middle-class women are putting friends at the ‘core of their lives’ (Gouldner and Strong, 1987: 156). Similarly, Pahl argues that middle-class people, who tend to choose friends similar to themselves, are moving towards ‘an ideal of pure communicative friendship as the kernel of their lives’ (1998: 116). In findings reminiscent of Giddens’ analysis of the role of contingent love in relationships (1992), people are more likely to have contact with family members they enjoy or like being around. Relationships with wider kin are negotiated rather than obligated. Families are seen as ‘more trouble than they are worth’ (Pahl, 1998: 106). The middle classes in the US are also more mobile due to the job market, so ‘families of choice’ may be necessities of life (Gouldner and Strong, 1987).

At the same time, community contacts seem to be diminishing. Australian sociologist Anthony Elliott notes that recent psychoanalytic accounts agree that modern social conditions are driving a wedge between the self and others, leading to a waning in social ties and the sense of political community (1994: 19). People are less involved in community organisations (Putnam, 2000), mostly due to the impact of the longer working hours and job insecurity in western democracies. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim’s argument that the labour market militates against love, family and friends (1995) also applies to community life (Cox, 1995; Pocock,
In a discussion of contemporary period as ‘postmodern’, German sociologist Zygmunt Bauman adds that sexual mores have also been transformed: sexual undertones are suspected in every emotion or offer of friendship (1998: 148). Ours is the era of instant communication, instant friendship, instant sexual connection, rather than relationships taking time to develop.

This ‘story’ of the decline of community and a growth in negotiated kin relationships is, however, contested. Jamieson argues there never was a golden age of community and that kin ties have always been negotiated to some extent (1998: 89). She is particularly critical of the view that intimacy is ravaged by rampant self-interest, with potentially catastrophic consequences for personal and social life (1998: 170; see also Smart and Neale, 1999). She discusses research which shows that most people remain firmly attached to a personal network of kin and friends:

If the late twentieth century brings a heightened awareness of being unique individuals, this does not for the majority mean an absence of definitive social connections to others. People continue to sustain self-locating primary relationships with kin and friends, if not with communities (p. 172). Jamieson cites communities in small towns and the San Francisco gay and lesbian community Kath Weston (1991) describes where it is the ‘inner circle of intimates who are the crux of personal life’ (Jamieson, 1998: 173).

Giddens (1992) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) have been further criticised for a number of omissions: their lack of attention to race and class and their failure to examine the effect of wider kin networks on changing patterns of intimacy (Smart and Neale, 1999: 18); Giddens for his presumption of a world in which the necessities of life are taken care of (Jamieson 1998: 174) and his failure to consider children (Smart and Neale, 1999: 18), and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim for failing to consider lesbian or gay relationships and failing to acknowledge the complex and often problematic parent-child relationship that feminists have examined (Smart and Neale, 1999). Further, Jamieson suggests ‘pure’ friendships and relationships are ideals only reached by a few, and that other forms of friendship, that are less idealised, are just as worthy (1998: 105).
Theorists of the ‘project of self’ and the ‘transformation of intimacy’ argue that intimate relationships are changing under contemporary social conditions. While notions of a shift to universal ‘emotional democracy’, a decline in community involvement and a growth in negotiated kin relationships are debated, it is important to find out whether these concepts are salient for lesbians. Subsequent chapters develop Giddens’ claim that lesbians, more able to achieve the ‘pure relationship’, are at the forefront of a posited ‘transformation of intimacy’, and examine the changing roles of friends, families and communities. Giddens’ concept of the ‘project of self’ will also be further developed and extended in my analysis of the data, but using feminist theories of the self as ‘relational’ rather than individuated. I argue that because of being ‘relational selves’, women have different responses to social change than many men, and that lesbians, confronted with the additional challenge of living against the heterosexual grain – and surrounded by other ‘relational selves’ – have different responses again.

The ‘relational self’

The lesbians in this study have distinctive, intense experiences of friendships and relationships with other women. They are concerned with relatedness and caring for others, and relatedness is heightened in a predominantly female milieu; boundaries blur between friends and lovers; they have problems with being so concerned for others that their own needs are not articulated and therefore not met, yet they are uncomfortable when accessing traditional models of psychology that emphasise independence and separateness.

In the light of participants’ concerns, I sought alternative feminist theories of women’s development in relationships. I wanted to discover the origins of intimacy in lesbian friendships and how lesbian subjectivity might be constituted through these friendships. My aim here is to situate the women’s experience of friendship and relationships within the existing knowledge of the ‘relational self’ to provide a background to inform analysis. This discussion draws on feminist and lesbian critiques of traditional models of psychology from feminist psychoanalysis, caring
ethics, self-in-relation theory and lesbian psychology. I argue that theorists of the ‘project of self’ and the ‘transformation of intimacy’ need to take more account of the importance of relatedness for women, and that both they and theorists of the ‘relational self’ need to take account of heightened relatedness for lesbians.

As Carmen Braun Williams notes, over 100 years of psychological theory and research have preceded the study of women from a female perspective (1993: 27). ‘Masculine concepts have shaped women’s sense of self since the beginnings of psychological study, casting women’s development as inferior to men’s and relegating women to an unalterably deficient status’ (Williams, 1993: 27; see also Rowland, 1988; Chodorow, 1989; Benhabib, 1992). However, the theory and research that came with the women’s movement in the late 1960s in western countries challenged this (Wright, 1992). Feminist psychology has given voice to the suffering and pain experienced by women as they have struggled to fit themselves into male models of health and mould themselves to a masculine reality, and to establish a self, however tenuous, against tremendous cultural resistance (Williams, 1993: 32).

In many cases, being measured against male models, and for lesbians, against heterosexual models as well, has been profoundly damaging (Vargo, 1987).

A key concept in feminist psychology is that of the ‘relational self’, which contrasts with the dominant, and powerful, model of human development, still preferred by counselling psychologists and mother and child health professionals (Benjamin, 1988; Schmied, 1998) from the US post-Freudian tradition of ego psychology (Elliott, 1994: 19-21). Ego psychology examines the genesis, development and adaptation of the ego in terms of the predominantly male experience of separation and individuation, or differentiation, from the mother. It emphasises the progressive development of an autonomous, separate self, and is typically individualistic, focusing on the individual as a closed system rather than examining the impact of social and cultural conditions. In this model, intimacy and attachments are seen as developmental impediments. Dependency, which is seen as a weakness, demonstrates failure in differentiation, regression, or immaturity (Frosh, 1987: 3).
That this is an overtly gendered model is revealed by women’s construction as opposite and inferior to men, and their measurement against the yardstick of male models of psychological health and development (Belenky et al., 1986; Stiver, 1991; Williams, 1993: 30). A double standard is revealed by the fact that at the same time, under patriarchy, women are required to be dependent, submissive and caring\(^2\), and women’s anger is pathologised (Miller, 1991).

The alternative model of the female ‘relational self’ developed out of two schools of psychoanalysis, which historically diverged from ego psychology. The British object-relations school followed Melanie Klein, and US self psychologists followed Karen Horney (Benjamin, 1988; Williams, 1993; Elliott, 1994). Second-wave feminists and others drew on these schools of thought for the concept of the ‘relational self’ to explain women’s sense of self as connected to others, and to rescue and reframe those aspects of women’s experience that have been pathologised (eg. Miller, 1976; Chodorow, 1978).

Nancy Chodorow (1978, 1989), a US sociologist who trained as a psychoanalyst, draws on object relations theory to explain how the ‘relational self’ develops. In contrast to the Freudian and Lacanian focus on the primacy of oedipal phenomena and the role of the father, Chodorow privileges the pre-oedipal (before five years of age) mother-child relationship as critical to the construction of self. She argues that because of being mothered by someone of the same gender, girls develop more fluid or permeable ego boundaries than boys, and a sense of self that is continuous with others. Mothers see a girl child as the same as or an extension of themselves and encourage connection, which becomes an important part of the girl’s identity. By contrast, Chodorow argues, because boy children are different, mothers propel their sons towards differentiation and autonomy (1978). The different constructions of male and female selves mean that women tend to be more concerned with boundary negotiations, separation and connection, while men tend to be more distanced, their sense of self based on defensively firm boundaries and denials of

\(^2\) A further double standard is revealed by Sarah Lucia Hoagland in her argument that women’s caring enables the male subject to pretend autonomy (1991a).
self-other connection (1989: 2). Even a sense of agency and autonomy remain relational in this model, because
agency develops in the context of the early relationship with the mother and bears the meaning of her collaboration in and response to it. Separation and autonomy are not so crucial to development, because the model assumes the permeability of boundaries and focuses instead on the nature of the inner world and the inner core of self, whose implicit relatedness is acknowledged in its very structure (1989: 159).

Because of their developmental trajectories, Chodorow argues that women miss and often seek closeness with other women (1989: 15), but women’s isolation from one another in patriarchy and taboos on homosexuality mean friendships are unlikely to develop erotically (1978). Women also seek to recreate the intense primary link with their own mother through having a child, Chodorow argues (1978, 1989).

The concept of a ‘self-in-relation’ is used by Janet Surrey and her colleagues at the Stone Center at Wellesley College in Massachusetts to discuss the organisation and development of women’s sense of self in the context of all their important relationships throughout life, such as those with parents, friends, lovers, children, work colleagues and communities (Surrey, 1991; Jordan, Surrey and Kaplan, 1991). ‘Identity and relationships develop in synchrony’, argues Surrey (1991: 63). The model does not idealise women’s altruism or relational capacities, rather it better fits women’s experience so clinicians can be more constructive in fostering women’s development by building on women’s strengths (Surrey, 1991). Women do not want separation, but affiliation, argues Jean Baker Miller in a 1981 paper, where she observes therapists encouraging the male model of independence and separation for women (1991). She cautions that this model does not serve men, and that women will be adversely affected if they seek ‘equal access’ to it in the name of women’s liberation (1991; see also Keller, 1986).

Philosophers have joined these debates, with Carol Gilligan’s (1982) research on women’s moral development also demonstrating how connection is central to
women’s sense of self. Gilligan argues women see moral dilemmas in terms of conflicting responsibilities and makes efforts to sustain connection. Women are sensitive to individual contexts, and attend to voices other than their own, which Gilligan sees as moral strengths. Further, Gilligan finds women judge themselves in terms of their ability to care, and experience a ‘moral imperative’ to care. This result is repeated in studies of adolescent girls by Gilligan, Nona Lyons and Trudy Hanmer (1990), and in the work of Mary Belenky, Blythe Clinchy, Nancy Goldberger and Jill Tarule (1986). Nel Noddings’ (1984) work follows Gilligan’s in its exploration of the origins of women’s caring. She goes into detail about caring in life’s different and complex situations, agreeing with Gilligan that even in difficult situations such as distrust, repugnance or hate, people continue to care because they believe caring is ‘superior to other forms of relatedness’ (1984: 96).


But relatedness is an ambiguous virtue, according to Jane Flax (1993a; 1993b), its origins, expressions and consequences not necessarily as benign as those who celebrate it propose. There can also be negative consequences of being focused on relationships. Elizabeth Wright observes that the Stone Center clinicians, like other feminists who discuss the relational self, oscillate between a celebration of women’s relational skills and a recognition that these may often depend on the sacrifice or loss of self-identity and autonomy (1992: 264; see also Miller, 1976; Noddings, 1984; Chodorow, 1989; Surrey, 1991; Williams, 1993; Orbach and Eichenbaum, 1994). The female compulsion to care can manifest in a ‘paralysing injunction not to hurt others’ (Gilligan, 1982: 149). The self-in-relation model helps explain why self-enhancing, self-determining behaviour causes women to feel ‘selfish’ when they act on their own needs (Surrey, 1991). Whatever the expense to herself, Surrey argues that it becomes intensely difficult for women to act in a way that might hurt another; they do not want to be ‘agents of abandonment’ and can feel totally responsible for others’ feelings (1991).
Vigorous debates around the female ‘imperative to care’ are set in the context of (mostly heterosexual) women’s position in relation to men in a patriarchal society, and the degree of agency they are able to bring to bear in different caring situations. Any discussion of caring, philosophers argue, must take place in the context of an analysis of women’s oppression, because many women practice care as slavishness or self-preservation in patriarchy (Puka, 1990; Hoagland, 1991a; 1991b; Sherwin, 1992; Cole and McQuin, 1992; Williams, 1993; Tong, 1998). Internal pressures to care are supported by tremendous cultural pressure on women to care for others at the expense of themselves (Lerner, cited in Williams, 1993: 33). Further, theorists of the welfare state argue that women’s caring work is part of women’s identity as nurturing and self-sacrificing beings. Because women do caring work and derive satisfaction from it, it is unpaid or underpaid, devalued and exploitative, at home and/or in the public sphere (Graham, 1983; Waerness, 1987; Baldwin and Twigg, 1991; Baines et al, 1993; Hancock and Moore, 1999). Both Gilligan and Noddings have been criticised for espousing a feminine rather than a feminist ethics (Hoagland, 1990; Hoagland, 1991a), and for a tendency to essentialism that helps keep women in traditional roles (Scaltsas, 1992), despite assertions to the contrary. To pursue the feminine, as Noddings does, is to pursue oppression, argues Sarah Lucia Hoagland (1991a). In building their work on a mother-child model, Noddings, Gilligan, Miller and the Stone Center theorists do not take account of the central roles of hate and ambivalence for both mothers and children and the possibilities of conflict and abuse in families, according to Hoagland (1991a; 1991b) and Flax (1993a; 1993b).

Others dispute that pursuing care pursues oppression, but rather that caring is a valuable human quality (Jordan et al, 1991, Cole and McQuin, 1992; Jordan, 1997; Houston, cited in Tong, 1998). I am in agreement with these theorists, as it is clear from my reading that both Noddings (1984: 16; 99) and Gilligan (1982: 149) give women agency in and criteria for caring.

Carol Gilligan and the Stone Center clinicians have also been criticised for constructing women as a homogenous group (Tong, 1998; Flax, 1993a). This is particularly the case for Gilligan, who researched a diverse sample (Tong, 1998;
Hekman, 1999). The self-in-relation theorists acknowledge the limits of their own early work in that it draws on clinical samples of mostly white, middle class women (Jordan et al, 1991), deficits they attempted to redress in Jordan (1997). Problems with expressing feelings may be a white woman’s dilemma rather than a universally female experience (Hall and Rose, 1996), suggesting different socialisation patterns and cultures also have an impact.

The most obvious criticism for this study is the failure by theorists of the ‘relational self’ to consider, until recently, the application of the model to lesbians (eg. Mencher, 1997). Miller and Chodorow, and to a lesser extent Jane Flax (1978), a psychoanalyst who addresses mother-daughter relationships and their impact on adult women’s relationships with each other, have been criticised for virtually ignoring lesbian existence and failing to recognise or explicate how lesbian experience might fit in their models (Rich, 1981; Boston Lesbian Psychologies Collective, 1987). Adrienne Rich, for example, argues the work of all three would have made more sense if the authors had examined lesbian existence as a reality and as a source of knowledge and power available to women (1981: 5), and the institution of compulsory heterosexuality, which she argues forces many women to redirect their search for intimacy away from women and towards men (p.10). Instead, most of the theorists of the ‘relational self’ discuss its implications for male-female and mother-daughter relationships and heterosexual women friends.

Beverly Burch suggests that extending the model to lesbians, work which she herself takes up, needs to focus on aspects of mother-daughter relationships that have an effect on adult relationships between women, together with the devaluation of women and lesbians in culture (1987: 127). Drawing on her own clinical sample, she explores how and why issues such as the balance of power, the pulls toward and away from dependency and the roles involved in nurturing have an unusually intense charge in some lesbian relationships. These issues, she observes, may lie dormant until a woman becomes intimately involved with another woman, when the parallel between the mother’s body and the lover’s body, so powerful unconsciously, is capable of evoking deepest childhood experiences. Fear of re-engulfment in the mother-daughter history can be an unconscious barrier to
intimacy (Burch, 1987: 140; see also Orbach and Eichenbaum, 1994: 128). For Vargo, it is useful to be able to understand lesbian development as involving a struggle with learned female behaviour concerning relatedness to others and self-image (1987: 172). However, Vargo argues that still more research is needed into socialisation, self-esteem and other-relatedness that lead to differences for lesbians.

While feminist psychologists and psychoanalysts have developed various models in which women might care for others and for themselves, usually in heterosexual relationships (Cancian, 1986; Benjamin, 1988, 1995; Chodorow, 1989; Jordan, Surrey & Kaplan, 1991; Surrey, 1991; Orbach and Eichenbaum, 1994; Miller and Stiver; 1997), reciprocal caring between equals, and particularly between lesbians, remains undertheorised in this and in the welfare state and philosophical literature. Hoagland (1988) is an exception: she provides an example of caring between lesbians in her concept of the ‘self-in-community’ in a separatist community.

A relevant area that has been researched more is that of fusion in lesbian relationships, with debates among lesbian psychologists focused on whether this dynamic, also called enmeshment or merging, is pathological or healthy for lesbians. Common definitions in a review of the literature include that fusion is a state of ‘psychic unity’ in which individual ego boundaries are crossed and two individuals experience a sense of oneness; boundaries between self and other are unclear; intimacy is intense and partners over-identify with each other (Mencher, 1997: 313). This is a common issue for lesbians because women’s capacities for intensity and intimacy are heightened in relationships with other women who share similar capacities. While this shared capacity can be joyful and fulfilling, it can heighten problems as well, suggests Beverly Burch, 1987: 140).

Many psychologists agree fusion is a problem, and suggest solutions based on maintaining separateness and distance in relationships (Krestan and Bepko, 1980; Nichols, 1987; Kassoff, 1989; Clunis and Green, 1989). Others dispute their views, suggesting fusion has been pathologised when it may simply be a result of the socialisation and identity-building processes both women have experienced (Vargo, 1987: 165; see also Lindenbaum, 1985; Rothblum, 1989) and benign, if not positive
and functional, for lesbians (Mencher, 1997; see also Boston Lesbian Psychologies Collective, 1987; Mitchell, 1989; Kitzinger, 1996b). Krestan and Bepko and their followers, Mencher argues, measure patterns of intimacy in lesbian relationships by a male standard of separation and autonomy, and the heterosexual experience of difference and distance in relationships (see also Gilligan, 1982; Stanley, 1993).

In contrast, Mencher cites several studies that suggest the prevalence of dynamics that have been called fusion do not necessarily create pathology or dysfunction in lesbian relationships; rather, they find that lesbians express a high degree of satisfaction in their relationships because of the byproducts of intense intimacy – equality, companionship, the connection between friendship and love, the valuing, by both partners, of communication and emotional support – many of the features that have been interpreted as fusion (1997: 316). Further to Mencher’s detailed analysis, it is important to note that most lesbians who prefer connectedness to autonomy in relationships are, on another level, personally autonomous compared with heterosexual women (Peplau et al., 1978), and their relationships with other women may well facilitate that autonomy (Dunne, 1997; Orbach, 1998).

Despite many criticisms and omissions, I argue that theories of a (female) ‘relational self’ offer a cogent alternative to (mostly male) concepts of a separate, individuated self. They throw light on participants’ search for a self-in-relation as opposed to an individualistic self, as evidenced by their reflections on their close-connected friendships and love relationships, where boundaries between friends and lovers often blur. Lesbian psychologists suggest lesbians’ experience of friendships and relationships is largely different from that of heterosexual women because the intensity of these relationships more powerfully evokes mother-daughter histories. They highlight my argument that lesbian experience relates to, but also extends, existing theories of subjectivity.

READING LESBIAN FRIENDSHIP

Keeping the above theories of intimacy and the self in mind, this section interrogates the literature on lesbians and friendship to ascertain the extent to which
it considers the impact of wider societal changes on relationships and subjectivity. The major discourses that influence lesbian identity and practices, surveyed in the Introduction, roughly parallel the interdisciplinary literature on lesbian friendships. This literature can be divided into four main areas: friendship and intimacy (which parallels the discourse of passionate friendships), friendship and community (lesbian identity as a sexual rather than a political identity), friends as family (the shift to equal relationships and the ‘transformation of intimacy’) and ‘coming out’ (the ‘project of self’). The latter two discourses were explicated more fully above. However the foci of the literature on lesbian friendship and intimacy and the lesbian feminist writings on community are too narrow, failing to discuss widespread social changes in the context of late capitalism. The literature in the other three areas begins to signpost these changes more effectively. However none of the literature discussed in this section provides an account of lesbian subjectivity constituted through friendship in the contemporary period.

Friendship and intimacy

Most of the literature on lesbian friendship studies friendship in relation to love relationships, rather than in its own right, with findings that resonate with the issues and debates around the passionate friendships of nineteenth-century women. A majority of these studies are from the discipline of psychology. They find that lesbian lovers tend to be friends first, or that friendship is a way into relationships (Peplau et al., 1978; Ponse, 1978; Vetere, 1982; Rose et al., 1993; Stanley, 1996). Lovers are already, or tend to become their partner’s ‘best friend’ (Vetere, 1982; Raphael and Robinson, 1984; Nardi and Sherrod, 1994; Kitzinger, 1996), a finding which contrasts with heterosexual women who usually say their best friend is another woman (Bell, 1981; Johnson and Aries, 1983; Rubin, 1985; Gouldner and Strong, 1987; Hite, 1989). Current norms favour monogamy in relationships (Rose et al., 1993; Stein, 1997). Despite lesbianism being defined by sexual activity, the friendship component of a relationship is often seen as more important (Vetere, 1982; Blumstein and Schwartz, 1983), leading to fierce debates about the meanings of ‘sex’, intimacy and closeness (Lindenbaum, 1987; Frye, 1992; Rothblum and
Brehony, 1993; Weeks et al, 2001). In addition, the tendency of lesbian lovers to ‘merge’ and seek to get all their needs met by their partner means friendships external to the relationship are important to reduce isolation (Vetere, 1982; Stanley, 1993; 1996; Peplau and Spalding, 2000).

Studies across a range of disciplines find that boundaries blur between friendships and love relationships in ‘alternative intimacies’ (Hall, 1993), which defy simple categorisation of friend or lover or ex-lover, but have elements of each (Vetere, 1982; Heyward, 1989; Palladino and Stephenson, 1990; Weston, 1991; Hunt, 1992; Nardi, 1992; Hall, 1993; Card, 1995; Stanley, 1996; Lapsley, 1996; Weinstock and Rothblum, 1996b). While unspoken desire, unrequited love and sex can cause tensions, eros in friendship is generally regarded positively. For Hall (1993), ‘the borderland’ between friends and lovers is the most promising area for new intimacy forms. Lesbians often make room for more than one primary intimacy in their lives. This is most clearly evident in the tendency for lesbians to remain friends with ex-lovers (Martin and Lyon, 1972; Tanner, 1978; Wolf, 1980; Becker, 1988; Shumsky, 1996; Stanley, 1996; Futcher and Hopkins, 1996; Weeks et al, 2001).

These studies, many of which are from the discipline of psychology, are usually framed to solve friendship and relationship problems. They contain few references to social or political changes or to a conscious ‘project of self’, issues salient for the lesbians in this study. They point to the need for a wider frame of reference for understanding lesbian friendship negotiations in the contemporary period.

Friendship and community

Lesbian feminist writings on friendship and community parallel debates on lesbian identity as a political choice versus lesbian identity as formed through the experience of sexual relationships with women. This is the case for both historical and contemporary discussions.
Many scholars argue women’s communities in the US and UK in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries supported the independence and creativity of women who would otherwise have been forced to marry to survive (Davis, 1973; Cook, 1977; Wickes, 1977; Lash, 1980; Vicinus, 1985; Hanscome and Smyers, 1987; Brittain, 1989; Raymond, 1991a; Auchmuty, 1992; 1993a; Jeffreys, 1997). While not all of these women were lesbians, the existence of these communities provides evidence for contemporary lesbians of women who have chosen alternative paths than that of wife and mother. They are thus claimed as part of lesbian history (eg. Lesbian History Group, 1993). By contrast, studies of lesbian friendship groups from the 1910s to the 1960s (Hanscombe and Smyers, 1987; Martin and Lyon, 1972; Schuyf, 1992) show how lesbian identity is formed by having relationships with women.

In more recent times, discussions of identity formed in lesbian feminist communities contrasts with arguments that anyone who identifies as lesbian should be able to join broader, more diverse communities. Lesbian feminists discuss how separatist communities of the 1970s and 80s model social change (Bunch, 1987) and help lesbians survive and thrive in a male-dominated society (Hoagland, 1988; Frye, 1995). Richly descriptive ethnographies and studies of lesbian identity in communities in the US in the 1970s and 80s (Tanner, 1978; Ponse, 1978; Wolf, 1980; Ettorre, 1980; Krieger, 1983) discuss the pros and cons of feminist communities where lesbian identity is seen as political. For example, there is the classic struggle between the individual and the group, and struggles with personal and political differences (Krieger, 1983). Informed by the debates around political lesbianism, lesbian feminists also lament that lesbian identity is contingent upon having a lover, while the same standards do not exist for heterosexuals (Doughty, 1982; Rothblum, 1989). They note that single lesbians have more friends than couples (Raphael and Robinson, 1984), and argue that lesbians’ friendships need to be taken more seriously (West, 1989; Weston, 1991; Loulan, 1991; Card, 1995; Jo, 1996; Kitzinger, 1996a; Stanley, 1996; Weinstock and Rothblum, 1996b; Hunt, 1996, 1997a). Efforts to form friendship across differences such as race are highlighted (Lugones, 1992; Hunt, 1992; Hall and Rose, 1996).
The issues in these communities are thrown into sharp relief by Arlene Stein’s (1997) study of generational change amongst lesbians in San Francisco, which reveals how as lesbian feminists of the 1970s grew older, they got mainstream jobs and reestablished connections with blood families. The disenchantment by lesbians of colour, working-class lesbians and bisexual women with lesbian feminists who ‘policed the boundaries’ of who could and could not join communities, led to shifts to more open, plural, diverse and tolerant, mostly social communities (Stein, 1997; see also Stanley, 1996; Lemon and Patton, 1997; Horsley, 2002). The decline of interdependent, political lesbian feminist communities is also evident in calls for their reinvigoration (Strega, 1995; 1996; Jo, 1996; Sitka, 1996; Kitzinger, 1996a).

Lesbian feminist writings on communities document efforts to change society for the better for women and lesbians. However they do not take account of actual social and political changes, such as the greater acceptance of lesbianism today (partly the legacy of their activism) which means women can choose a lesbian identity or have a relationship with another woman without reference to feminist politics. Apart from Stein (1997), nor do they take account of shifts to individualism and the conditions of late capitalism that might lead to a decline in friendships, political activism and communities. A handful of studies show lesbian communities changing, as do the next two areas of literature.

‘Friends as family’

The significance of friends as ‘families of choice’ is hotly debated amongst lesbians. It contains traces of the discourse of equal relationships that is part of a suggested ‘transformation of intimacy’ in the contemporary period. In anthropological and sociological discussions friendships are of enormous importance for lesbians and gay men due to continued marginalisation in society. The notion of friends as family in relation to lesbians was first used by feminist anthropologist Deborah Goleman Wolf (1980), and subsequently by Karen Lindsey (1981), Sharon Raphael and Mina Robinson (1984) and Hilda Hidalgo (1984). In general, lesbian feminists have been critical of the adoption of the term ‘family’
(Weinstock and Rothblum, 1996b; Hunt, 1997a; Jo, 1996) but other lesbians have argued that the institution of the family is not static and that it is a cultural category that can represent assimilation or challenge (Weston, 1991: 199). Discussions of friends as family are linked to a wider societal trend towards negotiated rather than obligatory kin relationships (Pahl, 1998; Beck-Gernsheim, 1998; Weeks et al, 2001). Sociological studies of friends as family (Nardi, 1992; Davis, 1994; Goss and Strongheart, 1997; Weeks et al, 2001; Bernstein and Reiman, 2001) suggest that when lesbians and gays use the term family, it radicalises it.

These studies tend to collapse the experiences of gay men and lesbians together in their final analyses, a common criticism when lesbians and gay men work together or are studied together (Jeffreys, 1993b; 1997b; Stein, 1997). Recent Australian research fails to find lesbians identifying with the notion of ‘friends as family’ (Nall, 2002; Dempsey, 2002). Instead, lesbians define their families as their partners, their own children, now as likely to be born into lesbian relationships as come from former heterosexual relationships, ‘donor dads’ and blood relations. These issues, debates and changes need to be interrogated in more depth.

‘Coming out’

Changes in recent decades in the content of lesbians’ personal testimonies, or ‘lifestyle histories’ (Lemon, 1993), and in friendship experiences across difference, reveal the influence of the discourse of a deeper individualism in the contemporary period and the ‘project of self’.

In the years following gay liberation and the emergence of lesbian feminism in the late 1960s, personal testimonies made lesbian experience newly visible. Stories of lesbians’ friendships appear in ‘coming out stories’ (eg. Cruikshank, 1985; Penelope and Wolfe, 1989; Penelope and Valentine, 1990) and oral histories (eg. Hall Carpenter Archives Lesbian Oral History Group, 1989; Neild and Pearson, 1992). Weeks et al characterise ‘coming out stories’ as tales of ‘discovering the self, achieving a new identity, finding others like yourself, and gaining a new sense

Lesbian narratives of friendship with heterosexual women also reveal changes over time. Friendships between lesbians and heterosexual women are inauthentic for older lesbians who do not ‘come out’ (Raphael and Robinson, 1984; Davis, 2000); and are likely to end when lesbians do ‘come out’ (Krieger, 1983; Palladino and Stephenson, 1990; Daly, 1996). For younger lesbians, and those coming out in the 1990s, however, friendships are not possible unless they are ‘out’ and differences are addressed (Wilton, 1993; O’Boyle and Thomas, 1996).

Personal testimonies and narratives of friendship are beginning to reflect social changes and changing selves. However still more detailed interpretations of lesbian life stories and subjectivity in the contemporary period are needed.

Sociological theories of the ‘transformation of intimacy’ and the ‘project of self’, and psychological theories of the ‘relational self’, are of great relevance to the concerns of my participants. Their significance to this thesis is grounded in my argument that the ‘project of self’, which is always a ‘relational self’, is played out in distinctive ways in lesbians’ friendships, family and love relationships and community lives. These ways, discussed in more detail in the substantive chapters, are often at odds with contemporary culture’s preoccupation with individualism and individuated selves. The thesis argues that the women in this study are searching for a self-in-relation, rather than an isolated, individuated self. Studies of lesbian friendship and intimacy, friendship and community, ‘friends as family’ and ‘coming out’ reveal important themes in lesbian friendship experience. They begin to signpost social change and changing views of the self. However apart from Stein (1997), the literature on lesbian friendship does not take account of widespread social changes in recent decades and the implications for identity and the self: issues pertinent to participants. In particular, the psychologists’ focus on friendship and intimacy and the lesbian feminist writings on community are too limited.
Further to the work of Stein (1997), it is the task of this thesis to examine lesbian friendship experiences, using theories of the self and social change, in order to better understand how and why lesbians construct a very particular version of subjectivity or selfhood in Australia at the turn of the 21st century.
CHAPTER TWO: STUDYING LESBIAN FRIENDSHIP

This thesis is the result of a research process that examined the literature on lesbians’ friendships, varying theoretical perspectives, and the stories of the often complex friendship experiences of 40 lesbians in Victoria in the late 1990s. As I was studying richly detailed personal experiences, qualitative methods were appropriate (Allen and Walker, 2000). Many feminist researchers also suggest qualitative methods are more appropriate than quantitative methods in order to gain an understanding of all the dimensions of women’s experiences. Feminist research methods – and increasingly other social research methods – emphasise exploring the social construction of the research encounter, and how the researcher’s self is part of the research process, rather than pretending objectivity (Kirby and McKenna, 1989; Reinharz, 1992; Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). However feminist research practices are not universally agreed on by all feminists, and debates in the field became more salient as the research progressed. This chapter explores that journey, including the implications of feminist processes, of unexpected findings, and changing theoretical frameworks as the research progressed.

The chapter also considers participants’ motivations for joining in the study: to contribute to mainstream knowledge about lesbians; and for the opportunity for self-development through the reflection and catharsis that the questionnaires and interviews provided.

STAGE ONE: THE STUDY DESIGN

A feminist research methodology

I was committed to a feminist approach to research, which I understood to mean research for women rather than on them, and research that worked side by side with the women’s movement in contributing to the emancipation of women (Duelli Klein, 1983, Acker et al, 1983). A feminist approach also meant striving to minimise power differences between myself and research participants (Bowles and Duelli Klein, 1983, Reinharz, 1992). Feminist and other social science methodology emphasises the importance of the researchers incorporating their own
experiences and understanding as part of doing research (Reinharz, 1992). Who is doing the research and how interpretations are made should receive equal billing with analysis of content (Kirby and McKenna, 1989: 83).

While I briefly considered that joint analysis was an important component of feminist research (Ribbens, 1989; Kirby and McKenna, 1989) in the end I had to consider that the structure of a PhD was not suited to this. As sole author, ultimately I would have to take responsibility for the analysis to gain the degree (Reinharz, 1992). Instead I sought to make the research relationship more collaborative by asking participants to choose their own pseudonym (Ribbens, 1989: 589), approve transcripts (Billson, 1991: 212) and asking them what they would like to see come out of the research. I also undertook to send a summary of the results.

A commitment to feminist research also meant the research had to be useful and relevant to participants and others. To this end I took my proposal to the 5th National Women and Labour Conference in Sydney and the National Lesbian Conference in Alice Springs in 1995. I asked lesbians, in Gloria Bowles’ words, ‘what do we need to know to live relatively peacefully and happily together?’ (1983: 42). Each presentation evoked much interest. Attendees at the National Lesbian Conference were interested in how the lesbian community deals with the repercussions of the breakups of relationships and friendships, notions of community and friendship generally, problems with conflict resolution both personally and in the community, and lesbian domestic violence. I added questions about conflict resolution and violence to my interview schedule, and felt assured of the usefulness of the research.

Choosing methods

Shulamit Reinharz suggests choosing methods that are appropriate to the topic (1992: 213). As friendship is a process that develops over time, I initially considered a series of focus groups. These would enable participants to reflect on their friendships over a period of time, with the added stimulus of other group members to spark off (Culbert, 1975; Kravetz, 1978; Morgan and Spanish, 1984;
Kirby and McKenna, 1989; Butler and Wintram, 1991). Because I also wanted to
test out some ideas about friendship, I was attracted to Reinharz’s description of
consciousness-raising groups as a research method (1992: 220-21), and to action
research, where I could impart knowledge about friendship as well as gather it
(Gergen, 1988).

However, I was encouraged by my supervisory panel to start with questionnaires
and interviews to make sure I had relevant data. My initial recruitment material
suggested groups if enough lesbians were keen. I received many enquiries about
being involved in the research project, but none expressed interest in a group.
Participants were only interested in being interviewed one-to-one, for reasons I
explore later in this chapter. At this stage I dropped the idea of focus groups.

Questionnaires were important to gather demographic and other personal
information, friendship histories and attitudes to friendship. All of the questions in
the questionnaire were designed to encourage participants to start a reflective
process about their friendships, which they could then continue in interviews. The
questionnaires were also a good source of information, in their own right, for those
participants I did not interview.

While the questionnaires were valuable, the richer qualitative method of the semi-
structured interview was chosen as the principal data-gathering tool about the
processes of friendship. Interviews enable researchers to hear women’s experiences
(Reinharz, 1992: 244). Hilary Graham argues that ‘the use of semi-structured
interviews has become the principal means by which feminists have sought to
achieve the active involvement of their respondents in the construction of data
about their lives’ (cited in Reinharz, 1992: 18). Reinharz also cites Janice
Raymond’s observations about how the unstructured research interview ‘maximises
discovery and description’ (p. 18). For Reinharz, it produces non-standardised
information that allows researchers to make full use of differences among people
(p. 19). This form of interviewing uses only the barest minimum of prompts to
elicit women’s stories in their own words. For example, I started my interviews
with ‘Tell me about your friendship with Rhonda – where did you meet, how did it
evolve, what happened?’ Later, after stories were completed, I had a list of questions to ask if they had not already been covered.

Interviews are also appropriate for studying marginalised groups such as lesbians, who have been researched and written about as objects rather than subjects in their own right (see Wolff, 1971, as an example). Qualitative methods are uniquely suited for learning to see ‘what is there, not what we’ve been taught is there’ (DuBois, 1983: 109). Katherine Allen and Alexis Walker argue that complex phenomena, such as the social relations of sexuality or forms of close relationships in which sexist, racist and heterosexist ideology tend to distort people’s recognition of their own lived reality, require in-depth methods that emphasise participant meanings to grasp new insights about previously mystified experiences (2000: 25).

My 40 participants are not a random sample of a larger population, hence I do not make generalisations from my results. As Morin (1977) comments, it is impossible to get a representative sample of a hidden population such as lesbians. However the results do offer insights into social life in general and lesbians’ experiences of friendship in particular.

The pilot study

I designed a questionnaire which I piloted with friends and other Women’s Studies postgraduates. Finding participants for the pilot study and indeed the research project as a whole raised the issue of whether I would include friends and acquaintances. My experience with friends in the pilot study echoed that of Pamela Cotterill (1992), who reflects on the complications that may arise when friends are involved in research. These include blurred boundaries between friend and researcher and researched, with the possibility of revelations being made in research that had not been made in friendship, and that this might affect the friendship. Considering the pressure that Krieger (1982) felt that her study of a lesbian community mirror not reality but self-protective ideology, I was also concerned about how my analysis might affect our friendships or my place in a
particular section of Melbourne’s lesbian community. Shulamit Reinharz cites researchers Liz Kelly and Mary Zimmerman, who believed studying women they knew would complicate relationships and having relationships with women would complicate research. Wanting to respect the privacy of women they knew, they therefore chose not to work with them (Reinharz 1992: 164; see also Acker et al, 1983). It seemed wiser to omit friends and acquaintances altogether to avoid complications, especially from interviews. I made two exceptions for acquaintances from non-Anglo backgrounds whose perspective I sought to make my sample more diverse.

STAGE TWO: THE RESEARCH PROCESS

Recruitment

I recruited 40 participants at the conferences I spoke at, and by speaking at other conferences and gatherings of lesbians, sending out information about my study to lesbian and gay publications and groups across the state, my local newspaper and the rural women’s Network magazine, and doing an interview on community radio. I encouraged lesbians to tell their friends about the study and pass on my recruitment flyers (Appendix 1) and introductory letters (Appendix 2). I also placed flyers at lesbian events I went to. By far the biggest source of participants was Victoria’s lesbian magazine Lesbiana (n=11). I got 12 participants from letters to groups, and four from my local newspaper. The rest came from a variety of sources: four were referred by friends, three read about the study in mixed gay and lesbian publications, two each came from conferences and from the rural women’s Network, one from the radio interview, one from a flyer at a lesbian event, and three I omitted to ask.

My methods of recruitment resulted in a group of participants that for the most part, were involved in the lesbian and/or mixed gay and lesbian community, at least to the extent of reading publications. Predictably, larger numbers of white, middle-class/educated, able-bodied, city-based lesbians in their 20s, 30s and 40s responded to the call for participants. While I would have liked a more diverse group, I did not
make a concerted effort to seek one beyond sending letters to the multicultural gay and lesbian groups listed in gay and lesbian publications, a strategy that yielded only one response. My talk at Lesbian Open House, where several lesbians in their 70s attend regularly, yielded no response. My recruitment flyers to several groups for older lesbians and lesbians with disabilities got a couple of enquiries, but these women did not request questionnaires after reading my introductory letter. It is likely that the language I used, the way the study was framed and where I promoted it might have affected the response I got. Involving lesbians of diverse backgrounds in designing the study, and using personal contacts and snowballing may have helped in gaining a more diverse sample (see also Stanley, 1993).

My introductory letter explained in detail what was involved in the research. Given the history of oppressive research on lesbians by non-lesbians, it was important that this letter, as well as my recruitment material, identified me as a lesbian researcher (Kirby and McKenna, 1989: 70). While ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ research both have pros and cons, there is an increasing trend towards research in marginalised groups being done by ‘insiders’ (Kirby and McKenna, 1989). Confidentiality was guaranteed by my undertaking to remove all identifying information from questionnaires and interview transcripts and keep names secure and separate from data (see Appendix 2).

I had a high response rate for the questionnaires, with 40 out of 54 coming back, or 75 percent. Only a few needed prompting and encouragement, with the reason most often given for delays being lack of time. It is a measure of changing attitudes to homosexuality that five wanted to use their own names rather than pseudonyms, but to protect the privacy of their families and friends, I still changed names.

All but one of the women identified as lesbian, the other as bisexual. Although bisexuality emerged in the narratives of six women who identified as lesbian, and was a possibility for a seventh, who was married, as in Deb Dempsey’s (1999) study, ‘lesbian’ was still the label of choice. Most (n=28) were in a relationship, and of these, 23 lived with partners. Most were originally heterosexual (n=27), and although I did not ask about sexual history or ‘coming out’ processes, it emerged
that many had been married and only recently identified as lesbians. More than half (n=21) had children, 19 of these from previous heterosexual relationships, one with a lesbian partner and one unknown. The age range was from 20 to 61. Ten women were in their 20s, 10 in their 30s, 13 in their 40s, five in their 50s and two in their 60s. Three quarters (n=30) identified as feminists, although their definitions varied and levels of activism were low, while nine were ambivalent about feminism. Only one was not a feminist: the only bisexual woman and the only non-white woman in the study (Lisette, from Nicaragua), which is not surprising given the critiques of feminism by women of colour (Hull et al, 1982). Most participants had mainstream religious backgrounds, the most common being Catholic (n=15), but only five were still involved in mainstream churches, the rest having no religion or being involved in a range of alternative spiritual practices, or non-mainstream or personal versions of Christianity.

At the time of the interviews, more than half lived in Melbourne (n=25), the other 15 in country Victoria (10 in regional cities, four were rural, and one was from the coast). Several women were mobile during the period between interviews in 1997 and final checking of transcripts in 2002; three of the country women moved to Melbourne, three moved from Melbourne to other capital cities, and one moved from a rural to a coastal area, then to a capital city overseas. This is consistent with observed trends of lesbians and gay men to move to cities (Weeks et al, 2001). Participants were generally mobile: only seven had not moved outside of Melbourne since their birth. For the other 33, the number of moves between cities, towns and countries ranged from one to 12, with an average of four moves in their lifetimes. More than a quarter (n=11) were born overseas, and migrated to Australia as children or adults, and six had spent significant amounts of time living overseas.

Approximately three quarters (n=29) were of Anglo and Celtic background (24 were Anglo Australian, one Irish, one Scottish, three Anglo-New Zealand), and approximately one quarter (n=11) were from a range of non-Anglo racial and ethnic backgrounds (two Jewish, one Jewish-Welsh, one Jewish-US, one Greek, one Anglo-Taiwanese, one Hungarian, one Italian, one Anglo-Bulgarian, one Lithuanian-English and one indigenous Nicaraguan). Over half (n=24) were from
middle-class backgrounds, 15 from working class or poor backgrounds and one from a farming background. When asked about class now, more than half (n=21) did not identify with any class or found the notion of class problematic (cf. Barrett, 1992: 216; Hall et al., 1992), 16 identified as middle class (three of these as middle class but poor, or lower middle class as they were on sole parent or carer’s pensions), and one as a ‘peasant hippy’. Notably more than half of those from working class backgrounds (n=7) were upwardly mobile, only one still identifying as working class and one student on the Austudy government student allowance as ‘poor’ (see Appendix 1 for a profile of the participants).

I interviewed the first 20 of the women who completed questionnaires, and, in a belated effort to make the sample more diverse, adding two more as questionnaires came in from a woman who lived in the country and the Nicaraguan woman. Half of the interview group (n=11) were from working class backgrounds and more than half (n=13) lived in country Victoria. However my desire to collect data quickly meant the majority of my 22 interviewees (n=15) were women from white Anglo backgrounds. Had I waited a little longer for more of the 40 questionnaires to come in, I could have chosen interviewees from more diverse ethnic backgrounds.

In my exploration of the terrain of lesbians’ friendships I did not differentiate between those friendships established before or after participants decided on an exclusively lesbian identity, as I had not anticipated the interview sample being so heavily weighted towards women who had been previously heterosexual and/or married, and fairly recently ‘out’ as lesbians. I simply asked them to identify one or two significant friendships in their lives, and if they chose two, to select one that was ongoing and one that had ended. I said I would prefer it if they chose a lesbian friend, as research had not been done in this area, but allowed them to make the choice. I gathered 16 detailed friendship stories; of these, seven participants chose lesbian friends, one a bisexual friend, one an asexual friend, and seven chose heterosexual woman friends to talk about. I also gathered 16 relationship stories. This meant 23 out of the 32 case studies were stories of relationships or friendships between lesbians. Of the friendships, 10 were ongoing and six were changing or had ended; and of the relationships, eight were ongoing and eight had ended.
I speculated about the reasons a study of friendship appeared to appeal more to new lesbians. As data analysis progressed it became apparent that the nexus between friendship and lesbianism was more salient for new lesbians than for those ‘out’ longer and whose identities had been consolidated over a longer time. When I asked for friendship stories, half (n=11) of the interviewees chose to tell the story of their first lesbian relationship. New lesbians were also more likely to have friendship networks in transition due to this shift than those out for longer (cf. Suitor, 1987), and reported that an opportunity to explore and reflect on these changes through the research process was appealing. Participation in the study thus appeared to be part of their ‘project of self’.

It must be acknowledged that retrospective accounts may be problematic, as people tend to construct their own reality out of past events (Browning, 1984; Koutroulis, 1993).

The stories my participants told are also only one half of the story of any one friendship or relationship. The other person’s story remains untold, except in the case of the three interviews I did with lesbian couples, together and separately. I cannot expect that couples will have told me, or each other, ‘the whole truth’ about their relationships. Forsyth (1996) discusses a number of studies of heterosexual couples where partners told conflicting stories to researchers. Indeed one member of a couple I interviewed admitted she had not told her partner everything about her past, but she very easily handed that information to me, leaving me with the ethical dilemma of whether to make it public in the thesis. Rubin (1985) and Gouldner and Strong (1987) observed that when they interviewed pairs of friends separately, they did not describe their friendship in the same way. One would often see the other as more important than the other one did. Thus a caveat for Gouldner and Strong’s study was that friendship among middle-class American women carried a lot of self-deception and disguise. Their participants did not know or admit the reality of the depth or superficiality of friendships, hiding or embellishing numbers and qualities of friendships (1987: 8). While friends may talk to other friends about the state of a particular friendship, most do not talk to each other about their own friendship (p. 23).
Gouldner and Strong (1987) conclude that friendship is an idealised relationship, and Rubin (1985) argues that the disparity between ideals and realities is an overlooked aspect of friendship (see also Rose and Serafica, 1986; Jamieson, 1998). Women’s friendships are certainly idealised in the discourses of passionate friendships and the ‘transformation of intimacy’ discussed in Chapter One, discourses which influence participants in this study.

The questionnaires

The questionnaires, collected in 1997, were divided into two sections (see Appendix 4). In addition to demographic information and participants’ definitions of and feelings about friendship, I provided a timeline for them to chart their most significant female friends over their lifetime, and asked them to reflect on the nature of these friendships, their duration, changes and/or endings. This timeline was informed by Suzanna Rose’s ‘lifeline’ (1984: 270) and Janice Raymond’s concept of a ‘genealogy’ of female friendships: a periodisation of women’s lives into segments characterised by the most significant friendships they have had at the time (cited in Reinharz, 1992: 226-27). This genealogy is in opposition to the traditional family tree, which only lists marriages and children. (See Figures 2.1 and 2.2 for examples of Terri, who married and had children and ‘came out’ at age 42, and Jane, who ‘came out’ at 20. I have redrawn timelines and changed names).

Asking participants to keep the timeline in their minds, I asked what was needed for friendship maintenance, to describe feelings when friendships ended, and whether there was any difference between lesbian and non-lesbian friends. I asked them to comment on statements about the pressure on lesbians to be in relationships, the ‘second-best’ nature of friends, and the sexualisation of physical contact in Anglo-Australian culture.

To elicit their current friendship network, I provided space for them to draw a diagram, asking them to use concentric circles to indicate closeness and level of involvement. (Figure 2.3 is an example from Alex, aged 49, a single lesbian with many friends in her inner circle).
Figure 2.1 Terri

Sr. Catherine
Had a crush on this girl's sport's teacher. Wrote to her on and off for many years. Took up hockey to be near her more often.

These three girls were 18 yrs when I met them during my RN training. Kept only intermittent contact.

Have known this lady constantly since I met her through my children. She was approx. 32 yrs. We have very intimate friendship, and talk in depth about all things in our lives that are important. She makes me feel that I count.

First met at 8 yrs. Lost touch at 16 yrs. School friend.

First met at age 13 yrs. Kept in touch 3-4 times per year since leaving school. Very much like a sister-type friendship.

- Had a one-sided crush on these two girls. They were approx. 14 yrs old.

Got to know this lady when she was approx. 30 yrs. We had children at same school. Very attracted to her.

Genevieve P. Very one-sided. Very close, almost possessive friendship for many years.

- First met through work when she was 21 yrs. Worked together for 8 yrs and have kept in touch 3-4 times per year mostly by phone till now. Communications have increased this year. Slightly attracted to her sexually but not an in-depth friendship.

Karen M.
First met Karen when she was 36 yrs. She was my workmate and we worked together for 10 yrs. We became very intimate friends over that time.

Our relationship changed to sexual when I was 42 yrs. and we have been a committed partner in the past 18 months.

45 yrs.
I asked participants to consider whether geography affected where they placed friends in the circles. This diagram was informed by one woman in the research of Gouldner and Strong, who described her friends as wrapped around in layers. One layer, occupied by her best friend, was pulled close to the centre of her life. Other layers of friends encircled her further out.

Like peeling an onion in reverse, she could tell you who was nearest to the core of her being, who occupied the next band, and so forth until she reached the outer skin (1987: 97).

Gouldner and Strong comment that in ranking her friends by degree of closeness she is not unusual. I was interested to see if this way of describing a friendship
network would work for my research participants. In analysis, it became important to note where in the circle participants placed the friends they were talking about, and how the degree of closeness – indicated by placement or shifts in or out of the concentric rings on the diagram – affected management of the issues that arose. Finally, the questionnaire asked participants to reflect on the similarities and differences between friendships and sexual relationships (O’Connor, 1992: 193). At the end, I asked them to indicate if they were interested in a interview.

Some participants found the questionnaire time-consuming. One said she had to keep putting it aside and thinking about the questions and coming back to it, another found it ‘rather daunting’ and another felt she deserved a medal after completing it. The fact that not all questionnaires came back fully completed also suggests that it was demanding. I also received many positive comments and thanks for the opportunity the questionnaire gave them for self-reflection. I telephoned some participants to clarify statements made, which also provided me with an opportunity to record developments over time.

A further point of interest was that the diagrams of the friendship networks varied. My suggestion of concentric circles did not suit all. Some drew their own diagrams that better reflected how they saw themselves in relation to friends, and what was important about the network itself that the model hadn’t allowed (see Chapter Six).

The interviews

I conducted interviews with 22 individual women in 1997. Six of these women were interviewed a second time in three couple interviews. Most took place in the women’s homes, with a couple being held in cafes or at places of work or study in private rooms. Most proceeded without interruption for one to two hours. Refreshments were usually offered and when I could, I contributed so they did not feel that they had to play the host (Kirby and McKenna, 1989: 99). Two were not completed in the scheduled time and a second interview took place, taking the total duration to about three hours. One of these second interviews, and an interview with a couple, both members of which I had already interviewed separately, took
place at my home in Melbourne. These interviews were with country women who were visiting Melbourne and found this arrangement convenient.

I started the interviews with open-ended questions about one or two friendship experiences, asking them to take a few minutes to describe the friendship in their own words. If they had not already answered them, I asked more specific questions later. These included how friends met and how friendships were maintained, conflict resolution, dealing with differences, feelings when friendships ended, and sexual connections in friendship. In a section on sexual relationships, I asked about friendship in the love relationship, friendships with ex-lovers, levels of happiness in relationships, issues around equality, difference, power, dependency, independence and feminism. In a section on friendship networks, I asked about categorising friends, criteria for friendship, the impact of counselling on friendship, levels of happiness with friendship networks, sexual connections in friendship and participants’ visions for lesbian friendship and community. As the interviews progressed and some themes I had not considered arose, I added questions (see Appendix 5 for a full schedule). For example, as participants spoke emotively of friends, I added a question on the importance of particular friends, and after many volunteered details about sexual issues in their relationships, I added a question on the importance of sex in relationships. When returning transcripts, I asked the earlier interviewees to answer these questions in writing if they had time. Many did not, so there are gaps in the data here.

At the end of the interview, I asked for an evaluation of the process and the questions (Kirby and McKenna, 1989: 100), why they had been interested in participating, and what they would like to see come out of the research. Once interviews were concluded, I wrote brief reflections. Transcripts were returned to participants for comments between two and five years after interviews, due to delays in transcribing and losing contact with participants who moved. The contents of my telephone conversations with participants at this time, and their written and taped postscripts and reflections, were included as ‘response data’ (Bettie St Pierre, cited in Lather, 1996) for analysis. All but four transcripts were returned.
The use of questionnaires, telephone clarification, follow-up interviews and sometimes lengthy postscripts (despite my requests to keep them short) provided valuable information on friendship processes over a period of up to five years. This amount of detail, in particular through stories of change, could not have been obtained with a single data collection tool at a single point in time.

Reflections on feminist interviewing

The feminist research methods that I had been taught were ideal included the concept of the interview as more a dialogue than a one-way seeking of information or ‘interrogation’ (Reinharz, 1992: 33). Feminist interviewing meant creating a non-hierarchical relationship between interviewer and interviewee, with the interviewer prepared to invest her own personal identity in the relationship. There was to be ‘no intimacy without reciprocity’ (Oakley, 1981: 49; see also Kirby and McKenna, 1989: 71). In my research training, this was extended into a prescription that all interviews had to be dialogues, or that I had a responsibility to at least offer participants my point of view or experience on any topic as well as eliciting theirs. I was attracted to this style of feminist research methodology both in theory and as a result of my own experience of being interviewed, where I felt I had been used and exploited for the researchers’ personal gain.

However it soon became apparent that most of the women were not interested in anything much I had to say. Their motivations varied between wanting to help, curiosity about whether their experiences were common or rare, seeing an opportunity to gain further self-understanding, catharsis, and making a contribution to knowledge. Three had done research before and wanted to help me out by volunteering. One, Lisa, a PhD student, who declined an interview because she was too busy, said she would reconsider ‘only if you’re really desperate or find my case fascinating!’ She was still willing to help despite her busyness. Others talked about making a contribution to knowledge and community education, in particular to validate lesbians’ friendships and relationships and to disprove stereotypical ideas about lesbians in the public arena. This was also one of the motivations of lesbians and gay men in the study by Weeks et al (2001).
Several participants noted that the questionnaire was a good opportunity to reflect on their friendships, and ‘think about things’ (Laura). Others felt that the interview similarly contributed to their self-awareness. Being involved was ‘a learning experience’ (Ruth), ‘not easy, but overall a positive reflection’ (Indigo), ‘challenging and rewarding’ (Sally) and ‘interesting and thought provoking’ (Alex). Jane, the 36-year-old Anglo-Australian lesbian whose timeline was reproduced earlier, demonstrated an awareness of the value of reflection for research when she wrote on the questionnaire that she was worried she hadn’t been ‘self-reflective enough’ for me. She had ‘found it much easier to comment on the friendships that went wrong in the past (probably because I’ve thought a lot about them over the years as they followed similar patterns) than I did about the current friendships’. Ali saw the advertisement for the study at a time when she realised she was ‘really intensely processing this thing that’s going on in my life’, and it had been ‘good’ to help clarify her thoughts and feelings around changes in her friendships.

Many interviewees simply wanted the opportunity for catharsis. One actually used the word: for her, reflecting on past events for the research was ‘cathartic’. Many had not spoken this freely on their friendships to anyone before (cf. Gouldner and Strong, 1987: 1). I asked them questions about deeply personal issues such as love and sex. I thought that before sharing such information, that participants might want to know that I was trustworthy, and might want me to share something of myself as well. I think one or two participants did appreciate me telling them that they were not alone in their experiences, and I shared a friendly interview/conversation with several over lunch. But for the most part, participants did not need to know anything about me. While some politely tolerated my attempts at sharing of myself, and then moved on with their stories, others were obviously irritated and just wanted to get on with the interview. On listening to the transcripts, I could hear and understand their irritation. I too often interrupted them in my effort for an equal relationship.

Yet another participant, after a lengthy description of a 10-year love relationship in an interview, refused to answer some of my direct questions but rather continued
on with her story about their relationship breakup, which had happened 10 years prior to the interview. Despite my commitment to feminist research and the unstructured interview, after an hour or so I was getting anxious that I wasn’t going to get any of my other questions answered, so I interrupted Emily, an Anglo-Australian lesbian aged 60 living in a regional city. However my questions were completely ignored as she ploughed on with her reflections. (Emily also wrote to me when she returned her transcript saying it was good reading, and she intended to leave it with her will for family and friends to read after her death). In another interview, Natalie, a Jewish lesbian aged 26 living in a regional city, was concerned to tell her story of one friendship only. My preoccupations did not concern her. After my interview with Bess, she wondered if I might be intending to be a counsellor after my studies. Another, Rosemary, when asked why she took part in the study said ‘it’s not very often you get to talk about yourself for a whole hour or two. And I didn’t even have to pay you’. Elaine suggested I might see her lengthy postscript, provided to me on tape, as ‘therapy’ for her, and Jillian identified that involvement in the study helped take the edge off her loneliness.

Participants’ responses to the questionnaires also suggested a desire for catharsis. Elizabeth attached five pages of notes to an already detailed questionnaire about some of her friendships. She wrote ‘I am taking the opportunity to provide other information that is probably not relevant to you but it provides me with an outlet’. Annette wrote to me a year after the questionnaire with a change of address, saying doing my questionnaire had given her a chance to reflect on her lifestyle, which included an unsatisfactory relationship: ‘I personally cannot believe how much my life has changed so much (for the better) in one year and I can say that your questionnaire helped that along in a way because it gave me a chance to reflect on my lifestyle – so thank you’ (Annette had ended her relationship with a closeted married woman and started a new relationship).

In these ways, participating in the research became part of the ‘project of self’ for participants, as it did for myself. Participants’ lack of interest in focus groups with others is consistent with their preference for self-development through reflection
and catharsis in questionnaires and interviews. In addition, making a contribution to knowledge was gratifying in its own right.

As a further effort towards a non-hierarchical relationship, at the end of all the interviews, I asked each participant if there was anything she wanted to know of me. A couple asked me a question or two but most declined. I also invited them to call me and discuss any topic at any time should they want to, as a way of thanking them for sharing their stories with me and making the relationship more equal, and by way of assisting them ‘to cope with the aftermath of intensive interviews’ ( Kirby and McKenna, 1989: 69). No one took me up on this. I asked for their reflections on the research process and questions, but as this was at the very end of what was often a lengthy interview, most were brief and polite, saying only that they enjoyed it and that it was interesting. When I called participants to confirm their current address before sending transcripts out, I made sure I was available for a lengthy chat if required. Only one woman wanted to chat, and she was one with whom I had developed quite a rapport over time. The others were happy with brief, co-operative conversations. If anything, they counselled me because I had to explain the delays in getting back to them because of an extended illness.

I concur with Joanna Malseed (1987) in her evaluation of Oakley’s work, that the interview technique should fit the situation. Regardless of the feminist intention to create a non-hierarchical relationship, at times in my interviews this was simply not appropriate. My participants did not require a non-hierarchical relationship, they required a listening ear. Or perhaps they simply did not experience the interview as hierarchical. While a few were interested in other women’s experiences and said they looked forward to hearing about the results, most were not. I also agree with Jane Ribbens (1989) who suggests we take our cues from the person interviewed. Her experience certainly accords with mine. Ribbens writes about how she has sometimes felt that when she has volunteered information about her own family experiences, that her contribution has been seen as a nuisance, interrupting the women’s own flow of thought:

After all, is not part of the research exchange that I have expressed an interest in hearing about the interviewee’s life? I have given her permission
to do what is normally seen as an indulgence and socially reprehensible: to talk about oneself at length. If I start talking about myself, this may be seen as breaking this research contract, rather than sharing myself with her (Ribbens, 1989: 584).

On another level, Ribbens suggests that talking openly might shift what is said to the researcher (1989: 584), a concern also raised by an interviewee in a project discussed by Reinharz (1992). The interviewee, Marilyn Wedenoja, felt constricted by the interviewer’s self-disclosure:

Personal sharing on her part (where she was from, what she has done, some of her own views) was triggering off in me a self-censoring process. I began to notice myself stereotyping her and second-guessing what she would want to hear and not want to hear based on my perception of the information about herself (Reinharz, 1992: 33).

Like Ribbens and Wedenoja, I was aware that participants were influenced by my responses. For example, I made what I thought were empathetic noises in response to something Bess said, and she responded to me with concern: ‘Is that not what you want?’ She was being honest, but also wanting to please. In Reinharz’s example, Wedenoja’s interviewer, Mary Bricker Jenkins, on discussing Wedenoja’s concerns, concluded that the timing of self-disclosure is the key to its value (1992: 33).

Oakley (1981) and others discuss the often therapeutic nature of interviews between women. Gouldner and Strong comment on how women in their study were ‘not only willing to talk about friends, but wanted to discuss them at great length’ (1987: 1). Janet Finch has discussed her concern about the ‘extreme ease with which, in my experience, a woman researcher can elicit material from other women’ (1984: 71). She is concerned about the exploitative potential of interviewing (see also Koutroulis, 1993). Finch puts forward a number of reasons why women might be so open: because the interviewer is another woman and it is presumed she shares the same world view; because women persistently face intrusions of a personal nature more than men, in particular around childbirth and
mothering; because interviews take place in the home where the interviewer is a guest, a setting that encourages the sharing of intimacies as one would with a friend; because the structural position of women, more often consigned to the domestic sphere, mean that they will welcome the opportunity to talk to a sympathetic listener (1984: 74).

These suggestions are written about heterosexual women, but they could also apply to lesbian women in different ways. I expect our shared identities as lesbians meant my participants presumed a shared worldview. I expect that societal homophobia, isolation, especially for the country women, and being at least partially ‘in the closet’ meant that my participants might also have welcomed the opportunity to talk to a sympathetic listener. Certainly I elicited much richer and more personal information with direct questioning in interviews than I did in questionnaires.

Many of the participants who told me stories of their personal pain and struggles were very warm towards me on subsequent meetings in the street by chance or over coffee to exchange the interview transcripts. They greeted me like old friends. The self-disclosure of the interviews, perhaps on both sides, fast-tracked an already ‘unnatural’ (Ribbens, 1989) intimacy. But is it unnatural? As Finch argues, women typically are keen to open up to strangers for a number of reasons (1984: 74); perhaps it is a normal feature of the practice of interviewing.

It appears a fine balance is needed between self-disclosure and the kind of withholding of information recommended in the methodology texts Oakley criticises. Oakley and others suggest that there is no such thing as an objective researcher, but the feminist methodology I was trained in encourages researchers to go in the opposite direction and volunteer subjective information to participants whether they want it or not. My experience in this study leads me to concur with Mary Maynard and June Purvis that


despite the high profile now given to discussing feminist research, however, much of the material published, with a few exceptions, tends to focus on the principles involved in a rather abstract way. This can sometimes be at the
expense of exploring the dynamics of actually doing research in the field (cited in Appleby, 1997: 138-39).

As Reinhartz (1992) and Virginia Olesen (1994) suggest, feminist inquiry is dialectical, ‘with different standpoints fusing to produce new syntheses that in turn become the grounds for further work’ (Olesen, 1994: 323). My experience is a contribution to this ongoing process.

The impact of the research process

A final comment must be made about the impact of the research process both on participants and on myself, the researcher. It is almost a standard of university ethics committee applications for research projects on personal topics that researchers be prepared to offer referrals for counselling should our interviews cause distress to participants. It is taken as a given that such interviews will cause distress. Many of the women relived emotional pain while talking to me about their experiences, but I did not at any point feel I needed to terminate an interview and refer a participant on for counselling. It is of interest that some participants were already having professional counselling when the interviews were conducted.

However the return of interview transcripts to participants for checking was confronting in a way I did not predict. Two country women were uncomfortable with the transcripts, and worried about anonymity, even though I had changed identifying details. They asked to withdraw from the research. I asked both to reconsider, sending them a few extracts from the transcripts that I wanted to use, stripped of context, for approval. Both agreed to continue. However four more participants did not return transcripts, nor did they contact me to withdraw, leading me to wonder whether they had had a similar response, perhaps regretting that they gave away too much too easily (Finch, 1984). I took particular care in my use of their data, and I trust using their stories here does not compromise them in any way.

By contrast to the apparent ease with which most participants told highly personal stories and left them with me, I felt that I needed professional counselling after completing 22 individual interviews. Listening to repeated stories of participants’
pain about the loss of friendships and relationships, and of the pain their partners and friends had been through, was difficult. In addition, I heard many stories about the impact of past sexual abuse on subjectivity and on adult relationships. I had not expected a thesis on friendship to elicit these sorts of details, nor that the research would raise issues for me personally. Arlene Stein (1997) and Deb Dempsey (1999) write about their intense identification with participants, and Kelley Johnson about being ‘subject to the research process’ (1998: 17). Like them, I found that research of a personal nature has the capacity to affect researchers as strongly as participants.

STAGE THREE: DATA ANALYSIS

As I listened to the interview tapes, it became clear that most of the questions I had started my research with were of little interest to my participants. In the original research design, I had not planned to do full transcripts because I was only going to listen for the answers to my questions. When those questions had to be set aside, it became obvious I would have to go back to the written questionnaires and transcripts, and see what the women did have to say, in their own words, and start a whole new ‘bottom up’ analysis. As discussed in the Introduction, I also needed to do a whole new literature review and seek new theoretical frameworks to interpret the women’s stories. My new reading, suggested by supervisors at a new university, proceeded concurrently with completing full transcripts, coding them and the questionnaires, and ‘writing as a method’ (Richardson, 1994: 516). I changed identifying details and returned interview transcripts to participants to check and make any changes desired.

I started data analysis with the questionnaires. Using a manual system of coding, I compiled tables of responses to each question and examined them for similarities and differences. For example, because many questions asked participants to write their responses, they did not provide yes or no answers, or feelings on a scale, but sometimes lengthy descriptions of feelings around the issue to hand. I would then have to divide 40 different responses into a smaller number of groups. I gave these groups names, for example ‘the yes camp’, ‘the no camp’ or ‘the ambivalent camp’.
I wrote up summary sheets for each question, noting common themes and divergent ones. I cross-checked answers with demographic information, looking to see whether particular answers might be a function of class, age, location or the length of time they had been ‘out’ as lesbians. From these sheets, I developed a list of keywords.

Concurrently, I listened to tapes and read transcripts in progress, noting important themes in a preliminary analysis. The arguments of post-structural feminists such as Joan Scott alerted me to the need to problematise ‘experience’ and not take it as necessarily ‘right’ or ‘true’ (1992; see also Mohanty, 1992). As Norman Denzin suggests, meaning-making in social interaction must always be connected to current discourses and cultural representations of experience in the media (1992: 96). Participants’ use of the language of counselling and popular psychology, their criteria for friendship and family relationships, and their concerns with self-development pointed me to theories of the ‘transformation of intimacy’ and the ‘project of self’ in late modernity. Their concerns with relatedness and care pointed me to theories of the ‘relational self’ described in Chapter One. I was then able to go back to transcripts for coding with a view that participants’ experiences would not be the sole origin of my thesis (Olesen, 1994), but rather that which I would seek to explain (Scott, 1992: 26).

I began the systematic coding of interview transcripts manually, and when this became too time-consuming, I employed the NVIVO qualitative research computer software (Richards and Richards, 1994). Coding in NVIVO was useful in order to enable me to retrieve and print sections of transcripts coded according to themes, and to see where themes and categories recurred in relation to one another. This work then informed my writing.

On reflection, questionnaires and interviews were appropriate methods for collecting complex data about lesbians’ friendships, love relationships and networks. In particular, the use of timelines and diagrams of networks enabled participants to reflect on past and current friendships prior to interview. Several commented on how they appreciated the opportunity for this reflection. These
comments, together with the preference for one-on-one interviews for catharsis about friendships and the rejection of focus groups, alerted me to participants’ interest in individual self-development.

Qualitative methods were a strength of the research, allowing me to obtain detailed narratives of complex relationships. This became particularly obvious when the questionnaire and interview questions, designed to elicit very specific data about friendship and politics from my early radical feminist framework, failed to do so. Having chosen semi-structured interviews, I had long narratives of friendship I could then begin to analyse from the ‘bottom up’. In retrospect, I would have liked to have included questions about occupation, level of education and length of time they had been ‘out’ as a lesbian. While these did not seem important in the study as I initially designed it, systematic data on these factors would have added another layer to the analysis. This information only emerged patchily in interviews.

While a feminist approach was appropriate, in particular to ensure the study was for rather than on lesbians, following feminist prescriptions for interviewing damaged the data as I interrupted participants in an attempt for rapport. As subsequent reading revealed debates on feminist interviewing that confirmed my experience, I came to the conclusion that the feminist prescriptions I followed were overstated. While the feminist aim of modifying power differences between researchers and researched is laudable, I learned of the need to find a balance in interviewing styles.

Ultimately, the thesis is my interpretation of lesbians’ experiences of friendship from the 40 questionnaires and 25 interviews I conducted with lesbians in Victoria in 1997, in relation to the literature discussed in the Introduction, using the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter One and the methodology described here.

The next chapter, the first of the substantive chapters, examines lesbians’ definitions of friendship, how friendships begin and develop, and issues in maintenance.
CHAPTER THREE: MAKING FRIENDS

Making and maintaining friends is part of the ‘project of self’. Most women in this study meet friends and lovers at work or study, a reflection of their status as predominantly new lesbians in paid employment and/or further study. We can see this as evidence of how a societal shift to a deeper individualism and the demands of the market preclude community involvement, and a confirmation of how the intensity of the work or study setting is conducive to friendship for women who are ‘relational selves’. Criteria and ideals for friendship demonstrate the desire for friends who support self-development and self-awareness. In friends both sameness, which provides a mirror for the self, and difference, which provides opportunities for growth, are valued. Both casual and close friendships are important, and transitions in friendships, from casual to close (and sometimes back again), demonstrate lesbians’ relational capacities and reflect their changing selves. Finally, discussions of what it takes to maintain friendships reveals the importance of shared intense or life-changing experiences, in which women support each other’s self-development through change, and how this helps friends weather further changes.

This chapter is based for the main part on responses to questions on friendship formation and maintenance in the questionnaires. It is also based mainly on benign friendships not marked by major conflict or change, and where the transition to a lesbian identity that many participants experience is supported by friends. Subsequent chapters take up in more detail issues in lesbians’ personal relationships, and how lesbians negotiate conflict and change, and for some, negotiate endings. As will be seen in Chapter Seven, how lesbians negotiate major conflict and change – including, for many, the transition to a lesbian identity – is crucial to whether friendships survive, or don’t.

The questionnaire responses on friendship networks, confirmed by interviews, show that most participants have complex social networks made up of a range of people. They include women and men who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, asexual and
heterosexual. Selected family members, ex-lovers, neighbours and parents of children’s friends are important for many, as are those met in creative and spiritual pursuits, at school, higher education or work. Housemates, teachers, helpers and health care professionals, acquaintances, and members of groups they belong to, such as sporting, leisure, environmental, feminist activist and lesbian and gay groups are all included on friendship diagrams. Most friendships are dyadic, with occasional threesomes or groups in outer circles.

Because most of the stories are told by women reflecting on their transition from a heterosexual to a lesbian identity, they thus provide not only narratives of profound personal change, but stories of how friends, lovers and communities assist (or do not assist) in that change, or ‘project of self’. While many participants say a lover is important to confirm lesbian identity, friendships with other lesbians do not necessarily fulfill the same function. Despite identifying the importance of having lesbian friends, and some wanting more, many participants have no or very few lesbian friends. Those who have been lesbian for longer have more lesbian friends, but in general, close friends of all sexualities affirm participants and assist them to live their unconventional lives.

Based on her review of the literature on female friendship, Pat O’Connor argues there is a need for research that tests and develops theories about the processes through which women’s friendships are created, maintained and ended (1992: 193). Greater attention needs to be paid to the cultural valuation of friendship between women, the sexualisation of physical contact, the availability of public interaction venues conducive to the initiation of friendship, and the availability of personal resources – time, money, freedom from other responsibilities – to create and/or maintain friendships. I based my questions, in part, on these identified gaps.

LEVELS OF FRIENDSHIP

Studies of friendship usually put friends into different categories. Ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle distinguished between friendships of excellence as compared with friendships of utility or pleasure (cited in Card, 1995: 98). More contemporary
writers distinguish between casual, close and best or superficial and developed friends (Rose and Serafica, 1986: 275-76), or social (superficial), familiar (close) and communicating (aiding self-discovery) friends (Little, 1993). In this thesis I adopt the terminology of close and casual friends because it is evident that for lesbians, close friends are, by definition, ‘communicating’ (Little, 1993) friends.

For participants, close friends have a different intensity than casual friends. There is more depth, intimacy and understanding. Definitions of close friendship privilege acceptance and emotional support over practical help. Close friendships provide strength and a space to discuss personal and relationship issues. This is in line with a suggested shift to ‘pure communicative friendship’ in late modernity (Pahl, 1998) that reflects participants’ positions as middle-class (or upwardly mobile working-class), autonomous women (Jamieson, 1998). The intensity and importance of close friendships is also a result of continued marginalisation as lesbians (Weeks et al, 2001), an issue taken up more in Chapter Four. Casual friends, as well as being social, are often situational. When situations change, friends often do too.

It is consistent with the literature on lesbian love relationships, and with my own findings, that discussion of a ‘best’ friend is often omitted here, because for many lesbians, their lovers are their best or most important friends (Vetere, 1982; Raphael and Robinson, 1984; Nardi and Sherrod, 1994). It is also a reflection of the fact that almost three-quarters of the lesbians in the study (n=28) are partnered. Studies among heterosexual populations generally find that single adults have more interaction with friends than do married ones (Rubin, 1985; Rose and Serafica 1986; Jamieson, 1998). This is the case for my participants. Predictably, more single lesbians have several women in their inner circles while partnered lesbians tend to only have one, their lover, and perhaps one other close friend or relative.

Most have a small group of intimates and a larger network of casual friends. Mostly, close and casual friends are kept separate from one another, although at times and over time, some friends change from casual to close and back again. Only Lisette, the Nicaraguan woman for whom family was important, said her women family members fulfilled the functions of both close and casual friends.
CHOOSING FRIENDS

Meeting places

It is not surprising, given that a majority of participants in this study are new lesbians, that they meet their friends and lovers out in the wider society rather than in lesbian groups. For many, falling in love with work or university friends precipitates the shift to a lesbian identity, whether or not these attractions are verbalised or acted on. This finding demonstrates an embracing of the discourse of lesbian identity as based on sexual relationships, as opposed to the identity of the ‘political lesbian’ common in the lesbian feminist movement. For several of the women, this journey is a long one: they have lesbian experiences or feelings in their teens and early 20s, usually followed by (or sometimes alternating with) heterosexual relationships, marriage and/or children, before arriving at a more definite commitment to a female partner and a lesbian identity. Arguably, it is easier to be a lesbian now than it was when these women were in their teens and 20s in the 1960s. It is significant that most of the lesbians in this study identify as feminists, indicating an awareness of this movement even though they are not activists. Increased lesbian visibility and awareness of feminism helps these women with a ‘project of self’ that is complex and multilayered. Lesbian groups are well down on the list for places to meet both friends and lovers, reflecting both the original sexuality of the participants, and that these lesbians are well integrated into the wider society, rather than being involved in primarily lesbian groups and communities. It also reflects the location of many in suburbia and country Victoria, away from lesbian groups in inner city Melbourne.

Table 3.1 summarises where lesbians met friends, and Table 3.2 where they met lovers.

The wide variety of places lesbians met friends not listed on the table included the single answers of naval training, spiritual questing, a nightclub, Alcoholics Anonymous, a common hobby and a self-help group. Others met lovers at a conference, a dance, community group, via a current lover and via a personal ad. Karen, an Anglo-New Zealand lesbian, aged 49, living in suburban Melbourne, had
a unique network reflecting the fact she had three children with disabilities, all now grown. Her friends, many of long-standing, included her landlady, community bus driver, home help, mothers met through her children, and her doctor.

Table 3.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Where did lesbians meet their friends?</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School (for longest-term friendships)</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In their families (i.e. family members are friends)</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In higher education</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesbian social or discussion groups</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parenting</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Via friends</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Via lovers</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Via family members</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At school (befriended a teacher)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing houses or squats</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighbours</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women’s activities or groups</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay and lesbian groups or activism</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminist activities</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative pursuits</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In healing (health professionals of self or family)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At university (befriended a lecturer or tutor)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Via husbands</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteer work (feminist and gay/lesbian)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community activities</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In healing (others with same illness)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>196</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NB. Number of responses more than 40 as they referred to multiple friends.
Table 3.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Where did lesbians meet their lovers?</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Work</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In lesbian groups</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Via family members</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Via friends</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women’s groups</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminist groups</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>44</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NB. Number of responses more than 40 as they referred to more than one lover.

The finding that the majority of participants meet friends and lovers in work or educational settings is not surprising given the intensity of these settings, and the amount of time spent in them. The close proximity of women in these settings over time, together with shared experiences, allows for a quicker and deeper bonding more often than in other settings. This finding is consistent with other studies (see Fehr, 1996: 46-47 for a review) which find that many work tasks require or allow for friendly, co-operative behaviours, and that this fosters friendship. One relevant example is that women in service occupations are more likely to have friends in the same line of work than business people (eg. Parker, 1964, cited in Fehr, 1996).

‘Those who labour beside us become our kith and kin’, suggests Gary Fine (1986: 203). Work and study facilitate personal autonomy through economic independence, bonds that are lasting, mutual self-development and, for some women, the transition to a lesbian identity. For example at the age of 30, Elaine, married with a child and living in a rural area, ‘fell in love’ with another woman as they worked side by side on a manual task. For a while, this was obvious to everyone around them except themselves. Once they realised what had happened, they had to make decisions about what to do.
Those who have been lesbian for longer, and who live in the country, note that lesbians often find lovers from within small friendship networks. This phenomenon was observed in the 1950s to the 1970s in suburbia in the US (Martin and Lyon, 1972: 110-11), where the need for secrecy made it difficult for lesbians to meet a wide range of potential partners, and by Krieger (1983) and Stanley (1996) in more recent times. Stanley suggests lesbian couples are more at risk of breaking up than heterosexuals due to the romantic involvement of one partner with a friend because of the lack of socially recognised boundaries around relationships, such as marriage (1996: 53). In addition, because lesbians lack social norms for dating they therefore rely on the more ambiguous conversion from friend to partner. When this has happened once, it sets up a familiar pattern, since few other roads to partnership have been experienced (see also Rose, Zand and Cini, 1993). Country lesbians in this study, such as Bess, Alice, Sally and Laura, observed lovers ‘swapping’ in small groups in their own country areas where lesbian communities were small and often isolated from the larger communities in Melbourne. They marvelled at how past and present lovers seemed to mix very well in what was obviously an adaptation to circumstances, as well as a desire to stay friends with ex-lovers. However Christine, whose lover left her for one of their friends, found the experience painful. She chose to ‘opt out of’ her country network.

Criteria for friendship

Lesbians’ friendship criteria reveals an interest in friends who foster their own priorities of self-development and self-awareness. My questioning around criteria was informed by Janice Raymond, who suggests that women exercise the ‘rigors of discernment’ in the making of friends (1991: 172). Raymond applies Alice Walker’s notion of the ‘rigors of discernment’ for black women in the making of political alliances to women’s friendships. She rephrases Walker’s original statement in the context of friendship:

What is required of women friends is that they learn to distinguish between those who are real friends and those who are not and to exert energy in developing friendships only when there is little risk of wasting it. The rigors of this discernment will inevitably keep throwing women back upon their
Selves where they will find their original friend (1991: 172) … Discernment helps us to regain perspective about our Selves and others. Without this habit of reflection, we lose the feel of our own Be-ing, the sense of integrity that makes us who we are (p.164).

Janice Raymond also discusses how the absence of the rigors of discernment fosters the attitude that feminism makes all women friends, but that this is not true (1991: 173). In the context of this study, it can also foster the belief that all lesbians can be friends. Feminism is occasionally a criterion, but most of the lesbians in this study are not feminist activists and more often similar values are cited as important (cf. Rose and Roades (1987) and Hall and Rose (1996), whose study participants are all feminists and for whom feminism is an important criterion). Many participants preferred lesbian friends because they could ‘be themselves’ with other lesbians, and they knew others who only had lesbian friends, but they stopped short of declaring lesbianism to be a criterion for their own friendships. For many, a shared sexuality was not enough for friendship. This was most evident in the overwhelming rejection of the notion of ‘the lesbian community’ (see Chapter Six).

Most interviewees faltered at the question on criteria for friendship. I had half expected this result, as feedback about this question at conferences was that the notions of criteria and discernment were elitist. I surmise participants did not want to be seen as elitist, or to be discriminating against others in the way they might have been discriminated against themselves. Many said no, they had no criteria. However, when I rephrased the question to ask if there were any kinds of people they would choose *not* to have as friends, this elicited a strong ‘yes’ response. Participants wanted friends who were non-violent, non-drinkers, non-smokers, not into drugs, non-racist and not Liberal voters, and who were honest and trustworthy. This is consistent with other studies that show that people eliminate potential friends based on ‘exclusion criteria’ or ‘dislike criteria’ before they actively choose or seek out a friend (Gouldner and Strong, 1987; Fehr, 1996).

The qualities sought in a friend can be seen as those of ‘ideal’ friendships that have the function of mirroring the self or helping women to achieve an ‘ideal’ future.
self. Having criteria and ideals are thus not only about applying ‘exclusion criteria’ to friends, but also about an interest in self-development and self-awareness, and the perception that alcohol, drugs and dishonesty might impede this goal. Wanting friends who are non-racist and non-Liberal voters indicates an awareness of shared marginal identities and political enemies in the fight against all kinds of discrimination. Having these ideals, however, contrasts with participants’ definitions of friendship as being about acceptance of the self. A deeper analysis reveals that acceptance depends on friends continuing to meet ‘like criteria’: when friends and lovers lie or use drugs or become violent, or political differences become an issue, participants distance, or in some cases, end friendships (cf. Rose, 1984). Only close friends merit efforts with conflict resolution. Ideals also militate against the toleration of differences needed for participation in lesbian communities and political activism (see Chapter Six).

**Sameness and difference**

Friends and lovers experience sameness and difference in different combinations and permutations. Both are valued. Friends that are similar provide an affirming mirror for the self, while friends that are different provide opportunities for growth.

The majority of friends discussed in interviews are similar in age, race and class, and half are similar in sexuality. As in the reviews of the friendship literature by Brown (1981), Raphael and Robinson (1984), Rubin (1985), Solano (1986), Gouldner and Strong (1987) and Fehr (1996), participants gravitate towards women similar to themselves. The majority of women in the study are of Anglo-Australian background, pairing up with women from similar backgrounds. For the women of non-Anglo background, all but one pair up with friends and lovers who are also non-Anglo. The Jewish women often have other Jewish women as friends. Sameness is comfortable and affirming. For example, Rae, a 52-year old Anglo-Australian lesbian living in suburban Melbourne, wrote about an old school friend:

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1 The Liberal Party, currently in power at the federal level in Australia, is a conservative party.
She is me, to some extent. We rarely discuss deep issues - we know we will agree. We used to often buy the same clothes without knowing it, same dinner sets when we set up house etc.

By contrast, in lover relationships there are often differences of class or age, and occasionally ethnicity and race, a different result from 1970s research by Cotton (1975). Participants’ positive attitudes to self-development, and subscription to a discourse of equal relationships, means class, ethnic and racial differences are more able to be negotiated than are age differences, which present bigger obstacles.

It is more common for women of working-class backgrounds to become upwardly mobile and accept a middle-class lifestyle than the other way around. Of the 15 participants who identify a poor or working-class background, only two currently identify as poor or working-class. The others acknowledge upward mobility or say the notion of class is problematic. It was generally uncomfortable for women of working-class background to move into the middle-class lives of their partners. Middle-class women had to be sensitive to issues for their partners. For example Jean, from a middle-class background and earning a high salary, was comfortable with the income disparity between herself and Marilyn, but Marilyn, from a working-class background and unable to work due to a disability, was less happy. Lucy had to come to terms with Alice’s close relationship with her working-class family, and Lucy and Jocasta had to be sensitive to their respective partner’s differences around food at home, with families of origin and when eating out.

Anglo-Australian lesbians also had to be sensitive around issues of food and family in different ways for non-Anglo partners. For example Laura had to accept her partner’s rituals around food and commitments to family and community events that were part of growing up in a Maltese immigrant community. Indigo’s lover had to get used to Italian mealtime rituals. These were the only two overt examples of conflict around ethnicity, however.

Age differences are more difficult to negotiate. Many participants were between nine and 24 years older than their partners. Age was not generally seen as an issue during the relationship, although both Bess, aged 61, and Emily, aged 60 believed it
was a factor in their younger partners leaving and seeking friends and lovers closer
to their own age. Bess acknowledged that at 61, she was ‘winding down, in a way’,
wanting to ‘have time to smell the flowers’, while at 37, her partner was ‘just
feeling her wings’. However Bess, and Rae, aged 52, both preferred the company
of younger women rather than those in their own age group, who they found to be
more conservative. For Rae:

    I think this is just because we have had the opportunity of opening up to
each other, and I find joy in discussion of ideas with those who don’t have
the conservative blinkers affecting many of my contemporaries.

A young friend was ‘orchestrating [Rae’s] coming out’, and her ‘best friend’ was a
gay man 20 years her junior. After Bess and her partner separated, Bess started a
relationship with another younger woman.

Laura, an Anglo-Australian lesbian aged 44, living in a regional city, had resolved
conflicts over age with her partner, aged 33. Laura had originally thought she knew
better than her partner because she was older and more experienced. Her partner
had to stand up to Laura and challenge her beliefs for Laura’s perception to change.
In addition to an age difference, Laura and her partner also managed differences of
ethnicity, desire for personal space and desire for sexual contact, and difficulties
around remaining closeted while Laura stayed married for five and a half years and
then brought two children to live with her partner. Their relationship was of 13
years duration at the time of the interview, and Laura believed that the differences
they had struggled with had been opportunities for growth for her.

In friendship, similarities of age, race and class do not necessarily also mean
similarities in personality. The processes of making friends with dissimilar people
is remarked upon by Gouldner and Strong (1987: 41-42). Most people meet
potential friends because they are thrown together in places with others with whom
they would not normally associate. Gouldner and Strong (writing about the US)
suggest unpredictable factors such as being roommates, neighbours or co-workers.
Despite differences women who met in these places developed lasting
relationships: ‘Opposites were not attracted, but on becoming acquainted could and
did learn to like each other and become friends’ (Gouldner and Strong, 1987: 41-
This was the case for Lucy and a sporting friend. When they first met on the lacrosse team, they had quite a few ‘brawls’ at the pub over different issues, but over time, as they both left the team and conflicts were resolved, a friendship developed. Cathryn met one friend in a group, and remembered how she ‘disliked her a great deal at first’. She could not remember how their passionate friendship developed.

Lilian Rubin suggests different friends help people express different parts of the self (1985: 56). Verifying this, some women actively sought out friends who were different. Emily, for example, was attracted to women as friends because they were different and risked censure from her circle of friends because of this choice:

Like I can think of a couple that the circle thought ‘oh they’re a bit strange’, well I was more attracted to their friendship because they were a bit strange than the circle that was there … and [I was] seen as an outsider because I did mix with them.

Elaine, too, saw herself as very sociable and had a wide range of eclectic friends. She made particular efforts with workmates she disliked, persevering until she found something they had in common.

These very different friends, however, were enjoyed because they were friends and not lovers. Participants sought a different kind of compatibility in more ways with a lover, several commenting, as Jessica did, ‘I wouldn’t want to live with my friends’. Rosemary echoed Jessica:

I could not live with many of my close friends. A sexual partner is someone I’ll spend a lot of time with so we must be complementary unlike with friendships I often seek out the exciting or outrageous that would be impossible to live with.

Jane too said she wouldn’t want to spend the equivalent amount of time with her friends as she did with her lover. For May, friends’ lifestyles can diverge from yours more than a lover’s can. A lover allows you to touch deep vulnerabilities and this requires a commitment of time, energy and regular contact and sexual contact that you don’t ask of friends.
‘Different’ friends were enjoyed because they provided things relationships did not and could not offer. For Cathryn, a range of friends meant she got a range of needs met from a variety of different sources.

All combinations and permutations of sameness and difference support the women’s ‘project of self’: sameness provides an important mirror, reflection or affirmation of one’s self – particularly important as participants continue to be marginalised in society – while difference provides opportunities for self-awareness and self-development.

ESTABLISHING FRIENDSHIPS

_Casual or situational friends_

As discussed above, different friends allow for the expression of different parts of the self (Rubin, 1985: 56). Casual friends are an important part of the lighter side of lesbians’ lives. Close friendships often begin as casual friends.

I asked participants whether they differentiated between friends they ‘liked’ and friends they ‘loved’ to establish whether they classified friends as casual or close. May was explicit about her differentiation: ‘Friends are by definition people I love. Friends that I ‘like’ are acquaintances’. Most participants agreed, characterising their casual friends as acquaintances or ‘playmates’ (Rosemary). They were fun to get together with for social outings but did not have the depth that close friends did. Despite their superficiality, they were still important and enjoyed. They were good to ‘hang out with – have a drink, have a laugh’ (Ali) or to ‘provide light and shade to the tapestry of my life’ (Missy). Jocasta, who had just moved to Melbourne, lamented the loss of a network of casual friends:

> Having moved cities there are fewer ‘like’ friends around now – fewer people to run into, know casually. But those I used to have were superficial, jolly sort of relationships involving kindness but not great love.

Casual friends are also situational. Jillian distinguished between casual and close friends thus:
Friends I love are usually older friends; new friends are often situational – i.e. we share life circumstances, e.g. work, parenting, hobbies. When the circumstances change – the friends frequently do too!

Alice gave a different example in her discussion of how close or ‘real’ friends endured the commencement of a new lover relationship, but acquaintances often did not. Shared activities with casual friends included political activism, discussing study or community issues or work on creative projects. Sometimes situational friendships continued.

Rose and Serafica (1986) argue that strategies for maintaining friendships depend on the level of friendship. Their participants report that casual friends are harder to sustain, while best or developed friends are self-maintaining. Fehl (1996) also comments that social skills are especially important in the early stages of friendships. Two participants agreed, volunteering that they had to work harder to maintain casual friends. For Missy, they were in some ways ‘more challenging. I have to work harder and be more tolerant – slough off encroaching rigidity’. For Laura, casual friends were ‘not as comfortable as the person I love, I have to try harder with these people, be more careful of what I say’.

Moving from a casual to a close friendship

The development of close friendships helps in the ‘project of self’ for lesbians, allowing a fuller expression of the ‘relational self’. Lillian Rubin suggests friendships help maintain self and identity, and that this is particularly important for shared marginal identities (1985). But close friends in this study do not necessarily have to be other lesbians: supportive heterosexual friends and selected family members are just as common. Despite being influenced by the discourse of lesbian identity as based on sexual relationships, contemporary lesbians demonstrate that sexuality is not the only, or the most important, factor in identity. Yet acceptance and support take on special significance in lesbians’ definitions of friendships because of continued marginalisation, and are at the top of the list of factors that shift a friend from casual to close. Participants also identify reciprocity, shared
intense or life-changing experiences and time as helping them make the leap from acquaintanceship to friendship. Lovers often become close much more quickly.

Aristotle writes that true friendships take time and intimacy and dealing with difficulties, ‘for as the saying goes, ‘you cannot get to know each other until you have eaten the proverbial quantity of salt together’’ (cited in Raymond, 1991a: 264). Centuries later, Hall and Rose also note that lesbians’ cross-race friendships take time to establish trust (1996). These texts contrast with Bauman’s contention that in post-modernity, instant intimacy is common (1998). Time was important for Missy, aged 42 and with a four-year-old child:

*Time* is the factor that crosses a friend over in my heart from ‘like’ to ‘love’. If they’re still around in five years, we’ve probably spilled our guts enough and had enough laughs to rely on it being ongoing. I rarely make new ‘love’ friends now. I have the same five or six dating back from between 10 & 30 years ago (!!)

Missy’s comment also echoes the experiences of many in other studies of friendship that demonstrate how age and stage of life (Brown, 1981; Lopata, 1981; Callaghan, 2002) affect the desire and capacity to develop close friendships. The close friends of Annette, Louise and Jillian, who were all in their 30s, also tended to be those women they had known for quite a while.

For Cathryn, an Irish lesbian aged 27, living in inner-city Melbourne, the difference between casual and close friends was one of graduation, defined in part by a ‘rite of passage’ that resonated with Aristotle’s eating of the salt together, by the passage of time, and by sharing ‘both joyous and tragic’ times. Her narrative of ‘chosen family’ supports arguments of a ‘transformation of intimacy’ in the contemporary period:

I think I’ve understood for a long time that a real turning point in my friendships occurs when that person asks for my help in a time of difficulty or need, or when they help me. It’s like a rite of passage: I know I can trust that person and that they trust me. Thinking about why this looms large in my ideas about friendship lead me to think about how I have constructed a chosen family, made up of trusted friends of long standing, and how this
may compensate for not being from a close-knit family. It means I feel there are people I can rely on in bad times, as well as sharing all the good stuff with. It makes me feel safe and loved and that I contribute to others’ lives in equally positive ways.

Cathryn identified that she came to love friends who she got to know well, who she admired and respected and with whom the friendship was reciprocal. She was unsure of how to define ‘love’ with regard to friends, wondering ‘maybe it’s that feeling of joyousness when I see them’. This feeling was ‘underscored’ for Cathryn, because her closest friends were in Ireland, from where she had migrated two years ago, and she didn’t see them very often. Distance also probably had an impact on her discussion of the need for common interests to maintain friendships. For her, once a friendship had been ongoing for years, the need for common interests diminished: ‘You don’t have to ‘do’ things, find activities to share: the friendship can thrive on ideas and more intangible things’.

Close friendships often involve physical attraction. Echoing the discourse of passionate friendships, almost half (n=17) of the lesbians in this study commented on the similarities between sexual love for their partner and love in friendship, or the physicality of both kinds of love. For Sally love involved ‘a certain attraction’.

Rae wrote in her questionnaire:

Those friends I ‘love’, I really feel a need to see. There is an emotional attachment, and perhaps some type of physical one (perhaps sexual in some cases, not in others) – during time together (or communicating by phone and letter) the adrenal runs, there is a heightening of the senses – one is often on an emotional high.

The blurred boundaries between friends and lovers that are often a feature of lesbians’ friendships are discussed more in Chapter Four.

Casual and close friendships change for some participants. Sometimes Elaine’s friends moved between casual and close and back again. For Alice, liking and loving friends changed as she changed. It depended on ‘circumstance, happenings, individual growth’. For Lisa, love was ‘a fluid thing. Sometimes those friends I
only ‘like’ I can feel love towards, sometimes I only like my ‘love’ friends. Love to me is … a very impermanent phenomenon’. Lisa’s partner May had similar views:

Some (most) friendships wax and wane. I think friendship for me is a kind of feeling rather than a set of expectations. I can have feelings of friendship to those I barely know, at times, whilst others I’ve known for many years may remain acquaintances. It is a question of mutuality and attraction.

Once friendships are established, usually as either casual or close, the issue of maintaining them becomes salient.

FRIENDSHIP MAINTENANCE

I asked participants how their friendships were maintained, and following Pat O’Connor (1992), sought responses concerning time, money, freedom from other responsibilities, continuing common interests, living near each other and shared intense or life-changing experiences. Continuing common interests are important to more than three-quarters (n=31) and shared intense experiences to almost as many (n=28). Table 3.3 summarises responses. This section examines how friendship priorities reflect changing selves and affirm different parts of lesbians’ identities.

Table 3.3

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<th>Friendship maintenance</th>
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<td>Continuing common interests</td>
<td>31</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shared intense or life-changing experiences</td>
<td>28</td>
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<tr>
<td>Living near each other</td>
<td>19</td>
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<tr>
<td>Time</td>
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<td>Freedom from other responsibilities</td>
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<td>Other – acceptance of lifestyle changes</td>
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<td>Other – reciprocity</td>
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<td>Money</td>
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Continuing common interests

For most of the women in this study, the top choice of ‘common interests’ refers to treading similar life paths. Unlike the research on men’s activity-based friendships (eg. Wright, 1982), shared hobbies like sport or music are almost incidental. Discussions of a lack of or decrease in common interests are usually about friends lost or those who lessened in intensity due to the shift to a lesbian identity or other personal changes. Six are more explicit when they volunteer that ‘acceptance of lifestyle changes’ is important for friendship maintenance. The stress on these factors is consistent with the stress participants place on acceptance and emotional support when asked to define friendship. Ali expressed sentiments shared by many participants. She wrote:

> Common interests help. One of the things I find with straight friends is that my life/lifestyle is becoming increasingly different. That’s not necessarily a problem but within the common interest thing is being judgmental and relating to each other’s lives in some way. I find I am much more connected to people who experience life in a similar way to me (which I guess I would say is fairly intense/conscious/honest).

Here it is not so much the transition to a lesbian identity that is a factor, but how it is dealt with in the friendship.

Participants speak of four different kinds of change that affects friendships: the transition to a lesbian identity; situational change such as moving or changing jobs; personal change such as a shift in values or religion/spirituality; and changes that come about when sexual relationships end or begin. When one party changes and the other doesn’t, or change is not tolerated, friendships experience strain. Clearly the transition to a lesbian identity is the most monumental change that affects the women in this study. It is discussed more in Chapter Four, and along with the other more universal changes, again in Chapter Seven.

When two or more friends experience change together, however, it is a different story, and one that enables friends to withstand even more change. Friends that endure change together have a shared experience of how the self adapts under
pressure, and a shared understanding of self-development. Stories of shared intense or life-changing experiences demonstrate an awareness of ‘the self as a project’.

**Shared intense or life-changing experiences**

Shared intense or life-changing experiences help forge strong bonds for a majority of participants. These can be abstract, spiritual or more concrete experiences. On the abstract plane, Joan, a Scottish lesbian aged 57, living in a regional town, wrote that the maintenance of her friendships was ‘about the abstract ‘other’, spiritual experience of being alive – my friends travel the same paths’. She gave examples of two friends who had come in and out of her life at different times. She and one friend, who she had met at age 30, had a friendship ‘based in strong spiritual beliefs and exploration’. Joan had met another friend when she was 18, and despite having not seen each other for many years as they lived in different countries, Joan wrote ‘our lives have run in parallel in an extraordinary way and our friendship is strong and deep’. Indigo also felt spiritual connections with her close friends, who included her sister – who lived overseas – and her lover. Most of Jane’s friends had been through some sort of major spiritual change – Jane herself practised taoism. And all of Jocasta’s close friends had got out of multi-generational ‘bad family dynamics’, and with the help of counselling were trying to live their lives differently from the way they were brought up.

Others had more concrete experiences that had bonded them. Lesbians of different ages, and new lesbians and those who had been lesbian for longer, had different shared intense experiences. The most often-related story for formerly married women was the experience of raising children at the same time. Second only to this was the experience of nursing training in the 1960s and 70s for about a dozen women aged in their 40s and 50s. While participants did not go into detail about this, a nurse colleague commented that women of this age would have trained at a time when not many other occupations were open to women, nurses lived in nurses’ homes with strict rules, and worked in an institution where they had no individual identity, signalled by the convention of calling nurses ‘sister’ or by their last name (Helen Kenna, 2002). For Kenna, friendships provided a much-needed
support, to the point where nurses at reunions could ‘pick up where they left off’ up to 40 years before. One participant in her 20s who trained as a nurse also bonded with other nurses, suggesting the nature of the work may be a factor (cf. Chinn et al., 1988; Schweitzer, 1995; Fehr, 1996). Marilyn, aged 52, bonded with a long-time friend in the navy in the 1960s. Although they had only been together for six months in that initial location, the intense experience of this institution was enough to sustain a 30-year friendship. It included Marilyn being relocated and marked ‘not for promotion’ because she was caught having an affair with another woman in the navy. Later they had married, and while not always living in the same area, they had raised children at the same time, which strengthened their bond.

Younger women had different bonding experiences, most often around sharing houses. Mei Li, aged 24, wrote that one was ‘a happy, affirming friend through/with whom I took great social and lifestyle leaps’. They lived together for years, went to university and ‘sort of came out together’. Their friendship was so important to them that Mei Li noted they suppressed differences to preserve it. Alice, also aged 24, discussed a friend who had lived with Alice and her partner Lucy during the year of interviews. Alice became very close to her, and in her interview postscript, wrote how they had remained in contact, discussing all sorts of ‘life issues’, and how she had been a significant person for Alice’s ‘discovering a sense of self and regaining confidence in self’. Alice and Lucy also felt that they had family-like obligations to former housemates. Natalie, aged 26, bonded with a housemate when the housemate was leaving a violent relationship with a man. Natalie supported her then and again later through her friend’s pregnancy and the birth of her daughter.

Women who had been lesbian for most of their lives had more ex-lovers as close friends. Jocasta spoke about a friend with whom she had been lovers, but ‘we’re better as friends’. Cathryn, Jane and Missy also remained firm friends with several ex-lovers. Missy took the lesbian tendency to remain friends with ex-lovers to the furthest extent in that all of her five closest friends were ex-lovers.
The conditions of late capitalism such as having to move to find a job or follow a partner’s job, and being busy because of intensified work demands, also impacted on friendship. Friends were left behind due to moving, or participants were busy and wished they had more time for friends. Some friendships could and did survive such stresses, particularly if shared intense experiences had already forged strong bonds.

Geographical proximity was important for friendship maintenance for almost half (n=19) of the participants. Four lost contact with friends due to moving. Of these, two had moved from the city to the country and had lost their city friends, one had moved often and one had lost a friend who went overseas with her new husband. Maddy, aged 22, was sad about the fact that most of her friends were away: ‘I find the distance from my closest friends is the biggest barrier to friendships as most of my close female, lesbian/bi friends are overseas or interstate’. For Missy, aged 42, geography is everything. With work, study, raising a child, circus and I just love being in Melbourne – if anyone is too far away it’s almost impossible to fuel the friendship fire.

Despite geography being important for 19 of the participants, 16 of these 19 maintained friendships after they had moved to the country, interstate or overseas (21 in all had maintained friendships at a distance). Of these 16, almost all (n=15) had ticked the box on the questionnaire about shared intense or life-changing experiences being important for friendship maintenance, indicating that these close friendships could withstand moving. Most of these 16 were also more mobile than others in the study (see Chapter Two). They had moved cities or towns an average of six times (between two and 13 times, with the most common number of moves being seven), and seven of these 16 had emigrated to Australia from overseas. Moving and making decisions about friendships was clearly a normal part of these women’s lives (cf. Gouldner and Strong, 1987). It is apparent that shared experiences did not need to be ongoing and/or be shared from close proximity for friendships to continue. Indigo commented on how geography did not have to determine closeness:

I think it is hard to maintain friendships when distances are greater. I lost many friendships because of my many moves. However some friendships
seem to survive all distance. I think they are based on love like my friendship with my sister.

However, while these close friendships did continue, their intensity did reduce. Others who lived closer tended to be moved into participants’ inner circles, demonstrating that geography and embodied friendships were important. This is consistent with other studies that reveal that quality of friendship is related to proximity (Rose, 1984; Fehr, 1996: 44). Most participants with non-local friends placed them in their outer circles in their friendship diagrams (from the second circle outwards), some commenting that close friends would be in the inner circles if it were not for the geographical distance separating them. Jane had the biggest network. She maintained close friendships with 16 women, eight of whom lived in the country, interstate or overseas. They were placed in her fourth and fifth circles on her friendship diagram, her inner circles listing local women.

A few, however, disregarded geography and placed non-local friends in inner circles. These included overseas relatives who were friends (Indigo and Lisette) and interstate friends who were like relatives (Jocasta said a close friend was ‘like a sister’). This could be related to class and having money for travel, as all three were middle-class and mobile (Indigo and Lisette emigrated and Jocasta moved states). Cathryn, an immigrant from a working-class Irish background, noted that four of her five closest friends lived in different cities or countries, only her lover being local. Cathryn’s friendships definitely did not depend on proximity, although she did admit to missing them. Cathryn was also one of only three women that said money was a factor in friendship maintenance: ‘it just makes it easier to keep in touch if you live far away’.

Time was important for half (n=20) of the participants in maintaining friendships. Lisette observed that she was guilty of not making the time to see friends. As a result, she had lost them. Karen was unique in ticking only the time box on the questionnaire, but then Karen was also unique in the sample as a mother of three adults with disabilities all of whom still lived with her. She wrote ‘Time for communication i.e. phone, visit, write. Time for giving a thought’. Not
surprisingly, given the demands on her time at home, Karen’s most enduring friendships had initially been situational, for example her home help and community bus driver. Support was also important for Karen in her comments around maintenance: ‘Caring, being prepared to be there when needed. Being able to enjoy the friendship and let the friends know this’. Half of those who stated time was important for friendship maintenance (n=10) were also parents. Those with current full-time parenting responsibilities (n=6) all stated that freedom from other responsibilities was important for friendship maintenance.

Many participants commented on their busy lives and the demands on their time with work, study, partners and families. Their experiences echo the findings of Lopata (1981) and Brown (1981), who found that most (heterosexual) people had fewer friends in the middle years of life due to the constraints of work and family. While Lopata’s and Brown’s research assumes a typical heterosexual life course of partner and children, it appears that even lesbians without children experience a decline in friendship in the middle years. Almost two decades later, this could also be related to the prioritising of the ‘project of self’, and the changing work climate which means it is harder to stay afloat financially. For example, Nancy Davidson writes about her frustration at not being able to see much of an old friend due to the need to fit in work, study, art and activism, and how they often only find time to talk on the phone on their exercise machines:

> It’s the 90s. We are still close, but we don't have the kind of time together we would like. Our lives are on fast forward; we are each overextended and committed to our creative pursuits … mostly, we’re exhausted. I don’t think it’s only us. Life is more serious. The 90s are kind of like castor oil, and there’s always one more global problem to swallow (1996: 264; see also Stanley, 1996; Berger, 2002).

However the stressful conditions of late capitalism, while acknowledged, do not force the ‘emotional disengagement’ (Lasch, 1984), alienation and isolation remarked on by postmodernists (Elliott, 2001), or even a complete retreat into coupledom (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). Participants’ emphasis on creative pursuits and careers suggests a ‘project of self’, but the dual emphasis on partners
and a few close friends means that this self is not entirely individualistic. Rather, it suggests a ‘relational self’, and for some, a ‘self-in-community’ (Hoagland, 1988).

In this study, busy participants included Jean, who had her partner Marilyn, a demanding job as a nurse with a variety of long shifts, and an equally demanding daily caring role for her elderly mother, who lived some distance away. She resisted the isolation she had experienced in a previous closeted relationship by making efforts to keep up with friends. Jean had first done ‘on the job’ training as a nurse. As nursing became professionalised, she had come under pressure to complete a university degree while still working full time. Jean felt that her time pressures while studying had been one of the reasons why her first lesbian relationship had ended some years before. Rosemary was very involved in the mixed gay and lesbian community, ran her own business, had a partner, a good circle of close friends and no time to pursue any more: ‘the few straight women that I get to really like I don’t have the time to pursue a close friendship with because my social life/friendship bank balance is already so full’. Rosemary’s ‘bank balance’ metaphor echoes that used by Gouldner and Strong, whose interviewees talked about ‘the personal budget of friendship’, ‘investing’ in friendship and ‘getting dividends’ (1987: 42).

For May, aged 31, the fact that she had few friendships was not just about time, but also about priorities shifting as she grew older:

It used to piss me off in my 20s that older couples made less effort with friends and seemed to implicitly place more emphasis on ‘family values’. As I get older I understand that my own needs in that respect have shifted. For my own self-development and growth I need a deep and intimate committed relationship and that’s where I place my energy and priority. My developing career is vital for my sense of independence and intellectual satisfaction, and to a sense that I’m contributing to my world in some way. Beyond that, what friendships come my way are a bonus that I’ll value but not cling to.
Jillian found juggling work, study, a partner and children difficult. Annette, too, had her creative work, partner and children, and worried about being ‘lazy’ around friendship:

I’m very busy and don’t socialise much. So if I have a common interest with the other person or if we work together I find it much easier to stay in contact.

The issue of time also arose in finding that frequency of contact did not necessarily affect closeness. A quarter of participants (n=11) noted that they did not see their close friends very often, but remained connected, verifying Rose and Serafica’s thesis that the closest friends are self-sustaining (1986). However Rubin questions the reciprocity of these sorts of friendships (1985), Pahl notes that this kind of ‘pure friendship’ is ‘a luxury’ (1998: 108), and Jamieson is critical of the middle classes romanticising an ideal of friendship with people they rarely see (1998:165). Indeed eight of these 11 did come from middle-class backgrounds, and those who didn’t were educated and had access to resources which assisted in upward mobility.

Several of the women who did not need to see their friends very often noted on their questionnaires that with good friends, you could ‘pick up where you left off’ (Elaine, Anny and Missy) or ‘it was like you were only speaking to them yesterday’ (Susie). For Louise’s close friends ‘there is no big deal if we don’t catch up for a while’. Rosa wrote that ‘many of my friendships are ones where I see the people infrequently but nevertheless have close relationships’. Joan had friends that came in and out of her life but a strong spiritual connection maintained the friendships. Rosemary might spend a lot of time with close friends ‘or else just see them a few times a year’. Alice’s family and Jess’s close friends were not seen often, but were in their thoughts frequently. There was a mutual acceptance that levels of contact depended on where friends were ‘at’ in their lives. For Ali, a 29-year-old Greek lesbian living in inner city Melbourne, the quality of the interaction was more important than the quantity, reflecting a ‘relational self’:

I think time is important in the sense that you have time to see each other but more than that, that you are very present when you’re together. I don’t necessarily see friends that often but I like to have a good stretch of time
where both people are really focused on each other. That sort of space is important to me. I will often go weeks without seeing people and that’s fine for me as long as the time spent together is really focused on connecting.

With this sort of infrequent contact, and only one friend in a pair questioned, it is difficult to know whether feelings of close friendship are reciprocated by the named friends, especially considering the findings of Rubin (1985). When she telephoned nominated close friends of 132 of the men and women she interviewed, she found only 14 percent concurred with their friends that they were close. Sixty-four percent did not list Rubin’s interviewees as friends at all (1985: 7). Jamieson goes further with a critique of intermittent ‘soul baring’ as a middle-class women’s phenomenon, questioning whether this kind of ‘disclosing intimacy’, that is exaggerated in studies of women’s friendships, deserves to be elevated above other kinds, such as the practical help and more regular involvement in each others’ lives that is a feature of working class and men’s friendships (1998: 100). Rose and Serafica (1986) found that the belief that best or developed friendships were less affected by a decrease in contact was a hypothetical one only; actual friends required regular contact for maintenance. Several participants explicitly stated that they needed frequent contact with close friends (Toni), they missed friends if there was too long between contact (Susie) or would miss them if they moved away (Jessica). Elizabeth, a 43-year-old Anglo-Australian lesbian living part-time in Melbourne and part-time in the country, was very conscious about her friends. As she was currently single, she observed that she had to put more effort into friendships than coupled participants did. Elizabeth rang her friends regularly, making notes in her diary to remind herself.

Despite the criticisms of those who see friends rarely, it appears that this kind of ‘disclosing intimacy’ suits many lesbians. Their preferences demonstrate the importance of emotional support as a part of friendship. They also are a measure of the fact that the lesbians in this study are working to support themselves and are personally autonomous, not needing practical help. In addition, the time pressures of working life militate against contact, a fact accepted by friends.
This chapter illustrates the ways friends and lovers are chosen to assist in self-affirmation, self-awareness and self-development, an issue particularly salient for women undergoing such profound personal change as the transition to a lesbian identity, and/or living at odds with ‘compulsory heterosexuality’. This self thrives with small circles of supportive friends, and larger networks of more casual friends that, in the words of participant Missy, provide ‘light and shade’ to the tapestries of their lives.

Common interests are important for friendship maintenance, and some are lost along the way when a shift to a lesbian identity means loss of commonality. However shared intense or life-changing experiences, which forge strong bonds prior to the shift, mean some friends weather change and cross over into new lives. Shared intense or life-changing experiences also modify the effect of the conditions of late capitalism on friendships, with many being maintained despite geographical shifts and demands on time. Close friends do not necessarily need frequent contact, with a quarter of participants noting that close friends are self-maintaining. Despite the stressful conditions of late capitalism, participants’ focus on careers, relationships and contributions to community life and the world suggest a ‘project of self’ that is not isolated or alienated in response to pressure, but rather one that needs and enjoys connections with others.

The next chapter examines in more detail common issues and problems in lesbian friendships.
CHAPTER FOUR: ISSUES IN FRIENDSHIP

The ‘relational self’ is played out in distinctive ways through lesbian friendships. Friends are seen as of crucial importance, particularly because they accept the self when others in society may not. In line with more general societal shifts towards negotiated kin relationships, participants’ friends sometimes fulfill family functions in ways that heighten awareness of the need for a sense of belonging. In this regard they both aid a ‘project of self’ and are part of a ‘transformation of intimacy’ in the contemporary period. Yet the stated importance of friendship is often at odds with the actual practice of friendship for the lesbians in this study. There are several reasons for this. We live in a couple society, where there are many pressures and rewards for prioritising lovers over friends; the lesbian’s lover is often her best friend so the felt need for other women friends reduces when she is coupled; lesbian identity depends on having a lover so this relationship is often prioritised, especially for new lesbians. There are also some difficult, complex moments in friendships between lesbians and between lesbians and heterosexual or bisexual women when the boundaries between friendship and lover relationships blur. Sexual feelings can enhance, but can also harm friendships.

All of these dynamics in lesbian friendships reveal the different ways that lesbian subjectivity can develop and evolve through friendship. This chapter demonstrates how friends aid the ‘project of self’, a project strongly influenced by discourses of a more profound individualism, equal relationships, lesbian identity as based on sexual relationships, and passionate friendships.

THE IMPORTANCE OF FRIENDSHIP

Participants define friendship as a relationship that provides support, fun, love, care, intimacy and acceptance of self. It requires common interests and trustworthiness, it is an equal, reciprocal relationship and it meets physical needs (eg. for hugs). It is a flexible, non-obligatory relationship: true friends are often defined as those not needing regular contact but with whom one can, in the words
of several women ‘pick up where you left off’. At the same time as appreciating this flexibility, participants often express deep feelings of commitment to friends.

These qualities can be seen as universal, however the notion of friends being accepting and supportive of the self, no matter what (yet also challenging where required) takes on particular significance for the lesbians in this study. Acceptance and support by friends appear to be particularly salient in the context of societal and family non-acceptance and non-support of participants’ sexuality. In other studies of friendship among heterosexual populations (eg. Bell, 1981; Brown, 1981; Candy et al, 1981; Lopata, 1981b; Hite, 1989; Duck, 1991), the quality of acceptance is either not acknowledged or is just one of many features of friendship. Compared with the above studies, acceptance is given much more weight for the lesbians in this study. While Graham Little’s description of friendship as ‘being ourselves with others’ (1993) resonates with participants, the language used to talk about acceptance in friendship is much more emotive. Participants describe acceptance in terms of ‘being able to talk about anything’ with their friends. Although it is not mentioned explicitly by all participants that this is important because they are lesbian, the specific ways in which acceptance is described indicate that this is a strong possibility. Given that for the most part, Australian society does not respect or accept lesbians, this is a significant finding. Affirmation by others is thus crucial to the development of the lesbian ‘project of self’.

One participant who did explicitly draw the link between friendship and sexuality was Annette, an Anglo-Australian lesbian aged 36. She wrote in her questionnaire:

Women can be friends for many different reasons – because we have similar interests, because they are enjoyable company, etc. But mostly I consider my friends to be so because they are supportive in an emotional sense. I find my lesbian friends to be more empathetic to my problems because they have been, or are in a similar situation to me. There is an unspoken ‘bond’ between myself and my lesbian friends which I find really interesting because with a couple of them I don’t think I would necessarily be their friend if we didn’t know each other as lesbians. This ‘bond’ is very strong – like we belong to a secret group. It is this secretive nature of what we have
in common, I think, that makes the bond strong. We all look out for each other.

Emily also suggested that her experience that ‘you can be yourself with a friend more than you can with relations … may have something to do with my sexuality’.

Other definitions that indicated more subtly that acceptance was important because of participants’ lesbian identity included Laura’s: ‘Someone who … respects where I’m at in my life …’ For Ruth, a friend was someone who you could ‘be yourself with’, which could indicate the possibility that she was ‘not herself’ in other arenas. For Elaine, a friend was ‘someone with whom I feel I don’t need to explain myself’ and for Marilyn, ‘a person who I can be open with’. For Lisa, it was ‘a person who you can accept unconditionally (and likewise they you)’, and for Anny and Jess, it was someone who ‘accepts you as you are’.

A related word in participants’ definitions was judgment, or more specifically, friends were those who did not judge. For example, Ali’s definition of a friend was:

Someone who loves me and respects me and allows me to be exactly who I need to be. Someone who doesn’t judge me or my choices (even if they cannot agree with or understand them).

This could indicate that lesbians felt ‘judged’ in other areas of their lives.

Support, understanding, empathy, listening, affirmation and assistance were other words used in friendship definitions and reasons why friendship was important. These qualities were usually interwoven with the requirement that friends share both good and bad times. Participants said the comfort and warmth of friendship kept them alive or was part of the reason for living. It was important because they could depend on friends, and because friends boosted confidence.

Bess, an Anglo-Australian lesbian aged 61, from a rural area, was one for whom friendship was part of her ‘reason for living’. She described how she had had two husbands and several children, but had ‘still never had friendship like I’ve experienced with this woman [who she had started her first lesbian relationship with 13 years previously] and I doubt I will again … I hope I’m wrong’. She was
wrong: Bess separated from her lover around the time of the interview and two years later commenced a new relationship at the age when most heterosexual women have given up on this possibility (Raphael and Robinson, 1984; Cole and Rothblum, 1991). Bess’s comment also signals the blurred boundaries between friends and lovers common to lesbians: when asked about the importance of friendship she chose to speak of a lover. Susie gathered strength ‘from being together in women’s space particularly of my friends. I enjoy hearing about my friends lives/experiences and am affirmed in their company’. For Ali, who regarded her friends as her family, friendship sustained her. For Joan it was a deeper support: ‘Friends have been the touchstone for me as I move through my life, friendship has nurtured me and kept me alive’. The support commented on was for the most part emotional rather than practical or instrumental support. Lucy was clear about this differentiation: ‘You don’t need to get anything, just a nice feeling is enough’.

Other important features of friendship included being able to share with others. Participants discussed the joy and laughter, challenge, stimulation, growth, enlightenment, meaning and fulfilment provided by friendship. Participants shared ‘secrets, hopes, disappointments’ (Elizabeth); ‘intimate experiences and values’ (Lisa); ‘parts of myself …(history, opinions, stories)’ (Cathryn). Talking, often ‘about anything’, came up many times. Jean identified a key difference between her friends and her family: ‘family relationships have always been a struggle and through friendship I have been able to grow into interpersonal development’. These comments demonstrate the women’s self-development through friendship.

Reciprocity or mutuality was part of the reason friendship was important for many participants. It gave them an opportunity to give and receive, to be needed and to be able to depend on others. Anny suggested that ‘a one-sided friendship may not work’. While some of the women did maintain one-sided friendships for a while, these were unsatisfactory and usually ended. Ongoing friendships were more often valued for being equal, revealing the influence of the discourse of equal relationships that is part of a ‘transformation of intimacy’. The priorities demonstrate that the participants are ‘relational selves’ for whom mutual caring is an important part of what it means to be a woman and a lesbian.
A comparison with definitions of friendships among heterosexuals

Lesbians’ definitions of friendship differ notably from those given in studies of heterosexual men and women friends. For example, a review of the literature on friendship functions by Candy et al (1981) lists three functions barely mentioned in this study: power, status and assistance. This could be because power and status are most often features of men’s friendships, rather than women’s, and practical assistance is often a feature of ‘conventional’ (traditional or conservative) (Bell, 1981) or poor (Pahl, 1998; Jamieson, 1998) women’s friendship networks. However even the women of poor or working-class background in this study are unlikely to stress practical help over emotional support.

In addition to these factors, Helena Lopata’s research with heterosexual women found competition and a lack of trust made friendship ‘impossible to accomplish’ (1981a: viii). Lopata acknowledges that feminism might be making a difference to (heterosexual) women’s friendships (see also Acker et al, 1981; Rose and Roades, 1987), but Orbach and Eichenbaum (1994) find the opposite to be true: heterosexual women compare themselves mercilessly by their ability to manage a man, career and children. As the man part of this equation does not apply to lesbians, it is not surprising that competition does not arise as a felt issue in lesbian friendships in this study. This is not to say that it is not there. Miner and Longino (1987) argue that competition is ‘a feminist taboo’. It could also be a feminine taboo. The women in this study are very attuned to what they see as the ethical and moral issues of womanhood: they value relationships and experience a moral ‘imperative to care’. Feelings of competition with women friends sit uneasily within this framework.

‘Friends as family’

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1 This could be a feature of an Australian research population compared with overseas studies: Australians typically have a high standard of living and good access to the welfare state and so may require less practical assistance to survive. Lesbians also typically support themselves financially (Dunne, 1997).
A theme that is much discussed in the literature on lesbians’ friendships, and that also emerges in my data, is that of the importance of friends as substitutes for families or ‘better than families’ in providing love, care and nurturance. As is the case for lesbians in other studies, this is because of participants’ continued marginalisation as lesbians in a predominantly heterosexual culture (Weston, 1991; Bernstein and Reiman, 2001; Weeks et al., 2001). Participants’ narratives reveal both a ‘transformation of intimacy’ in which friends become family or like family, and how the role of friends in the quest for authentic selfhood – the ‘project of self’ – may be greatly amplified for lesbians.

In response to the question, ‘why is friendship important to you?’ participants gave descriptions of intimacy, which, like their definitions of friendship, were highly emotive and thus qualitatively different from descriptions in other (heterosexual) studies. I surmise that this is because participants are lesbian. Friends carry out what are usually described as family functions in providing a sense of belonging, connection, safety, support, familiarity, love, intimacy, care, comfort, warmth and nurturance. In their study of lesbian and gay ‘families of choice’ in the UK, Weeks et al. (2001) note similar emotions which they call a feeling of ‘home’.

Eight participants went so far as to describe friends as ‘chosen families’ – specifically as substitutes for family or ‘better than family’. Their friendship networks did not exclude blood family but typically included one or two chosen members. This is in line with the larger observed trend in western liberal democracies towards ‘negotiated’ rather than ‘obligatory’ kin relationships (Beck-Gernsheim, 1998; Pahl, 1998; Weeks et al., 2001), a trend that is contested by Jamieson (1998) but that appears very relevant to lesbians’ lives. However, these lesbians’ families of choice are significantly different from the families of choice of heterosexual women such as those described by Lindsey (1981) and Gouldner and Strong (1987). Friends are important because of emotional distance – if not outright rejection – from kin. This became clear when I asked participants to draw diagrams of current female friendship networks. If one or two chosen members of participants’ blood families – usually a mother, a sister, a grandmother and/or an aunt who accepted and embraced their lesbian identity – did not make it into the
close inner circles drawn on the questionnaire, blood family were not included at all in descriptions of extended networks. The only exceptions to this were participants’ adult daughters, who usually all made it into friendship networks.

It has been argued that close family ties are often more common in non-Anglo migrant and working-class groups than in white middle-class populations (Bell, 1981; Solano, 1986; Gouldner and Strong, 1987; O’Connor, 1992; Bruenjes, 1997). My data is consistent with this finding, although most of those from non-Anglo backgrounds in this study were Australian-born rather than migrants. The most intense family ties were maintained by immigrants Indigo, with her sister, and Lisette, with several family members. However, half of the eight who referred to friends fulfilling family functions were of non-Anglo background (cf. Hidalgo, 1984). Alex, a Lithuanian-English lesbian aged 49, was the most explicit in regard to emotions: ‘my friends are really my emotional family, my sisters’. Ruth, a Jewish lesbian aged 47, felt that her friends ‘in many ways are my family more so than my blood family’. For Natalie, also Jewish, aged 26, friends were ‘a sort of second family without the neurosis or blame’. For Ali, a Greek lesbian aged 29, estranged from her family, friends were her family and ‘to a degree’, her community: ‘because I don’t really have a family I look for some of that support and comfort and familiarity from my friends’.

Of the participants of Anglo and Celtic backgrounds, Jess, an Anglo-Celtic Australian lesbian aged 48, said friends could ‘be relied upon when relatives often cannot’. This is a reversal of the popular notion that family will always be there for you. Cathryn, aged 31, an Irish lesbian whose blood family lived in Ireland, wrote about the contrast between her ‘chosen family’ of friends, and her blood family, who were not close. Her friendships made her feel safe and loved and were a way of ‘getting my needs for intimacy, fun, personal growth, adventure, intellectual challenge … met from a variety of sources’. For Missy, an Anglo-New Zealand lesbian aged 42, whose six closest friends included five ex-lovers, the question on the importance of friendship provoked an emotional response:

I can hardly speak. Without my friendships I would have no authentic life. My friendships provide a political/lifestyle framework for my feminist
orientation, my sexuality and are a source of love and continuity of existence I can barely describe. Within my biological family I feel loved, but I don’t fully exist. Within my friendship network, family I AM ALL HERE.

Here the conjunction of intimacy and acceptance make for a powerful experience of friendship, with Missy’s quest for an ‘authentic life’ highlighting a ‘project of self’. Others echoed Missy’s notion of ‘existence’ in that the presence of friends was a matter of life and death: Jocasta, an Anglo-Australian lesbian aged 28, would ‘die without her’ friend, who she said was ‘like a sister’, and despite this study being about female friends, Louise, an Anglo-Australian lesbian aged 33, insisted that she had ‘always said’ she ‘couldn’t live without’ her twin brother, who was also gay.

The literature on lesbian friendships and relationships often refers to the phenomenon in the lesbian community of retaining close friendships with ex-lovers who become ‘like family’ (Martin and Lyon, 1972, Tanner, 1978, Becker, 1988; Shumsky, 1996; Futcher and Hopkins, 1996). For example, Catherine Hopkins writes about how the glue in her long-term friendship with ex-lover Jane Futcher was ‘interest, respect, difference, family feeling, history, and the friendship created out of this that gives the sense of place in the universe – unloneliness’. They did checks on each other, ‘making sure the other one is doing alright, and we feel secure ourselves’ (Futcher and Hopkins, 1996: 74).

As in the case of Missy, staying friends with ex-lovers was common in this study. It was due in part to the strong emotional bond typical of lesbian partners. Being lovers is one of the ‘shared intense or life-changing experiences’ discussed in Chapter Three that helps friendships endure over time. Lesbians also stay friends with ex-lovers because of pressure from small, and important, lesbian friendship groups and communities, which do not want to be disrupted, and lesbians’ own desires not to disrupt these groups. All parties tend to make special efforts to remain friends with ex-lovers, even though this may not be easy. Ex-lovers then have an important place in ‘chosen families’ or the inner circles on friendship networks. This is not often the case for heterosexual breakups, although a number of the participants who had left heterosexual marriages for a lesbian life remained
firm friends with their ex-husbands, often their first confidants. If caring is considered the ‘sine qua non’ of survival’ (Willard Gaylin, cited in Noddings, 1984: 99) for relational selves, the maintenance of friendships with ex-lovers may be an adaptive mechanism for lesbians as well as a preference.

The use of the word ‘family’ by lesbians and gay men has been supported (Weston, 1991; Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby, 1994; Goss and Strongheart, 1997; Bernstein and Reiman, 2001; Weeks et al, 2001) and contested (Hunt, 1997a; Weinstock and Rothblum, 1996b; Jo, 1996). The participants in my study who said friends were like family or better than family did not refer to these debates or qualify their use of the word family, which could indicate that they were appropriating a broader definition of the term for themselves. This was certainly the case for the more conventional usage of the term by Jessica, a Jewish-American lesbian aged 42, who conceived a child in a lesbian relationship, and who stated ‘we are a family’. Others who research the lesbian ‘baby boom’ also unapologetically use the term ‘family’ to describe partners and children (McNair et al, 2002; Dempsey, 2002; Nall, 2002).

Lesbians in this study were not asked if they considered their friends to be family, and only a few volunteered this. However the importance accorded close friendships, which often includes ex-lovers, suggests friends provide continuity and affirmation of the self for lesbians that may be missing from blood families and the wider society. While there is not a resounding embrace of the notion of ‘friends as family’, the emotions generated when asked to speak of the importance of friendships suggest lesbians need a sense of ‘belonging’ that friends provide.

OBSTACLES TO LESBIAN FRIENDSHIP

Despite the stated importance of friendship, the interviews reveal that friends do not receive as much attention as might have been expected, given the emotive language with which they are described. As well as interruptions to friendship from the busy pace of modern life, discussed in Chapter Three, friendship is not always an easy relationship for lesbians. A number of reasons emerge for this, many of which are related to the implications for women of having ‘flexible and inclusive
ego boundaries’ (Surrey, 1991: 39), that are even more ‘permeable’ (Chodorow, 1989: 159) in friendships with other women. The rest of the chapter explores the impact for lesbians of being heavily invested in ‘relational selves’ in their friendships in the contemporary context, when the pressures on all kinds of relationships are exacerbated. Obstacles to lesbian friendship reveal the influences of discourses of individualism, equal relationships, lesbian identity as a sexual identity, and passionate friendships.

A couple society militates against friendship

It is important to note that these friendships occur in what the lesbian and heterosexual literature concur is ‘a couple society’ (Rich, 1981; Lopata, 1981b; Gouldner and Strong, 1987), which has been intensified by the insecurities and risks inherent in late capitalism, where lovers provide security (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995), and a more widespread shift to individualism (Beck, 1994).

Many lesbian commentators lament that lesbians tend to prioritise lovers over other friends (West, 1989; Weston, 1991; Weinstock and Rothblum, 1996b; Stanley, 1996; Hunt, 1996, 1997a; Kitzinger, 1996a; Brownworth, 1999). The lesbians in the study agreed with a statement put to them that there was immense social pressure to be in a relationship. However they qualified this by saying that this pressure applied to the whole of society. The most common response to the statement was that lesbians were under no more pressure than heterosexuals (14 participants). Indigo believed that ‘we live in a couple society’ that discriminated against singles. For Annette,

… our society puts immense pressure on people to have a partner – no matter what your sexual preference is. You are seen to be only worthwhile if you have a partner. I am reminded of this by simply going to the supermarket. Have you ever tried finding a small piece of pumpkin in an average supermarket? Everything in these type of places is geared towards ‘the family’. Yes, I could drive miles to an alternative place to shop but I don’t feel I should have to. Every magazine you pick up, but especially ones that the average teenage girl reads is full of those hints of ‘how to keep your
partner happy’ or ‘how to catch the right man’. Society is geared for
couples – something I find very difficult to deal with.
Annette was ‘not quite single, not quite one of a couple’ as she had a regular
partner, but as the partner still lived with her husband and children Annette had ‘to
be very careful not to reveal the fact that I have a partner’. The ‘couple society’
made Annette ‘sometimes feel I am less than a person because I can’t find someone
just for me, instead of putting energy into feeling good about myself’.

Jean also believed being in a couple was seen as important by society:

Society as a whole is geared to couples. The ‘lone person’ is considered to
be a ‘sexual predator’ on the lookout. Society teaches that to be a ‘couple’ is
the only ‘desirable stage’. Singleness is threatening – people will have to
deal with their own egos and self issues.

Living in a couple society inevitably affects friendships for heterosexuals as well as
lesbians. A number of studies find heterosexual men tend to keep friends while
dating and through marriage, while heterosexual women lose them (Rose, 1984), an
experience verified by the formerly heterosexual women in this study such as
Christine, Joan and Elaine, whose husbands and friends’ husbands stopped women
friends seeing each other. Claudia Card discusses the observations of a
 correspondent in a lesbian magazine in the mid-1970s of the consequences for non-
coupled lesbians of having been socialised in heterosexual society to prioritise
lovers over others, of seeing every lesbian primarily as a potential lover, and of not
having learned how to develop friendships with potential lovers (1995: 84). The
questions of the correspondent, Margy, included

why it is often easier for lesbians to find lovers than to find good friends,
how to deal with sexual aspects of friendships so as to preserve the
friendship, how to ‘draw the line’ between affection and sex, what can be
done to prevent isolation in lesbian couples, and what to do with the
difficulties of becoming friends with a lesbian who is ‘monogamously
coupled’ (cited in Card, 1995: 84)

Margy looked forward to the day when lesbians would appreciate and validate the
importance of nonsexual friendships (Card, 1995: 85). Her concerns were agreed
with by a number of correspondents to the magazine. Card’s solution, that lesbians refuse to buy into the couple society by choosing not to co-habit, echoes other feminists’ opposition to monogamy because of its connotations of patriarchal ‘ownership’ of one’s partner (eg. Raphael and Robinson, 1984; West, 1989).

However in this study, lesbians who preferred monogamous coupling and co-habitation prioritised their lovers over other friends for a number of different reasons: because lovers became ‘best friends’, because identity, especially for new lesbians, was contingent on having a lover, and because blurred boundaries between friends and lovers meant friendship was often difficult and complex.

*Lovers are best friends*

The lesbian lover is usually the important ‘best friend’ that is a part of most women’s and girls’ emotional lives (Bell, 1981; Winstead, 1986; Becker, 1987; Hite, 1989; Josselson, 1998), hence the felt need for other friendships is changed – usually reduced. This phenomenon reveals how lesbian relationships are informed by the discourse of equal relationships, part of a wider ‘transformation of intimacy’. For Toni, ‘I feel that a lesbian’s sexual partner is also their best friend therefore the time spent with this lover is far greater and more needed than other friends’. Toni qualified her remark with a statement that she did not believe other friends should be ‘completely deleted/neglected’. Friendships such as Laura’s with her ‘best friend’ changed when Laura took up with her lover. Laura didn’t tell this friend or anyone about her relationship for many years, in fact she stayed married for the first five years. Although this lack of honesty was probably one of the reasons for the friendship ending, it is also possible Laura’s friend felt usurped in the ‘best friend’ role by Laura’s lover. Laura loved spending ‘every minute’ with her partner and only arranged to see other friends and relatives when her partner was working or otherwise occupied.

Participants’ relationships with family members were also likely to change, for example Alice found her close relationship with her mother shifted once she had a
woman lover and Lucy became her best friend. She spoke about how she explained it to her mother, who lamented the loss:

I tried to explain that if I was with a guy and got married, I’d probably still come and spend all the time talking to you ‘cause I probably wouldn’t talk to him, as it just happens the person I wanna be with is a woman and so I’m able to talk to her about everything and it really is taking away a need to spend as much time with you … like if it was a bloke who was like dad I’d have to come and talk to you about everything ‘cause he wouldn’t.

Missy wrote at length on the difference between the ‘best friends’ of lesbian and heterosexual women:

My experience has been that a new lover quickly becomes an ‘intimate’ in the way my long-term, closest friends are. It’s almost as though we begin with the same blueprint; the same capacity for self-disclosure and risk. I believe girlfriends of the wife in a het. relationship often fill painful gaps and meet needs her husband can’t or won’t. A woman’s female partner is one of the ‘girlfriends’. If you therefore have a ‘best girlfriend’ type person in your bed and in your kitchen and there for you after work, some of the roles your friends play are taken over, quite naturally by the new best girlfriend on the block. Not only that, she has the extra high profile role of adoring your body. Hmm. A hard act to follow for old school chums.

As May entered her 30s she recognised her need for a ‘deep and intimate committed relationship’ and the importance of her developing career, so much so that friendships that came her way were ‘a bonus that I’ll value but not cling to’.

*Lovers confirm identity*

A number of participants who made the transition from a heterosexual to a lesbian identity commented on how they felt they needed to prioritise lovers over friends, at least initially, or spend more time with lesbian friends to consolidate their new identity. This aspect of the ‘project of self’ is a common finding in studies of other kinds of status change (Suitor, 1987). Friends who did not support the shift were dropped, distanced or left. For some of the new lesbians and younger women, a
lesbian identity itself did not just need consolidating; it was entirely contingent on them having a lover. This was experienced both as an internal desire and an external pressure, and resonates with the discourse of lesbian identity as a sexual identity that is dominant today. It would appear that because lesbians have to be distinguished and distinguish themselves from the heterosexual ‘norm’, or ‘compulsory heterosexuality’, lesbian relationships and lesbian identity are much more sexualised than heterosexual relationships and heterosexual identity. Lesbians certainly have to think about their sexual identity, whereas for many heterosexual people, it is more easily taken for granted and assumed to be the norm, whether one has a lover or not (Doughty, 1982; Rothblum, 1989; Richardson, 1992).

For the lesbians in this study, it was easy to let a lover ‘become [one’s] whole world’ (Cathryn, aged 27). Younger participants such as Cathryn and Maddy, 22, lamented the tendency to prioritise lovers because they had learned from experiences of loneliness after breaking up that it was not a good idea to be solely focused on one person. Older lesbians such as Ruth, aged 47 and ‘out’ as a lesbian for 17 years, so more likely to have consolidated her lesbian identity, felt that prioritising lovers was ‘probably true about lesbians for their 20s I think. As you grow older’, Ruth believed, ‘you appreciate your friends more and also your individuality in the relationship’. Ruth is also a lesbian feminist activist, so according to the findings of Peplau et al (1978) on autonomy in lesbian feminists’ relationships, she is probably less likely to let her lover become her whole world.

In the late 1990s, personal desires and social pressures towards coupling, and the discourse of lesbian identity as overtly sexual, appear to have a stronger influence than lesbian feminism. Since the 1970s, radical lesbian feminists have been arguing that ‘any woman can be a lesbian’, and that lesbianism can be a political as well as a sexual identity, i.e. that political lesbians do not necessarily have to seek a female lover (Rich, 1981; Gregory, 1981; Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group, 1981; Doughty, 1982; Darty and Potter, 1984; Raymond, 1991a). While these notions have been contested (Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group, 1981; Raymond, 1991a and 1991b; Pitman 1981; Johnson, 1990), a significant body of feminist literature remains asserting the right of any woman to call herself lesbian and indeed calling
on them to do so. Despite this, clearly there are still some lesbians who do not feel that they can say they are lesbians without having a lover, or observe this belief as normative for the lesbians around them.

In response to a question about the social pressure to be in a relationship, a number of participants observed that one was not a lesbian until coupled. Jocasta observed that ‘society recognises celibate hets but since we are solely defined by our sexual relationship it seems if you’re not sexually active you’re not a lesbian’. Annette was clear about the connection:

Lesbians are defined in our society by their sexual preference. Therefore if you really want to prove to society that you truly are a lesbian, then it is easier to do so if you have a partner. It is then clear to everyone that you are a lesbian. You can then take on all the other political hats that lesbians supposedly wear.

When Toni ‘came out’, her mother doubted her sincerity until she began a relationship. Natalie commented that due to ‘compulsory heterosexuality’, country lesbians were actually invisible as such unless they had a partner. For Alex, ‘the construction of lesbian as a category that refers to relationship rather than identity/affectional orientation may exert pressure’ on lesbians to be in a relationship. She argued that this was ‘about social constructions and whether they have meaning’. Her awareness about the social construction of lesbianism reflects the debates discussed above (see also Kitzinger, 1987).

Despite identifying a pressure on lesbians to be sexual to confirm their identity, the lesbians in this study lament its presence. Elizabeth and Jillian disagreed that a lesbian needed a lover to be a lesbian, while Rosa and Mei Li remarked on ‘the problems with defining identity according to sexual preference’ as ‘people have many identities’ (Rosa). It is evident that to come to this awareness, the lesbians in this study have been influenced by lesbian feminism, other strands of feminism and theories of sexual identity. Natalie indicated an awareness of ‘compulsory heterosexuality’, Alex of the social construction of lesbianism and Rosa and Mei Li of identity politics. However they observed that these ideas had not had a large impact on the lesbian communities they moved in. Lesbians still feel pressure to be
in a relationship, and for some, consistent with the currently dominant discourse of lesbian identity based on sexual relationships, lesbian identity itself is contingent on being sexually active. This finding in part reflects the mix of participants: women who, while identifying as feminists, were not involved in the lesbian-feminist movement and were unlikely to have read the literature cited above, and women who came to a lesbian identity through falling in love with another woman at work or study, not through politics.

**Communication blocks in friendships**

‘Wanting to please’ and ‘not wanting to hurt’ others are common themes for lesbian ‘relational selves’ in the friendship narratives in this study, leading to disruption due to a lack of open communication (cf. Gilligan, 1982; Gilligan et al, 1990; Surrey, 1991). Many participants commented on their desires to change this dynamic as part of their ‘project of self’. Alice and Louise reflected on their inability to be direct or assertive in communication, but rather wanting to be caring and thoughtful of others’ feelings. Laura and Jean commented on women’s socialisation to be indirect, while Emily believed that violence in her family of origin led to her holding back true feelings, especially when conflict arose, for fear of a negative or hostile response.

In addition, communication is inhibited because of the fluid and casual nature of friendship, which has no scripts or rules as there are for intimate sexual relationships. In particular, there is no script for friends to articulate expectations about the friendship, or express disappointments or joys (Lindsey, 1981; Rose, 1984; O’Connor, 1992; Orbach and Eichenbaum, 1994; Fillion, 1996; Kitzinger, 1996a). While friends can be extraordinarily supportive of each other’s achievements and sorrows, and talk endlessly about other people, the relationship between friends themselves is rarely on the agenda for discussion.

It is not surprising, therefore, that ‘relational selves’ in friendships without rules might find that their expectations are firstly not articulated, and then secondly, not met. This is often a cause of conflict. In some cases, lack of communication leads
to painful endings of friendships. For example, Susie, aged 44, was ‘devastated and hurt and sad’ at how a friendship with a young woman, who had brought her first female partner back from overseas and was staying with Susie and Susie’s partner, had ended badly. This friend had first withdrawn, then exploded in anger, accusing Susie and her partner of being like parents, then left. While Susie couldn’t be sure of what was going on for her friend, she observed the friend had not been honest about her needs in living with Susie and her partner. Susie’s own struggles between her private and public self at an earlier stage in her life gave her a window into what her friend might have been experiencing and helped her to understand the situation:

I think what was hard for her to do was to actually be herself. I can never invent that … but I had a very public face and a very private face and now they’re more at ease with one another, you know –

Being a ‘relational self’ can be positive and satisfying, but it can also have negative consequences when feelings are not out in the open. Susie’s story also demonstrates how a sense of self might evolve over time and through experience, so that lesbians might be less conflicted and more able to express themselves.

**Blurred boundaries between friends and lovers**

One of the most common tensions in lesbian friendships is due to boundaries blurring between friends and lovers, evoking the discourse of romantic friendship. One participant, Cathryn, even referred to this discourse: ‘I’ve had a couple of passionate friendships (like Lillian Faderman writes about)’. This dynamic can be compared with the sexual tension that often exists in (heterosexual) cross-sex friendships (Rubin, 1985; Nardi, 1992), but in a homophobic social context, it also inhibits the ‘project of self’. Blurred boundaries occur when ex-lovers become friends, but they are more commonly problematic when a sexual attraction on the part of one or both friends becomes evident. Such attraction may or may not be communicated, and if it is verbalised, it is sometimes denied by the other. Because the possibility of this kind of a shift is more likely when one or both of two women friends is a lesbian, sexual feelings are common in lesbians’ friendships. When sexual attraction is communicated or acted upon, in some cases, erotic energy
enhances friendships, and in others, it proves too much of a challenge for friends, who then distance or end friendships.

This phenomenon is given different names by different commentators: Vetere (1982) describes a ‘continuum’ between friends and lovers; Nardi (1992) discusses the ‘dialectical role’ of friendship, sex and attraction; Weston (1991) and Stanley (1996) talk about ‘boundary blurring’ and Hall (1993) suggests that the most promising area for new intimacy forms is in ‘the borderland’ between friends and lovers. It manifests in many different ways, with varying implications for identity and subjectivity.

For many of the lesbians in this study, desire is a component in one or more of their close friendships. Two stated that it was a thread in all or most of these friendships: all of May’s close female friendships had ‘varying degrees of unacknowledged homoeroticism’, and all of Ali’s close friendships with lesbians involved a sexual attraction or relationship. Some volunteered this information in questionnaires, but participants were shyer in interviews, often only admitting a sexual component when I asked the question directly at the end of discussions on particular friends. For some, desire is never verbalised or acted upon. Others have spoken their mind but been rejected as lovers, or had sexual relationships or casual ‘flings’ with their friends, and still maintain the friendships as ongoing platonic ones. Sometimes friendships are strengthened, but others distance or end. Participants’ reflections on all of these different experiences provide rich examples of how they negotiate a ‘project of self’ through friendships.

May and Alex wrote at length about the implications of desire for their friendships. May, an Anglo-Australian lesbian aged 31, living in inner-city Melbourne, was angry with a friend she had been attracted to, whom she had finally got the courage to proposition in writing. In her questionnaire, she wrote:

The painful demise of my relationship with Linda has everything to do with lack of honesty and openness in communication. I felt she was dishonest in implicitly projecting all the desire between us as mine. I felt angry that her withdrawal prevented my ability to express my understanding of the
situation. I felt angry, silenced, betrayed. I couldn't understand how the intimacy we’d shared could be disregarded and resulted in her withdrawal from me.

May had felt it a ‘right of friendship’ to expect communication and was baffled that Linda ‘could so easily upturn it all’. Her bitterness at the end of the friendship had taken a long time to subside. The incident had substantial implications for May’s awareness about the importance of open communication in relationships and also, significantly, for her identity as a lesbian:

I feel that I’ve learnt about my needs in relationships (mutual communication), and that it was, importantly, the deciding moment in my coming out. Before that I’d imagined myself as a pan-sexual and/or that sexual identity was artificial. I’ve also learnt that I have no interest in developing relationships with repressed lesbians. If friendships develop for me in the next few years it will be because we’re both aware of gender and sexuality as political/problematic issues, because we have honest communication and because we’re trying to live more consciously.

Here May blurs the boundaries between friends and lovers as she expects the sort of communication lovers rather than friends have.

Alex, a Lithuanian-English lesbian aged 49, living in inner-city Melbourne, also had her friendship with her art tutor end after Alex’s declaration of love and subsequent poor communication between them both.

May’s and Alex’s friends’ withdrawals are not surprising in the context of, firstly, women’s socialisation not to be direct in communication, and secondly, some women’s fear when faced with the lesbian possibility (cf. Anzaldua, 1996; Daly, 1996). There is also the possibility that their friends could have been on ‘the lesbian path’ but simply not attracted to May and Alex. Other lesbians in this study reported that friends distanced or departed when they ‘came out’ as lesbian, perhaps feeling the ‘ambiguity as to a sexual edge to [the] friendship’ (Rosemary); not wanting to follow through with an attraction (Jess) or not coping when friendships actually became sexual (Louise and Susie).
A further dimension of boundary blurring between friends and lovers is that lesbians can be rejected as lovers by their friends, or sexual tension can sit beneath the surface in their friendship, but these same friends will be jealous or behave oddly when lesbians become involved as lovers with someone else. This is a recurring story. Two participants suggested that it was likely friends would be dropped upon the commencement of a new sexual relationship if there had been boundary problems or expectations of sexual-type intimacy between friends. May attempted to explain the undercurrents of sexual attractions in many friendships that come to the surface when one friend in a pair develops a sexual relationship:

I think many friendships – more than people care to admit – develop to satisfy deep needs for sexual intimacy and that’s why they fold when sexual intimacy develops with someone else.

This was probably the case for Jocasta, who wrote about a friendship in her late teens that ended painfully when she became involved with someone else:

Erin I was mad about and we were very close but when I began a relationship with someone she knew (a man then) she became really strange and behaved jealously. She knew I’d had romantic feelings about her and I suspect she liked that but didn't think she could do the rest of that stuff. Very uptight about sex, which I’m not.

Sally had an insight from the other side. After she ‘came out’ at the age of 42, she looked back on her intensely close friendships with women and her jealousies when they had other friends, and thought that her desires for exclusivity meant she must have always been a lesbian. At the end of her questionnaire, Sally reflected:

Sometimes it has not been easy to separate ‘friendship’ from something ‘deeper’. I have had difficulty in identifying that ‘something’ and am not all that sure that I have done this successfully either on paper or in my head. Is it because it is an instinctual, spiritual connection that eludes that rationalising part of us? I don’t know. Is it adding that sexual component to an already involved friendship that is the difference? I don’t know. Or is it a combination of the above which, while binding two people intimately
actually sets free the individual’s spirit, opening the gates of self-expression and self-exploration.

Participants’ interpretations of these situations reflect both the intensity and eroticism of passionate, ‘best friends’ type friendships, and the difficulties in a homophobic culture of what might otherwise be an easy physical expression of love. When Sally ‘came out’ and was able to fully express herself in a relationship with another woman, she was happier. Her ‘project of self’ achieved some sort of a resolution. But for heterosexual women, or those fearful of going down ‘the lesbian path’, any eroticism must be kept beneath the surface.

Susie also commented on boundary blurring in the ‘coming out’ period for new lesbians. In her questionnaire, she wrote:

Lesbians in my experience are more likely to distance from friends in the short term when a sexual relationship starts if they are not clear about the boundaries of friend as opposed to lover in their relationships with their friends.

When questioned about this, Susie gave the example of her partner’s cousin, who in the process of coming out, demanded a lot of intimacy and physical closeness from Susie’s partner. Susie felt that this was only due to inexperience as the cousin didn’t quite know what it meant to be a lesbian: ‘there was sort of some grey area in the boundaries between how you would act with a friend and how you would act with a lover’. Susie observed that the cousin’s shift from a ‘heterosexual focus of relationships and friendships’ where lovers were of the opposite gender, to a ‘situation where you have friendships of the same gender and relationships of the same gender’, took quite a bit of adjustment and negotiating. Susie noted that once the cousin started a relationship, she stepped back from Susie and her partner for a time while she worked out what the boundaries should be, then their friendship resumed.

In another example of the impact of a homophobic culture on lesbians’ friendships, lesbians tend to restrict physical intimacy and talk about sex so as not to make heterosexual women friends uncomfortable (Palladino and Stephenson, 1990;
Bindel *et al.*, 1993; O’Boyle and Thomas, 1996). But responses to a question about the sexualisation of physical contact in Anglo-Australian culture also demonstrated the evolution of lesbian subjectivity over time. Most new lesbians admitted, like Susie, that they became more physically reserved:

I have observed that after ‘coming out’ I withdrew from casual physical contact as if I felt that this may make my straight friends uncomfortable. My concerns here were that the contact would have been interpreted as sexual.

Those who had been lesbians for longer, those who moved in non-Anglo social circles and those who didn’t care what other people thought were less concerned about restricting physical intimacy. In particular those who had been ‘out’ longer commented on how they became more comfortable with themselves as lesbians over time, and how hugs and other physical signs of affection with others became easier. This was especially the case if they were monogamously coupled and the boundaries around themselves and their lovers were strong.

Touch was less of a concern between lesbian friends for the majority, and hugs and kisses were often welcomed. However both Jessica and Natalie felt their heterosexual friendships were ‘safer’ and that lesbian friends were more likely to misread physical affection. Single lesbians admitted physical contact between lesbian friends was often sexual. Alex and May suggested that all physical contact belonged on some sort of sexual continuum. Alex was the most explicit about this:

As a single lesbian I would have to admit to a degree of sexuality in much of my affection. Sexuality (being sexual) for me tends to be on a continuum – I am very sexual by nature, so it’s not a question of either/or, but how much, and I think that’s perfectly legitimate.

Although Stanley (1996) observes jealousy may interrupt coupled lesbians’ friendships, in this study only Jean referred to this possibility in her suggestion that lesbians would drop their friends if they had a jealous lover. Her comment also points to the blurred boundaries between friends and lovers in the context of a homophobic society:

Lesbian life is still hard in wider society and insecurity and jealousy and a perceived notion that an intimate relationship with one and a friendship with

...
another cannot coexist. Trust and innate honesty are difficult to achieve in any relationship and friendship to others becomes a casualty of an intimate relationship.

Jean’s observation resonates with the ‘two against a threatening world’ tendency which Krestan and Bepko (1980: 286) argue is a common response of lesbian couples to a homophobic world. The world is shut out in order for the relationship to survive. It also echoes Margy’s concerns about the difficulties in making friends with lesbians who are monogamously coupled (cited in Card, 1995: 84). Participant Laura backed up these concerns when, newly out on the lesbian scene with her lover of 10 years, she observed lesbian couples separating and forming new partnerships from within friendship groups. In her interview Laura thought, with a laugh, that ‘maybe the secret to having a long relationship is to stay right away from them’. Emily had observed the same attitude amongst isolated lesbians she had met. Laura did acknowledge that she and her lover had felt isolated and were enjoying their first steps into lesbian social groups. A couple of years later, when reviewing interview comments on staying away from other lesbians, Laura stated ‘I don’t believe this any more’.

No other participants pointed to the jealous possessiveness identified by Jean as a barrier to friendship. This could indicate participants were more ‘out’ than the clients of Krestan and Bepko (1980), or perhaps that they were not willing to identify such a negative emotion as jealousy as something that affected them in a study which obviously pointed to the importance of friends as well as lovers.

For single women seeking a partner, it is easy for friend and lover relationships to cross over. Sonenschein speculates as to whether the category of ‘friends’ is really a residual category of individuals who did not work out as sexual partners or whether there are differential expectations through which individuals are initially screened to become either ‘friends’ or ‘partners’ (Sonenschein, 1968, cited in Nardi, 1992: 113).
As Nardi (1992) finds, participants’ experiences indicate that both processes operate: lesbians have had sex with their friends and have been sexually attracted without sex taking place.

In this study, Louise had had sex with some of her friends when she was in between relationships, but had never intended more than a ‘one-night stand’. This tested her friendships and she recommended against it. Jocasta had a ‘five minute fling’ with a friend but believed ‘we’re better as friends’. Cathryn wrote about her passionate friendship with one of her ‘very dearest friends’: ‘we loved each other so much we kind of got trapped into thinking that it was inevitable that we became lovers … Barbara and I had sex because we thought we should’. The friendship survived this phase. A passionate friendship of Natalie’s had survived her friend’s declaration of a desire for a relationship after the friend had pondered why it was she could be ‘completely honest, completely open, completely vulnerable, completely intimate with you but I cannot do that with my male partner’. And when a friend of Ruth’s declined Ruth’s suggestion of a relationship, Ruth found another lover, ‘got over it fairly quickly’, and the friendship continued. Reflecting on her feelings for this friend, Ruth remembered that she had been attracted to her around the time she was breaking up with a former lover. She laughed while she explained:

I probably had more in a way in common with Lynette than I had with Margaret, you know, so that was, maybe there was a bit of, um, a bit to do with you know, my, the way I was feeling after the end of the relationship and so on, so maybe it just was a particularly kind of temporary thing.

Like Jocasta, Ruth felt their relationship was ‘probably better as friends than as lovers’. In a sex-focused society, sex might seem inevitable as an expression of love, but it does not always have to be so.

Sometimes lesbians never verbalise their attraction. Elizabeth fancied a friend, although she never said so, but when this friend became involved as a lover with someone else she still intended that she would continue as a friend, and was disappointed at the friend’s withdrawal. Rae was in the process of ‘coming out’. While still married, a series of passionate friendships and sexual desire for her friends meant she could no longer ignore the implications for her identity. Alice
had been told by a third party that a friend ‘liked her’, and while they had some ups and downs in expectations and communication, the friendship was strong. At times, Alice and her partner had shared this friend’s house, and Alice felt an expectation on her friend’s part that they would all have a long-term, family-like association.

When partners made the transition to ex-lovers, sometimes it was difficult for outsiders to tell the difference. For example Bess and Emily broke up with their partners after relationships of 13 and 10 years respectively, but continued to live and sleep with them for months after the breakup. Ruth told a story of a friend who moved next door to her ex-lover and maintained a close relationship with her, so much so that it interrupted her relationship with a new lover. Neither of the ex-lovers seemed to mind, however, and the two women continued living happily – but celibate – next door. We wondered what the spurned new lover thought of the arrangement.

This sort of story is criticised in the psychological literature as ‘triangulating’ a third party into relationships (eg. Krestan and Bepko, 1980). While Celia Kitzinger is critical of Krestan and Bepko for ‘psychologising’ lesbian relationships, she also writes about the difficulties of balancing commitments between lovers and ex-lovers (1996b). And Marny Hall found a number of instances of ‘triangulation’ that did not lead to the loss of new lovers. She pointed out:

> What is unique about the women I interviewed is that they made room in their lives for more than one primary intimacy; another kind of ‘triangulation’ that doesn’t need treating, perhaps a kind of ‘polyfidelity’ that should be respected and cultivated (1993: 53).

While Ruth’s friend’s continuing connection with an ex-lover had jeopardised a new relationship, more often what Hall calls ‘polyfidelity’ worked for the women in this study. For example, Jane’s ex-lover was her closest friend after her lover. When Emily and her ex-lover finally made the break by Emily going overseas, they were able to change from being lovers to friends, and had stayed ‘soulmates’ for 10 years despite each having new lovers. Emily, an Anglo-Australian lesbian aged 61,
from a regional city, noted that both of them also maintained friendships with subsequent ex-lovers.

Sometimes it takes time for wounds to heal and friendships to be reestablished, but when this happen, friendships with ex-lovers are gratifying. Emily went away for a year to give herself some distance from the pain of the relationship ending, and others had periods of separation before attempting to rebuild friendships. Mei Li, a Taiwanese-Australian lesbian, was aged 29 when she returned her interview transcript with an update that she had broken up with the partner who she had discussed in our interview five years earlier. Mei Li revealed she was glad that her ex-lover was still part of her life. She appreciated that their new friendship was simpler than their old, important but troubled (non-sexual, Boston marriage-type) love relationship. Sometimes hurt and pain were swallowed to maintain important friendships. Emily had ‘never got over’ her partner, and maintained friendships with all her ex-lovers despite the fact that they had hurt her. Elaine, an Anglo-Australian lesbian aged 50, from a rural area, had had a lot of grief and pain over differences with an ex-lover with whom she resumed a relationship 20 years after the initial breakup. Through all the changes over that time, and subsequent troubles, their friendship had never failed. Elaine expected that it would continue.

It is not always the case that ex-lovers continue as friends. Sometimes differences splinter friendships, or the pain of breaking up or the split loyalties of friends mean that friendship is impossible. Elizabeth’s experience highlights this: her friendship with her ex-lover shocked all their friends because it was the norm in her rural district that breakups were acrimonious and led to the loss of friendship networks. Bess had observed other lesbians keeping their ex-lovers as friends, and current and past lovers appearing ‘to mix very well,’ but she was less certain about whether she would be able to achieve this with her ex-lover due to the very present pain of their separation. When participants’ ex-lovers did not continue as friends their comments demonstrated that they felt that they were an exception to the rule. Both Indigo and Cathryn had friendships with ex-lovers end due to magnified differences, Indigo commenting ‘you know, sometimes I think it’s just too much water under the
bridge’. Christine and Maddy both experienced all their mutual friends taking sides with their ex-lover, and hence lost both their former partner and their friends.

For others, ending friendships with ex-lovers (like the endings of relationships themselves) takes some time, typically three or four years. For example when I interviewed Jean, a Jewish-Welsh lesbian aged 48 from Melbourne’s outer suburbs, she talked about an important friendship with her ex-lover of 10 years. She believed they would be there for each other ‘without a shadow of a doubt’ whatever happened. By the time she returned her transcript three years later, this friendship had ended. I looked back to Jean’s earlier interview for clues. Jean had left her lover as she wanted to ‘come out’ of the closet while her lover wanted to stay married. Her lover’s addictions and mental illness (which I suspect are likely to be due at least in part to internal, family and societal difficulties with her lesbian identity) had also caused a strain between them. In her postscript, Jean wrote:

In retrospect Anthea and I were no longer good friends. We were hanging on to an illusion and she would not have been there for me although I was and have been for her … Friendship with her is now irrelevant and once again clinging to the past and looking through rose-coloured glasses.

For friendships with ex-lovers to thrive, they need a separation to allow pain to subside (Stanley, 1996), and a ‘mutual generosity’ (Kaplan and Rose, 1996: 114) in tolerating new lovers and other differences. Both partners also require a positive attitude and the support of friendship networks and communities, rather than friends taking sides. Partners who have no friends at all, due to being ‘in the closet’, such as Jean, are also unlikely to survive as friends after a breakup.

More instances of Hall’s ‘polyfidelity’ (1993) arise in lesbians’ important friendships that coexist with their lover relationships. One example, Lucy’s passionate friendship with Daniela, mentioned in the Introduction, is worth exploring in detail. Lucy, aged 26 at the time of interviews, talked about how she and her friend Daniela had supported each other daily through the intensity of a nursing degree in a regional city in their early 20s. When questioned about it, Lucy felt a sexual connection had existed between them. She had not expressed it for a
number of reasons: she had felt that Daniela was asexual, and certainly not lesbian; she was happy with their friendship the way it was, and she was in a relationship already with Alice. However, she wondered about the intensity of their connection:

You go to that theoretical ideal thing and it would have been lovely to have been, you know, sexual with her because of being able to express your emotions physically. But you can’t do that (laughs) …

Lucy had questioned ‘how is it that you can be so emotionally attuned to somebody and want to be there and be supportive and all that emotional stuff that you get in a relationship’. What she felt for Daniela ‘wasn’t lust. It was just being able to express that physically’, echoing Jamieson’s suggestion that ‘the completeness of intimacy of the self may be enhanced by bodily intimacy’ (1998: 1). Lucy and Daniela continued their friendship when Daniela moved interstate for a couple of years. At the time of the interview, Daniela lived nearby again, and they saw each other weekly. When Lucy returned her interview transcript three years later, Daniela had made a permanent commitment to nursing work overseas where she would be celibate, veiled and segregated with other women. Lucy felt this helped explain Daniela’s asexuality (cf. Loulan, 1993). Daniela was exceptionally important to Lucy and second only to Alice in her life: ‘She’s supportive, loving, caring and challenging (the celibacy thing particularly)’. Their friendship had grown enormously over the years and was deep and strong.

This chapter has described how lesbians’ friendships provide positive feelings of belonging and safety so that lesbians can come out of the closet for a while, relax and experience being their ‘authentic selves’ away from the prejudice and discrimination they face in the outside world. Many of the definitions of friendship of the lesbians in this study are in line with those in the more general friendship literature. Some elements of friendship common in studies of heterosexual men and women are notably missing for this group: the gaining of power and status through friendship, practical assistance and competition between friends. The importance placed on acceptance and the particular descriptions given of acceptance and emotional support differentiates this group of lesbians from other groups studied. For some, friends are like family or better than family. My results verify a study quoted by both Gouldner and Strong (1987) and Raphael and Robinson (1984):
Because friendship rests on mutual choice and mutual need and involves a voluntary exchange of sociability between equals, it sustains a person’s sense of usefulness and self-esteem far more effectively than filial relationships (Blau, 1973, cited in Gouldner and Strong, 1987: 4).

This quote applies to a heterosexual population. It is evident that the sense of self-esteem described is magnified for the lesbians in this study, that friends assist in self-development, that they are ‘inventing’ new ways of relating to friends that are functional for them, and that affirm and support their lifestyles, and in some cases, serve as a different kind of family or community. The most obvious examples are the tendency for ex-lovers to remain friends and for lesbians to have ‘more than one primary intimacy’ (Hall, 1993: 53). As Weeks et al find in their UK study, participants articulate all the complexities of family relationships as well as suggesting possible new meanings of ‘family’ (2001: 11).

However, there are many interruptions to lesbians’ friendships. The cultural context of the couple society, exacerbated by the insecurities inherent in late capitalism, busy working lives and/or children, and a more widespread shift to individualism, means that for those with relationships as well, friendships are likely to suffer, or, as May put it more positively, to be a ‘bonus’. When lovers are best friends, and identity depends on having a lover, lovers tend to be prioritised. Because friendship is a fluid relationship, roles and expectations of friends are rarely communicated, and problems can develop. In particular, the roles and expectations of ex-lovers are ill-defined. In addition, when two ‘relational selves’ get together, both with an inclination to avoid communicating difficulties, problems can grow.

A significant recurring theme is the phenomenon of boundary blurring between ‘friendships’ and ‘lover relationships’. Lesbians usually live in a very woman-oriented, women-identified world and thus have more opportunities to relate to other women, in a range of ways, than heterosexual women do. This chapter examined these issues, and how women’s socialisation to have more permeable ego boundaries or to be ‘relational selves’ is played out in very particular ways among lesbians. In this study, blurred boundaries are particularly evident when women are first coming out as lesbians, when they are single and seeking a lover, with ex-
lovers, and with passionate friends who do not want a lesbian relationship yet become jealous when participants start relationships with someone else.

As was the case for Lucy and Daniela, it appears that for most friends, some kind of erotic ‘spark’, whether it is acted on or not, furthers or enhances friendship. This is consistent with other studies by Nardi (1992) and Hall (1993). Nardi posits that because women achieve intimacy first, and sexuality evolves from that, if sex ends, the intimacy is still there. He concludes that ‘sexuality among gay people does not appear to be an impediment to the formation of friendships’ (1992: 114). For the lesbians in Hall’s study, both sexual contact, and the ‘certain frisson’ (1993: 49) between friends that can, but doesn’t, develop erotically, enhanced friendship. For the lesbians in this study, this appears to be equally true for ex-lovers (Emily, Elaine, Elizabeth, Missy, Jane), for Boston marriages (Mei Li), for short affairs (Jocasta, Cathryn), for friends who said ‘thanks but no thanks’ to the suggestion of a relationship (Ruth, Natalie), and for passionate friends where attraction on the part of one or both parties was not verbalised (Lucy, Elizabeth, Rae).

These friendships demonstrate the commitment of the women in this study to an identity that is based on sexual relationships, to passionate friendships with their lovers, (sometimes) ex-lovers and others that evoke the discourse of romantic friends, and a nexus between friendship and love that emphasises relatedness and the similarities between these two relationships for some women, rather than the differences. They also demonstrate how the lesbian ‘project of self’, which is always a ‘relational self’ can evolve and change through experiences of friendship. The women’s experiences support the views of various theorists (eg. Lorde, 1984; Trask, 1986; Heyward, 1989; Stuart, 1997) that intimacy, passion and ‘the erotic’ are not reserved for lovers, but can have important resonances for those who are friends, single, coupled, sexually active, celibate, or in the process of ‘coming out’. In this sense, friendships and love relationships are not dichotomised, but are more properly located on Vetere’s (1982) continuum. The next chapter travels along the continuum to examine what happens when friends do become lovers, and the implications for lesbian subjectivity of the ‘best friends’ model of lesbian relationships.
CHAPTER FIVE: WORKING AT INTIMACY

Lesbians’ lovers are often referred to as ‘best friends’, reinforcing similarities between women’s friendships and lesbian relationships. Satisfactory, mostly equal, close-connected, friendship-based, caring relationships are a pleasure for lesbians, and can be seen to be, as Anthony Giddens suggests, the vanguard of a ‘transformation of intimacy’ (1992) in late modernity. In this ‘transformation’, heterosexual partners are also expected to be ‘best friends’, although gendered power differences and many men’s difficulties with intimacy can militate against this (Jamieson, 1998).

Despite decades of writings on lesbian relationships, it appears lesbians are still in uncharted territory (Rich, 1978: 31), inventing the forms relationships take as they go along. This chapter argues that while many have seen this flexibility as a strength, especially contrasted with heterosexuals’ tendencies to fall into pre-set gendered roles (Weston, 1991; Dunne, 1997; Oerton, 1997, Weeks et al, 2001), the lack of a range of role models is also a challenge for a secure sense of self. At times, difficulties negotiating relationships mean that lesbians seek counselling, or in some other way take on the messages of traditional models of psychology available from their friends or from popular culture. Almost all of the participants in this study speak a language that evokes the possibility of absorption of Giddens’s ‘profusion of reflexive resources’ (1992) that aid the ‘project of self’: counselling, self-help books, magazines, television, friends and, for some, their own training to be counsellors or healing professionals. This language is particularly used when discussing relationships. The women report feeling pushed to be independent, separate beings, and feeling that their problems in intimate relationships and friendships are a result of becoming too ‘merged’ or ‘enmeshed’ or ‘co-dependent’ with their partners/friends. They report that this is useful knowledge.

While counselling helps resolve some issues in relationships, the dominant discourse of independence and separateness does not always fit with the women’s connected realities and is a source of struggle for most of them. The disjuncture between their own experiences and what they are told by others causes internal
conflict. The evidence from the women in this study suggests that these traditional models of psychology are not appropriate for lesbians (and indeed feminist psychologists such as Jordan et al (1991), Jordan (1997) and Mencher (1997) argue that they are not appropriate for heterosexual women or men either. Lesbians who have access to alternative discourses that affirm a ‘relational self’, while also assisting them to address relationship issues, such as the ‘imperative to care’, are more secure in their sense of self and able to practise authentic reciprocal caring with partners. Typically, these are lesbians who are less isolated and more educated than those in the study who have problems, and therefore have greater access to social support and awareness of alternative views.

Definitions of lesbian lover relationship given by participants fall into two categories: primary, long-term exclusive relationships or, alternatively, casual ‘flings’. Most of the following discussion applies to primary, serious, long-term relationships. Almost three quarters of the women in the study are partnered (n=28). Most of the women interviewed describe their long-term lover relationships as extremely important, if not the most important part of their lives. Casual relationships are less important, but are usually ongoing over a period of time and involve some emotional connection. ‘One-night stands’ are rare and usually judged negatively or regretted. For example Jocasta was laughing, but serious at the same time as she pronounced: ‘I have done many things in my time, but I have never had a one-night stand’.

THE PLEASURES OF LESBIAN RELATIONSHIPS

The very distinctive pleasures of a ‘relational self’ who relates primarily to women emerges in participants’ responses to questioning about prioritising lovers over friends. Chapter Four showed that the lesbian feminist literature on friendships often laments the primacy lesbians give to lovers (West, 1989; Weston, 1991; Loulan, 1991; Card, 1995; Weinstock and Rothblum, 1996b; Hunt, 1996, 1997a; Jo, 1996; Kitzinger, 1996a). Three quarters of lesbians in this study agree with a statement that lovers are more important than friends. However a number of distinctive reasons emerge for this.
Lovers are friends first, and then ‘best friends’

As discussed in Chapter Four, most of the women in the study are friends before becoming lovers, and if they aren’t already, their lovers then become ‘best friends’. For many, lesbian identity also depends on having a lover. A friendship script then fosters equality in relationships (Peplau et al, cited in Weeks et al, 2001: 120). Most of the women express a high degree of satisfaction with their relationships because of equality and what Dempsey calls ‘superior emotional attachment’ (1999) with their lovers. This satisfaction is usually expressed by comparing their lesbian relationships with previous heterosexual relationships or experiences. The women appreciate their relationships with other women for the quality of relatedness and the mutual care and reciprocity they experience, something that their husbands ‘never came anywhere near’ (Laura). Their ‘relational selves’ find full expression in an intimate relationship with another woman. The shaping of these selves reveals the influence of the feminist discourse of equal relationships that pushes them to leave male partners and seek more reciprocity with woman lovers, and discourses of passionate friendships and individualism.

Participants’ paths to ‘emotional democracy’ in relationships with other women resonate with what Giddens (1992) describes as a recent trend away from romantic to contingent love: if one partner’s needs are not being met in a relationship, and another opportunity crops up, they ‘cannot let it pass [them] by’ (Bess). As Giddens suggests, lesbian (and gay) relationships, with a greater potential for desired equality between partners, come the closest to the ‘pure relationship’ in the transformation of intimacy he is charting. This is because they are more likely to be negotiated than simply adhering to social norms that govern marital relationships (Weston, 1991; Dunne, 1997; Oerton, 1997; Weeks et al, 2001).

While not wanting to set up lesbian relationships as inevitably always ‘good’ (because they are not), and compare them with heterosexual relationships that may have been poor (because heterosexuals can also strive towards equality), it is evident that participants in this study are very aware of feminist critiques of inequality in heterosexual relationships. They celebrate achievements of the desired
‘emotional democracy’, while being willing to discuss obstacles. This is a shift from a 1978 study of lesbian relationships that found three kinds of relationships: traditional complementary style; flexible, nurturing, caretaker style; and negotiated egalitarian style (Tanner, 1978). As Weeks et al (2001: 106) find in their study of British lesbian couples, only the latter, or desire for the latter, is in evidence in this study. The exceptions are in stories of previous abusive or violent relationships.

Having a lover as a friend reveals the powerful influence of the discourse of equal relationships for these women. In a question about the similarities and differences between friendships and love relationships, the idea of lovers as close friends is important to more than half (n=25). Participants draw on the connections between the two relationships but see love relationships as extensions of friendship and as having more depth. Eight explicitly identify that their relationship has a very strong friendship base: that they are friends first and lovers only after that, or that lovers are best friends. For example Emily commented ‘I like to have a friendship first and not just a sexual relationship’. This was echoed by Indigo:

Friendship is for me always a start before a sexual relationship or at least involves all the qualities a friendship has. A sexual relationship is an extension of friendship. They both have warmth and trust.

Natalie believed ‘my partner is my friend first before anything else … no love can last without friendship’. Ruth considered a good sexual relationship ‘to have all the qualities of friendship and build on them’. Joan’s relationship, her first with a woman, ‘wouldn’t/couldn’t survive without her as my friend’.

Sally felt that because she and her partner were both female, they were much closer than she had been with her husband, and their relationship was more balanced. She valued that she and her partner were very much ‘in tune with one another’ and marvelled at how the relationship was ‘not like anything I’ve experienced before, you know, the 15 years of marriage I had’. When asked to pin down the differences, Sally emphasised reciprocity:

Well equality I guess, like in the old relationship and again that’s all I can compare with, I think you give give give give give, and never got anything in return or got something back but it never really met my needs so yeah,
meeting my needs is important, but not at the expense of my partner, I like it to be reciprocal.

Partners were not just friends, but ‘best friends’ (cf. Bindel et al., 1993). Laura thought it would be ‘a bit strange’ if a lesbian wasn’t best friends with her lover:

My best friends have always been female, my husband never came anywhere near ... And I never thought that was strange but if somebody said, oh, if a lesbian said her best friend was so-and-so I’d … For me, I can’t really say for other people but would have, I’d think it was a bit strange – that there might have been something lacking there if they weren’t.

Lovers were not best friends in only two cases. About her new partner, Christine said: ‘I don’t yet feel that she is my best friend’, signalling an expectation that she would be in time, and Jess’s relationship was troubled and ended soon after she completed the questionnaire.

As discussed in Chapter One, lesbian lovers tend to ‘merge’ as sex and intimacy and intense identification with another the same as oneself breaks down physical and psychic boundaries (Lindenbaum, 1985). Elizabeth shared the ‘blissfulness’ of her sexual relationship and how she let down barriers in ‘the afterglow’, and Louise the ‘openness’ and ‘ecstasy’ of sex. Mei Li went into more detail:

When you get sexually involved with someone it often involves letting down a lot of your defences so that in a way you’re seeking a kind of merger, you can actually open up a lot psychologically as well so that, um, yeah, merging or blurriness or getting a bit lost in the other person is more likely to happen I mean that’s part of, that can be part of the good thing about it.

However Mei Li did note that merging could go too far and she could react by distancing: ‘sometimes you don’t realise how much you’ve opened up until it’s all over and then you go ‘sh*t’ (laughter), build up a bit of a wall here’.
Despite merging being one of the pleasures of sexual interactions, relationships are typically more focused on emotional qualities like talking, support and friendship, rather than being based solely around sex, echoing both the discourse of equal relationships and the discourse of passionate friendships. This was certainly the case for Mei Li, whose first lesbian relationship, although very intense emotionally, was non-sexual. Consistent with this finding, merging can also occur in non-sexual friendships and relationships, such as Mei Li’s with her partner and with an earlier ‘best friend’ (cf. Orbach and Eichenbaum, 1994), and in relationships where sexual activity declines (Lindenbaum, 1985). In many longer-term relationships (as is also the case for heterosexual relationships), sexual activity has declined. In a sex-focused culture, and with much hype in the lesbian and gay press about ‘lesbian bed death’ (Haire, 1998; Horsley, 1999), sometimes this is a matter of concern for participants, who wish they were having more sex, or have a personal preference for more sex. However for others, it is not seen as terribly important, in particular while partners are still emotionally close. This is also a common finding in the literature (Lindenbaum, 1985; Frye, 1992; Hall, 1993; Weeks et al, 2001). When asked how important sex was to her relationship, Rosemary chose to give it a rating of three out of 10 in importance. She had earlier commented that talking was more important than sex, echoing Maddy’s view that ‘friendships are much more important to me than sex’.

The hectic pace of contemporary life and stressful jobs also affects sex lives, for example for partners Alice and Lucy and Marilyn and Jean. It emerged that for these and other couples, communication about sex and other aspects of the relationship was more important than sex itself. Many new lesbians reflected on how early on in their relationships they had conflated sex with intimacy, and once they realised they didn’t need sex to get close, it became less important. One of these was Laura, who wanted closeness with her partner, and used sex to get it: ‘coming from a male-female relationship, I thought that’s how you got it’ (Hollway, 1996: 92 and Weeks et al, 2001: 121 also comment on this). Susie felt that the close physical intimacy she had with her lover, for example sleeping naked together every night and ‘spooning’, was more important than ‘making love in the traditional sense if there is a traditional sense’ (cf. Frye, 1992). She compared it
with other relationships she had had where sex was confused with intimacy. She remarked that her relationship was
so wonderful and so healthy that it’s not something that is an issue, and you know I mean if you were to ask us we would say [it] is really good and very comfortable for both of us.

The de-emphasis on sex in relationships is notably at odds with the sexual tension in many friendships discussed in Chapter Four. However it may well be the case that in a sex-focused culture, sex is seen as the main way of expressing love, when, as lesbians’ experiences of relationships and the testimonies of passionate friends in history makes clear, this is not always so. As Elaine suggested, in relation to her (sometimes) lover, it could also be because sex was ‘probably more important when you’re not getting it’.

It is consistent with participants’ subscription to the discourse of equal relationships that they also prefer equality and mutuality in the bedroom, mostly rejecting the sexual practices of bondage and discipline and sadomasochism, and the resurgence of ‘butch and femme’ identities and roles that are often represented in the gay and lesbian media and in the lesbian nightclub ‘scene’. For Rosemary, these were ‘just fashion’. For Marilyn and Jean, sadomasochism was something younger lesbians might get up to. Laura was not interested in the harshness/hardness of sadomasochistic practices: ‘Oh, no, that’s, you know, it’s I think we’re all nice and soft and that’s the way it’s meant to be (laughter)’. Mei Li saw sadomasochism as intrinsically violent. For others, it evoked memories of a violent father (Emily) or a violent ex-husband (Susie). Louise and Lucy had been involved in short-lived relationships where their lovers wanted to practise sadomasochism, and neither had enjoyed it. Only Cathryn identified as ‘femme’ and that she was attracted to ‘butch’ women. Rather than focusing on the differences between lovers highlighted by sadomasochistic practice or butch and femme identities, most participants emphasise the pleasures of equality and the similarity of lesbian lovers.

Most couples also appeared to prefer committed and monogamous relationships, resonating with Beck and Beck-Gernsheim’s observation that in late modernity,
‘love is the new centre around which our detraditionalised life revolves’ (1995: 172). Monogamy has gone in and out of fashion in lesbian relationships in the last three decades amongst lesbian feminists and others, judging by literature from the US (Grahn, 1970, cited in Stein, 1997; Tanner, 1978; Sang, 1984, West, 1989; Kassoff, 1989; Munson and Stelbourn, 1999), but there is no comparable research in Australia. Although I did not include a question about monogamy in my research, except when I interviewed lesbian couples, other participants who were interviewed volunteered how they may have been attracted to other women but had chosen not to act on it because of their own relationships, which they valued, or out of respect for the other woman’s relationship. This contrasts with observation that some lesbians see all other lesbians as ‘fair game’ for relationships, regardless of couple status (Stanley, 1996), because lesbian relationships are so little affirmed by mainstream culture, and with earlier feminist positions that supported non-monogamy as a matter of principle. Missy’s suggestion that monogamy could be a response to growing older and busier reveals how this choice also fits with an individualistic ‘project of self’ in the contemporary context:

By the time you’re developing your career, raising a kid or two, pursuing your creativity or other passions, paying a mortgage etc., you want your love life to be as simple as possible. I mean logistically and emotionally.

Women’s journeys to a lesbian identity echo Giddens’ concept of ‘contingent love’, in which heterosexual relationships that no longer satisfy are replaced by other, more reciprocal partnerships with women in a ‘transformation of intimacy’. The discourse of equal relationships that is part of this ‘transformation’ has had a strong influence on formerly heterosexual women’s decisions to leave husbands for a female partner. Lesbians weave this discourse together with the discourse of passionate friendships, yet at times this melding is cross cut with individualism to shape very distinctive relational practices in the contemporary period.

Despite the pleasures and satisfactions of equal, close-connected relationships where lovers are ‘best friends’, as Weeks et al comment, lesbian relationships are not a ‘power-free zone’ (2001: 114). While the ‘best friend’ model of lesbian relationships is appreciated, for some lesbians it is a double-edged sword. The next
section explores some of the issues and challenges of this model for lesbians living in a heterosexual world.

CHALLENGES OF LESBIAN RELATIONSHIPS

Living as a lesbian couple in a heterosexual, patriarchal society sometimes puts extraordinary pressures on relationships. As Johanna Meehan suggests, ‘homophobia threatens the conditions of mutual recognition necessary to the constitution of our identities as subjects’ (1995b: 241). Challenges to lesbian relationships include the isolation that comes from being ‘in the closet’ and from having a lover as a best friend, the caring and loss of boundaries that can inhibit communication, the adoption of heterosexual models of relationships, and relationship violence. In this section I argue that when the lesbian ‘relational self’ is not recognised or affirmed by others, difficulties can be misdiagnosed and the ‘project of self’ can be interrupted.

Relating ‘in the closet’ leads to isolation

Several participants told stories of their early lesbian relationships conducted ‘in the closet’, and how the secretiveness around relationships caused problems, issues also discussed by Baetz (1984), Glaus (1989), Bradford and Ryan (1991) and Draper and Hall (1999). They had to make the decision themselves to relate to another woman or to take on a lesbian identity, then decide when and to whom to ‘come out’. Coming out desires did not necessarily match a partner’s wishes, and women had to deal with the consequences. This issue was particularly salient in the country and Melbourne’s outer suburbs, where there was much less acceptance of lesbianism than in diverse inner city locations. For example, Jean’s 10-year closeted relationship in outer suburban Melbourne failed, in part, because Jean wanted to ‘come out’ and her lover wanted to stay married. Laura and Susie hid their relationships from their children while their lovers lived in the same house in regional cities. This was tough on relationships. For Susie, being ‘in the closet’ for three and a half years with her first partner meant that they were extremely isolated:
… it was very difficult to maintain sincere friendships with people external to the relationship because of the closetedness … yeah it was an aspect of you that was held back and so that was very difficult, and became more difficult for me um I felt like an ostrich that’s put her head in the sand, it was really difficult sharing a house and you know –

For Rosemary, being closeted and isolated in regional Tasmania for 11 years with her first lover and her lover’s children, was ‘just diabolical’:

You’ve got no sort of standards that you can look at, you’ve got no other people or couples that you can say, oh, well, they behave in such a way, just got no benchmarks, nothing to judge yourself with, and you feel so lonely.

Jillian also had problems with a closeted relationship in a country town, because she had been ‘outed’ and her lover did not want to ‘come out’ too. It was hard for Jillian to go alone to her children’s social functions, knowing that ‘everyone knows my business’. Both Rosemary’s and Jillian’s closeted relationships were abusive.

Consistent with general trends for lesbians and gays to move to cities (Weeks et al, 2001), a number of the country women moved to inner city Melbourne or another Australian or overseas capital city during the course of the study. Those with children, however, put them first and continued to live in the same town after they ‘came out’. They and their children remained embedded in social, family and personal networks and, like Jillian, negotiated the terrain of disapproval. Even when children had grown up, they stayed put, suggesting the importance of the continuity of relationships with children and other friends, and the greater acceptance of homosexuality in country areas that these lesbians are forcing by choosing to remain. Only Christine, who had withdrawn from her local lesbian community after her relationship broke up, stated that she would like to move to Melbourne ‘one day when I no longer have my kids as my main concern’.

Lesbians who had been closeted for long periods of time in early relationships were now out and active in their communities and had the largest friendship networks, for example Susie, Rosemary and Jean. Rosemary made the point that her community involvement was a response to having been ‘in the closet’ for so long.
From their experiences, it could be deduced that others who have not been so closeted do not feel so strong a need to seek out a range of friendships and community contacts. The finding of generally small friendship and community contacts in this study could thus reflect the fact that most of the women in the sample ‘came out’ in times and places where lesbianism was relatively acceptable.

*Having a lover as a best friend leads to isolation*

The ‘best friend’ model suggests a high reliance of lesbians on their partners to meet most, if not all their needs, which can put pressure on relationships (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Pahl, 1998). Many participants noted how easy it was to ‘fall into the easy, delicious but dangerous, trap of trying to get it all from the one person, of not needing anyone else’ (Mei Li). This raised the issue of what might happen when relationships end, and other friends had been ‘deleted/neglected’, to use Toni’s words. Some participants were reflective and cautious about this. Maddy was clear about not dropping her friends when she got a new lover, as she had done in her last relationship. She had been caught out when her relationship ended and she lost all her friends, as they had all been mutual and none of them had asked her for her side of the story about the breakup. Cathryn had let her last lover become her ‘whole world’ and recognised that this was a mistake. Emily and Elizabeth found themselves on the other end of the equation: they had been dropped when friends got new lovers. Both talked about how they had helped friends through bad times and wanted to be there to share happy times also.

*Caring and loss of boundaries inhibit communication*

Women’s socialisation not to be direct in communication, but rather to care for their friends and lovers, can also cause problems in relationships (cf. Orbach and Eichenbaum, 1994). Problems can be exacerbated by the expectation of sameness and closeness that lesbians bring to relationships because both partners are female. This expectation is connected to discourses of equal relationships and passionate friendships, which tend to idealise women’s relationships. Yet equality does not have to mean sameness. Expectations of sameness can lead to the suppression of
difference to preserve closeness, often by both parties, and thus to the loss of a strong sense of self. As in the friendships discussed in Chapter Four, being a ‘relational self’ with an ‘imperative to care’ is thus not necessarily always a benign dynamic in relationships (Flax, 1993a: 21). For example, Jillian didn’t want to hurt her partner by expressing her own needs. In my interview with Louise, she stated several times that she was ‘not a hurter’, ‘not a confronter’, and not good at conflict, and hence had refrained from speaking up in unsatisfactory relationships and friendships. She ended two relationships, one abruptly and the other by withdrawing, and regretted that her mixed messages and lack of communication had hurt her partners ‘really really badly’. Several others discussed difficulties in ending unsatisfactory relationships, such as Christine, who was then shocked when her partner found another lover and forced a painful ending.

New lesbians also reflected on how they lapsed into old styles of communication with husbands, such as detaching (Sally) or withdrawing (Laura) from lesbian partners when upset rather than articulating problems. Both Sally and Laura recognised this was not ideal, and could be manipulative.

Over time, through reflection, or with the help of partners (Sally), or counselling (Laura), the women were able to shift these sorts of dynamics and improve their communication, although ending unsatisfactory relationships remained problematic. Mei Li used counselling language when she talked about ‘commitment-based’ conflict resolution, where it was safe to express feelings because of the committed nature of the relationship. Ruth noted how because she had been in counselling for some time, she had a more confrontational style of communication than her friends and lovers.

Loss of boundaries in relationships also inhibited communication. While participants appreciated the closeness of their relationships, at the same time they identified the reality of the ‘emotional shit that can occur’ (Elizabeth) with lovers such as power issues, jealousy, neuroses, possessiveness, ownership, dependency, and boundary problems. These were issues that differentiated lovers, with whom participants experienced deeper intimacy, from friends. They echoed the negative
features of merging featured in the psychological literature (Krestan and Bepko, 1980; Nichols, 1987; Kassoff, 1989; Green and Clunis, 1989). For example Jocasta wrote:

I think sex brings out our deepest family pathology and we behave worse as we lose our boundaries. Friends can be just that minute step away from that boundary lost.

By losing boundaries, Jocasta is commenting here on merging, or how sex breaks down boundaries between women to the extent that one member of a couple thinks her partner is the same person. In her interview, she gave an example from her experience in her relationship with her lover Kim:

It (sex) breaks down people’s um ability to see that I’m me and they are them, whereas people often start to think of their lovers as, you know, something like their left leg or (laugh) and they’re not really. Um, when I have conflict with Kim and I think oh god I’m being really unreasonable now, um it’s always because I’ve lost my boundaries and I have to go I’m me and she’s her, it’s okay if she wants to butter the toast differently, or if she wants to peg the clothes out differently (laughing). It’s okay!

(laughing)

Natalie and Emily made similar comments, and Emily reflected on how she used to take on her lover’s moods and blame herself for her lover’s problems.

Some participants had trouble ending unsatisfactory relationships where previous child sexual abuse, mostly of partners rather than themselves, was an issue. Feelings of solidarity with, care for or ‘not wanting to hurt’ the partner exacerbated a tendency to stay on in relationships which the benefit of subsequent reflection suggested were past their use-by date. When some relationships got to the point of ending, ex-partners continued to live together and/or sleep in the same bed for months or years. When discussing this in interviews, a number of participants asked me to turn the tape recorder off while they spoke of their difficulties. Mei Li was more open about her problems. She felt sad that she was unable to express her sexuality with her partner. Her partner’s fear of sexual contact had only emerged once the relationship had started. The pair had been to counselling together. Yet Mei Li valued the relationship enough to write in her questionnaire: ‘Kate … my
heart sings when I think of her’. She wrote at length how our society fetishises sex and how she had felt reassured by a friend who suggested sex was actually peripheral to most lesbian relationships. Yet Mei Li’s conflicting feelings obviously took their toll: when she returned her transcript, this relationship had ended and she was in another. After a painful period of separation she and her ex-partner were now close friends.

Sexual difficulties had other impacts on sexual relationships and on participants’ subjectivity and identity. Many interviewees had had at least one partner whose problems with intimacy led to the ending of the relationship. A few struggled on and like Mei Li, tried to be supportive. Emily and Louise both felt that having, as their first lesbian partners, women who didn’t want to be touched, damaged their sexual confidence. Finding herself in a similar situation with a subsequent lover, Emily went further: ‘I felt that not being able to touch a lover denied my sexuality’. For Emily, ‘being a lesbian means I want to touch my partner’. Lucy also spoke about a previous partner who did not want to be sexual, but she had a different response to Emily and Louise. She wasn’t ‘fazed’ by it at all: that was just where her partner was ‘at’ at the time. The different responses of these women indicate on the one hand, just how much lesbian sexuality is tied up with identity, and on the other, how pressures to care for lovers mean they accept the situation rather than question it. It is likely that as well as experiencing a moral ‘imperative to care’ for lovers, participants could have been influenced by discourses of equal relationships and passionate friendships, in which women privileged intimacy over sex, that meant that they did not address these issues (cf. Rothblum and Brehony, 1993).

All of these women grappled with these issues and sought a deeper understanding. However, in an individualistic, heterocentric culture, there were few avenues for them to deal with problems while also receiving affirmation of a ‘relational self’, the subject of the next section.
Adopting heterosexual models of relationships causes confusion

In the absence of other models and language to discuss their close-connected relationships, lesbians tend to adopt heterosexual models, and use the language of traditional models of psychology from counselling and ‘pop’ psychology. These models of psychology are written about the male experience of heterosexual relationships, elevating the male experience of autonomy and denigrating the female experience of connection (Miller, 1976; Vargo, 1987; Stanley, 1993; Mencher, 1997). Simplistic ‘pop’ psychology also obscures the workings of power in relationships in its use of terms such as ‘co-dependence’ and ‘women who love too much’ (Trathen, 2001). The lesbians in this study had concerns about ‘codependence’ (Jocasta, Ali, Lucy, Bess), and were wary about lovers who were ‘possessive’ (Sally, Rosemary, Louise, Jillian) or who couldn’t be independent (Lisette, Elaine). They talked about relationships being ‘healthy’ or ‘unhealthy’ (Lucy, Bess, Jocasta, Ali). The influence of ‘pop’ psychology is also evident in the language of those who experienced relationship violence. For example, Ruth talked about how her feelings of frustration as a ‘co-addict’ to an alcoholic lover had led to her being violent, and Ali found it difficult to leave an abusive relationship because she had ‘a continuing strong response to the wounded child in her’ lover.

Counselling assisted many of these women with issues around relationships, sexuality and violence. However, it could also create contradictory feelings for those whose therapists were unfamiliar with lesbian patterns of relating. This was the case for lesbians whose relationships were simply suffering from stresses and tensions, and for those in abusive relationships. The role of therapy or counselling in the validation or invalidation of the women’s subjectivity is important here. While women such as Laura appear to have been assisted in their relationship with communication strategies, others in this study struggled or complied with a discourse of traditional models of psychology, based on the male experience of separation, which emphasised independence and separateness from one’s partner.

Because the dominant discourse of independence and separateness did not always fit with the women’s connected realities, it was a source of struggle for most of
them. Most of the women valued their close connected relationships, friendships that endured after sexual relationships had ended, and important personal growth through relationships. This was highlighted most particularly in my interviews: when I asked the women to choose a friend to tell me about, most chose a lover or an ex-lover who had had a profound effect on their lives. While their close connected relationships were valued, problems also existed around being so other-directed. The women did experience enmeshment with partners and friends and, consequently, some felt a loss of a sense of self. Sometimes, both partners tried so hard to please the other that they each thought the other had the power in the relationship. Women struggled to keep connections without losing self. Problems were compounded by being closeted, living in the country, or relationships not receiving support from family, friends or in the wider community.

The kind of language participants use raises the question of the extent to which therapists might be applying a masculinist, heterosexual and individualistic model of relationships to lesbians, and the extent to which lesbians might be applying ‘pop’ psychology designed for men and heterosexual couples, perhaps unhelpfully, to their own situation. For example, lesbians in this study did not recognise that perceived problems such as dependency could be about differing friendship styles, such as introverted versus extroverted (Green and Clunis, 1989; Stanley, 1996). They only noted concern that partners did not have many or any of their own friends.

Two examples illustrate the effects on subjectivity of experiencing contradictions between one’s own feelings about a relationship and others’ views of what relationships should be like. In the first case, that of Bess, the relationship ended; in the second, that of Alice and Lucy, the issues were resolved. The issues discussed in these examples were raised by almost all of the women interviewed.

At the time of interview, Bess, aged 61, from a rural property, was in the process of ending a 13-year relationship with a younger woman, aged 36. While the couple had lived and worked in the city for the first eight years, busy and surrounded by friends, large families and work colleagues, their relationship went well. It was a
‘wonderful’, ‘caring’, ‘nurturing’ relationship: nothing like Bess’s previous two marriages. Their problems had begun when they had moved to the country five years ago, and became much more isolated. However, neither wanted to hurt the other, so rather than communicating about these new challenges, each had withdrawn from the other, although neither admitted this at the time. Eventually, the relationship fell apart.

Bess’s counsellor had emphasised that for her and her partner to have stayed together, they would have needed to have had separate identities, like you know, you have your separate friends, you have your separate work and you have all these other bits, you know, a bit of community, a bit of you know, a bit of all of these other things and then you come together as a whole and that makes a healthy relationship.

Bess felt that she knew this and had taught this to her children, but when she met her partner, she recalled ‘I lost all my logic’. She and her partner had been ‘co-dependent’ and had not included other people in their lives, ‘and that is not healthy’. They both felt they had accommodated to the other’s desires too much, and they both felt the other had the power in the relationship. Bess speculated that when you come into a relationship you just seem to sink your identity into that relationship, which is such a pity.

On the one hand, Bess valued the close intimacy with her partner, while at the same time lamenting that each of them ‘trying to protect the other one’ had backfired and led to its loss. Rather than affirming their close connectedness, it appears that the counsellor left Bess thinking she had done something wrong in preferring the company of her partner and in ‘sinking her identity’ into the relationship (although she could also have been simply assisting Bess to separate from her partner). While Bess lamented the communication difficulties that caused problems, she thought that their 25-year age difference would have brought the relationship to an end anyway. Bess was left with conflicting feelings: a philosophical acceptance of the situation and that she would be able to rebuild her life, coupled with powerful feelings of having done the wrong thing, jealousy of her partner’s new life and possible new loves, loss and fear of a future alone.
Another couple, Alice and Lucy, aged 24 and 26 and living in a regional city, also suffered from the contradictions between their actual experiences and their own and other people’s views of what a relationship should be. When they moved in together six months into the relationship, Lucy believed ‘Alice and I just became one in lots of ways. People still think we are (laughs)’. Lucy had taken time off work and was studying at home, she was having problems with her study, she had decided she ‘didn’t want anything to do with’ a previously important sporting network, a lot of her other friends and all her closest friends had moved away, and she was having a difficult time with her family. Isolation meant she ‘became very, very dependent on the relationship’.

Lucy used the same language as Bess in describing her continual togetherness with Alice at one stage as ‘not necessarily healthy’ and as ‘really dependent and, like hopelessly dependent’ and ‘codependent’. While I didn’t ask her about it, her language suggested she had absorbed these notions from ‘pop’ psychology. Becoming ‘codependent’ had surprised Lucy as she had grown up as a very self-sufficient person and had a view of herself that she didn’t need anyone else to depend on. Lucy also felt very uneasy, and that she had ‘lost herself’. Partly in response to this, Lucy had moved to Melbourne ‘to try and curb that as well, just to try and find myself again’.

In supporting Lucy through this difficult time, Alice had spent much less time than she would have liked with her friends and her very demanding family. She also identified that ‘I don’t know, I just, didn’t feel like myself for a while’. Alice felt that her crush on one of the ‘lacrosse girls’ was a sign that ‘something wasn’t right’. This had added to the tension between them.

Over the six-month period that Lucy lived in Melbourne, they had ‘sorted it out’. They observed that most of the people in their social network – ‘the lacrosse girls’ – had responded negatively to Lucy’s move, believing that living together as a couple was the only way to conduct a relationship. However, only seeing each other on weekends helped both of them to feel that they had become their ‘own persons again’. For Alice, ‘everything kind of just fell into place’ when they started
living together again. They were now vigilant about keeping their independence, although Lucy joked about occasional lapses: ‘we went oh no, stop it now (laughter)’. While critical of how Alice’s family took advantage of Alice, Lucy admitted that she had been ‘irrational’ and had ‘overreacted’ to Alice’s desires for time with her family. One of the reasons they wanted to participate in this study was to contribute their experience so other lesbians could see there was more than one way to have a relationship.

The stories demonstrate that both couples had significant external pressures that could understandably lead to tensions. For example, for their years in the city, merging was appreciated by Bess; it was only when she and her partner became isolated that it became a problem. Whether the continual togetherness of partners was ‘not necessarily healthy’ or ‘co-dependent’, as Bess and Lucy perceived it, or just a natural response to external situations, is a key question. The Stone Center theorists argue that dependence has been pathologised, and that human beings need to be able to depend on each other to survive (Stiver, 1991). Further, both Bess’s loss of ‘logic’ and Lucy’s admission of ‘irrationality’ point to the unconscious, fragmented aspects of the self rather than a self that is rational and unified. These states were uncomfortable for Bess and Lucy. As Lupton and Barclay (1997: 31) argue, ‘the tension between wanting to maintain a sense of an individuated self and finding oneself physically or emotionally intertwined with another can be confronting and unsettling’, a state intensified for lesbians whose relationships can more powerfully evoke mother-daughter histories (Burch, 1990).

Whatever the explanation for discomfort in relationships, it is clear that the situations Bess and Lucy found themselves in were unsatisfying and that something had to change. Lucy and Alice’s decision to live in different cities temporarily served a purpose for them. They reflected on how the experience meant they were now better able to tolerate differences and separations to the point where they discussed that they may be able to live separately again if one of them wanted to pursue interests or a career elsewhere, and still maintain the relationship. Whether this will extend to the new challenge reported in their postscripts – Alice’s desire,
not shared by Lucy, to have a child – falls outside the scope of this study. And as Bess reflected, her relationship might have ended anyway due to age differences.

The experiences of these two couples, and of other participants whose stories resonated with theirs, raise many questions. If, as Janet Surrey argues, for women ‘identity and relationships develop in synchrony’ (1991: 63), is there anything wrong with ‘sinking one’s identity’ into a relationship? How much of this kind of merging is positive and helps sustain relationships, and how much contributes to relationship breakdown, especially when differences are stifled and communication breaks down? How do lesbians, particularly new lesbians in the early stages of a relationship or when coping with change, find a balance between independence and togetherness that suits them? What expectations do they bring to a relationship with a woman who is their ‘best friend’ that might be the same as or different from previous relationships with men? What are the extra pressures caused by being isolated in the country, away from accepting and supportive networks and communities?

For lesbians who experience abusive relationships, these questions are of particular relevance.

*Relationship violence*

The causes, meaning and resolution of lesbian relationship violence – physical and psychological – are different from violence in heterosexual relationships, argues Janice Ristock (2002). In the context of overwhelming patterns of male violence against women in society, lesbian violence challenges discourses of passionate friendship and equal relationships, which include an idealisation of lesbian relationships built on the expectation that women are *not* abusive. Lesbian partner abuse also challenges feminist beliefs that domestic violence is an expression of patriarchy and gender bias, beliefs that are institutionalised in refuges and other services for heterosexual women (Ristock, 2002). Thus abused lesbians, often met with disbelief from friends, doctors and service providers, often say they have no place to talk about their experiences (Dann *et al*, 1997; Ristock, 2002).
Based on a large Canadian study of abused lesbians and service providers from a range of cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, Janice Ristock suggests the heterosexual victim-perpetrator model is not sufficient for lesbians or heterosexuals (2002). Rather, feminists need to take account of the context of violence, and examine the power relations that are produced not only by patriarchy, but by oppressions such as heterosexism, classism, racism and colonisation, and the intersections between them. Binary categories exclude some women’s experience and make them marginal, Ristock argues. Differences need to be acknowledged so friends, service providers and lesbian communities can respond effectively to violence in lesbian relationships, before these relationships are once again labelled ‘pathological’ by homophobic critics (Ristock, 2002).

Ristock suggests there are a number of risk factors for lesbian relationship violence (2002). Even though considerable gains have been made in human rights and in visibility, many lesbians remain closeted, or may be closeted in some arenas and not in others. The isolation and invisibility of first relationships increases the risk of violence, especially for young women who have less support externally and who depend on their partners for information about living as a lesbian, for those who move or are immigrants, and for those who have experienced a lifetime of violence and for whom violence is normal (Ristock, 2002: 102-03). Consistent with Ristock’s results, in this study Marilyn, Rosemary, Maddy and Ali all experienced abuse in first relationships, the latter three all while young women. Rosemary had the additional burden of being closeted and isolated. Ruth, Alex and Jillian also experienced abusive relationships.

There are a few instances in which lesbian relationship violence is similar to heterosexual domestic violence. Some lesbians use abusive tactics to gain and maintain power and control when abusers are lesbians’ therapists, professors and bosses (Ristock, 2002). This was the case for Marilyn, whose first counsellor when she was ‘coming out’ initiated intimacy, which then led to an abusive relationship. This experience, challenging the discourse of women as not abusive, damaged Marilyn’s trust in women and negatively affected her next relationship.
However, lesbians in abusive relationships more often experience fluctuating power dynamics that challenge the heterosexual, victim-perpetrator, power and control model (Ristock, 2002). A more contextualised model reframes victimism, seeing fighting back as a coping strategy, resistance, an act with intent to hurt, self-defence or an occurrence at saturation point at the end of a relationship (Ristock, 2002: 107). This is not the same as the myth of mutual abuse, Ristock argues. Relevant examples from my data include Ali’s, Rosemary’s and Ruth’s expressions of guilt about single instances of violence that occurred in the context of relationships where they were abused. At the time, their only point of reference was an adaptation of a heterosexual victim-perpetrator model (eg. Ray, 1991). While Rosemary acknowledged the impact of being ‘in the closet’, and of her partner’s abuse, on her violence, and resisted being labelled as a perpetrator by others, Ruth saw herself as a perpetrator of domestic violence and sought counselling. It is consistent with lesbians’ desires for egalitarian relationships that violence is problematised and addressed (Weeks et al, 2001: 119), for example by Ruth and Rosemary. But a model such as Ristock’s is clearly more relevant to their experiences. While Ali reflected that she had been ‘irreparably damaged’ in her violent relationship, her experience fits the model, as in retrospect, she recognised that she had fought back. Jillian’s realisation, also in retrospect, ‘that equality is far more than I originally thought and power and its misuse is far more subtle than I had thought’, also fits.

In summary, heterosexual models of relationships, and of relationship violence, might have resonances for some lesbians, but are inappropriate for or confuse others. The close connectedness that is often described negatively as merging (Krestan and Bepko, 1980; Nichols, 1987; Kassoff, 1989; Green and Clunis, 1989) is appreciated, gratifying and functional for participants, as it is for the women in Berzoff’s (1990) and Mencher’s (1997) research, even if it is perceived as a problem in retrospect in relationships where isolation is a factor. But the question remains as to how two women who are ‘relational selves’, with an ‘imperative to care’, might negotiate their way through their own and their partners’ views of how a relationship should be, and through varying power differences, with few role models, to arrive at an arrangement where both are able to be fully ‘themselves’
without relationships deteriorating into abuse. As similar questions are also asked by heterosexual women wanting more satisfactory relationships, I looked back to the feminist psychological literature and then again to participants’ stories for answers.

ACHIEVING RESOLUTION

*Valuing individuality and togetherness*

Increasingly, feminist psychologists and psychoanalysts are arguing against dichotomising individuation and merging, and for valuing both where appropriate. Nancy Chodorow (1989) suggests a ‘mature dependence’ which enables access to feelings of identity and oneness with a partner, while also maintaining individuality: ‘Such a theory refuses the alternatives of individualism run wild or extreme fusion that becomes solipsism …’ (1989: 152). The Stone Center clinicians suggest ‘relationship-differentiation’, where growth is not towards autonomy but exists *in* relationships as mutual interactional growth (Jordan, Surrey and Kaplan, 1991). Jessica Benjamin argues for mutual recognition (1988) and Johanna Meehan for autonomy, recognition and respect between partners (1995b). Susie Orbach and Luise Eichenbaum argue for a kind of ‘separated attachment’ or ‘connected autonomy’, where ‘differentiation [does] not dissolve the connection’ (1994: 171). Yet Orbach and Eichenbaum’s research shows ‘separated attachments’ are a mystery to most (heterosexual) women; that achieving psychological separateness and maintaining attachments is ‘almost unattainable’ (1994: 156).

I suggest this task is also a mystery to lesbian women, in particular those who do not have access to these alternative views. There is obviously a need for a more sensitive understanding of the psychologies of lesbian women: for models that value and affirm close-connected relationships while empowering women to care for themselves as well as each other, through open communication and expression of differences. Julie Mencher’s concept of ‘embeddedness’ in relationships (1997) does not quite strike the right chord, with its connotations of being cemented in
place. The women in this study are working towards more flexible models. Carol Gilligan’s communicative process of investigation and discovery to find a balance between care for others and care for the self (1982), Joyce Lindenbaum’s ‘separateness that is relational rather than reactive’ (1985: 102) and Jodi Dean’s suggestion of ‘overcoming role recognition in favour of the mutual recognition of subjects deserving equal respect’ (1995: 222) resonate better with participants’ experiences. Melbourne-based psychologist Salli Trathen’s relationship counselling practice, which includes same-sex couples, also fits. Trathen explores ‘optimal levels of closeness and distance’ and invites experimentation and flexibility to find out what works best for the couple over time (2001).

I examined participants’ experiences to see who had moved through relationship challenges the most successfully. The most harmonious relationships among coupled participants share a number of features in common: the experimentation and flexibility cited by Trathen (2001) over a period of time (eg. Alice and Lucy), and the resources to be able to do this; being ‘out’ to most of the significant people in their lives and being supported in their relationships by others; and having access to information and/or counselling that affirms models of close relationships, including lesbian and feminist theory and psychology. Although living in the country or outer suburbs immediately puts lesbians at risk of isolation, it does not have to be a disadvantage if these other conditions are met. Partners that successfully negotiate individuality and togetherness, and that do not see difference as a threat to equality, are indeed, as Giddens (1992) suggests, at the forefront of a ‘transformation of intimacy’ in the contemporary period.

These participants cite a range of different techniques for staying close while preserving independence. In recognising the ‘delicious but dangerous trap’ of wanting to get all her needs met by her lover, Mei Li instead favoured a kind of ‘interdependence’. She explained her theory:

You realise that if you are emotionally committed to someone then you are, part of that is depending on the other person, you know, and that’s, that’s a positive thing really, you know, you don’t want to be an island all your life and not need other people and not depend on them but yeah you want it to
be balanced so you don’t want one person to be heaps more dependent than the other, and you want it to be say reciprocal sort of interactional dependence so interdependence.

Country lesbians Susie and Indigo also defended dependence, in ways compatible with the arguments of the Stone Center theorists (eg. Stiver, 1991). Susie, who fell seriously ill shortly after starting her current relationship, and couldn’t move from her partner’s bed, admitted dependence on her partner. However, to modify this she made attempts to create her ‘own space’ and sense of separateness within her partner’s household, and pulled others in to help, to avoid putting too much pressure on her partner. She believed they had a balanced relationship. Indigo felt that dependence was ‘inevitable’ in a loving relationship, and that living in a rural area, it was essential she be able to depend on her lover. One of the mechanisms by which she preserved a sense of self was by keeping her own bedroom, and negotiating with her lover that she sleep there alone from time to time. It was important to Indigo that she only slept in her own room when things were good between her and her partner, and that she avoided using the room as a retreat from conflict. Her more recent part-time work in the city was a conscious choice ‘as the isolation of the coast was becoming a too frequent topic in our conversation’. Indigo felt her time away had strengthened their friendship even more as their decisions to spend time together were ‘conscious’ rather than ‘habitual’. She felt that their 16 years together were ‘worth celebrating’.

Other views on managing difference included Jocasta’s belief that there were times it was important she and her partner were ‘a unit’, such as at family gatherings, and times for being separate and valuing individuality. Laura felt differences were better than similarities in a relationship as the differences between her and her partner had been opportunities for growth for her. Elizabeth felt the same way. Sally and Susie were sensitive to their partner’s feelings yet firm about articulating their own needs for separate friends and activities. Rosemary too had come to believe this was important. Ruth believed that as she grew older she valued her individuality in relationships more, and that she had learned from experience to communicate with her lover. And Jean and Rosemary, despite busy schedules,
resisted the isolation they had experienced in previous relationships, and were committed to lesbian friends and groups that also involved their partners.

The experiences of participants in negotiating satisfactory close-connected relationships also has implications for theorising around caring. For those whose relationships are no longer satisfying but who cannot find the words to say so, a framework of women as ‘relational selves’ with a moral ‘imperative to care’ assists in understanding this situation. However it would appear that in this case, some of the women have taken caring to the point of denying the self, and as in the case of Bess, who delayed articulating her dissatisfaction for five years, and Ali, who stayed in an abusive relationship for several years, it has become destructive. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) suggest that while love in late modernity is harder, due to desires for more equal relationships, it is also more important, due to all of the other pressures of a detraditionalised life. They argue that difficulties separating in the contemporary world may be due to this as much as to the ‘symbiotic entanglement’ that psychologists blame.

But there is another layer of complexity for lesbians: if lesbian identity is contingent on having a lover, what happens to the self, and other people’s views of the self, when a relationship collapses? Many of the women in this study, including Bess and Ali, were in their first or first serious lesbian relationship, which Susan Krieger observes often comes with an expectation that they will be perfect by comparison to their heterosexual relationships (1983: 71-72; see also Berzon, 1988). New lesbians, Krieger argues, have more invested in relationships: both the stakes and the expectations are higher. If relationships end, loss is intense. I would add that this is particularly the case when lovers are ‘best friends’, and discourses of passionate friendships and equal relationships have led to the idealising of women’s relational capacities. I wonder how much the lesbians in this study had invested in relationships working both for their own sense of a coherent self and for the appearance they presented to others.

The literature on women’s caring is mostly about unidirectional caring; reciprocal caring is undertheorised. These women’s stories provide a clear example of
reciprocal caring. The women value the mutuality and reciprocity in their relationships. In the same breath, however, the other side of the coin can appear: some of them still bend over backwards to please their lovers, to ‘live out somebody else’s ambitions’ (Bess) – that is, to care for them at the expense of the self. Women such as Bess and her partner experience something akin to Gilligan’s moral ‘imperative to care’ (Gilligan, 1982; Gilligan et al, 1990). Gilligan gives women an out from caring when she discusses how the concept of rights gives them the right to care for themselves as well as others. However, women such as Bess, and others who are isolated, do not appear to have internalised this right. They are not aided by living in a culture that both lauds and deprecates typically female qualities such as caring and relatedness. It is only when women such as Lucy do recognise their rights to take care of themselves, and have the resources to do so, as Lucy did with her temporary move to Melbourne, that a more authentic reciprocal caring between women becomes possible.

This chapter addressed more closely the similarities between women’s friendships and lesbian relationships in its examination of the normative ‘best friend’ model of lesbian relationships that is part of a wider ‘transformation of intimacy’ in contemporary western societies. Lesbians’ experiences in relationships throw the ‘relational self’ and the female ‘imperative to care’ sharply into focus, and suggest that theorists of the ‘transformation of intimacy’ and the ‘project of self’ need to take more account of the importance of relatedness for women.

New lesbians in this study bring their experiences of ‘best friendships’ with other women to their relationships, applying a feminine moral code of caring and relatedness in relationships. Yet the ‘imperative to care’ for lovers is sometimes at the expense of the self. These close relationships are highly valued by participants. Despite the ostensible equality that comes when two women are together, relatedness is not always benign (Flax, 1993a: 21), nor are lesbian relationships ‘power-free zones’ (Weeks et al, 2001: 114). It is clear from both their narratives and language used that the challenges of lesbian relationships, including relationship violence, mean that many lesbians seek assistance from counselling or look to ‘pop’ psychology for explanations.
Counselling assists some women, but traditional models of psychology that emphasise separation and individuation cause internal conflict for others. While the latter group report that counselling to separate or individuate from their lovers is a useful solution to many problems, they struggle with the advice they received because it sits at odds with the realities of their close-connected relationships. Lesbians who have experienced relationship violence suffer from the contradictions between woman to woman abuse and discourses of passionate friendships and equal relationships built on expectations that women are not violent. The application of simplistic, heterosexual victim-perpetrator models of domestic violence to their situations denies the complexities of abuse in lesbian relationships. Trying to make inappropriate models of relationships fit, the women’s subjectivity and sense of moral agency therefore becomes conflicted. Women with access to education, supportive networks, and/or lesbian-friendly counselling which takes account of both the strengths and problems of the ‘relational self’, are more secure in their close connections, yet not afraid to speak up about their needs. They thus are better able to negotiate happier relationships and a less conflicted sense of self.

This chapter identified that isolation, among other factors, can lead to problems in lesbian relationships. Since the 1970s, lesbian communities have helped reduce isolation, and have been a focus for lesbian politics, activism, friendship and the affirmation of lesbian identity. The next chapter discusses the changing role of ‘lesbian communities’ and other social networks in lesbians’ lives in the 1990s.
CHAPTER SIX: CHANGING LESBIAN ‘COMMUNITIES’ AND NETWORKS

The ‘lesbian community’ – the vibrant, international feminist movement discussed in the Introduction – has been a focal point for lesbians in recent decades. For the women in this study, by contrast, it is of very little interest. Participants acknowledge this ‘lesbian community’ and its offshoots, but their lack of involvement in it points to a shift in definitions from this often separatist, interdependent, international ‘movement’ to a disparate collection of mostly social groups. It is important to them, and pleasant that these communities are there – in fact they are rather taken for granted – but they are not an integral part of lesbians’ lives or essential to developing a lesbian identity. Rather, these lesbians construct their own, much smaller, ‘communities of choice’ (Friedman, 1995), perhaps more properly called networks, through which their subjectivities are constituted. Networks include a range of people: lovers, ex-lovers, women and men who are lesbian, gay, bisexual and heterosexual, close and casual friends, one or two chosen blood relatives, and for only a handful, the wider lesbian or lesbian and gay community groups with which they are involved. These networks are important in several ways. They provide acceptance and support of the self, facilitate sharing and self-development, and provide opportunities for mutual care for others. ‘Communities of choice’ also provide a sense of ‘belonging’ or ‘family’ often missing because of lesbians’ continued marginalisation from heterosexist, homophobic families and the wider community. Yet at the same time, these lesbians are more integrated into mainstream society than at any other time in the past, suggesting that lesbian feminist and lesbian and gay activists have ‘done their job’ (Horsley, 2002: 3).

The results match those found by Arlene Stein in her interviews with new lesbians in San Francisco during the 1990s (1997). While participants in this study have an awareness or experience of the activist lesbian feminist communities that first made their mark on the lesbian scene in the 1970s and ‘brought out’ many women as lesbians (eg. Wolf, 1980), most reject such ‘politically gated’ (Horsley, 2002: 3) communities for themselves. Very few are political activists. Rather they want diverse, tolerant groups and activities. For the most part, they do not feel any need
to access lesbian communities to affirm identity. Nor do they refer to any sense of an international lesbian or lesbian and gay community, or any kind of community or networking in cyberspace, suggesting their most important relationships are local and embodied. Their self-awareness as lesbians is formed through personal experience of being attracted to or falling in love with a girl or woman, having a love relationship, and having lesbians in the wider culture and in literature – the legacy of the activism of the 1970s and 80s – as points of reference for a non-mainstream identity.

At first I wondered if my participants’ lack of interest in ‘the lesbian community’ was a byproduct of my decision not to interview anyone I knew from my own large, lesbian feminist community, as discussed in Chapter Two. But over the duration of the study, I observed how my own community too had changed in a similar way to that of the lesbian feminists in San Francisco interviewed by Stein (1997). Its members are more likely to join in mixed lesbian and gay events, activism includes anti-globalisation, environmental and anti-war protests, women have finished studying and have got mainstream jobs, and women-only events are rare, mostly social, and increasingly tolerant of difference.

The results are consistent with the widely noted decline in community contacts in late capitalism (eg. Cox, 1995; Putnam, 2000) that is part of a ‘transformation of intimacy’. Changes in the labour market create risk and uncertainty, and in response, there has been a widespread swing to a deeper individualism than at any other time in the past (Beck, 1994, 1996; Morgan, 1999). Most participants work to support themselves, and many are also studying or retraining to cope with the changing labour market. Rather than relying on a lesbian community or female support network, as women in the past have done, should they be unsuccessful in finding employment they are able to fall back on, firstly, a welfare state, and secondly their own ‘communities of choice’. This is their preference, as in busy lives they cannot see the point of the struggles with difference needed to make interdependent lesbian communities work. Highly valued, individual freedoms conflict with notions of shared communities.
In examining the challenges to and changes in definitions and expectations of ‘the lesbian community’ through the 1970s, 80s and 90s, this chapter demonstrates how the new multiplicity of redefined ‘lesbian communities’ in the 1990s provide social activities and friendship rather than politics, and how activism takes place at home. This is particularly the case for lesbians who ‘come out’ in country areas, and who with great resilience take it upon themselves to educate those around them just by being ‘out and proud’. For the majority of the women in this study, needs are met by lovers who are ‘best friends’, and by small friendship networks, within which the ‘project of self’ is affirmed and developed.

SHIFTING DEFINITIONS OF LESBIAN COMMUNITY

The meaning of the term ‘the lesbian community’ has shifted from the 1970s to the 1990s. As discussed in Chapter One, lesbian feminist scholars have highlighted the importance of historical women’s communities and female support networks which enabled women to be independent of men (Davis, 1973; Wickes, 1977; Cook, 1977; Hanscome and Smyers, 1987; Raymond, 1991a; Auchmuty, 1992, 1993). Lesbian feminist communities in the second wave of the women’s movement continued the tradition of the suffragettes who refused to marry (Jeffreys, 1997), advocating the withdrawal of women from men as part of their activism (Bunch, 1987; Hoagland, 1988; Raymond, 1991a; Frye, 1995; Ferguson, 1995; Kitzinger, 1996a). The calls of Celia Kitzinger (1996a), Bev Jo (1996) and Chris Sitka (1996) for a more interdependent, political lesbian community could be seen to be connoting a recent decline in these sorts of feminist communities.

Gai Lemon and Wendy Patton cast their net more widely in their literature review of ‘the lesbian community’. They find it variously described as a subculture, a ghetto, social networks of lesbians or a range of social groups which may or may not be exclusively lesbian (1997: 118). Arlene Stein (1997) charts the changes in San Francisco from a lesbian community dominated by lesbian feminists in the 1970s, to a broader, more diverse, pluralistic and tolerant community in the 1990s. The term ‘community’ in the lesbian and gay context at the end of the century more accurately describes ‘the pool of lesbians from which to draw friends and lovers’
(Stanley, 1996) or the general ‘population’ of lesbians and gays (Weeks et al, 2001), rather than the interdependent or political communities of earlier decades.

Participants’ definitions of ‘the lesbian community’

When seeking views on ‘the lesbian community’ from participants in interviews, I did not define it, instead allowing them to interpret the concept themselves. I wanted to discover if lesbians had taken on board any of the notions of lesbian community described in the literature, particularly the lesbian feminist notion of a political, interdependent community. To elicit their views, I first asked them to indicate their broad social networks and communities on a diagram. In the questionnaire, I asked for their definitions of feminism to see if they included creating community. I asked what different needs are fulfilled by different friends, their opinions on ‘the lesbian community’, and further questions about feminism.

From their answers, I have determined that lesbians do not rely on female support networks exclusively for support in the way that women of earlier times did. Most demonstrate an awareness of the concept of the political, interdependent, supportive, feminist type of community, or a lesbian separatist community, and reject it. Very few list lesbian community groups on their friendship diagrams. I conclude that a conscious effort to create or find lesbian community is not important to most of these women. Rather, they take the social networks and meeting places which Lemon and Patton (1997) describe as ‘the lesbian community’ for granted, and want more of them. However, for the most part, these are not political groupings. The findings are consistent with the shift in definitions of lesbian community to a ‘pool’ or ‘population’ of lesbians. The reasons for this trend are explored throughout the chapter.

Ideals of lesbian community versus realities

While valuing the ideals associated with communities, feminists have also acknowledged their limitations and constraints, in particular the tensions between individualism and communitarianism that besiege all communities (Krieger, 1983; Hoagland, 1988; Raymond, 1991a; Weiss and Friedman, 1995; Ferguson, 1995;
Frye, 1995). Attempts have been made to address these issues in self-consciously lesbian feminist communities. Susan Krieger documents efforts to build a lesbian community that is ‘truly accepting of its members’ in one US midwestern town (1983: 169). Calling on women to ‘separate from heterosexuality’, Sarah Lucia Hoagland synthesises ‘the community’ and ‘the individual’ to come up with the notion of ‘the autonomy of the self within community’, and with a word to describe it made up of its Greek roots: ‘autokoeneny’ (1988). Ann Ferguson takes this further with her idea of networks of ‘oppositional communities’, and her discussion that lesbians ought not to decide on either individualism or community but can choose both (1995). Marilyn Frye discusses how the lesbian community’s acknowledgment of diversity in her town in the US enables lesbians to survive and thrive and create community (1995).

Most of the 22 lesbians interviewed for this study do not have so sophisticated an understanding of managing potential tensions in a community. Their responses are consistent with a decline in community participation that is part of a more general shift to a deeper individualism in western societies, combined with support for the discourse of lesbian identity as sexual, i.e. individual, rather than political. Most have read about, experienced or in some other way absorbed the body of work around lesbian feminist communities and have formed certain opinions about them: that interdependent and political lesbian communities expect that lesbians will get along just because of a common sexuality, and/or that lesbians will separate completely from men and look after each other. These expectations are problematic. None practise lesbian feminist separatism and none want the responsibilities they assume lesbian community requires. Two have concerns about the tensions between individuals and communities and demonstrate an overt preference for individuality: Lucy thought that because our society was so individualistic, living in a community would be ‘bloody hard’, and Elizabeth had concerns about ‘getting sucked into’ the group mechanism and ‘losing individuality’. The two (out of 22 lesbians interviewed) who do believe in the concept of lesbian community are feminists who appear to have read literature or experienced women’s or lesbian communities, believe in their benefits, and are not daunted by difference (Ruth and Susie). For the rest, feminism is about equal rights
and eliminating discrimination against women, and lesbian community is either a possibility, ‘just a part’ of lesbian lives, problematic, or the suggestion is given a firm ‘no’. The lesbian feminist communities which were prevalent in western liberal democracies in the 1970s and 1980s are not part of the lives of most participants, or even on their horizon save to reject them.

Most have had experiences that inform their opinions, ranging from a benign lack of connection with other lesbians in groups to overt and distressing conflict. For these women, differences among lesbians make it impossible for sexuality alone to be the basis of a community. For a couple, sexuality itself is changeable and cannot therefore be the basis of a community. Several women have strong beliefs that lesbians should not separate from the wider community, even temporarily, but should live in it and educate its members. One is firmly opposed to the notion of a political lesbian community that excludes men, and one has had such negative experiences of a lesbian community that she sees no or very little hope for such communities in the future. I will now examine this range of experiences and opinions about ‘the lesbian community’, before revealing the nature of lesbians’ actual social networks.

Ruth and Susie, both feminists, and importantly, both older women, had good experiences of lesbian community. Ruth, age 47 and out for almost 20 years, had enjoyed the lesbian feminist heyday of the 1980s and early 1990s. In 1997, she was still active in several lesbian feminist political and social groups in Melbourne. Many of Ruth’s closest family members were deceased, so when asked about lesbian community, Ruth was quite clear that for her, ‘the lesbian community is my family’. She demonstrated an awareness of the interdependent notion of community as people who were able to look after one another, together with a practical awareness of difference:

> Again you know I’m not denying that there are a lot of differences … I don’t think that negates the possibility of us being a family, of being there for each other especially in times of need …

For Ruth, the lesbian community could also be a political grouping where lesbians worked together across difference for a common purpose.
Susie, aged 44 and out for about five years, lived in a regional city and had initiated a couple of lesbian community groups. After having had a relationship ‘in the closet’ for a number of years before ‘coming out’, Susie felt that she, personally, needed a lesbian community around her. She was strongly of the opinion that it was important lesbians came together regardless of differences, and in her discussion of how the focus on diversity in the lesbian community was a ‘patriarchal plot’, demonstrated an awareness of lesbian feminists’ focus on women’s similarities:

I’d like to see a shift away from the focus on diversity in the lesbian community and concentrate on our commonality. It’s very fragmenting in the rural environment, because of lesser numbers, we’re less visible. It’s more conservative here. I think it’s a patriarchal plot to stop women bonding. We need groups in the community. We need to be sensitive to diversity. We have to contain insensitive people. Not get caught up in personal agendas, keep it broad, but create space for people to talk about what’s important to them.

These lesbians value a lesbian community that is political and interdependent. At the same time, they have taken on board the arguments of lesbians of colour, working-class lesbians and others, as discussed by Stein (1997), to embrace difference, without losing sight of commonalities. For Susie, good facilitation was part of this. The communities Ruth and Susie are helping to build may be the contemporary face of lesbian feminism.

Another participant who was positive about the prospect of lesbian community, Elaine, re-visioned it as ‘just a part of most women’s lives’. As we had run out of time in the interview to address this question, she subsequently wrote:

Good question. I’m about to join a gay and lesbian business group. I’d see this way of coming together a sensible thing – we have a basic common interest … but would not expect everyone to share our interests/views on life, the universe and everything else. I’d like to think that women coming together with one common aspect, not expecting everyone to have everything or even many things in common, but a desire to find common
ground and allow ‘give and take’ for the sake of community. I do not see community or networking amongst lesbians as anything but just a part of most women’s lives – much the way that Jewish people might meet together as community or for networking as part of their lives in the much bigger world they inhabit. They all have one thing in common – i.e. they are Jewish, but they may have many different views even about what being Jewish means, and a wide variety of different views on every other subject, but they use what they have in common as the thread that holds the community together.

Elaine’s pragmatic approach to lesbian community probably comes from experience: earlier she had discussed how she struggled to find anything other than lesbianism in common with most of the lesbians she had met in other groups.

Jean thought a lesbian community could work because it would be made up solely of women, and because women were better at resolving differences and conflicts peacefully than men (although she acknowledged this was not always the case).

Three participants have hopes, dreams or fantasies about an idyllic lesbian community, but find the reality different. Interestingly, Christine and Jocasta both referred to ‘Utopia’, a common theme in lesbian feminist novels. Christine, who had felt severely let down by her country lesbian community upon her relationship breaking up, had ‘moments of wildly unrealistic Utopian dream’ where she conjured a picture of a separatist community, ‘but then reality strikes, and I think it would be hell, not Utopia’. Christine could not imagine a harmonious lesbian community in her area, and wondered instead whether she would ‘fall under the ‘Melbourne is the answer’ school of dreams that it seems country lesbians seem to adopt’. Jocasta’s definition of feminism was ‘Utopic (and I suspect impossible) Sisterhood. Women loving themselves and putting each other first’. In reality, Jocasta had had an extremely difficult time on an urban lesbian project which she described thus: ‘the lesbian committee, what a godawful place that is’. The project members suffered from open conflict and recriminations over whether transsexuals should be allowed access, an issue that has divided many lesbian groups (Lienert, 1995; ABC, 1999). Jocasta believed many lesbians suffered from the effects of
child sexual abuse and had never learned boundaries with others, and many had undiagnosed mental illnesses. She strongly felt lesbians needed to take personal responsibility and seek counselling to deal with these issues, or communities would not function. Her experience suggests city communities are no more utopic than country ones, so if Christine were to move she may be disappointed yet again, unless the issues in or expectations around these communities are addressed.

Like Christine and Jocasta, Lucy had had an ‘ideal world’: an expectation that the lesbian community would be ‘… so supportive and nurturing’, but instead, the country lesbian sporting community she was a part of invaded her privacy, pushed her to conform and judged her to the extent that she viewed her earlier ideal as ‘a crock of shit …’ (c.f. Krieger, 1982, 1983). As a result, Lucy was not interested in joining any lesbian communities ever again. When asked about the possibilities of lesbian community, she asked me back ‘and would we want one?’

In particular, Lucy remembered how the community tried to own Alice and like, mine and Alice’s relationship, that became something that was very public, ah, you know, open to the public to, to comment on and you know, people can be very critical with those, like whatever Alice and I did. Say if I didn’t go to Melbourne one weekend to spend it with Alice, well I’d be the worst in the world because I wasn’t treating her fairly. Or that, you know, and so, everything that you did was open. People commented on, um, people tried to destroy our relationship, um (pause) and you know, got nearly very successful at one stage …

When Lucy wanted to withdraw from the competition, she was put under pressure to put lacrosse and the team first in her life:

A couple of the stars of the lacrosse team I guess you would refer to them as, came round and really hassled me and said you know you really want to win the finals, I’m saying well no I don’t, and you know you’re letting us all down, did all that sort of emotional blackmail stuff, and you know and it’s really hard to resist that when you’re in a group where you’ve got all that really heavy stuff continually …
Lucy felt she ‘actually had to move to Melbourne to get out of it, to let people know that I’ve had enough of you, get out of my life … that’s how mad the actual culture is’. She gave another example of the constant judging she was subjected to:

like people drive past your house to see how many cars are there and then report to somebody else that somebody’s car’s there, do you know whose car it is and then you could be having an affair … oh god … and these, here I was thinking that you know, lesbian communities would be so supportive and nurturing, and like, what a crock of shit’.

Lucy’s views shifted over time from desiring an ‘ideal’ lesbian community to appreciating individual friendships. As discussed above, at the time of interview, Lucy had very strong feelings that, given her experiences, she did not want to be part of a lesbian community again. However, by the time she returned her transcript she had made some lesbian friends, which she was pleased about. Her pleasure could possibly indicate that at the time of interview she had been so disillusioned with her lesbian community that she would not seek any lesbian friends again, revealing a slippage in terms that could also be part of the shift in definitions this chapter demonstrates.

Lucy’s partner, Alice, had mixed experiences of the same community. While she could see Lucy’s point of view, and objected to the way members of the community treated Lucy and herself, on another level she also enjoyed the community. Alice had ‘come out’ in the community as a young woman, and Lucy observed that Alice gained some ‘reaffirmation’ from it that she didn’t need. Alice herself had told the story of about how she had first taken up lacrosse at age 17 through to 22, and how she had ‘admired and idolised these older women who were all lesbians, in particular Gill and Maria – I guess I had crushes on them’. Alice reflected on how she moved away from her boyfriend during this time, realising she would prefer to be with women, and hence how she ‘needed these people then during dealing with sexuality’. Alice was less prepared to be critical of the community than Lucy was, although over time, she came to agree with Lucy that they were better off away from it. By the time of returning transcripts, the pair
noted that the community had fallen apart, and that they had withdrawn from most of the women who had been in it, only keeping in touch with a select few.

While not referring to such extreme situations as that of Lucy and Alice, many participants chose to focus on difference and the impossibility of the kind of lesbian community encouraged in the lesbian feminist movement. Anny observed that in the lesbian ‘world’ there are just as many personality types as in the ‘straight’ world. For Emily, ‘the biggest mistake we make is because we’re women we think we’re going to get on’ (a direct contrast to the optimistic stance provided by Jean and other lesbian feminists that women could get on and create community). The opinions of Anny and Emily were echoed by most of the participants I interviewed. Because of this, many did not have any sense of a shared lesbian community, nor did they want one.

For the country women in this study, the issue of difference was highlighted by the lesser numbers of lesbians living in close geographical proximity to them. Elaine’s experience of attempting to be part of a lesbian community, and then being disappointed, was common among the country women in this study. She lived in a rural area and wanted to extend her networks. She had attended some social occasions out of her town and found that despite her sociable nature, ‘even I have stretched myself to find much in common with most of the women – i.e. just being lesbian isn’t in reality enough to make a long trip by car to some venue’. Sally wasn’t always comfortable with attending public events with the country group where she lived, and hadn’t met anyone interesting in any of the lesbian groups she had been to in Melbourne. Jillian enjoyed the diversity of those groups she had attended in the country, but struggled to find anything more than lesbianism in common with them:

I’m still seeking to find a group of lesbians that I have more than just lesbianism in common with ... we’ve had like a lesbian mums group, ‘cause that’s two things we’ve have in common but it’s still not enough.

Difference was also an issue in the city. May’s fifth circle on her friendship diagram included lesbians at her lesbian and gay workplace in inner-city
Melbourne. However, she echoed Jillian’s experience in noting that there was ‘an easiness between us because of lesbian identifications but no other deep bonds or common interest beyond that camaraderie’.

In addition to the differences among lesbians, Mei Li was uncomfortable with forming a community on the basis of sexuality because she didn’t want her identity defined or limited. Discussing how she had talked with a friend about feelings of ‘belonging’ at a lesbian gathering, she explained:

We felt like we didn’t want to be accepted into this community just because of who we wanted to be sexually involved with at the moment, do you know what I mean, like we felt that wasn’t at all the most important thing about us.

Mei Li felt ‘uncomfortable with the fact that I had slept with guys in the past and might do again in the future’ and wondered whether she would then be automatically excluded from the community ‘when I didn’t feel like I’d changed at all, I was still the same person, but to me that was wasn’t a criteria for community necessarily, even though, I can see all the reasons why it is at the same time …’

Mei Li’s answer indicated an awareness of the importance some lesbians give to a community whose members are 100 percent permanently lesbian, even if she didn’t share that need. For her, diversity was normal ‘… so why necessarily make a community, it’s like saying everyone that’s Taiwanese should be in the community … but you know, there are so many different factors in identity …’

A few women took exception to the idea that lesbians should have their own groups out of the mainstream of society, arguing instead that lesbians needed to exchange ideas and not be an exclusive community. Elizabeth took this further, arguing that by forming lesbian-only groups lesbians made themselves more oppressed. It was more important for lesbians to be ‘out’ and educate the wider community. Interestingly, these women lived in country Victoria (Laura and Elizabeth) and outer suburban Melbourne (Marilyn) – where lesbians are few and far between – and were aged in their 40s and 50s, had come to lesbianism later in life and had
mostly grown children. Given their location and experiences, it could be argued that the perceived need for community education (and ability to engage in it) is greater for these women than for others who might live in the inner city. In addition to these comments, four out of the five women who stated they wanted to use their own names rather than pseudonyms in this study were from regional cities. In being ‘out’, these women are activists in their own backyards, workplaces, towns and localities. Rather than waving placards or lobbying for law reform, the women see just being themselves helping to demystify lesbianism for the people around them. This stance is consistent with many women’s motivations to join the study, as discussed in Chapter Two: they wanted to tell their stories and put them out in the public domain as a contribution to community education (cf. Weeks et al, 2001).

For Lisette, aged 26, the one openly bisexual woman in the study, an emigrant from Nicaragua and an inner-city dweller, the lesbian community was a political tactic, part of a feminist movement she did not relate to:

I think it’s high time that we stopped trying to identify ourselves as a gender, as a political group, as an ethnic group, or as anything. We’re just part of the human race ...

None of the other lesbians in the study volunteered that feminism was about building community. While 31 identified as feminist, eight were ambivalent and Lisette said she wasn’t a feminist, only three of the feminists had loose ideas about women’s or lesbian community being part of their definition. Marilyn and Jean thought feminism was about living a lifestyle that was mainly female oriented. But Marilyn didn’t want lesbian community, and Jean thought only of the possibilities, she did not speak of it as a reality. Jocasta included in her definition ‘Utopic (and I suspect impossible) Sisterhood. Women loving themselves and putting each other first’. But Jocasta did not have any lesbian community groups in her circles either, and as discussed earlier, had had a very bad experience in a lesbian group. Other definitions of feminism were more about women achieving equality and eliminating oppression and discrimination in the wider world.
The desire for more social groups

Some women did want more of a ‘lesbian community’ to exist, but it was more along the lines of the broader definition of venues and groups. For example Anny wanted to endow a women’s retreat, and, as discussed above, Elaine wanted to network with other lesbians in business. Elaine also wanted this research project to stimulate discussion on the building and strengthening of the concept of networking and ‘a sense of community’. Ali wanted a venue away from the pub and club scene:

It’s a shame there aren’t more avenues for lesbians to meet. The clubs are not great because they are loud and smoky. If you don’t have a lot of time you can’t join support groups or switchboard (the Gay and Lesbian Switchboard) so it’s hard to network. I’d like a lesbian-only café/lounge/bookshop that’s quiet, not necessarily smoky, a place to hang out. A lesbian centre. It would have to accommodate a lot of different things. Different groups running different activities.

Rosemary was in agreement with Ali, providing an example of a venue she attended that wasn’t based around alcohol, Lesbian Open House. Rosemary believed Lesbian Open House was ‘extremely important’, partly because there are ‘so few spots that aren’t to do with booze and pubs and stuff, where people can get a sense of you know, being open to each other, being friendly’ (cf. Csornyei and Palumbo, 1996). Rosemary had observed that many women who attended Open House were making their first foray into a lesbian space, which reminded her of her first venture there. She strongly identified with new lesbians:

I get a lot of enjoyment from seeing people turn up there who probably had to really really struggle to make that first step, ‘cause I think that once they come to something like Open House for the first time chances are everything else is going to be easy after that. They walk in that door and see that lesbians don’t have two heads, and that’s a real delight, I mean because I’ve spent so long in the closet you know, I always, you know, it’s always me walking into the room.
Other women who saw the notion of the interdependent kind of lesbian community as problematic still all wanted to have access to groups like Open House they could go along to and join in with. Some participants felt it was important that they join lesbian groups to reduce isolation in the lesbian couple (Laura, Marilyn and Jean, who lived in the country and outer suburbia). Jillian and Laura, who lived in country towns, felt that lesbian groups were the only place they and their partners could be ‘out’: they could ‘really relax’ (Jillian) and didn’t have to pretend (Laura). Lisa, partnered and busy doing a PhD, and with no lesbian friends, wrote in her questionnaire that she ‘would love to spontaneously develop friendships with other lesbians but lack of time and interest in the scene prohibits this’.

The findings reveal that these participants sought out lesbian communities to find friendship, to reduce isolation, affirm the lesbian self and provide a space where they could ‘be themselves’. Their lack of interest in political activism suggests a change in the notion of lesbian community over time, from interdependent, political lesbian feminist groups to ‘the scene’ (Lisa), a ‘population’ (Weeks et al, 2001) or ‘pool of lesbians from which to draw friends and lovers’ (Stanley, 1996) in any given geographical area. Participation in these redefined lesbian communities assists in the organisation and development of lesbian subjectivity, but lesbians resist any pressures to conform. Rather, they value their own individual ways of ‘being lesbian’.

COMMUNITIES OF CHOICE

Despite identifying the importance of having lesbian friends, and some wanting more, for the lesbians in the study, lesbian community is part of the lives of only a handful. Most have complex social networks made up of a range of people that more closely resembled Friedman’s notion of friends as ‘communities of choice’ (1995). A number have no or very few lesbian friends. Many are close to one or two chosen blood relatives. The remainder of the chapter examines the nature and extent of lesbians’ friendship networks, including how they differentiate between close and casual friends, the impact of geography on friendship, and the importance of selected family members. Friendship diagrams illustrate the choices of these
lesbians to surround themselves with friends and kin who accept and affirm their lesbian lives. The influence of discourses of a more profound individualism and a ‘transformation of intimacy’ is evident in small, affirming networks that are part of the ‘project of self’. Despite low levels of involvement in communities, the friendship networks reveal that the ‘project of self’ is never undertaken in isolation.

The friendship circles

I asked participants to draw a diagram of their current female friends, starting with the most intimate and broadening out to include networks and communities. I asked them to draw it in a circular shape with themselves in the centre and more concentric circles radiating outwards, and to note what factors, such as geography, affected where they placed friends in the circle.

Figure 6.1 Alice
Alice and Lucy provide examples here (I have redrawn the diagrams and changed names). Both indicate that some friends are moving in and out of circles, demonstrating the flux that Elaine described in Chapter Four where some friends move from casual to close and back again, and the inevitabilities of some friendships changing and/or ending.

**Figure 6.2 Lucy**

As for Alice and Lucy, close friends are generally placed in inner circles, and more casual friends in outer circles. Distance – both geographical and emotional – can modify this pattern, with some close friends who live far away or who are heterosexual relegated to outer circles. Other close friends from shared intense or life-changing experiences, such as raising children, being lovers or sharing houses, are in inner circles regardless of proximity or sexuality. For the most part, close and casual friends do not cross over; only Elaine and Jillian talked about connecting friends up or having parties where they would invite all their friends.
The lack of occasions where a variety of friends mix raises a number of questions. Does the busy pace of contemporary life mean that lesbians (and maybe others) have no time for parties or other events where friends might cross over? Is it that the deeper kind of intimacy that comes with one-on-one meetings is preferred. Or is it simply too difficult to imagine putting a wide variety of friends, family members, work colleagues and ‘study buddies’ (Jillian) together when lesbians may not be ‘out’ to all the people they know, and those they are ‘out’ to may have varying degrees of acceptance? I would have liked to have taken this line of questioning further.

Most participants complied with my request for concentric circle diagrams, but some came up with their own diagrams which allowed them to more adequately express their place in a network and what was important about the network itself which my model hadn’t allowed. For example Susie, aged 44, with a daughter, several ‘stepdaughters’ and a granddaughter, inevitably had a more complex network. Rather than using concentric circles, she drew lines to indicate closeness, and was hence able to indicate that she was closer to one member of a couple than another. Crossed lines and an arrow out indicated that one friendship that had previously had ‘a very special closeness’ (three lines), was over.
Cathryn, aged 27 and an immigrant from Ireland, demonstrated in her diagram that distance and frequency of contact did not affect closeness: she had more intimacy with distant friends than those who lived in the same city, with the exception of her partner.
For Indigo, age 44, who emigrated from Italy to Australia at age 18, the geographical distance between herself and her sister, who still lived in Italy, did not affect her placement in the diagram: she appeared in Indigo’s inner circle along with her partner. In the interview Indigo discussed how as adults, the geographical distance between them had become too great and she was in the process of appealing a rejection by the Immigration Department of an application for her sister and her sister’s family to emigrate to join her. If the appeal failed, they all planned to relocate because they could not bear to be separated any longer.
Indigo’s case is an example of how, as discussed in Chapter Four, while many of the lesbians reported that friends fulfilled family functions, many also had close ties with selected blood relations. Indigo was not close with any other member of her blood family. Twenty seven out of the 40 said that they were close to at least one woman family member. Sixteen put family members in their friendship diagrams, even though I had only asked them to include friends. The only exception to this was Lisette, whose circle was made up entirely of family members, most of whom lived in Australia with her (but whose closest intimate, her grandmother, lived in Nicaragua). This is consistent with the literature on contemporary western (Anglo) society that notes a decline in family relationships of duty and obligation and an increase in negotiated kin relationships (Pahl, 1998; Beck-Gernsheim, 1998), part of a ‘transformation of intimacy’ probably even more salient for lesbians who may be marginalised in their families.
Arlene Stein (1997) found lesbian feminists in San Francisco in the 1990s valued kin ties more than they did in the separatist communities of the 1970s and 80s. While for Stein’s older participants this was a change, for the younger lesbians in this study, it was more of an indication of greater levels of acceptance from kin than might have been the case had they ‘come out’ in earlier times. This is probably due in part to the legacy of activists of the past. For example Louise, aged 33, who was from a working-class Anglo-Australian background, had very few lesbian friends, but made a note that she was very close to her twin brother and her mother:

I wouldn’t say I have a great deal of lesbian friends and haven’t really found the need to go and find lots of them when I came out. I am very fortunate to be a twin, and my brother, who lives in Melbourne, who is gay as well, we are very, very close and I think with growing up and living in whatever city I have, knowing my twin is there gives me a lot of strength. So although it’s great to have friends there, as support, my brother really takes over that arena. As well I have just come out to my Mum, and now we are back to where we were before I got confused about my sexuality and started hiding
things from her. So now whenever I need strength and support I first contact my partner, then my brother, then my mum.

The female friends in Louise’s inner circle were significant, but they were not reliable sources of emotional and material support in the way other friends were for lesbians without those family ties.

Alice, also from a working-class Anglo-Australian background, was the oldest of several girls in a close-knit Catholic family from a regional city. Her mother and sisters were in her second circle, together with a note that they were ‘emotionally here but not always an integral-important part of daily life’. She reported a very close relationship with one sister in particular since her birth. The pair were close in age and still good friends, although not as close as they had been due to location and different interests. Alice had always been very close to her mother, who she called ‘a good friend’.

Mei Li, aged 24, from an Anglo-Taiwanese background, also had close family ties with her mother and a sister. At age 21, after ‘a turbulent late adolescence’, she became friends with her mother: ‘… she’s become a big support. Our values and politics are so similar, she knows and loves and believes in me’. Mei Li was close to her younger sister as well, and wrote about how they had been close as children, not so close as adolescents, and had reestablished a relationship in adulthood:

We used to do everything together, she was my shadow. Adolescence separated us, I abandoned her for [best friend] Gail, later she shrugged me off to establish her own identity. Still some competition/identity stuff between us, but also enormous goodwill and love. A lot unspoken.

Jessica, aged 42, from a Jewish-American background, and Cathryn both noted that they had become firm friends with their mothers when their mothers left their husbands, echoing Mary Hunt’s observation that many women in families only become friends when the husband/father dies (1992). Jessica’s relationship with her mother was further enhanced when they both moved towards a lesbian identity at the same time. Women with adult daughters, such as Susie, Jean and Marilyn, included them in their friendship circles and noted that these were important relationships.
Closeness to select family members, like to old friends, demonstrates that history is an important part of the ‘project of self’. This theme is developed more in Chapter Seven.

The majority of lesbians in the study were involved in a large range of lesbian and other community sporting, arts and social groups, but these were for the most part not drawn on friendship diagrams. This suggests that because these groups were not as intimate as individual friends and lovers, they may not have been as important, a speculation in line with participants’ preferences for ‘communities of choice’ – friends – rather than wider affiliations. About a quarter did list groups: they included Ruth, who included three lesbian feminist groups in her fifth circle; Anny, who put one lesbian feminist group in her second circle; Toni, who placed the lesbian group at her university in her fourth circle, and Louise and Rosemary, who included a lesbian group in their second and third circles respectively. Feminist women’s groups at universities made it into outer circles for two of the younger women: Natalie placed them in her third (outer) circle and Toni in her fourth circle. Karen, the mother of three adult children with disabilities, placed the mothers of other children with disabilities who worked together to organise events for their children, and the ‘netball girls’ in her fourth circle, and her partner Terri also put the ‘netball girls’ in her fourth circle.

Involvement in a lesbian group at a community radio station differentiated Rosemary and Louise from the other women studied. The radio station fulfilled an important function for both of them. They had both been involved at different times over a period of years. A couple, Louise and Rosemary had also met each other at the station. Both included friends who they had met there in their inner circles on their friendship diagrams, making them two of very few women who had friends as well as lovers in their inner circles. Coupled women tended only to have lovers and perhaps a sister or one other significant friend in their inner circle. Consistent with other (heterosexual) studies of friendship that show that single adults have more interaction with friends than do married ones (Rose and Serafica, 1986: 278), and Coss’s (1991) assertion that single lesbians value friendship more than coupled ones, most single lesbians had larger inner circles, some numbering up to seven
women, for example Alex (see her diagram in Chapter Two). This is also consistent with Solano’s argument that the lack of one close friend can be made up for by having several friendly relations and close acquaintances to meet needs (1986: 236).

By contrast, Louise’s inner circle included Rosemary, her mother and two friends who she had met at the radio station (and would have included her twin brother if this hadn’t just been a study of female friends), and Rosemary included Louise, one of the two friends from the radio station that Louise had listed, and a further four friends, including an ex-lover, in her inner circle. However, interviews revealed that the placement of radio station women in both Rosemary’s and Louise’s inner circles was more about regular contact and an active social life than reciprocal emotional closeness. This was particularly the case for Louise, who wrote on her questionnaire that the women in her inner circle were ‘special to me’, but whose interview revealed that the radio station friends were not as reliable as she would have liked. By the time of returning her interview transcript, one of these friendships had ended.
Figure 6.7 Louise

Figure 6.8 Rosemary
Some participants discussed their involvement in the mixed gay and lesbian community in interviews, although they had not listed these communities on their diagrams. Emily had always preferred mixed groups to an exclusively lesbian social setting. She felt that the lesbians and gay men in the groups she had belonged to were ‘very precious’ (emotionally important) to each other. Rosemary, too, thought very much in terms of gay community rather than lesbian community, and acknowledged her participation in this community by putting it in her outer circle. While she appreciated women-only spaces on a regular basis, she was appalled by separatist lesbian events such as the Amazon Games which excluded boys over the age of six years. While not expressing such strong opinions as Rosemary, the tendency away from separatism, and towards integration into diverse communities, was a notable feature of the women’s views.

Missy, aged 42, revealed the slippage in terms between friends and community noted earlier in her explicit labelling of her friends as her community:

The older I get, the more important and wonderful my lesbian friendships become to me. I need a sense of community, of belonging, and lesbian belonging, as a woman just isn’t enough these days.

Missy wrote about building ‘a community – social and emotional as well as political and practical’ around her son and herself, echoing Friedman’s notion of ‘communities of choice’ (1995). At the time of the questionnaire, she admitted that due to recent events, including almost getting married, she had ‘no-one to tell my day to’. Now that she had moved house to be closer to old friends, she intended to work on moving them into her empty inner circle. Despite a number of casual and previously close friends in her friendship diagram, Ali, too, saw herself as very much alone at the time of interview. However this was a conscious choice as she ‘now realising that I prefer friendships that really reflect the person I am now as opposed to the person I once was’. These narratives demonstrate the importance of ‘communities of choice’ to affirm and reflect a ‘project of self’.

Although some participants, like Ali and Elaine, wanted more lesbian community, the reality for participants in the study is that needs are fulfilled from a variety of sources, not just the lesbian community. Participants doubt whether there is even
any point attempting to create a lesbian community given significant differences between lesbians. A shared experience of minority sexuality, while significant, is not enough to create the bonds needed for reliable and ongoing networks. Rather shared or intense life-changing experiences, such as being lovers or sharing houses, are more likely to be the bases of strong, enduring friendship networks. Selected family members are also important, as are casual or situational friends such as workmates and sporting friends. This wide range of friends affirms and supports the self.

Despite lesbian friends affirming lesbian identity for women such as Alice, a lesbian community is something most neither live in nor want. Lesbian identity is formed through relationships with women, and a more visible lesbian culture provides points of reference for this identity, but they do not necessarily have to be a part of this culture. Hence the ‘lesbian community’ is important ‘to provide a pool of lesbians from which to draw friends and lovers’ (Stanley, 1996), indicating a shift in terminology from an interdependent, political community to a ‘population’ of lesbians (Weeks et al, 2001). However, once those friendship and love relationships are established, the community is no longer as crucial. Immediate needs are met from small friendship networks, lover relationships and families, which are seen as more important than any sense of obligation to lesbians one does not know in a wider lesbian community.

Given the hard work needed to stay afloat financially in the current employment market, and participants’ reports that this has affected time available for friendships in Chapter Three (cf. Cox, 1995; Putnam, 2000), I suggest participants do not have the time or capacity for much community involvement or activism. The fact that groups participants are part of are not listed on friendship diagrams suggests close friendships are more important.

It appears the widespread shift to a more profound individualism in western societies is also occurring in lesbian communities. Writers on all kinds of communities discuss the inevitable tensions between the individual and the group. The lesbians in this study prefer individuality to community, rejecting the struggles
around difference needed to make interdependent communities work. They use
difference as a justification for not having such communities at all. They also are
not interested in activism for political change. It is likely that the gains achieved by
activists of the past, somewhat taken for granted by his group, enables these
lesbians to live more openly and happily in their own ‘communities of choice’. The
affirmation and support provided by legislation that gives lesbians and gays the
right to live and work free from discrimination, and to seek counselling knowing
they will not be classified as mentally ill, gives many lesbians the confidence to be
‘out’ in wider society. For those who may not be ‘out’ to everyone they know, or
who may be ‘out’ but continue to be marginalised or self-censoring, lesbian social
groups provide a buffer and a place where lesbians can ‘be themselves’ for a while.

The political activist lesbian feminist communities of the 1970s and 1980s appear
to have been superseded at the turn of the 21st century by individualism, a quiet
confidence in lesbians’ rights to be full members of society, and a different kind of
activism at home. But low levels of community involvement do not necessarily
lead to isolation. The lesbians in this study maintain what Lynn Jamieson calls
‘self-locating primary relationships with kin and friends’ (1998: 172) that are the
‘crux of personal life’ (p. 173).

Choices around communities and networks, over which participants have some
control, suggest that lesbians in this study enjoy acceptance in mainstream
Australian society. Despite many gains, however, discrimination against
homosexuals continues to be widespread. The next chapter reveals this in its
examination of how lesbians negotiate the self through conflict and change in
friendships, which includes, for many, the transition to a lesbian identity.
CHAPTER SEVEN: NEGOTIATING CONFLICT AND CHANGE

Conflict and change in friendships are common, but because of the continued marginalisation of lesbians, they can experience these processes differently. Personal and situational changes, and changes in relationship status, all challenge friendships. However the most momentous life change that affects many lesbians is that from a heterosexual to a lesbian identity. Issues arising from this transition were overwhelming in the questionnaires and interviews, and hence the largest part of this chapter is concerned with them. When this transition intersects with or follows other changes, for one or both partners, friendships are under pressure. Mainstream culture’s preoccupation with self-development is extremely relevant as participants engage in what Stein (1997) calls ‘identity work’ to change to and maintain an authentic and satisfying lesbian identity in the context of a culture which stigmatises homosexuality.

This chapter explores how lesbians negotiate the self through the negotiation of conflict, change and endings in friendships. The women’s experiences strongly support the postmodern notion of a fluid, changing, multiple self as opposed to the fixed ‘rational subject’ of enlightenment thought. Reflection and counselling aid a ‘project of self’. Participants are preoccupied with ‘coming out’ and wanting their friends to support this new part of themselves. As a result, they have a low tolerance for conflict around sexuality and other issues. The findings also reflect research questions about durable friendships and those that have ended, rather than new friendships. Actively choosing which friends to pursue and which to drop, and responding to losses, help lesbians define their own changing selves. In addition, surviving late capitalism effectively means making choices that suit the busy times we live in, and for these lesbians, that means downsizing to a small group of affirming friends. Despite this, lesbians are always ‘relational selves’, rather than the isolated, individuated (probably male) selves that mostly male theorists have postulated are a response to widespread social change.

Anthony Giddens comments on transitions in his description of the self as a ‘reflexive project’ in late modernity:
Transitions in individuals’ lives have always demanded psychic reorganisation, something which was often ritualised in traditional cultures in the shape of *rites de passage* … In the settings of modernity, by contrast, the altered self has to be explored and constructed as part of a reflexive process of connecting personal and social change (1991: 32).

With ‘rites of passage’ all but abandoned in modern life, the architects of social policy note that at critical life transitions, individuals and families need extra social and government support (eg. Prior *et al*, 2000). Not surprisingly, no such support for ‘coming out’ is offered officially by the state, but consistent with observations by Vivienne Cass (1979), lesbians in this study tended to access counsellors employed by the state and in private practice to assist them with this ‘psychic reorganisation’. Counsellors, along with lovers, were the main sources of support, as there were no ‘coming out’ groups or other public spaces for these changes to be explored, and as participants had low levels of involvement in lesbian groups. This finding also reflects the sample: most fell in love with a woman at work or study and subsequently ‘became lesbian’.

Many male theorists argue that the stressful conditions of late modernity or late capitalism cause the self to ‘contract to a defensive core’, or ‘emotionally disengage’ (Lasch, 1984; see also Elliott, 2001). Given that the lesbians in this study experience major life changes and personal conflicts in the context of a stressful world, it might be expected they would go down this path. New lesbians’ low tolerance for conflict partly verifies this thesis. However processes of conflict and change, while not easy, demonstrate lesbians’ more positive negotiation of the self under pressure than these theorists postulate, because theirs is an ever-renewing ‘relational self’. Rather than going under, being a ‘relational self’, with emotional support from friends and lovers, promotes resilience in times of change.

A major issue in negotiating conflict, change and the endings of friendship is the fluid nature of the friendship relationship. Because friendships typically have no expectations set in concrete, and commitments are often not even discussed, conflicts are unlikely to be articulated. Hence endings can be fraught and painful and filled with uncertainties (Lindsey, 1981; O’Connor, 1992; Orbach and
Eichenbaum, 1994; Kitzinger, 1996a) or identifiable only in retrospect after they have ‘faded away’ (Rose, 1984). However Argyle and Henderson (1984) suggest that friendships do have informal ‘rules’, and that failing to follow these can impair them. These include that friends will stand up for you, share good news with you, give emotional support, trust and confide in you and offer aid when needed. Wiseman suggests that ‘the intimacy and closeness that is an integral part of friendship creates mutual expectations that makes both participants vulnerable to betrayals of trust’ (1986: 201). Participants’ friendships that do not follow these ‘rules’ or unspoken ‘mutual expectations’ during the transition from a heterosexual to a lesbian identity, and through other conflict and change, are indeed vulnerable, and often end. Endings can be conflictual, dramatic and painful, or friends can drift away more subtly. Either way, loss is a powerful and pervasive theme. It is clear from the ways participants discuss their friendship losses that their disappointment stems from an expectation that women, who are meant to be caring, will not betray them. Here, and through the following discussion, their idealistic views on women as relational selves reveal the influence of discourses of romantic friends, and of the equal relationships that are part of a posited ‘transformation of intimacy’ in the late modern period.

Participants demonstrate different patterns in negotiating conflict and change. This diversity shows up strongly in narratives of the transition to a lesbian identity. Similar processes are evident in how lesbians handle other conflicts. Four patterns demonstrate the threats to friendship change can bring, and how lesbians’ desires for a supportive network for the self they are becoming inform their management of conflict. A fifth pattern demonstrates how the embracing of change enriches friendship and allows for multiple dimensions of the self to be validated.

Firstly, lesbians refrain from ‘coming out’ (or articulating other feelings) due to fear of the loss of friendships they value because of shared histories. In some instances, as was discussed in Chapter Five in relation to lovers, women’s moral ‘imperative to care’ for friends inhibits the full expression of emotion and feelings in friendship, including friendships they want to end. Not wanting to hurt the other or wanting others to like them is a barrier to conflict resolution. Rather than
‘emotionally disengaging’, participants stay engaged but find it difficult to communicate feelings. Secondly, lesbians make decisions about letting go of those who end friendships when they ‘come out’ (or upon other conflict). Thirdly, they pre-emptively end friendships with those who respond negatively to their ‘coming out’ (or other changes). Fourthly, while heterosexual friends might be accepting, lesbians allow them to drift or decline in intimacy, wanting a stronger affirmation of a lesbian self than heterosexual women can provide. Fifthly, lesbians maintain strong friendships across difference, demonstrating that sexuality is not the only factor in identity, and that different friends can affirm different parts of the self.

Participants’ low tolerance for conflict demonstrates difficulties similar to those discussed in Chapter Four. Difficulties with change (the first four responses) are associated primarily with those who discuss needing more affirmation of new lesbian identities, particularly when just ‘coming out’. The embracing of difference (the fifth response) is associated more with those who have been lesbian for longer, are older in years, or who do not like labels. Embracing difference through other changes is associated with access to discourses of the individual’s right to choose and of conflict resolution, shared intense or life-changing experiences that forge strong bonds, and longevity in friendship. However lesbians do not slot neatly into the above categories, some falling into more than one depending on the individual friendship and personal priorities. Decision-making around friendships can also be a positive stance, a ‘moral agency’ akin to the ‘friendship ethic’ posited by Weeks et al: an ‘intricate weaving’ of the reciprocal values of care, responsibility, respect and knowledge, where ‘knowledge is self-awareness: openness to your own needs and the needs of others’ (2001: 74-76).

BECOMING LESBIAN

Most of the women in this study had been through various processes of changing from a heterosexual to a lesbian identity. This inevitably had an impact both on friendships and their sense of self. As one of the participants in Susan Krieger’s research wrote, the process of ‘coming out’ sometimes took a long time: ‘You didn’t just walk in the door, you had to go through this long process, this transition
This section first explores ‘coming out’ through the experiences of two participants, Sally and Annette. It then examines in more detail the different patterns for negotiating friendships and the self during the transition period.

The lesbians in this study are more ‘out’ in their friendships than those of earlier generations, demonstrating changes in recent years in attitudes towards lesbians, and the importance of authentic friendships and an ‘authentic self’ for personal satisfaction (cf. Krieger, 1983). Developing an ‘authentic self’ is part of the constant reworking of the ‘reflexive narrative of self’, which has to be brought in line with lifestyles for personal autonomy and ontological security (Giddens, 1992). Studies of older lesbians’ friendships find many are not ‘out’ to friends, including close friends (Raphael and Robinson, 1984; Davis, 2000). By contrast, for most of the women in this study, it is a given that they are ‘out’ to close friends, although this is not always easy. Sometimes friends are lost and this causes hurt, others know all along and are just waiting to be told; others accept the news and friendships are strengthened. In no cases do friends sway ‘coming out’ decisions, verifying that lesbian identity for the women in this study comes first and foremost from the powerful experience of loving another woman.

Two women who were married with children when they started feeling attracted to other women provide examples of the variation of experience in ‘coming out’ at different times and places and with different resources. Their significant differences are worth exploring in detail, as they demonstrate the impact that age and changing attitudes to homosexuality can have on friendships and the ‘psychic reorganisation’ of the self during this transition. Sally, a 44-year-old Anglo-Australian lesbian from a regional city, talked about the importance of new lesbians ‘coming out’ to themselves first, while Annette, an Anglo-Australian lesbian aged 36, living in inner city Melbourne, wrote about the pain of feeling let down by one close friend when she tried to talk about her confusing feelings. However Sally herself pointed to the impact of ‘age of coming out’ on experiences, and it was indeed a factor. Sally ‘came out’ in 1995 at the age of 42, with the assistance of her partner and ‘three or four months’ and ‘several hundred dollars’ worth of counselling, while Annette’s story referred to a loss of a friend in 1983, when she was 22 years of age.
and married, with no female partner. Even Sally’s location in the country, typically a disadvantage for lesbians, did not have as strong an impact as having a partner, her age, living in a time when homosexuality is more acceptable, and access to and money for supportive counselling.

Sally believed ‘the rest of [one’s] life as a lesbian hinges on that initial understanding of self and the level of acceptance with self as a lesbian’. Reflecting on her experience, which she wanted to pass on to others, Sally thought:

I don’t know whether there is any easy way, because eventually you’ve gotta tell someone, so um, I don’t know. Probably the first 12 months were really traumatic for me I think in identifying as a lesbian, coming out wasn’t necessarily a big deal, once I’d done it once it was easier to do it a second time and it just gets easier down the track and, but I think, it took nearly 12 months for me to actually come out to myself … it just takes time. For myself it took probably 12 months and several hundred dollars at a counsellor’s because things were really caving in on me, even with the support of my partner, the support of other people I still found it really difficult, and it wasn’t really until I sought some professional help [that things got better].

Once she had done this, she was better able to cope with ‘all [the] shit going on with the family’ (in particular, one teenager’s refusal to accept Sally’s new relationship).

Sally’s counselling gave her a confidence in her right to be ‘out’ as a lesbian, and she became committed to being ‘out’ to her family and at work. She had not lost any close friendships, and over time, things in her family had settled down. She held a managerial position at work, which she acknowledged gave her some power, but it was still important to her to ‘be open about our own lifestyle and my partner’ at the office – ‘otherwise what would women ever talk about (at that level)’.

By contrast, Annette wrote about the pain of feeling let down by a close friend many years earlier. Annette had ended this friendship because she badly wanted to speak to her friend about her thoughts that she was a lesbian, and her confusing
feelings. When Annette began to broach the subject with her friend, the friend lectured her on how important her husband should be to her and that she should give everything up for him. Annette felt that this was very out of character for her. She was deeply hurt:

I never got around to telling her I thought I was ‘gay’ and this was particularly painful for me because I felt she was the closest friend I had at the time. I was very hurt and I chose never to see her again. It wasn’t until years later that I realised that she had probably guessed at what I was going to tell her and that she wasn’t quite ready to accept the truth. It was like she was telling me ‘I don't want to know’. But I still feel like she let me down and I don’t wish to see her again.

This experience was still fresh in Annette’s memory even though it had occurred 15 years earlier. Annette did not try to resolve the conflict, pointing to women’s typical discomfort with conflict, her relative youth and inexperience, the seriousness of her friend’s breach of the informal ‘rules’ of friendship, and the challenge that a change in sexuality presents to heterosexual friends. It is likely that Annette was also disappointed because her friend’s behaviour contradicted discourses of passionate friendships and a ‘transformation of intimacy’ that tend to idealise women’s friendships. In the years following, Annette made lesbian friends who she valued, ‘came out’ to some heterosexual friends and colleagues at her conservative workplace, but at her married lover’s request, kept this relationship secret. She experienced feelings that she was ‘less than a person’ because she couldn’t find anyone ‘just for me’, and guilt ‘that nearly everyone thinks you’re single and coping so well with that fact’. Annette had many questions about the contradictions and complications of a ‘gay’ lifestyle, indicating her ‘coming out’ journey was continuing. Later, Annette wrote to me saying this reflection had helped her leave her partner and start another, more satisfactory relationship. Her experience, contrasted with Sally’s, indicates the importance of being ‘out’ for relationship satisfaction and for a confident sense of self. Their stories illustrate some of the dilemmas around ‘coming out’ in a society that continues to discriminate against lesbians, but that is slowly changing.
As discussed in the introduction, participants demonstrate five different patterns in friendship as they negotiate the transition to a lesbian identity. I examine each of these responses in more depth.

**Not coming out affects authenticity**

Firstly, like Annette, fear of a negative response leads some women to decline to articulate their transition to a lesbian identity to friends. Several writers comment on the phenomenon of the loss of heterosexual women friends when a new lesbian comes out (Krieger, 1983; Raphael and Robinson, 1984; Palladino and Stephenson, 1990; Stanley, 1996), so these fears are probably well-founded. However participants find that rather than saving friendships, not ‘coming out’ can actually contribute to the harming or ending of friendships because of the loss of authenticity and trust. These experiences also raise the question of why lesbians would want to continue friendships that are not authentic or honest.

The women who stayed ‘in the closet’ were from the country or outer suburban Melbourne, where lesbians are few and far between and it is harder to be ‘out’. Laura and Jean felt not ‘coming out’ contributed to the endings of one close friendship each. Laura, a 44-year-old Anglo-Australian lesbian from a regional city, felt her best friend of 23 years must have ‘got her nose out of joint’ when Laura started a lesbian relationship while she was still married, without telling her friend about it. Laura hadn’t told anybody about the relationship, but suspected that her friend knew and did not approve. Jean, a 49-year-old Jewish-Welsh lesbian living in outer suburban Melbourne, felt that one friendship was ‘pretty well broken anyway’ when this friend had demonstrated a lack of trust in Jean. However Jean’s partner Marilyn, an Anglo-Australian lesbian aged 52, felt sure that this friend saw her ‘as a threat to Jean’s friendship with her, I’m not silly, I saw that within five minutes’. If trust is one of the informal ‘rules’ of friendship, it is possible that Jean’s failing to tell this friend about her relationship had also undermined the friend’s trust in Jean. Neither Laura nor Jean communicated their feelings to their friends, instead withdrawing and allowing friendships to drift and end. Not ‘coming out’ also harmed some of Jillian’s friendships in the short term when friends found
out anyway. This harm was possibly due to a breach of trust, in addition to any homophobia that may have been present. Jillian, a 35-year-old Anglo-Australian lesbian living in a small country town, was ‘outed’ by her church. Her friends, who initially distanced themselves ‘for a while, till they could cope’, were ‘in the front line’ of the town’s response for a while. They eventually ‘came around’ to be supportive of Jillian, following the ‘rules’ of friendship in standing up for her. However Jillian missed her church community, and was glad the church was tackling the issue of homosexuality at a national level.

The importance of trust and of being ‘out’ for the maintenance of friendships, and for a confident sense of self, is clearly significant. However, ‘coming out’ is not always easy in a climate of homophobia. Sensitivities around former friends being usurped by new lovers, without explanation, can also cause strain. Friendships that lack authenticity because one partner fails to ‘come out’ can still have some value when friends have a shared history (Laura) or a shared faith community (Jillian).

Losing friends on ‘coming out’

A second pattern in negotiating transitions is that of lesbians who have to cope with losing friends when they ‘come out’. Toni, an Anglo-Australian lesbian aged 20 living in suburban Melbourne, recalled that when her close friend couldn’t accept that she was a lesbian, she was ‘annoyed and upset’ but ‘I didn’t even try to change her mind’. They had also had an earlier rift over Toni’s drinking which she felt contributed to the ending, confirming Rose’s finding that once a friendship is weakened, a second strain more easily leads to dissolution (1984: 273). When Marilyn decided she was a lesbian, she ‘came out’ to everyone, losing two friends. She felt anger, disappointment, resentment and sorrow. One cited religious reasons for her disapproval of Marilyn’s new relationship. Susie also lost a Catholic friend due to religious intolerance. Susie was ‘devastated and hurt and sad’ when this seven-year close and intimate friendship ended because Susie entered her first lesbian relationship. Like Toni, Marilyn and Susie were unwilling to try to resolve this conflict with their friends.
**Ending unsupportive friendships**

In a third response to the transition to a lesbian identity, some excited, impatient new lesbians have no tolerance for negative responses to their ‘coming out’, and act swiftly to end friendships. Bess, an Anglo-Australian aged 61, who ‘came out’ at the age of 48 while living in Melbourne, knew that her lover was going to be an important part of her life and immediately ‘ditched’ non-accepting friends. Nevertheless, she was sad about these losses. Jocasta, an Anglo-Australian lesbian aged 28 who ‘came out’ at high school in Adelaide, remembered losing school friends but not being worried. Her attitude was one of ‘love me for who I am, or fuck off’, a confidence possibly generated by the visible, activist lesbian community in that city at the time.

The experiences of lesbians following the second and third patterns raise the issue of communication, and why, if their friendships are close, the women cannot persevere and articulate their changes. In these friendships, there appears to be no space for negative emotions. These experiences of loss also demonstrate the power of homophobia, and the contradictions between discourses that idealise friendship and the reality of conflict in friendship. But the choices of participants in the third group to drop unsupportive friends also appears to be about the need for affirming friendships to consolidate lesbian identity, a finding consistent with other studies of status change (Suitor, 1987). It is a measure of their own self-esteem as emerging lesbians: an awareness of their rights to choose who they relate to and a kind of ‘moral agency’ (Weeks et al, 2001: 76) in ending friendships that are not going to be supportive. This need overrides disappointment at loss. It also informs choices around friendship for a fourth group, even though friends are accepting of participants’ shifts to a lesbian identity.

**Letting heterosexual friends drift**

In a fourth pattern, the nature of friendship changes even though friends are accepting of participants’ shifts. Some friends are allowed to drift due to declining intimacy because of a loss of common sexual identity. These participants feel more
comfortable with lesbian friends. In their research, O’Boyle and Thomas (1996: 244-45) find that heterosexual women tend not to disclose as much about relationships in their friendships with lesbians as they do with heterosexual women friends. They echo Tamsin Wilton’s experience of her transition to lesbianism, when she found her heterosexual friends became defensive about their male partners, stopped talking about their intimate relationships, and didn’t want to hear about her lesbian relationship (1993: 274). In language reminiscent of Pat O’Connor’s contention that married women’s friendships ‘oil the marriage machine’ (1992; see also Card, 1997; Jamieson, 1998), Wilton reflects on her life when she was heterosexual and argues that ‘bonding between heterosexual women acts to shore up the heteropatriarchy’ (1993: 274). Heterosexual women appear to be no different from lesbian women in needing affirmation of their relationship choices; however this may be more difficult for lesbians to provide.

Raphael and Robinson, in their study of older lesbians’ friendship networks, also discuss lesbians who are misunderstood and rejected by heterosexual people who had previously been close, and how it is more ‘comfortable and meaningful’ for them to look for friendship and support within the lesbian and gay community (1984: 68). The older women in their study who came out later in life in the context of the gay liberation and feminist movements noted that their heterosexual friends ‘dropped off’ as they preferred to seek friendships among their older lesbian peers. O’Boyle and Thomas also found that the lesbians in their study felt more ‘kinship’ with other lesbians and could relate on a more comfortable level (1996: 245; see also Rubin, 1985; Stanley, 1996).

Among participants in this study with comparable experiences, Elizabeth, a 43-year-old Anglo-Australian lesbian from a rural area, noted that her friendship with an old friend had changed since she ‘came out’. They had used to be close, and while Elizabeth saw a lot of her because she lived with her and her family in the city during the week, the tone of the friendship had changed to be much more casual and superficial. Marilyn similarly noted that a couple of friends avoided talking about her relationship. Jillian and Laura appreciated the comfort of lesbian friends. For Jillian, the local lesbian group was the ‘one time when Jules and I can
be out. And just be relaxed and revel in it, really. Really enjoy it. And we also talk about stuff’. Lesbian friends understood the dynamics of her lesbianism so she would talk to them first about her relationship or related issues. Laura and her partner had a new group of lesbian friends after 10 years ‘in the closet’. For Laura,

I think, it’s kinda nice to have, to have lesbian friends in, from what I’ve seen so far in that you can be, yourself more when, when you’re with them, whereas when, when you’re with a group of straight people you have to be so conscious of not, not being yourself, um, so it’s kinda nice to be able to be yourself.

Laura felt that with her heterosexual friends, even though she was out to them, she was ‘not wanting them to see anything or, or have anything upset them, or, you know …’ The dynamics in these friendships echo the reflections of Carey Kaplan and Ellen Rose that at times their own friendship, which they consider to be strong, replays, ‘in microcosm, the dynamics of imperialism’ (1996: 112). The feelings of always having to watch what is said for fear of offending can be stressful, and heighten the value of lesbian friends for women such as Laura and Jillian.

While most lesbians in this study maintain their friendships with heterosexual women despite declining intimacy, some allow their friendships with heterosexual and bisexual women to drift. Annette noted that ‘since I’ve become more lesbian’ a heterosexual friend had moved out of her circle due to loss of commonality. With several of Annette’s friends, the main bonds were shared sexuality, bonds which she said ‘keep me sane at times’. Missy, an Anglo-New Zealand lesbian aged 42, living in inner city Melbourne, overtly prioritised lesbian friends after realising her mistake in nearly getting married. Ali and Jean both talked about how friends ‘reflected’ lifestyles, and as lifestyles changed, friends did too. Jean’s lesbian friends related to ‘a way of life, not just life experiences but life itself’. These lesbians were all developing or consolidating lesbian identities, and friendships with other lesbians helped in that ‘project’. Their experiences contrast with those of others in the study for whom sexual commonality was not enough of a basis for a friendship.
Maintaining friendships across difference

A fifth pattern of negotiating the transition to a lesbian identity is that of lesbians who ‘come out’ and are able to maintain strong friendships across difference with heterosexual or bisexual women, ones that affirm the self ‘no matter what’ (Natalie). While most lesbians in this study acknowledged they felt more affirmed in their lesbian friendships, sexuality and gender were rarely criteria for friendship (Chapter Three also discusses this). Those whose negotiations followed this pattern emphasised that point.

Lesbians following the fifth pattern can be placed into two categories: firstly, new lesbians whose link with the past through heterosexual friends is an important part of their self-image despite their transition; and secondly, those who have been lesbian for a longer time, or aren’t attached to the label ‘lesbian’, or are older in years, and feel friendship is an individual matter. Both groups demonstrate that sexuality is not the only component of identity, and the possibility that it might recede in importance over time. While a very large body of research shows that most people form friendships with those who have similar demographic characteristics, social status and attitudes (Fehr, 1996: 57), this group demonstrates how friendship across difference enhances a ‘project of self’ that is multi-dimensional.

Insights into the strengths of friendships between lesbians and heterosexual women and other friendships across difference might be gained from Ruth Hall and Suzanna Rose in their study of lesbians’ cross-race friendships in the US:

‘When the friendship is built across race, it’s stronger,’ Marlene explained.
‘You’re conscious of it. In same-race friendships, there’s a lot of unexamined assumptions that may fall apart. There’s not the same thoughtful attention to building [a friendship] that will enable you to get through a crisis’ (1996: 182-83).

While friendships between Anglo and non-Anglo lesbians are uncommon in this study, Marlene’s words also apply to the lesbian-heterosexual women’s friendships presented. Hall and Rose (1996) further suggest that if tension is weathered it often
serves to strengthen friendship. Different friends need a mutual generosity of spirit (Small, 1984; Lapsley, 1996; Kaplan and Rose, 1996) and ‘preparedness to enter new territory’ (Kaplan and Rose, 1996: 114). For friendships between lesbians and heterosexual women to survive, heterosexual women have to be willing to resist pressures to continually prove and maintain their appearance of heterosexuality (Jeffreys, 1997); to be able to cope with stigma or ‘guilt by association’ (Stanley, 1996); and to be willing to ‘come out’ of their own personal ‘closet’ that comes with having a lesbian friend (O’Boyle and Thomas, 1996).

The mutual respect of choices that characterises friendships across difference is also a measure of these lesbians’ belief in the individual’s right to choose, a key value of a liberal, individualistic society. This respect demonstrates how the discourse of individualism cuts across relatedness, informed by the discourse of passionate friendship.

Those in the first category of lesbians who negotiated friendship across difference, who valued ‘links with the past’ (Marilyn’s term), included Marilyn, Laura, Louise and Susie. Marilyn spoke at length about a deep friendship of 30 years duration from her time in the navy. She and her friend had married and brought up children around the same time, and their close friendship had ‘never faltered’ even though they had not always lived in the same place. Her friend had been her ‘lifeline’ when her marriage ended, with actions such as sending her an air ticket for a long visit. Although they had had major disagreements over her friend’s relationship and parenting choices, Marilyn had felt able to speak her mind while still respecting her friend’s right to make her own decisions. Marilyn’s friend also respected Marilyn’s transition to a lesbian identity. While there were ‘subtle changes’ since Marilyn began her relationship with Jean, it was still a very important friendship:

We were very, very fortunate we can have differences of opinion and get back to what we were. I think the friendship is that strong. It’s a good healthy friendship that has endured over the years.

For those in the second category of lesbians who negotiate friendship across difference – those who value individuality in friendship – sexuality and gender are
not important. Unlike the new lesbians discussed above, two of these women had identified as lesbians for several years and no longer felt the need to consolidate their identity by choosing lesbian friends (Christine and Natalie). Others did not identify as lesbian anyway (Lucy, who didn’t like labels, and Lisette, who identified as bisexual), or were older with a variety of friendship experiences (Joan, aged 57). Lucy provided an example of the contrast between this group and the others when she compared herself and her partner Alice: ‘I don’t rely on people for my, like … heavily rely on people for how I feel about myself, whereas at the time Alice had said that she did, she was really looking toward people for that reaffirmation’.

Some participants had had such difficult experiences in their lesbian communities they found heterosexual woman friends, removed from this intensity, to be ‘wonderful, supportive’ (Lucy), and ‘more honest and trusting’ (Christine). Lucy, who had not enjoyed being part of a lesbian group that pushed conformity, was now of the view that:

If I met you and I like you I like you and I’m going to spend time with you regardless. And I can’t make sense of how you’d do it any other way. That’s me at the moment. I mean that could very well change and there has been times when that hasn’t been the case, where I got in to the lesbian thing and I end up on the bloody lacrosse team (laughs).

Lucy and Natalie appreciated their heterosexual and bisexual women friends who did not pressure them to conform the way lesbian friends did. Lisette had ‘never befriended any lesbians’ and did not believe people should be discriminated against as friends or lovers because of sex or sexuality: ‘everybody’s an empty shell’. Similarly, Joan, a Scottish lesbian aged 57 from a regional city, agreed with Lisette in her belief that friendship was ‘not governed by gender or sexual preference’ but rather was ‘a unique interaction/exploration with another person’. All of these women spoke about intensely close friendships with heterosexual, bisexual or asexual women friends or family members, and Joan noted that she also had a close friendship with a man. Lucy and Natalie had both had friendships that suffered ups
and downs but were helped by accepting ‘where the other was at’ at the time, by open communication and willingness to explore difference.

To summarise, the finding of four patterns of negotiating the transition to a lesbian identity that demonstrate difficulty with change, and only one that embraces change and the multiplicity of the self, reflects the preoccupations with most of the new lesbians in the study with issues around their ‘coming out’. The majority want a supportive network for their new self. The results also reflect the fact that in interviews I asked for stories about friendships that were ongoing and ones that had ended. As relationships and a lesbian identity are likely to consolidate over time, or become less of a preoccupation, it would be interesting to revisit the women studied in the future to see if attitudes to change and difference have changed. The generally low tolerance for conflict takes place in the context of the fluid nature of friendship, where feelings tend not to be expressed. It demonstrates a possible inability to resolve differences around ‘coming out’, but equally possible is a confidence in their right to love that overrides disappoints at loss originating in discourses that idealise friendships, and makes lesbians’ disinclination to resolve conflicts a kind of ‘moral agency’ (Weeks et al, 2001: 76). Thus the choice of more amenable, affirming friends is a positive one for women making the transition to a lesbian identity.

Further, while Christopher Lasch argues that under pressure of widespread global social and political stresses, ‘the self contracts to a defensive core’ and disengages emotionally (1984: 15), the lesbians in this study have a different response. In Lasch’s world view, the pressures of social change, coupled with conflict and change in personal relationships, can be expected to have an impact on the self. While these lesbians may disengage from unsupportive friends and communities, they do not disengage altogether, maintaining their lover relationships and choosing new friends that better support their new selves.

1 This may be a biological response as well as a social and psychological response to stress, suggest Shelley Taylor et al (2000). Their research finds that men and women have different responses to stress. Men have the testosterone-induced ‘fight or flight’ response formerly attributed to all humans, even though 90 percent of stress research has been done on men. Women are more likely
OTHER CONFLICT AND CHANGE

The processes of negotiating the self through the transition to a lesbian identity are also evident in the negotiation of other conflict, change and endings in friendship. Sources of difficulty include personal changes such as religion or a change in priorities; situational changes such as moving towns or jobs, having children, or serious illness, particularly mental illness; and changes in relationship status. Conflict arises over being open with parents, parenting practices, religious values and drug use. These changes and conflicts are universal, however some are experienced differently by lesbians. For example, while participants are sad at losses due to job changes, moving or having children, these changes are more likely to be accepted philosophically as ‘all part of evolving, life evolving’ (Jillian). However changes in priorities or relationships can be much more emotionally loaded, arousing fears of conflict and personal rejection and leading to breakdowns in communication. When more than one change occurs, friendships are under particular strain (cf. Rose, 1984).

The diversity evident in negotiating the self through the wider range of conflicts and changes in the friendships of participants falls roughly into four (again non-exclusive) patterns. The first, very common pattern is that lesbians have difficulty in communicating changes or verbalising conflict, and the largest part of this section addresses this issue. Some actively avoid conflict, due to not wanting to hurt or upset people and/or in order to preserve relationships. Here the ‘relational self’ and ‘imperative to care’ come to the forefront once again. Second, letting go of friends who have been disloyal or ended friendships, or whose changes or lack of change participants cannot tolerate, while sometimes a painful process, is part of to experience a surge of the hormone oxytocin, buffering the fight or flight response and encouraging them to tend children and gather with other women. This in turn releases more oxytocin, which has a calming effect. While this is obviously a simplistic explanation, and has not been subject to testing with lesbians whose marginalisation may affect responses to stress, it is consistent with the behaviour of the lesbians in this study who were interested in friends that supported the self.
defining and redefining a changing self. An attitude of personal growth or self-development, which includes the concept of friends fulfilling ‘needs’, helps participants manage change and loss. Third, while most friendships require reciprocity to survive, they can continue if one partner pushes or drives the friendship. And fourth, acceptance of difference helps friendships survive conflict and change. As with the transition to a lesbian identity, lesbians prefer a supportive network for the self, and their view of themselves and the closeness or distance of their friends informs their management of conflict and change. I will examine each pattern in detail.

**Difficulties in verbalising conflict**

Of all the qualities that assist friends in conflict to get through tough times, the most difficult is communication. In many cases, lack of communication or negotiation about issues or problems impedes any chance of conflict resolution and leads to friendships ending. This is consistent with other studies that show avoidance of conflict in friendships is more common than tackling it, even though addressing conflicts has a more positive outcome; and that girls and women are much more concerned than boys and men with avoiding conflict and disagreements in friendship (see Fehr, 1996: 162-63 for a summary of these studies).

Problems with communication may be a result of a number of factors. The fluid nature of the friendship relationship, and disappointments at losses due to the idealising of friendship, have already been discussed in this chapter. Chapters Four and Five suggested women’s socialisation to be ‘relational’ and ‘caring’ inhibits communication in close friendships and lover relationships, a dynamic intensified where boundaries are blurred. But the strong emotions expressed by the women in relation to conflict led me to look to feminist psychotherapy for explanations. In particular, emotional intensity in friendships led to some lesbians feeling ‘abandoned, expendable or replaced’ when their friends began new relationships (Stanley, 1996: 50; see also Robinson, 1996; Futcher and Hopkins, 1996).
Feminist psychotherapists suggest that women’s difficulties in communicating in friendships relate to early experiences between mothers and daughters. Susie Orbach and Luise Eichenbaum (1994: 128) argue that all women’s friendships replay, unconsciously, aspects of the early mother-daughter relationship. For Beverley Burch (1987), individually varied early experiences as daughters in patriarchal culture come to bear forcefully on issues of power, nurturance and dependence, and on a sense of self and separateness. Conflicts can thus arise in relationships with other women. Fear of re-engulfment in the mother-daughter history can be an unconscious barrier to intimacy. For Jane Flax, relatedness is an ambiguous virtue, its origins, expressions and consequences not as benign as the theorists who valorise it propose (1993a; 1993b). Flax focuses on the central role of hate and ambivalence for both mothers and children. She argues that mothers’ tendencies not to reward a daughter’s developing autonomy can lead to conflict in adult women’s relationships with each other, compounded by a homophobic society, and that this may result in women abandoning intimate relationship with one another altogether (1978). Despite these comments, Flax refuses the stance of mother-blaming, arguing mothers struggle with selfhood in a culture that glorifies mothers, while at the same time denigrating and isolating them (1993b).

These unconscious fears, when combined with women’s socialisation not to be direct in communication, the fluid nature of friendship that discourages such communication, and the moral ‘imperative to care’ and not hurt others, can make conflicts in women’s friendships a potential source of pain. When the lesbian possibility enters the equation and the boundaries between friends and lovers blur, tensions can rise. It may be the case, as participant May suggested, that ‘many friendships – more than people care to admit – develop to satisfy deep needs for sexual intimacy and that’s why they fold when sexual intimacy develops with someone else’.

While these sorts of feelings between friends are rarely articulated and may sometimes be unconscious, participants did speculate about them. Mei Li wondered whether she and a close friend suppressed differences out of ‘a fear that to lay them bare might shatter everything’. Among the formerly heterosexual women discussed
earlier, Marilyn felt a friend of her partner Jean was ‘threatened’ by their relationship, and Laura thought her ‘best friend’ probably got ‘her nose out of joint’ when she began a lesbian relationship. Caroline wondered whether the two women in her long-term ‘family unit’ ‘didn’t feel as important in my life’ when she met her partner Joan. She felt confused, dismayed and betrayed by them when they couldn’t accept her ‘new found happiness’. Caroline had been lovers with one of these friends at one stage, which could have added to what Caroline perceived as her friend’s inability to accept Caroline’s new situation. Lucy felt ‘replaced’ when a close friend got a boyfriend, and all of the things the friend had been going to do with Lucy, such as overseas trips, ‘she was now doing them with [the boyfriend].

Further to this, Lucy ‘felt bloody weird’ at this friend’s wedding, given her long relationship with all of the friend’s relatives, yet there was no socially sanctioned place for her at the wedding (cf. Rubin, 1985). With even more emotion, Jocasta recalled how her friend felt angry, that she was going to be made ‘redundant’ and that she would be ‘abandoned’ when Jocasta started a new relationship. Jocasta and this friend had also briefly been lovers.

None of these feelings were ever resolved. Mei Li’s feelings were never expressed. Jean, Laura and Caroline’s friendships all ended, Laura’s suffering the additional strain of her friend’s conversion to a fundamentalist religion. Lucy’s friendship only continued because of her friend’s persistence in wanting to see Lucy after the wedding. Jocasta and her friend only reconciled when Jocasta was nearly killed in an accident. The conflict was dropped immediately in a way that echoes Linda Strega’s reconciliations with friends when she got cancer: ‘maybe life and death crises help remind us of the things we do like about one another’ (1996: 284).

In addition to these tensions, participants can also be ‘controlled’ by friends who are seen as powerful. This is particularly the case for young women. For example, Mei Li had felt ‘overpowered’ and ‘negated’ by a school friend, Cathryn was bullied by a university friend, and in return became passive, Missy remembered that two schoolgirl friendships were ‘dangerous’ and she ‘nearly disappeared’ trying to fit in, Alice had felt ‘controlled’ by two friends she was attracted to that
she wanted to like her, and Caroline had felt ‘controlled’ by her ‘family unit’. Dynamics were complicated by the fact that Cathryn’s friend was an alcoholic, and boundaries between friends and lovers blurred for the others, which impeded attempts at conflict resolution. Mei Li’s school friendship ‘broke up’ for a year and a half, recommencing when both were in new relationships and had their own, separate lives, and Mei Li had more friends and more confidence in herself as a person. Caroline’s and Alice’s feelings of being controlled also only ceased when both began new relationships, which firmed up blurred boundaries and enabled them to stand up to their friends more. However these friendships were tested by change: Caroline’s and one of Alice’s friendships ended, Missy lost contact with one of her school friends when the friend married and moved away, Cathryn’s friendship with her alcoholic friend was on and off until it finally ended badly, and Mei Li’s school friendship moved to a more superficial level.

May, who made the comment above about friendships that meet deep needs for intimacy ending when relationships begin, had more to say on this issue: ‘A significant sexual relationship can be growthful and move you to deeper levels of self-awareness: in that context losing relationships of convenience can be positive’. This was certainly the case for Caroline and Alice. Caroline went so far as to comment ‘I found myself when I found Joan … I felt excommunicated by them but now I see it as their loss not mine’. Caroline’s romantic language could signal on the one hand, her perception of an original, core self that she felt was not fully expressed with her ‘controlling’ friends, and on the other hand, the possibility of a new-found confidence and assertiveness when she entered her relationship with Joan. Her ‘excommunication’ signals her perception that the new situation was not amenable to resolution, and her position ‘now I see it as their loss not mine’ suggests that she has turned the situation around to now feel she is better off without these friends. Following disappointment at poor treatment, Alice also reflected that she was better off without some friends.

All of the above stories demonstrate the complexities of women’s friendships, and the deep emotions that might lie beneath the surface to prevent conflict resolution.
Defining the self through ending friendships

Another pattern in negotiating conflict and change is the defining and redefining of the self through the endings of friendships, whether forced or actively chosen. Lesbians learn and grow with each experience, supporting Suzanna Rose’s suggestion that ‘failed friendships may play an important role in the development of personal responsibility and growth’ (1984: 275), Janet Surrey’s claim that ‘identity and relationships develop in synchrony’ (1991: 63) and Johanna Meehan’s theory of ‘self-reconstruction’ after painful experiences (1995b: 239). Participants who let friends go when they breached the ‘rules’ of loyalty and trust in friendship demonstrate that conflict resolution is not always an option. Instead decision-making about ending friendships can also be decision-making about the self. As is the case for women making the transition to a lesbian identity, friendship choices in situations of conflict help firm up definitions of friendship as accepting and supportive relationships, and criteria for friendships such as honesty and trustworthiness (see Chapter Three). Being discerning about friendship also helps whittle friendship networks down to small, affirming groups that reflect participants’ own shifts and values.

Women demonstrating this kind of discernment included Bess, who ‘saw another side’ of a friend when she went to work for her, and discovered she did not want to be around someone who told lies. In the future, Bess wanted ‘quality, not quantity’ in her friendships. Maddy felt very angry when she broke up with her partner and none of the couple’s friends had asked her for her side of the story. Christine ‘chose to opt out of’ her entire lesbian friendship network when her lover left her for a woman in a prominent leadership position in a country town and all her friends followed:

I believe the most damage is done to friendships when relationships end as no matter how good the intention, people choose and in my case they chose the social power of my ex’s new lover.

Alex ended two friendships over ‘loyalty and betrayal issues’ around an ex-lover. Alex was ‘particular (precious) when it comes to friendship’ and wrote that she did not ‘have the time to accommodate deep hurt’. And Natalie had ‘cut off’ from all
her ‘old’ lesbian friends in the city when they had failed to keep in touch after her move to the country, ‘realising they were not ‘real’ friends’. Through new friends, Natalie was developing a new understanding of the meaning of and her expectations of friendship, and was concomitantly loosening her criteria:

Since this shift in people I have met a few ‘country’ dykes who are not necessarily feminist or vegetarian but they have reconstructed the definition of friendship for me.

An attitude of personal growth or self-development assists many participants with managing change and the endings of friendships. They express the perception that friendships change or end because they no longer meet ‘needs’ or the friendship has served its ‘purpose’, indicating an understanding of friendship as a transient relationship that mirrors and supports the changing self. This language was used especially by Elizabeth, Natalie, Susie, Cathryn, Rae, Alice and Rosa, women from a range of backgrounds who all embraced the ‘project of self’. Elizabeth thought that ‘sometimes I need a particular type of friendship because I have a ‘lesson’ to learn’. She noted that ‘sometimes this friendship has continued’, indicating the possibility that others had not continued. Reflecting on one friend, who had withdrawn from her when she started a new relationship, she wondered whether friendships end because ‘that need for each other disappears’.

Others who were sad at the loss of friends were able to draw on a philosophy that life was one of change and growth to come to an ‘acceptance’ of the situation. Most of these women had had counselling. Christine talked about doing ‘self work’ to come to an ‘acceptance’ of her loss of many friends when her relationship ended. Cathryn’s friendship with an ex-lover ended because ‘I’d changed, she hadn’t’, and for Rae, friendships tended to lose impetus when she became ‘bored’ with people, signalling a constantly changing self. Despite her aloneness since her relationship ended, Ali was also willing to let go of an old school friend because of escalating differences. For her:

Things change, you change, life changes. For me it feels normal to connect, disconnect, connect, disconnect, you know….
While Susie was ‘devastated and hurt and sad’ at the loss of a friend, she was also philosophical: ‘… sometimes there are losses and sometimes there are gains not that that’s what you’re in it for anyway …’ Bess lost two significant friends when she moved to the country, but didn’t feel so bad about letting them go:

If it’s time to go it’s time to go (pause). That’s what happens, and I look back now, as my mother says nothing stands still and if it does, it dies and that’s the way I’m really looking at it now and and the people that I would want in my new life now that will take me through to whenever, ah are a different kind of person again. (pause) Maybe like, like I said to you, if you can’t have a friend that you can just be lovely with and tell anything and be anything, whatever that is at the time, then to me it's not worth having, I'd rather read a book I think.

The findings suggest termination experiences inform definitions and expectations of friendship, and maintenance strategies for the future (cf. Rose, 1984: 275).

Non-reciprocity in friendship

A further pattern in negotiating the self through change is evident in stories of non-reciprocal friendships. In line with the ideal in middle-class friendships of ‘pure communicative friendship’ (Pahl, 1998: 116), part of a suggested ‘transformation of intimacy’, most friendships require reciprocity to survive. However a smaller number of one-sided friendships demonstrate that a strong wish or determination to hold on to a particular friendship can also help it endure. In these cases, one partner maintains a friendship that is not fully satisfactory, or that declines in intimacy, because of a desire to affirm different parts of the self through friends. For the lesbians in this study, it is to keep links with the past or to care for another. Conflict is completely avoided in these friendships, which only takes one partner to ‘drive’ the friendship and the other to respond for it to continue.

Lesbian Diane Felicio writes about how history helps constitutes the self in her discussion of a friendship with a heterosexual high school friend (1996). While she agrees with feminist attempts to build friendships across difference, this friendship
‘has taught me that nothing can take the place of history’ (1996: 203). Several participants agree. Louise recognised that an important friend since she was 13 years old gave her no emotional support, but that she would ‘drop anything’ to help if this friend needed her. Terri was frustrated that most of her friendships were initiated by her getting in touch. However, she kept these friendships, which she had made at school, nursing training, work and in raising her children, because she wanted to. Annette found it hard to pin down the ‘abstract’ feeling of love she felt for some friends who had been ‘quite shitty’ and yet she had ‘a fierce protective love for them and I know I would lay down my life for them’. Marilyn was the most explicit: while she found it hard that old friends refused to discuss her relationship, she kept in touch with them because ‘they’re part of me, and they’ve been part of my life since I was 18, 19 and I’m not about to throw that away’.

On the other side of the equation, Missy and Lucy were prepared to let old friends go due to their different (heterosexual) lifestyles and the geographic distance separating them, but because their friends persisted, contact continued. While Missy and Lucy didn’t have time or energy to maintain these friends, Alex, a 49-year-old Lithuanian-English lesbian, offered some insight into why they might have continued despite being so one-sided when she wrote about her own close friends: ‘the ones I really love, I love probably primarily because I know they love me, and I love them for that …’

Non-reciprocal friendships also involve caring for women who are Christian (Emily and Elizabeth) or for whom caring is an important part of identity (Susie, Rosa and Jean), but these are harder to sustain. Emily put ‘women in need’ in the outer circle of her friendship diagram. Elizabeth felt ‘a sense of duty, nearly’ to a depressed friend who had supported her in an earlier time of need, echoing Nel Noddings’ notion of ethical caring in response ‘to the fact and memory of tenderness’ (1984: 98). Susie and Rosa noted that they tended to be quite ‘giving’ in friendships. When Susie developed cancer around the same time she started her current relationship, she had to shed these one-sided friendships and consider the importance of reciprocity in future friendships. When another caring friendship of Susie’s backfired, she acknowledged that ‘there were obviously needs being met’
for her and her partner as well. Caring was part of Jean’s identity as a nurse. While participants feel love for their friends, and that these friendships are valid, they are likely to become discouraged at non-reciprocity. Difficulties in sustaining these friendships highlight the importance of reciprocity for most friendships to continue.

**Resolving conflict**

A final pattern in negotiating conflict and change is evident in the experiences of lesbians who maintain friendships despite differences. Like friendships that survive the transition to a lesbian identity, many of these friendships are influenced by the discourse of individualism. They are assisted by acceptance of difference, acceptance of an individual’s right to choose her own path, open communication and the practice of conflict resolution. When friends share intense or life-changing experiences, or have been close for a period of time, friendships are more likely to withstand change.

Several studies find that lesbians accept differences in their friends more as they age (Blumenfeld and Raymond, 1988; Raymond, 1991a; Stanley, 1996). Elizabeth and Ruth, both in their 40s, agreed. However for the most part, abilities to resolve conflict well do not appear to be based solely on age, but rather on access to discourses of conflict resolution, probably through counselling, and an embracing of the liberal notion of ‘the individual’s right to choose’ their own position on issues. These notions were alluded to not only by Elizabeth and Ruth in their 40s, Marilyn (discussed in the previous section), who was in her 50s, but also by several women aged in their 20s.

The conflicts that are amenable to this kind of resolution are those over values and practices, rather than personal characteristics. While participants believe it is important to articulate their views, they also feel that they ‘don’t have the right’ to impose views on their friends. They choose to accept differences, or in relation to a disagreement, are prepared to ‘try and see the other person’s point of view, ‘let it rest’ or ‘agree to disagree’ rather than risk losing the friendship. The kinds of
conflict that were resolved using the ‘agree to disagree model’ included Ruth’s disagreement with a friend over the friend’s decision not to ‘come out’ to her parents, Elizabeth’s and Marilyn’s concerns about their friends’ parenting practices, Lucy’s stand with a friend over women’s right to choose abortion, and the concerns of Jocasta and Natalie over their friends’ drug use. With experience, Natalie also loosened her requirement that friends had to be feminist and vegetarian. Elizabeth wrote in her questionnaire that she had recently come to a definition of love and friendship as acceptance of others ‘warts and all’.

Despite allowing ‘the individual’s right to choose’, participants feel that open communication helps rescue close friendships from conflict. While negotiation of a friendship can be painful (Kitzinger, 1996: 297), for participants in this study it is the prime determinant of success (cf. Weeks et al, 2001: 101). The language Natalie used in her discussion of how she went about resolving conflict with a close friend after their falling out over the friend’s drug use, revealed her access to counselling, assertiveness training or textbooks on conflict resolution:

> Well I guess you just say I mean you state your point of view and you say look this is how I feel um you never use defensive language in a situation like that, you never say ‘You’re fucking up your life’, you always say ‘I feel like this is happening and’ and I also talk about the time when I was on the road to destruction you know and I brought up stuff from my own, and, life.

Natalie’s language and sentiments about this conflict were echoed by the others. The key to getting their friendship back, Natalie felt, was that the friendship meant a good deal to them so they persevered in resolving issues, and they were not interested in judging each other:

> N We are both very forgiving, and we both know how much this friendship means to each other, and um we’re both quite accepting of difference, um accepting of um unperfectiveness, is that a word, um,

T Imperfection

> N Yes (laughter).

T Yeah. So something held you together? What do you think it was that held you? …not to call it off, and say see you later, I never want to see you
again?
N Perseverance, I think perseverance and stubbornness.

Like Natalie and her friend, all of the friends that survived these kinds of conflicts had been close friends, in pairs, for many years, and bonds had been forged through shared intense or life-changing experiences. These experiences remained important parts of the self that friends reminded them of. For example Natalie had been involved with the birth of her friend’s child, Elizabeth and Jocasta had been lovers with their friends, and Lucy and her friend had studied, trained, and got their first jobs in nursing together. Newer friendships that had not endured such rites of passage, despite having the feeling of closeness and much hurt on endings, did not survive conflict as often. Nor did friendships where there was an age difference or those in threesomes or groups. Two newer friendships between an older couple and a younger, single lesbian ended with much hurt, in part because the single lesbian found a new partner and the dynamic between them changed. For example, Susie told the story of the loss of her and her partner’s young friend, and Rosemary of the loss of the friendship of an older couple (cf. Hochmann, 1996). Friendships between older couples that were made when couples were already established were more stable. Marilyn, Jean and Laura, all in their 40s and 50s, discussed how they had joined lesbian groups and made friends with other couples, with whom they socialised regularly.

To summarise, lesbians negotiate the self through the negotiation of conflict and change in a diverse range of ways that echo how they also negotiate the transition to a lesbian identity. Participants prefer friends that affirm a changing self, and different friends can affirm different parts of the self. Conflict resolution is worthwhile to help maintain close friendships.

While personal, situational or relationship changes can affect any friendships, the transition to a lesbian identity, in the context of a homophobic society, has a significant impact on participants’ friendships. Friendships challenged by the transition to a lesbian identity, in conjunction with one or more other changes, are under considerable strain and many do not survive. Disappointment at losses is
influenced by discourses of passionate friendships and a ‘transformation of intimacy’ that idealise women’s friendships. But experiences of conflict, change and endings also help lesbians decide what is important to them in a friendship, and to discover more about themselves, for example their likes and dislikes, in the process. While friends are ‘part of you’ (Marilyn), parts can be dispensed with if they don’t suit, or retained, if they do. Experiences and decision-making around conflict, change and endings help to form and firm definitions of and criteria for friendship and aid the ‘project of self’.

Participants’ generally low tolerance for conflict resonates with Lasch’s suggestion that under pressure, ‘the self contracts to a defensive core’ (1984: 15). However participants do not go to the extremes of Lasch’s ‘emotional disengagement’, a path that seems more likely to be taken by men than women. While they quickly disengage from unsupportive friends, they do not disengage altogether, continuing to value relatedness in comparable ways to the ‘tend and befriend’ behaviour observed by women under stress (Taylor et al, 2000). Small circles of friends are the ‘crux of personal life’ (Jamieson, 1998: 173), focused on ‘quality, not quantity’ (Bess), and on affirming the self.

Friendships that survive conflict and change tend to be close rather than casual, longer-term rather than new, communicative, and able to deal with difference. They value the individual’s right to choose, accepting each other ‘warts and all’ (Elizabeth). A shared awareness of and commitment to self-development is part of this. Often these friends have already forged strong bonds and good communication through earlier shared intense or life-changing experiences. One-sided friendships display a strong desire not to lose links with the past, demonstrating that the past is as constitutive of selfhood as the present.

As Jane Flax (1993a) observes, relatedness is not always a benign virtue. Caring can inhibit communication and conflict resolution, and the possibility of the unconscious replaying of mother-daughter relationships might explain the deep emotions felt on conflict with or on the loss of friends.
Despite painful losses, ultimately the casting off of old friends and the making of new ones that better reflect the self provide ‘the necessary underpinning for moral agency in an uncertain world’ (Weeks et al., 2001: 76). While most participants are not politically active, they are politically aware. A sense of the injustices in the outside world fuels the quest for ‘care and mutual responsibilities’ at home (Weeks et al., 2001: 101), an arena in which they can exercise some control. While most do not tolerate friends who judge their shift to a lesbian identity or other changes negatively, once transitions and changes have settled and participants are comfortable with them, and as they grow older, they are able to tolerate difference more.

In Chapter Eight, the final chapter, I discuss how participants reflect on the personal experiences, socialisation as women and counselling that formed and reformed their caring behaviour and difficulties with communication and conflict resolution, and suggest ways forward for lesbian friendships based on the concept of the ‘project of self’.
CHAPTER EIGHT: MOVING TOWARDS SELFHOOD

Through its exploration of the reflections and visions for the future of their friendships of the lesbians in this study, this chapter reveals lesbians’ embracing of a framework of self-development. Regardless of age or background, when asked to reflect on their experiences and offer suggestions for women’s relationships with women in the future, most participants are concerned with self-development and individual learning from mistakes over and above social change.

In keeping with the shift to a more profound individualism noted throughout this thesis (Lasch, 1984; Giddens, 1992; Beck, 1994; 1996; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Morgan, 1999), moving towards a better future is seen very much as a personal journey. However in spite of choosing ‘the project of self’ (Giddens, 1992) over and above social change, the lesbians in this study are at the same time seeking ways to move beyond individualism. Aspects of their experience examined in this chapter point to some of these: their concern with continued close relatedness despite problems and challenges in personal relationships; their concern with improved communication with others; and their belief that ‘knowing the self’ would help. Most participants seek counselling for specific assistance with ‘coming out’ or relationship skills, and some embrace alternative religions to aid self-development. In detailing the aspirations for better personal relationships suggested by participants, this chapter demonstrates that however individualistic they may seem, their concern for the self is always a ‘relational self’.

At the end of interviews, participants were asked about what they had learned from their experiences, if they would do anything differently if they had their time again, and their visions for future friendships and relationships between women. Their responses reveal only a handful interested in the need for political activism, and the links between the political context in which lesbians live and the ways lesbians relate to friends, lovers and communities. For these women, even political activism, however, has to go hand-in-hand with personal development work. The rest advocate taking responsibility for themselves in individual work towards realising
the potential of women for peaceful, equal relationships, emphasising relatedness and thoughtfulness, building self-esteem and self-awareness, discernment in the choice of friends, and above all, assertiveness in communication. Counselling helps most women in this study, and, for some, the embracing of alternative religions assists in self-development. Because the shift to a lesbian identity takes place in a culture which still stigmatises homosexuality, it is likely that it is only women who are interested in self-development and who are resilient enough to withstand social pressure can be as ‘out’ as the lesbians in this study are, especially when they are not involved in lesbian groups or political movements. Participants’ interest in their own personal growth, backed up by the increased visibility of lesbians in culture that is the legacy of lesbian and gay activism, keeps them in the mainstream.

The minority who are interested in how the political context affects relationships are more pessimistic about the conditions of late capitalism than they are about discrimination against homosexuals. Echoing Eva Cox’s concern about the predominance of ‘Economically Rational Man’ (1995: 2), they talk about how the positive values of co-operation, caring, support, nurturing, goodwill, honesty and trust, that they feel are important so that women can have good relationships with each other, are at odds with the current climate of ‘economic rationalism’ (Elaine) and the ‘free marketplace’ (Lucy) in which competing individuals do best. The lack of time for friends, given the need to work, study, cope with an oppressive political climate and tend to other relationships, is also a concern. However stressful the context is, the women in this study do not respond with the ‘emotional disengagement’ Lasch (1984) and other theorists of postmodernity (see Elliott, 2001) postulate. Instead, remaining connected to others – albeit in a small network – facilitates resilience and coping.

VISIONS AND STRATEGIES FOR LESBIAN FRIENDSHIPS

Realising the potential of women

Commentators on lesbian relationships suggest that one of the strengths of these relationships is that there are no rules, so they have to be negotiated, and are thus
able to escape falling into male-female gender roles (Giddens, 1992; Mohin, 1996; Dunne, 1997; Jamieson, 1998). There is more potential for desired equality in lesbian relationships. The lesbians in this study are deeply concerned that they realise the potential of women for equal, peaceful relationships. In many ways, recitals of visions and strategies for change are like songs of lament for what they want women’s friendships, lesbian relationships and communities to be like, while knowing the reality is often different (cf. Rubin, 1985; Rose and Serafica, 1986; Gouldner and Strong, 1987). Formerly heterosexual women hint at an idealistic, even romanticised notion of a women’s world, in which the intimacy of their ‘best friend’ friendships is simply carried over into all other spheres: their sexual relationships with women, lesbian communities, other friendships (cf. Krieger, 1983; Berzon, 1988). These concerns are related to the discourses of passionate friendships and the ‘transformation of intimacy’, which provide very idealised images of women’s relationships, as discussed in Chapter Seven. As has been shown throughout this thesis, the reality is far less benign and far more complex, and often disappointing. In reciting their visions and strategies for women’s relationships, the women are holding firmly on to an ideal that is rooted partly in experience and partly in fantasy. In so doing, they both celebrate and justify their choices to continue being lesbian.

Despite a strong wish that women would fulfill their potential for equal and harmonious relationships, experience or knowledge of hurtful or violent women helps participants to an understanding that these qualities are socially constructed rather than biologically given or innate. For example, in rejecting lesbian sadomasochism, Jean felt that women were ‘supposed to be the gentler sex’, and Laura that women were meant to be ‘all nice and soft’. Lucy expected lesbian communities to be supportive and nurturing and had the opposite experience with women who were violent. Abuse also arose as an issue in relationships for seven participants. Despite awareness that not all women were ‘gentle’ or ‘soft’, or ‘nurturing’, including themselves, participants still had experiences of positive women’s friendships and relationships on which to build their visions.
Elaine’s vision was to see women relate to one another in a supportive, caring way so that strength would be gained both from the individual experiences of friendship and by the wider networking of women. For her, this involved

in a way the idealism of the 1970s women’s movement but leaving out some of the negativity of excluding men altogether, and getting bogged down in politics or a naive view of how the world and people really work ...

Elaine felt that lesbians needed ‘to re-invent’ some of the best that was part of the idealism of the 1970s,

and add to it a bit more common sense about sexual relationships (i.e. that sexual ‘freedom’ can lead to pain and the breaking up of communities or groups), about politics (i.e. that it requires a lot of accepting of different points of views rather than the rigid adherence to a set of laid down rules and regulations).

Some of Elaine’s visions were supported by others. Ruth believed lesbians were in a good position to have equal relationships, but like Elaine, she felt they needed to tackle difference better in communities. Jean suggested that because most women were mothers, their experience in negotiation and compromise prepared them for these tasks. Negotiation and compromise were better ways of solving problems rather than the typically male way of using violence, she felt. Elaine's view that sexual freedom can lead to pain was partly realised by the women in this study in that monogamous relationships are favoured. However because of the tendency for lesbians to find new lovers from within small communities or friendship networks, the endings of relationships can still cause pain and the breaking up of networks.

*Women’s values should be taken up by the whole of society*

In addition to women fulfilling their potential, participants agree with theorists of women’s caring in their beliefs that ‘women’s values’ such as relatedness and thoughtfulness need to be taken up by the whole of society (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984; Jordan *et al*, 1991; Cole and McQuin, 1992; Jordan, 1997). Both Laura and Lucy thought the way women and men were socialised was ‘all wrong’, and that our society needed to ‘start again’ from the beginning so that co-operation
and caring would come to the forefront. Jean felt that human relations training needed ‘to start in kindergarten’. Women’s socialisation to be ‘nice girls’ was at fault, Laura believed. Having learned that being ‘nice’ did not serve her in her relationship, she felt that women needed to be taught to be assertive rather than manipulative. These beliefs echo Elaine’s and Lucy’s concerns about how ‘women’s values’, such as co-operation and caring, are at odds with dominant ‘male values’, such as the individualism that serves economic rationalism.

Caring and thoughtfulness is also expressed in the friendship behaviour of those for whom caring is an important part of their identity, so much so that they tolerate non-reciprocity and bad behaviour (Elizabeth, Emily and Jean, discussed in Chapter Seven). The moral ‘imperative to care’ is therefore seen as positive.

**Growth-fostering relationships**

Jean Baker Miller and Irene Stiver argue that women participate in relationships to assist in psychological development (1997; see also Stanley, 1993). Their concept of ‘growth-fostering relationships’ is embraced by several women in this study, indicating that the ‘project of self’ is always a ‘relational self’. Lucy used the exact term ‘growth-fostering relationship’ to express her vision, suggesting that she had accessed these ideas from the literature or discussions with others. Similarly, Ali was looking for a lover she could ‘really share and connect and grow with’. Cathryn had an actual experience of such a relationship: she wrote about her lover that ‘the friendship is a growing and changing delight, which challenges and enriches me intellectually and emotionally’. May believed that ‘a significant sexual relationship can be growthful and move you to deeper levels of self-awareness’. And Emily’s perspective on growth through relationships was revealed when she spoke about conversations with her ex-lover, which regularly included discussions of how her ex-lover grew through relationships ending.

As discussed in Chapter Five, relationships that are flexible and negotiated have the most chance of success, and this is a vision for some women in the study. For example, Lucy and Alice believed relationships were individual and needed to be
negotiated between each couple. Here relatedness, informed by discourses of passionate friendships and equal relationships, is cross cut with individualism. For Alice, relationships were about ‘getting to know the other and the self’. Lucy and Alice recognised that what suited them did not suit other couples they knew, who had different models, and they knew that the way other couples structured their relationships would not suit them. Alice reflected:

even thinking about Amber and Lee, they would probably think they have the ideal relationship and not want to change it, and we think we do, but ours is different to theirs and we wouldn’t think theirs was ideal for us, they probably wouldn’t think ours was an ideal relationship (laughs) ...

Having been judged by the lesbians in their community for the way they conducted their relationship, Lucy wanted this study to put forward a variety of models so lesbians could learn that there wasn’t just one way:

I think we do need to see that there are other models and see them actually work. But it’s all about esteem as well and believing in yourself and blah blah blah blah, blah.

Lucy’s language about esteem also reveals a preoccupation with self-development that is shared by most of the women in this study.

Personal growth does not come without pain, however. Johanna Meehan’s concept of ‘self-reconstruction’ after painful experiences (1995b: 239) is salient for participants. Alice and Lucy had their share of pain negotiating their relationship. Elaine’s vision was that love shared in a relationship was about equality and independence, and

that love is not about owning someone or about dominating their life or their time but about having the confidence to let the other grow and move freely. That’s the vision – the reality is probably something else again! Indeed it was: between the interview and returning her transcript and postscript, Elaine had suffered much pain as she tried to stay true to her vision. She moved across the state to be geographically closer to her lover, hoping to manipulate her into an exclusive relationship. However the move backfired: her lover refused to leave her male partner. While the friendship remained solid, a future sexual
relationship looked unlikely. Elaine had let go of the sexual side of their relationship, not wanting to destroy a very deep friendship by pressing the point.

OBSTACLES TO LESBIAN VISIONS

The need to improve self-esteem and self-awareness

Many of the women in the study feel that lesbians cannot live up to their full potential until they improve their own self-esteem and self-awareness. The lack of self-esteem and self-awareness was demonstrated by the discrepancies between what many lesbians said and what they did, believed Alice, and the lack of care by many for their bodies and appearances, according to Jocasta and Elaine. It was also apparent in many lesbians’ fears of being single, felt Ali. Lesbians needed to feel okay about being single, Alice and Elizabeth believed, rather than going from one relationship to another. Lesbians, in particular younger lesbians, needed to value friends more, and not place so much emphasis on being in a sexual relationship, according to Mei Li, Ruth, Jean, Indigo and Rosemary.

The task of improving self-esteem is one that lesbians need to take on themselves, according to some. At the same time, however, they recognise that this is not easy for lesbians. For example, they note how societal homophobia affects lesbians’ self-esteem, especially for those without education, employment or resources, for older lesbians who have lived through less tolerant times, for those subject to religious teachings and/or living in the country. Alex demonstrated her belief in lesbians taking control of their lives in her appreciation of friends who were ‘brave like lions, rather than victims of fate or their own pasts’. Further, she acknowledged ‘having negotiated the inner rocky terrain of a seriously troubled life I’ve lost my youthful taste for pain and know what I need, and that my needs are responsibility’. Lisette believed ‘love comes from within’. Jean commented that lesbians could feel more secure in themselves ‘through knowledge, interaction with others, everything from socialisation to education, watching behaviour of other people’. This was not just a lesbian thing, but for all people.
Rosemary, who had lived ‘in the closet’ for 11 years in a country town in Tasmania before coming out, felt passionately that lesbians had to ‘stop thinking of themselves as victims’. While she thought counselling was good on one level, on another level she believed it led to selfishness. Rosemary wanted lesbians to ‘stop thinking of themselves as absolutely incapable of saying yes, no or whatever’ and to ‘get out of the fuckin’ therapist’s chair’. She wished lesbians would start, instead of concentrating on me me me me me would actually start doing things for other people … because there’s heaps of things that could be improved if everyone devoted just a little bit of energy.

Community life depended on lesbians appreciating themselves more, not just political activism, Rosemary believed. To give an example, she talked about Aboriginal writer Sally Morgan:

She was talking about how people go to movies or read books and they read about all these heroes and that and she was saying well why don’t they figure out that they’re their own heroes you know that they’re part of the really interesting journey through life and the things that they do are really quite heroic, you know, people do amazing things. You know just in the ordinary sort of nature of a life, they go and they do the most amazing things.

The need to express yourself

The ability to express needs is the most often-cited vision for the women in the study. Almost all of the women interviewed speak about the importance of learning how to relate to other women better, in particular through assertiveness in communication. They realise that trying to protect past lovers from hurt by not communicating feelings, especially around relationships ending, often causes more hurt further down the track both for themselves and others. They make resolutions to communicate better with present and future partners. This could be a white and Asian woman’s (Chan, 1996) dilemma, however. In an interview study of the cross-race friendships of six African-American lesbians and six white lesbians in the US, Lynn, an African-American lesbian recounted:
One of the major problems I have to deal with [in cross-race friendships] is that I was raised as a free female. A lot of white women can’t express their feelings, especially anger, and they don't want me to either ... what I think about them is ‘you’ve already got problems with who you are. Why do you want me to be like you?’ (Hall and Rose, 1996: 180).

While I only have a non-white sample of one, Lisette, from Nicaragua, she verifies Lynn’s experience with her belief that lesbians have ‘to go-get things for ourselves without having to worry about other peoples’ opinions’. None of the other participants expressed confidence in this area.

Of those in the study concerned with communication problems, Ruth advised that women take time to develop relationships, build trust and communicate rather than making assumptions about the other. Both Bess and her partner Rhonda suppressed feelings of unhappiness for five years before the relationship ended, with Bess regretting that she had ‘lived out [her partner’s] ambitions’ rather than her own. Christine advised that if lesbians were unhappy in relationships, to ‘end it now’ rather than allowing someone else, such as a new partner, to end it for them. And Louise knew she had hurt two ex-lovers ‘really really badly’ by not letting them know she was unhappy in relationships, which subsequently ended.

Participants have different views on how women can become more assertive. Elizabeth, who worked in the relationship education field, tried to translate what she was doing at work into a vision for lesbians. She discussed education programs in communications and conflict resolution and assertiveness and people being able to state their bottom lines without other people wanting to hit them and things like that … somehow being able to educate people around, um fairness in relationships, that we all have equal rights.

Lesbian publications were important to promote women’s rights in relationships, Elizabeth believed. In their discussion of the limited use of parent education, Lupton and Barclay (1997) argue programs presume a rational self, failing to take account of parents’ formative experiences in their own families. While lesbians in this study are not as explicit as Lupton and Barclay in their rejection of relationship
education, more of them talk about how dynamics in families of origin contribute to communication blocks, and how they and their friends are working to remove these through counselling. Emily knew she shied away from conflict because she did not want to arouse emotions associated with fear of her violent father. Bess ‘had a real complex’ about people who said one thing and meant another, because her mother used to do this. Lucy understood that a friend had problems relating to others because she had witnessed her mother’s violent death. Assertiveness was not just about expressing feelings, according to Ali, but being self-aware enough to be in touch with them. In a future relationship, Ali hoped that she would be able to ‘recognise that if I really did need some quiet time, that I would actually take it … and not succumb, not give in (laughter)’ to spending all her time with her lover. The seductive pressure that Ali experienced from her ex-partner to be together echoed Mei Li’s concern about ‘the easy, delicious but dangerous, trap of trying to get it all from the one person, of not needing anyone else’.

While assertive communication is valued by participants and seen as important for lover relationships, it is more difficult in friendships, where expectations and conflicts are less likely to be articulated (Orbach and Eichenbaum, 1994; Kitzinger, 1996a; Fillion, 1996). Nevertheless, some have an ‘ideal of pure communicative friendship’ (Pahl, 1998: 116) gained from counselling and the discourse of the ‘transformation of intimacy’. But this communication is not always welcomed by those on the receiving end, as Ruth’s story about a friend demonstrates. When this friend was very ill and Ruth wanted to give advice, she learned about the possibility of a middle ground between her friend’s non-communicative style (‘angry and smiling’) and Ruth’s more confrontational style of communication that she learned in counselling:

I think my tendency is to I guess try and in a way be more confrontational or be more open about issues and yeah I sometimes feel that Lynette doesn’t really like that … I think over time I think I’ve learned that … it’s not very beneficial to kind of come head on, it’s better to kind of take your time about it, and usually the issues do come out but maybe not, as directly.

It was important to find out friends’ feelings on a particular topic before expressing your own to avoid hurt, Emily believed. While counselling assisted many
participants with direct communication, Ruth’s and Emily’s stories reveal that there is a time and a place for subtlety in friendship.

DEVELOPING THE SELF

*The role of counselling*

The importance of counselling for the self-development of women in this study through their relationships is a significant theme in all of the narratives. It is in line with the increasing use of counsellors in the contemporary period, especially by middle-class people in the US. Theorists of modernity such as Lasch (1984) argue that in a post-traditional order, counsellors have replaced priests as a ‘medical ministry’ for ‘the average man (sic)’ who ‘seems haunted by a feeling of the meaninglessness of life’ (Lasch, 1984: 114). While Lasch argues he includes ‘woman’ when he writes about ‘man’, it appears he is probably only writing about men: the women in this study have no such existential crises. Giddens is closer to the mark when he argues that ‘the doctor, counsellor and therapist are as central to the expert systems of modernity as the scientist, technician or engineer’ (1991: 18). This is not just to help individuals cope with novel anxieties but ‘an expression of the reflexivity of the self – a phenomenon which, on the level of the individual, like the broader institutions of modernity, balances opportunity and potential catastrophe in equal measure’ (1991: 34). Certainly choosing a lesbian path can be argued to involve balancing opportunity and potential catastrophe. Psychologist Vivienne Cass observes that lesbians seek counselling to assist identity formation (1979). Given that most participants have experienced a major life change in choosing a lesbian identity against their heterosexual socialisation, it is not surprising that they seek out counselling and other ‘reflexive resources’ (Giddens, 1992) to affirm their new selves. As Jocasta reported, most of her friends and she herself had had counselling and it ‘helped us to be who we are’. The lack of other avenues for exploring personal changes is another important factor. But the self the women used counselling to explore was not the independent, separate self of Lasch’s world view, but a ‘relational self’ using counselling to improve knowledge, and hence relationships.
While no participants had had counsellors who discounted their experiences or desires, Marilyn did have a negative experience of counselling that affected her sense of self as a new lesbian. When she was leaving her marriage and ‘coming out’, feeling very vulnerable, her counsellor initiated intimacy, and invited Marilyn to live with her. The relationship was abusive, and Marilyn left after a few months. She was able to find another, more professional counsellor, who assisted her to report the first counsellor to the Gay and Lesbian Switchboard, have her removed from their listings, and helped Marilyn’s ‘coming out’ more constructively.

Participants overwhelmingly reject suggestions that counselling might be a substitute for female friendship. Following William Schofield, who in 1964 called psychotherapy ‘the purchase of friendship’ (cited in Gouldner and Strong, 1987: 126), many feminists have been critical of counselling as individualising personal problems. They prefer that problems be shared and political action taken as a result of injustice, as was the case in 1970s consciousness-raising groups (Daly, 1979; Raymond, 1991a; Hall et al, 1992; Kitzinger and Perkins, 1993; McLellan; 1995; Kitzinger, 1996b; and Sjöö, 1992, who makes the same argument about the new age movement). Jessie Bernard suggests one of the negative impacts of psychiatry is ‘its discouragement of talking to friends about personal problems’ (cited in Gouldner and Strong, 1987: 126), and Janice Raymond is critical of ‘therapy as a way of life’ for many women as a substitute for female friendship (1991a: 155). Telling problems to counsellors instead of friends undermines the authenticity of friendship and is thus an obstacle to female friendship and politics, Raymond argues.

While mainstream counsellors do not always understand the psychological experiences of lesbians, as was discussed in Chapter Five, most participants talk about how supportive counsellors have assisted them in their transition and in the choices they made about friends, lovers and communities. Rather than being an obstacle to female friendship, participants feel counselling has helped them to communicate better with friends and partners. Counsellors assisted them with strategies to deal with the responses of family members (Sally and Marilyn), with conflict resolution in friendships and relationships (Ali, Mei Li, Alice, Ruth,
Marilyn, Jocasta and Christine), with ‘letting go’ of friends who did not fully support the evolving self (Ali) and with allowing ‘reassessment of myself and the role others play – both positive and negative’ (Christine). Counsellors supported the women in the development of a confident sense of self and in the valuing of supportive, affirming friends who were both lesbian and heterosexual.

Sally, who found counselling helped her ‘come out’ to herself, as discussed in Chapter Seven, spoke at length about how counselling gave her the confidence to be ‘out’ at home and at work.

I’d come to the conclusion that you can say on a good day that it’s not your responsibility how people react to you or how they perceive you as a lesbian but on a bad day that really doesn’t rule, you know, you can’t sort of hit yourself. But after working through this stuff with this person and with myself I can honestly say that now I really don’t care (what other people think).

In particular, being out with the other (heterosexual) women at work, she felt, was ‘a good opportunity to share differences, but importantly similarities, dispelling myths and setting the records straight’.

The finding that most participants do not feel that counselling negatively affects their friendships could be a reflection of the fact that most of the critics of therapy are based in the US and UK and the situation for Australian women is simply not the same. It is certainly clear that therapy is not ‘a way of life’ in Australia as it is in the US. Several participants made this point. Most of the women only sought short-term therapy when they needed to solve a particular problem. For example, Elaine talked about how she expected her friends to be there for empathy and support: ‘friends are good for a gripe’, but how she would seek counselling for resolution of problems. She saw the two roles as distinct.

Counselling is only an obstacle to female friendship and political activism in the way Janice Raymond (1991a) suggests when women seek it for more serious issues, such as healing from past sexual abuse or assault. A number of the women talked about their partners having counselling for past sexual abuse or rape, but
they usually asked for the tape recorder to be turned off to protect the privacy of their partners. Two participants talked about their own sexual abuse, and one of these asked that the information she gave me be deleted from the transcript and not used. While counselling assisted couples in resolving issues to do with the impact of sexual abuse on their relationship, I gathered that this was not a topic for discussion outside the relationship and the counselling room. I wondered whether this secrecy could have been related both to shame, and to a desire not to contribute to stereotypes that lesbians choose relationships with women because of bad experiences with men. Mei Li was the one exception: she discussed her partner’s past sexual abuse in the interview, and how she and her partner had only recently started talking about the issue with friends. Prior to that they had kept the abuse, and the impact on their sexual relationship, private. Mei Li moved in feminist circles, which possibly enabled her to feel more open about sharing this issue, with the feminist movement’s long encouragement to ‘break the silence about sexual violence’. The desire for privacy in this matter – while understandable – could well be undermining the potential for sharing the issue with friends and for political activism on this issue were it to be more out in the open.

Even those women who are interested in activism demonstrate a concern for the self as well. Lesbians had to be prepared to be introspective and ‘look at’ themselves before commenting on or helping others, according to Jillian. Jocasta had a strong belief that political activism had to go hand in hand with women ‘working on themselves’. She had formed this opinion after having worked on a lesbian event where she believed many of the lesbians that were ‘acting out’ were suffering from ‘undiagnosed mental illnesses’ that they were able to mask, such as depression, manic depression and schizophrenia. While acknowledging that discrimination and homophobia probably contributed to mental illness, activism was not sustainable, she felt, unless these lesbians sought professional help first:

Feminism is vital, and working to get stuff done, but that stuff won’t happen until the lesbian community is healthier because it doesn’t, it’s not sustainable if you’ve got a pack of people who are really unwell it just doesn’t work … It’s a vicious circle that one.
The role of spirituality

For some participants, self-awareness is connected to spirituality. Alice recommended that women have ‘a couple of weeks at the ashram’ to get to know themselves. For Lucy, spirituality was about self-awareness, which would ultimately lead to social change, although she noted that personal growth and spirituality were ‘a middle class privilege’. Lucy admitted she was ‘getting over a bout of depression’ at the time of the interview and was pessimistic about any future for any sort of a lesbian community. However, by the time she returned her transcript with a postscript, she was more optimistic. She had made new lesbian friends and, having ‘gone a bit Buddhist’, admitted she had more compassion:

I think if we ‘improve’ ourselves – learn about who we are as people and what’s important to us – compassion etc. And we live that, things can only get better (that’s the Buddhist in me).

Like Lucy, when asked about their current religious practices and beliefs, another 13 out of the 40 women studied had also adapted alternative or Eastern faiths to suit themselves, supporting their interest in self-development. Lucy’s view that this was a middle-class luxury was consistent with the results, which showed 11 out of these 14 women having a middle-class background. Jillian’s extreme experience of being ‘outed’ by her intolerant church, consequently losing her faith and moving to enjoy ‘women’s spiritual (pagan) celebrations’ suggests the kind of journey lesbians might take from mainstream to alternative religions. Of the women who embraced alternative religions, five had adopted Buddhism, one wholly and four partially, and one the Hindu-originated siddha yoga. The rest were involved in an eclectic mix of beliefs and practices including self-defined spirituality, women’s spirituality, paganism and pantheism, and Ruth admitted she sometimes said that feminism was her religion.

The way that women adapted religion and spirituality to suit themselves was exemplified by Ali, who was brought up in the Greek Orthodox faith. In her questionnaire, she drew a distinction between religion and spirituality:
Now (and for about the past ten years or so) I don’t identify with any religion. However I have a strong a very connected sense of spirituality. I have a very strong sense (particularly at this point in my life) of feeling very connected to a deep sense of self and a feeling of guidance which comes from that. For me it’s about consciousness and clarity, being very true to myself. A belief that if you are very clear in your choices, if you are not fearful of asking and if you are open to receive then you manifest your dreams.

Missy was on a similar journey. Despite having been brought up Catholic, she had ‘never been religious’. She also drew a distinction between religion and spirituality in noting that she had a strong spiritual life that was more developed at this point in her life than it had ever been, in particular since she had become a mother. She had envied the spirituality she had seen in other women in crisis. However hers was a ‘stop and start’, ‘needs-based spirituality’, that she experienced ‘when I feel joy, and also with my son’.

Most of the other women in the study have also abandoned conventional religious upbringings, the most common being Catholic (n=15), and now report they have no faith at all (n=12), or a non-conventional or personal form of Christianity (n=7), while five still identify with mainstream Christian religions (four Anglican, one at the liberal end, and one Catholic) and three did not answer. Most Christian denominations and churches in Australia support traditional roles for women such as marriage and children, and oppose homosexuality. The exceptions are the lesbian and gay Metropolitan Community Church (to which one participant belonged) and some dioceses of the Uniting and Anglican Churches, which argue that Jesus never preached against homosexuality. Most lesbians’ (and many heterosexual women’s) rejection of conventional religion is therefore no surprise.

The kind of self-awareness gained through spirituality is also valued by participants who speak about discernment in friendship. They want friends with the positive qualities of honesty and trustworthiness, and without a long list of attributes they perceive as negative, such as smoking, excessive drinking, drug use, violence, racism and voting Liberal (see Chapter Three). These choices reinforce the
orientation of the women in the study towards a self that is politically aware even if not politically active, and thoughtful and considerate of others, rather than one that might lie, cause discomfort to others or avoid reality by entering altered states of consciousness. Louise, Christine and Ali wanted friendships and relationships where women were able to express needs and have them met, and were conscious about their choices to be together.

In conclusion, the findings that the lesbians in this study believe self-development is the way to a better future for lesbians rather than political activism is consistent with a widespread trend to a deeper individualism in society of which the ‘project of self’ is a part. It is likely that the gains won by past and current activists, and the level of acceptance lesbians feel as they move about the wider community, may have influenced the lack of perceived need for activism. Only Jocasta drew connections between the continued marginalisation of lesbians and their relationships with others.

The ‘pop’ psychology that Giddens bases his ‘transformation of intimacy’ (1992) on suggests relationships in late modernity are moving towards ‘emotional democracy’, but as Lynn Jamieson (1998) argues, this is an ideal very far from reality for most heterosexual couples. For the lesbians in this study emotional democracy is also an ideal, but one more often achievable due to the relative equality of female partners. Despite communication problems associated with the ‘relational self’, positive relational experiences keep lesbians working to fulfill their visions of women’s potential. Some even have a vision that more women will take up lesbian relationships (Mei Li and Indigo). Personal growth work includes valuing caring, developing self awareness with each experience, recognising that the ways women have been taught to communicate don’t work, learning better negotiation, assertiveness and communication strategies to achieve growth-fostering relationships, and refusing to be victims.

Despite a preoccupation with the self over and above social change, the kind of self being developed by the lesbians in this study is one that is connected and bonded to others. The findings challenge theorists of the isolated, individuated self engaged in
a ‘self-cutback for psychic survival’ under pressure, seeking counselling to find meaning in a meaningless life (Lasch, 1984). Lesbians do not need to seek meaning from counsellors; nor is counselling a substitute for female friendship. Rather, their many and varied relationships fill lives full of meaning, and emotional security in difficult times is enhanced by looking to each other (Orbach, 1998). They use counsellors to support major life changes such as the transition to a lesbian identity, and to seek strategies for dealing with relationship problems. Counselling is an obstacle to political action when it privatises experiences of male violence, however. Involvement in alternative religions enhances self-awareness, personal growth and a sense of a place in the world for a significant minority. The rejection of heterosexuality and of mainstream religions, or the defining of their own kind of Christianity or spiritual life for themselves, demonstrates women with a confidence to live life by their own rules.
CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates how lesbians choose, establish, maintain, resolve conflict in and end friendships, love relationships and community involvements, and how through all of these experiences, they negotiate the self. In the context of continuing marginalisation, small, affirming networks of friends are extremely important for most of the women studied because they support changing selves, particularly for those in transition from a heterosexual to a lesbian identity.

Lesbians are embarked on a ‘project of self’, but this self is always a ‘relational self’, played out in distinctive ways due to the intensity of lesbians’ friendships and relationships with a range of women. Lesbians in the contemporary period are influenced by historical and modern discourses of women as passionate friends, lesbianism as a sexual identity, equal relationships (in a ‘transformation of intimacy’), and individualism, but the ways they weave them together are their own. In particular, discourses of passionate friendships and equal relationships inform sometimes idealistic views of women as ‘relational selves’. They are active and confident in constituting their own sense of self, for the most part with no template of political consciousness derived from feminist, lesbian feminist or lesbian/gay theorising, communities or activism. The activism of the 1970s and 1980s and the persona of the ‘political lesbian’ appear to have been superseded in the 1990s by a particular late twentieth century version of lesbianism that has benefited from this activism, absorbing and embracing the weaving together of historical and modern identities.

Friendship is often seen as a lifeline, as giving meaning to life, or a mainstay of life. Friends of all sexualities are seen as a source of emotional support, the significance of which is multiplied because of the widespread lack of acceptance or understanding of participants’ lesbianism by family, work colleagues and society. This is especially the case for those lesbians geographically isolated from the gay and lesbian communities in Melbourne. Friends facilitate resilience and coping, and in some instances, friends are seen as ‘family of choice’. While friends affirm lifestyles, for most of the women in this study only a lover can affirm a lesbian
identity. At the same time, because lovers are usually ‘best friends’, the felt need for other friendships and community involvement reduces when lesbians are coupled.

The conditions of late capitalism – job insecurity, the need for mobility, the need for constant retraining and multiskilling, and a resultant widespread shift to a more profound individualism – are an added determinant of friendship networks. The demands of work, relationships, and for some, children and/or other family members, means the time available for friends is necessarily lessened. Decades of lesbian and gay activism have resulted in some legal protection against discrimination, leaving the new demands of the market the major struggle for the women in this study. They are preoccupied with surviving late capitalism rather than surviving as lesbians. They are living in the mainstream, ‘out’ in most if not all spheres of their lives, intensely busy and wishing they had more time and energy to give to friends.

The study answers the questions of friendship researchers about the similarities and differences between lesbianism and friendship (O’Connor, 1992; Stanley, 1993; Peplau and Spalding, 2000). It draws a strong link between women’s friendships and lesbianism, and shows what can happen when romantic feelings arise in friendships. Friendship is typically the way into relationships for lesbians, and the way into a lesbian identity for non-lesbians. Close friendships between women, regardless of their sexuality, contain this possibility. Blurred boundaries between friends and lovers suggest these relationships exist on a continuum: that over time, individuals can move from casual to close friends, and from friends to lovers, and back again. As feminists have demonstrated, eros has many manifestations (Lorde, 1984; Trask, 1986; Heyward, 1989; Palladino and Stephenson, 1990). In the contemporary period, when there is widespread knowledge about sexuality, erotic attractions between women can lead to relationships, but equally they may not take this path. Eros can enhance a friendship or harm it, depending on one’s attitude. Unspoken or denied attractions can lead to complex and intense friendships, which do not always survive.
For most of the women in this study, desire is a thread in their friendships, but not necessarily something they feel compelled to act upon. Like Elizabeth Stuart, they recognise ‘that sexuality is not some irrational, uncontrollable beast that has to be tamed into one relationship but rather is a rational passion that reaches towards others but remains under the control of our will’ (1997: 175). Most women consider their actions in the light of whether attractions are reciprocal, whether articulating them might damage the friendship, whether the object of their attraction is a suitable partner or ‘better as a friend’, and their other friendships and relationships.

Lesbian ‘relational selves’ are encouraged by female socialisation and choice towards an ‘imperative to care’ which makes their friendships and love relationships closer to the ‘best friends’ model found in heterosexual women’s friendships than to those in any other framework. Indeed lesbians bring an idealised ‘best friends’ model to many friendships and relationships. When one or both women are lesbians, the intensity of friendships can increase. However, the ‘imperative to care’ is not always a benign dynamic. While caring is valued as a positive and moral position, it is easy for concern for the other to occur at the expense of the self.

The study contributes to understandings of friendship processes when one friend makes the transition to a lesbian identity, and the benefits of friendships between lesbians and heterosexual women sought by O’Boyle and Thomas (1996). The lesbians in this study demonstrate a low tolerance for conflict around changing sexuality: heterosexual friends are expected to be accepting and supportive of participants’ shifts from a heterosexual to a lesbian identity, or they are lost. The friendships that survive this, and other conflict and change, provide examples of the importance of friendship in affirming the self, particularly in times of radical change, and of the possibilities of friendship across difference. These are close, communicative friendships between women with a mutual interest in self-development. The discarding of unsupportive friends also reflects changing selves, and a confidence in the right to love whomsoever one chooses that is only possible
because of lesbian and gay activism and the increased visibility of homosexuals in society.

Consequently, this thesis also fills gaps in knowledge about the impact of changing legal recognition of same-sex couples; the impact of prejudice and discrimination on lesbians, including how they cope and create supportive social networks (Peplau and Spalding, 2000), and the experiences of lesbians in country areas (Weeks et al, 2001). It shows that the legal protection now afforded lesbians in recent years, and shifts away from lesbian feminism to a more diverse ‘queer politics’, have given lesbians more confidence to be ‘out’, but less inclination to be involved in activism. Despite the obvious need for more activism to increase societal acceptance, struggles around difference in lesbian communities, activist groups and extended families provide a rationale for non-participation, and are consistent with many lesbians’ desires to avoid conflict. Instead, activism has shifted to being a private activity: activism at home just by being ‘out’. The latter is particularly salient for country and suburban women who with great resilience take it upon themselves to educate their (mostly heterosexual) immediate families and communities of place.

Political changes also mean shared or intense life-changing experiences are likely to be the basis of small, supportive and affirming friendship networks. The networks meet needs and within them women negotiate a sense of self. Heterosexual women friends and selected kin provide important links with the past and share other parts of lesbians’ identities, such as those derived from work, study and other interests. Bisexual and asexual women friends do the same, as well as reflecting the diversity and changeability of sexuality that participants acknowledge. While male friends are outside the scope of this study, for some participants both heterosexual and gay male friends are important. Other lesbian friends, including ex-lovers, provide a feeling of ‘belonging’ crucial to a confident sense of self.

Changing legal recognition of same-sex relationships has also given lesbians greater confidence to approach counsellors for assistance, and the counselling profession has gained a new market. However some counsellors appear ill-prepared
for their new clients. It is apparent that the discourse of traditional models of psychology, available to participants through mainstream counselling or the popular media, and focusing on independence and separateness, leaves some lesbians confused. This discourse sits at odds with the realities of their close connected relationships. Hearing one story and experiencing something else increases feelings of self-blame and depression around problems in relationships (cf. Williams, 1993).

Yet lesbian relationships are under enormous pressure. Commentators on the insecurity inherent in late capitalism argue that now ‘love is the new centre around which our detraditionalised life revolves’ (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995: 172). This inevitably puts more pressure on all relationships. Added to this, lesbians are conducting relationships on the margins of heterosexual society, and in some arenas keeping them secret and pretending to be heterosexual, increasing isolation. A lesbian’s lover is usually her best friend, further increasing the likelihood of isolation, as dependence on and inclination to be involved with others is lessened, particularly in country areas. The phenomenon of lovers ‘merging’, excluding all others and suppressing difference, is often blamed for relationship problems. Yet as the study shows, close-connected relationships can be functional and beneficial if lesbians are ‘out’ and supported by others, including counsellors who offer strategies for managing difference within this context. Secure, enabling attachments help people survive periods of rapid, unmapped change, argues Susie Orbach (1998), providing, as participants do, a stark contrast to the alienation and emotional disengagement that is the common response to stress of mostly male postmodernists (Lasch, 1984; Elliott, 2001).

The results also demonstrate lesbians’ immersion in an individualistic ‘therapy culture’ or ‘project of self’ (Giddens, 1992). Self-awareness and self-knowledge are assisted by counselling and reflection, especially after experiences of loss. Most have had counselling, or have studied or practise it as their profession, or otherwise demonstrate in their language and preoccupations an absorption of what Giddens has called the ‘profusion of reflexive resources’ (1992) available in contemporary western liberal democracies. They appreciate the opportunity for self-reflection
being involved in this study provided. More than a quarter are involved in alternative religions that foster personal development and spiritual growth. Most are concerned with issues of identity and the self and individual responsibility for actions. The most startling examples of this emerge when participants are asked to reflect on their experiences of friendship with other women and to offer visions for the future. Most volunteer that personal rather than social change is needed. Yet once again, the focus of their efforts is on relationships with others: work towards realising women’s potential for peaceful, equal relationships; emphasising relatedness and thoughtfulness; building self-esteem and self-awareness; discernment in the choice of friends; and above all, assertiveness in communication.

**Implications of the study**

The findings help further understandings of women’s sense of self. The results support the observations of theorists of widespread changes in intimacy in late capitalism, such as Giddens (1992) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995). However, they also add to them, demonstrating a complexity in women’s subjectivity not addressed by the above authors. The women are on a quest for an authentic selfhood. But it is not an isolated, individuated, masculinist quest. Despite low involvement with families and communities, and an apparent embrace of individualism, their ‘project of self’ is still achieved in and through their close-connected friendships and relationships, where boundaries blur between the two relationships as well as between self and other. As ‘relational selves’, ‘identity and relationships develop in synchrony’ (Surrey, 1991: 63); small networks are the ‘crux of personal life’ (Jamieson, 1998: 173). The combination of theories of the ‘transformation of intimacy’, the ‘project of self’ and the ‘relational self’, applied to the lives of the women in this study, reveals the crucial importance of relatedness for women.

More than lesbian feminism, theories of the changing nature of intimacy and the self also expand understandings of the choices of formerly married women for
lesbian relationships. Chodorow suggests that because of being mothered by women, women miss and often seek closeness with other women (1989: 15). In a social climate where women seek ‘disclosing intimacy’ (Jamieson, 1998) in relationships, and homosexuality is more acceptable, the choice of a female partner becomes more likely than Chodorow envisages. The results show how women achieve Giddens’ ideal of an equal, contingent or ‘pure relationship’ (1992) with other women. They support Giddens’ argument that lesbian and gay relationships, uncomplicated by gender differences, come the closest to the ‘pure relationship’, and hence are the vanguard of the ‘transformation of intimacy’. However, his pure relationships are uncomplicated by children or the need to meet material needs (Jamieson, 1998; Smart and Neale, 1999). The lesbians in this study, including partnered lesbians with children, all work to support themselves and their children, and study to keep up with the demands of the market. In this context equal relationships, although not easy and not always possible, are much more likely than they were in participants’ previous heterosexual relationships.

The study also has implications for theorising around women’s caring. Much of the caring literature is about women’s unidirectional caring for men, children and older people (eg. Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984; Baldwin and Twigg, 1991; Baines et al, 1993). Reciprocal caring remains undertheorised. The lesbian friendships and relationships in this study provide an opportunity to examine reciprocal caring. In particular, lesbians who have previously been in traditional heterosexual relationships with children appreciate the contrast between the old relationships, where they gave much and received little, and their lesbian relationships, where caring is mutual.

However it appears that women’s socialisation and deeply felt ‘moral imperative’ to sacrifice self for the other in caring is difficult to undo, even in the unconventional arrangement of two women involved in mutual caring. This modifies ostensible equality. The lesbians in this study reflect on many instances of both partners caring at the expense of the self, and how this is a barrier to communication. In friendships, expectations are frequently not articulated and therefore not met, causing conflict. While this is a common problem, according to
the friendship literature (eg. Orbach and Eichenbaum, 1994), it seems to be exacerbated by the blurred boundaries between friends and lovers that lesbians frequently experience. In relationships, there are many occasions of lack of communication out of a desire to avoid conflict and not to hurt the other. When partners have been affected by past violence or abuse, the ‘imperative to care’ can further inhibit communication of feelings. Lack of communication causes friendships and relationships to drift and end unresolved, leaving the lesbians in this study almost unanimously wishing they had been able to do a better job at talking through issues. At times, the protection of the other from hurt desired by not communicating sits uncomfortably with the recognition of possibly greater hurt caused by this error of judgment.

It is apparent that a more authentic reciprocal caring is only possible in new relationships after lesbians have learned from previous mistakes. Some women who have experienced or caused loss and pain through not wanting to cause loss and pain reflect on these incidents and resolve to communicate better in the future. Education and counselling around these issues assist women on new paths. These results are consistent with clinical studies by Jean Baker Miller (1976) that found that radical change in ways of relating could only occur after reflection on the failure of past relationships, as a part of what Johanna Meehan calls ‘self-reconstruction’ after painful experiences (1995b: 245; see also Rose, 1984).

Further to this, the study has implications for understandings about the role of counselling in lesbian subjectivity. As lesbians’ involvement in communities declines, the importance of counselling for assistance in the transition to a lesbian identity, and in relationship skills, increases. It is pleasing to note that no participants had counsellors who discounted their experiences or desires, a measure of the changes in the profession since homosexuality was removed from the American Psychological Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders in 1973 (Morin and Rothblum, 1991). The women are active consumers, using counselling as a tool rather than being the subject of a curious profession.
Despite their low involvement in communities and groups, participants overwhelmingly reject suggestions, such as those by Raymond (1991a), that counselling might be a substitute for female friendship. While mainstream counsellors do not always understand lesbian psychology, as was discussed in Chapter Five, most participants talk about how supportive counsellors assist them in their transition to a lesbian identity and in the choices they make about friends, lovers and communities. Rather than being an obstacle to female friendship, participants feel counselling assists them to communicate better with friends and partners. Counsellors help them with strategies to deal with the responses of family members, with conflict resolution in friendships and relationships, with ‘letting go’ of friends who do not fully support the evolving self, and with allowing reassessment of themselves and the role others play in their lives. Counsellors support the women in the development of a confident sense of self and in the valuing of supportive, affirming friends who are both lesbian and heterosexual. The results could also be a reflection of the preference of the women for small, supportive, private networks rather than larger communities or political groupings, as has been examined throughout the thesis, and the more widespread shift to a deeper individualism noted earlier.

Counselling could well be an obstacle to female friendship and political activism, however, when lesbians and their partners seek it for issues such as healing from past sexual abuse or assault. The desire for privacy in this matter – while understandable – could be undermining the potential for sharing the issue with friends and for political activism on this issue were it to be more out in the open.

The issues arising from past and present violence, such as intimacy problems, alcohol and drug abuse and domestic violence, suggest a need for practitioners who are aware of the impact of violence, discrimination and living ‘in the closet’, and who are able to assist lesbians to deal with these issues. Given the high rate of lesbians using counselling, counsellors have a pivotal role in facilitating lesbians’ access to supportive communities in order to reduce isolation, and in generating awareness of gender issues, the politics of sexuality and pride in a lesbian identity (eg. McLellan, 1995). Lesbian and gay activists, communities and services need to
keep these issues on the agenda. Hand in hand with this personal and community work, activists, governments and communities need to continue to fight, educate and legislate against violence against women and girls and discrimination against homosexuals. When women and girls can live in a world free of violence, open communication and with it, intimacy, may also flourish.

Lesbians also have special needs for appropriate health and counselling services. The contradictions between dominant models of psychology and lesbian realities experienced by some of the lesbians in this study, suggest the benefits of access to practitioners with knowledge of lesbian psychology. Lesbians appear to be as happy seeking mainstream counselling as lesbian counselling, and indeed may prefer to do so, given the privacy – they are less likely to run into their counsellors at lesbian and gay social events. Mainstream counselling may also be the only counselling that is available, especially in country areas. But it appears that models of relationships that affirm close-connectedness and the realities of lesbian lives are not common – counsellors, even those who are supportive of lesbians, are just as likely to impose heterosexual models. Education of mainstream counsellors could take place via pamphlets or special training sessions, and of new counsellors via curriculum reform in courses.

The findings challenge lesbians as a group – and indeed all members of society – to create friendships and lover relationships that are more accepting of diversity and able to respond to conflict and change. As has been shown, the lack of norms for addressing problems in friendship can inhibit communication. It is also difficult for the lesbians in this study to express their true feelings for fear of hurting friends and lovers. The testimony of Lynn, an African-American lesbian in one study, reveals that not speaking up may be a product of white women’s socialisation rather than a universally female experience (Hall and Rose, 1996: 180). White Australian lesbians (and all women) can learn from black women that it is okay to express feelings.

As Celia Kitzinger argues,
Taking friendship seriously – as seriously as our relationship with lovers – would mean addressing the problems, seeking to better understand and to deal with obstacles to friendships, with ruptured or broken friendships, with waning friendships, and with open warfare between friends. She quotes Andee Hochman who asks ‘how much support do we get for efforts to mend a hurting friendship?’ (1996, p. 297). She implies there is none, but that perhaps there ought to be. The experience of Lynn in Hall and Rose (1996) and of the lesbians in this study who have tackled conflict demonstrates the possibilities, but it is clear that for many women, this is a long and difficult journey. This may be especially the case when the intensities of woman’s friendships evoke mother-daughter histories, as psychoanalysts suggest (eg. Burch, 1990).

Conflict resolution and acceptance of diversity in lesbian communities also appears to have a long way to go, if the experiences of these lesbians are any indication. As Philomena Horsley argues,

> The politically ‘gated’ communities of the 1970s and 80s have done their job: we sowed the seeds of enormous social change; we’ve infiltrated the mainstream in ways hitherto unimagined (2002: 3).

While participants are not interested in the remnants of the ‘gated’ communities, they still want access to social groups they can go and join in with, to meet new friends and lovers, and ‘to get a sense of being open to each other, being friendly’ (Rosemary). This desire signals the potential for a renewal of diverse, welcoming, non-judgmental lesbian communities that may yet be, as Horsley desires, ones ‘where conversation is as open and welcome as confrontation and turf wars are old and tired’ (2002: 3). Participants acknowledge lesbian groups are important to reduce isolation for both single and coupled lesbians. While the interest is there, many of the lesbians in this study are casualties of ‘turf wars’ and struggles over difference, and are unlikely to be involved. A major obstacle for the handful who are keen and committed to this work is simply the lack of time for community organising as they struggle to manage multiple commitments. Once again the conditions of late capitalism are implicated.
Given the impact of time constraints on social life, it is clear that like all members of Australian society, lesbians would benefit from government and employer action to increase employment availability and job security. Reasonable working conditions, in particular reasonable working hours, would free up time for the family, friendship and community involvement that many lesbians would like and that have been identified as a hallmark of a civil society (Cox, 1995).

Limitations of the study and suggestions for future research

More research is still needed with the diverse range of lesbians in Australian society. It is difficult to generalise about lesbians from this study, because so many lesbians still live ‘in the closet’, or even if they are out, they are not the ‘joiners’ of groups or readers of publications that would lead them to participate in this study. It is also difficult to generalise about lesbians because of racial, ethnic and class differences. This study describes mainly white, Anglo-Australian lesbians who are ‘out’, and whose education and upward mobility modify the effect of working class backgrounds and current poverty. Morin (1977) comments that it is difficult to get a representative sample of a hidden population. A research design and recruitment strategy that actively sought a more diverse sample, such as that described by Stanley (1993) could lead to different results.

Research with pairs and groups of lesbians and their friends, over time, could get ‘the other side of the story’ I was unable to get through my research with individual lesbians. Being able to study lesbians’ friendships at up to four different points in time – the questionnaire, telephone clarification of the questionnaire, the interview and the return of transcripts with postscripts – gave many more insights than if I had only used one data-gathering method. But multiple narratives of particular friendships, networks and communities, in longitudinal studies, will further enrich our understandings of the ways in which lesbians create, nurture and negotiate these important relationships, and form a sense of self. In particular, more narratives of conflict resolution are needed to suggest ways forward. While lesbians have a tendency to remain friends with ex-lovers, a phenomenon that helps
preserve important friendship networks, more research is needed on the fallout for
these networks at the time when relationships end and for those who are unable to
remain friends, especially in the small communities in country areas. Given that
this study is so much a story of the friendships of women in transition from a
heterosexual to a lesbian identity, future studies of the friendship networks of
lesbians who have been ‘out’ for several years and can act as role models for others
will further our understanding of the place of friends in lesbians’ lives.

To summarise, lesbian friendships, while not easy, are crucial parts of the ‘project
of self’ so valued by the lesbians in this study. As Victoria Brownworth argues,
‘friendship is as vital to who and what we are – and will become – over the course
of our lives as romance’ (1999). Brownworth laments that women have been taught
to value romance over friendship. She argues that:

   It’s friendship that teaches us how to love more unconditionally, to accept
   foibles and flaws, to create emotional balance, to grow and change with
   others and to become stronger, more independent women.

Lesbians whose friendships survive conflict and change, in particular the transition
from a heterosexual to a lesbian identity, learn these lessons and appreciate their
friends anew. Those whose friendships end learn other lessons about the impact of
homophobia, their own shifting values and priorities, and about how they might
tackle conflict in the future. Whatever the experience of friendship, reflection –
including that afforded by counselling and by participation in this study – offers
important insights into the self and towards personal development and growth.

Lesbian partners in romantic relationships are typically friends first, then ‘best
friends’ in equal and reciprocal relationships, and often continue as friends when
relationships end, making them, as Giddens (1992) suggests, at the forefront of a
‘transformation of intimacy’ in the late modern period. The ‘relational self’, with an
‘imperative to care’, has many positive benefits if caring does not occur at the
expense of the self. Relationships provide lesbians with opportunities to learn about
finding this balance. However, when accessing traditional models of psychology
that support independence and separateness over close connected relationships,
lesbians are left confused. It is evidence of the pervasiveness of the ‘therapy
culture’ for these lesbians that that they situate themselves in the therapeutic world, even though it is at odds with their experiences.

Experiences of lesbian communities, while difficult for many, also help shape lesbian subjectivity. Participants’ experiences suggest the potential for revitalised networks and communities that might yet take up Susan Krieger’s challenge that ‘there is perhaps no more worthy endeavour in social life than to create communities that are fully accepting of their members’ (1983: 169). A recognition that in these busy times, communities are ‘only a part of most women’s lives’ (Elaine), could lessen the requirement for conformity and encourage the embracing of diversity.

A number of factors help lesbians to negotiate satisfactory friendships and relationships. It is important that lesbians are ‘out’, with access to supportive networks to reduce isolation. Access to alternative feminist discourses which value relatedness, yet provide strategies for managing difference, help. So do being a confident communicator, and, together with friends, being open to change and accepting of difference.

The study demonstrates how the changing self is negotiated through experiences of friendship, love relationships and communities, particularly through experiences of loss. While lesbian and gay communities and lesbian feminists provide reference points for lesbians’ lives, prescriptive communities that push conformity are rejected. In their preference for smaller ‘communities of choice’, these lesbians are forging their own individual paths – and constituting their own subjectivity – in the wider world. Carefully chosen friends affirm and support a ‘relational self’, providing a buffer against the isolation and stress associated with continuing marginalisation.
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<th>Age</th>
<th>Location (including moves)</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Class (background and current)</th>
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<td>Susie</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Regional</td>
<td>Anglo-Australian</td>
<td>m-c → none</td>
<td>P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terri</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>Anglo-New Zealand</td>
<td>m-c → l-m-c (carer)</td>
<td>P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toni</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>Anglo-Australian</td>
<td>w-c → w-c</td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**COUPLES INTERVIEWED**

- Rosemary and Louise
- Lucy and Alice
- Marilyn and Jean

**ABBREVIATIONS**

**Class**

- w-c – working class
- m-c – middle class
- l – lower
- u - upper

**Relationship Status**

- P – Partnered
- S – Single
- C – Changing
- M – Married
APPENDIX 2: RECRUITMENT FLYER

LESBIAN STUDY AT DEAKIN

Are you interested in joining a research project looking at lesbians’ experiences of love and friendship with other women?

I am a lesbian student, and am looking for other lesbians interested to respond to questionnaires, either in writing or on audio tape. I would like to interview some of the lesbians who do the questionnaire, and then possibly do a group interview or discussion group if enough lesbians are keen. I am working on this research between February and September 1997.

The study is part of my doctoral research in Women's Studies at Deakin University, Geelong. I want to discover lesbians’ experiences of love and friendship, including the processes of such relationships: how women choose, maintain and end them; and their place in lesbian's lives. I am interested in friendship pairs, lesbian relationships, work and political relationships, friendship groups and communities.

The study will compare the results with literature on the topic in the field of women's studies, in particular work on women's friendships and feminist and lesbian ethics. I am keen to involve lesbians from diverse racial and class backgrounds and of differing ages.

I am aware that that the processes of women's relationships with each other are rarely discussed, in particular what happens when conflict arises or relationships end. I want to uncover lesbians' experiences and make them available to other lesbians, in order that our friendships may be seen as valuable, and that we may all learn from each others' insights about achieving harmonious relationships in our personal, work and community lives.

I can give an information letter to any interested lesbians with more details of what is involved in the research. Formal written consent to the research process will be sought from all participants in accordance with the requirements of the Deakin University Ethics Committee. The project has been approved by the Deakin University Ethics Committee, and my supervisor is Dr Renate Klein, Senior Lecturer in Women's Studies at Deakin University, Geelong. All participants will receive their interview write-ups for comments during the research process and be invited to read a summary of the final research. Confidentiality and anonymity will be guaranteed for all participants.

If you are interested in getting more information, please write to me, Tania Lienert, at Women’s Studies, Deakin University, Geelong, 3217, or telephone me on (03) 5227 3396.
APPENDIX 3: INTRODUCTORY LETTER AND CONSENT FORMS

Dear

Thanks for your interest, and here are some details about my research project on lesbians’ experiences of love and friendship with other women. I do hope you may like to participate in it. Please let me know if you would like to do this after reading the following project description, and please pass this letter on to others if you think they may be interested too.

The study is part of my doctoral research in Women's Studies at Deakin University, Geelong. It aims to discover lesbians’ experiences of love and friendship, including the processes of such relationships: how lesbians choose, maintain and end them; and their place in lesbians’ lives. I am interested in friendship pairs, lesbian relationships, work and political relationships, friendship groups and communities.

The study will compare the results with literature on the topic in the field of women's studies, in particular work on women's friendships, lesbians’ friendships, and feminist and lesbian ethics. Participants will include lesbian women from diverse racial and class backgrounds and of differing ages.

The researcher recognises that the processes of lesbians’ relationships with each other are rarely discussed publicly, in particular what happens when conflict arises or relationships end. I therefore am seeking to uncover lesbians’ experiences and make them available to other lesbians, in order that we may all learn from each others' insights about achieving harmonious relationships in our personal, work and community lives.

The research will take the form of a questionnaire and an interview. Both have been approved by the Deakin University Ethics Committee. Formal written consent to the research process will be sought from all participants in accordance with the requirements of the Ethics Committee. The research is supervised by Dr Renate Klein, Senior Lecturer in Women's Studies at Deakin University, Geelong. All participants will receive interview write-ups and be invited to read a summary of the final research.

The questionnaire

The questionnaire involves participants reflecting on a lifetime of their relationships with other women, and answering questions either in writing, or if preferred, speaking into an audio tape. I ask participants to construct a timeline noting their most significant relationships. It will also ask some general questions on opinions on the topic of friendship. It is estimated that the questionnaire will take about an hour and a half to complete. It will be mailed to participants on indication of willingness to participate, and a stamped, self-addressed envelope will be provided for its return. The questionnaire will also ask if participants would like to participate in an interview, and depending on time and geographical distance, I will interview a number of those who have completed the questionnaire.

The interview
The interviews will be conducted by the researcher, Tania Lienert, throughout 1997. It is estimated that they will take about one and a half to two hours. These can be arranged at a time and place to suit the participants. Interviews will be informal and initially will focus on areas which the participants recognise as of special interest to them. This may include reflecting on one or two significant friendships, and what happened in them. It also includes some general questions about sexual relationships, sexual practices, and general questions about friendship, friendship networks and communities. Interviews will be taped and later summarised. Participants will be offered a copy of their interview summary and the opportunity to add or delete comments before the results are analysed, and be invited to read a summary of the final research.

Benefits and risks of the research

I anticipate participants will enjoy the benefits of taking time to reflect on their friendships, and that this opportunity may provide useful insights. The researcher is also willing to discuss the topic and share personal insights and information gained from the study with participants.

I am also aware that discussing personal relationships may be stressful and potentially invasive, particularly where relationships have ended or issues are unresolved. In order to avoid potential stresses, participants will have the opportunity to tell me only what they want to say about any particular relationship, and to identify any areas not to be discussed. They will also be free not to answer any question I may ask, to turn the tape recorder off at any time, or to terminate the interview should it prove distressing. Participants are also free to withdraw from the research at any time, and no information received will be used.

Confidentiality

Privacy will be guaranteed for all participants in the study. No identifying information will be used in the final research, and names and any other identifying information of participants and the women they discuss will be changed or deleted from the interview write-ups. Participants’ names will be kept separately from the coded questionnaires and interview write-ups in a locked filing cabinet at my home.

Contact details

If you have any queries please do not hesitate to contact me on (03) 5222 3903 or (03) 5227 3396 (message) at any time during the research. If you have any concerns about the research my supervisor is Dr Renate Klein, and she can be contacted on (052) 27 1335.

Yours faithfully,

Tania Lienert
DEAKIN UNIVERSITY
ETHICS COMMITTEE
CONSENT FORM: SURVEYS, QUESTIONNAIRES

I, of

Hereby consent to be a subject of a human research study to be undertaken by TANIA LIENERT, DEAKIN UNIVERSITY, GEELONG, 3217 and I understand that the purpose of the research is to discover lesbians’ experiences of friendships and love relationships with other women.

I acknowledge that

1. Upon receipt, my questionnaire will be coded and my name and address kept separately from it.

2. Any information that I provide will not be made public in any form that could reveal my identity to an outside party i.e. that I will remain fully anonymous. A pseudonym will be used in the final writing up of the study.

3. Aggregated results will be used for research purposes and may be reported in scientific and academic journals.

4. Individual results will not be released to any person except at my request and on my authorisation.

5. I am free to withdraw my consent at any time during the study in which event my participation in the research study will immediately cease and any information obtained from me will not be used.

Signature: Date:
I,                                                                                           of

Hereby consent to be a subject of a human research study to be undertaken

by TANIA LIENERT, WOMEN'S STUDIES, DEAKIN UNIVERSITY, GEELONG 3217

and I understand that the purpose of the research is to discover women's experiences of friendships and love relationships with other women.

I acknowledge

1. That the aims, methods, and anticipated benefits, and possible hazards of the research study, have been explained to me.

2. That I voluntarily and freely give my consent to my participation in such research study.

3. Upon completion, my interview tape will be coded and my name and address kept separately from it.

4. Any information that I provide will not be made public in any form that could reveal my identity to an outside party i.e. that I will remain fully anonymous. A pseudonym will be used in the final writing up of the study.

5. I understand that aggregated results will be used for research purposes and may be reported in scientific and academic journals.

6. Individual results will not be released to any person except at my request and on my authorisation.

7. That I am free to withdraw my consent at any time during the study, in which event my participation in the research study will immediately cease and any information obtained from me will not be used.

Signature:                                                                             Date:
APPENDIX 4: QUESTIONNAIRE

QUESTIONNAIRE CODE NUMBER:

THANK YOU ONCE AGAIN FOR AgreeING TO FILL IN THIS QUESTIONNAIRE. PLEASE REMEMBER THAT ANY INFORMATION YOU PROVIDE WILL REMAIN TOTALLY CONFIDENTIAL. YOUR NAME, OTHER IDENTIFYING INFORMATION AND THE NAMES OF YOUR FRIENDS WILL BE CHANGED IN THE RESEARCH WRITE-UP SO YOU AND THEY REMAIN FULLY ANONYMOUS.

SECTION ONE: PERSONAL INFORMATION

1. By what name would you like to be identified in the research (choose your own pseudonym):

2. Your age:

3. Your place of birth:

4. Where have you lived during your life, and where do you live now?

5. What is your racial, ethnic and class background? eg. Anglo-Australian working class, Italian-Australian middle class.

6. Do you identify as belonging to a particular social class now?

7. What is your family background/composition/history? In particular, list any sisters or other important, close female relatives.
8. What, if any, is your religious background and current faith?

9. What is your sexual identity? Do you identify as:

Lesbian ( )
Gay ( )
Celibate ( )
Bisexual ( )
Other ( )

Please specify:

10. Are you currently in a sexual relationship?

11. Do you currently live:

with blood family ( )
in a shared household ( )
with a friend ( )
with a partner ( )
alone ( )
in a community ( )
other ( )

Please specify:

12. Do you identify as a feminist?

13. What is your understanding of feminism?
SECTION TWO: YOUR EXPERIENCES OF FRIENDSHIP

This survey is about your experiences with and opinions about women as friends and lovers, both lesbian and non-lesbian women. However, because friendships and relationships with lesbian women can be different, in answering these questions please think mostly about your lesbian friends and lovers (it is in this area that there has been very little research). If you have or have had particularly important friendships or relationships with non-lesbian women please include them also, but in the first instance, think about your lesbian friends when considering these questions.

1. What is your definition of a friend?

2. Why is friendship important to you?

3. Is there a difference between those friends you 'like' and those friends you 'love'? How would you define 'love'?
4. Next, I would like you to reflect on your female friendships, both lesbian and non-lesbian, over your lifetime and write them down on the next page on the timeline provided. Starting with your childhood, include your most significant female friends, lovers and friendship networks, i.e. the ones that spring to mind immediately.

To accompany the timeline, write a separate note on the most important friendships, thinking about:

- whether they were continuous or interrupted over the time indicated;
- how old your friends were when the friendship started;
- what the nature of your relationship to these girls or women was.

If I use any of this information in my research, I will change names and other specific information to protect your friends' privacy. You may also like to give them other identifiers, such as initials, nicknames, occupations or descriptions.
YOUR FRIENDSHIP HISTORY TIMELINE
5. After having reflected on your friendship history, think about how your friendships may have changed over the years, or ended. What do you think you need to maintain your friendships (tick as many as you like, or add some):

- time
- money
- freedom from other responsibilities
- continuing common interests
- living near each other
- shared intense or life-changing experiences
- other

I would appreciate it if you could elaborate on the above:

6. If you have been in friendships that ended painfully, how would you define some of your feelings then and now? Are there any differences between lesbian and non-lesbian friendships?
7. Please comment on the following “statements”:

“There is immense social pressure on lesbians to be in a sexual relationship”.

“It is common for lesbians to drop their friends after they start a sexual relationship; friends become second-best to lovers”.

“In Anglo-Australian culture physical contact is sometimes seen as sexual. This influences how affectionate lesbians are with their friends”.
8. I would like you to now reflect on your *current* female friendships in the space below.

Draw a circle with you in the centre, and bigger circles around it. Now place your female friends in the circles (both lesbian and non-lesbian).

Those in the inner circle are the most significant in terms of both closeness sentiment, emotion, feelings) and involvement (how integral are they to your life?) Include individuals, female friendship networks and communities depending on how important they are to you at this point in your life. Please think about friends who are around daily or on a regular basis and those who are more remote. Does this affect where you place them in the circle? Draw as many circles as you need, and add explanatory notes if you like.

Once again, I will change names, or you can give your friends pseudonyms or other identifiers.
9. Finally, I would like you to reflect on your sexual relationships, if you have them:

What qualities are similar in your friendships and your sexual relationships, if you have them?

Do you think there are any differences between friendships and sexual relationships?

10. Do you have any other thoughts about your experiences not covered by this questionnaire?
THANK YOU AGAIN FOR YOUR TIME. PLEASE RETURN THIS QUESTIONNAIRE IN THE STAMPED, SELF-ADDRESSED ENVELOPE PROVIDED.

WOULD YOU LIKE TO PARTICIPATE IN AN INTERVIEW TO FURTHER DEVELOP SOME OF THESE IDEAS AND DISCUSS YOUR OWN EXPERIENCES? IF SO PLEASE INDICATE YOUR NAME AND CONTACT DETAILS HERE, AND TIME AND DISTANCE PERMITTING, I WILL BE IN TOUCH.

Yes, I can be contacted for a follow-up interview:

Name: ________________________________________________

Phone(s): _____________________________________________

Best time of the day to reach me (hour/day of the week):

______________________________________________________

______________________________________________________

AGAIN, THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION IN THIS RESEARCH.
APPENDIX 5: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

INTERVIEWS WITH INDIVIDUAL LESBIANS

Agree on time; identify tape code number

Did the questionnaire bring up any issues you would like to expand upon?

Clarify any questions from the questionnaire results.

Friendship questions

I would like to talk about one or two of your significant friendship experiences, or those of other women you may know who have a special relationship. Perhaps one good and ongoing one, and one that has ended.

Please take a few minutes to tell me the story of the friendship (ask these questions later if not already answered):

How did you/they meet?

What do you have to do to keep the friendship going?

How important is/was this friendship to you? Why? (Interview no. 9 on)

How have you resolved conflict? Describe one or two instances of conflict and what you or others have done. In case it couldn’t be resolved, what happened then?

How do you and others deal with differences, eg. class, race, age? Describe some instances.

Can you remember how you felt when your friendship(s) have ended? How did you deal with it/them? How do you decide whether to end a friendship?

When you’ve had someone end a friendship with you, do you know why? Do you agree to end it or is it just left?

I’m interested in the similarities and differences between friendships and sexual relationships. Have you considered developing any friendships into sexual relationships? Why/why not? What happened?

In retrospect from all these experiences is there any advice you would offer to others, or anything you would have done differently?

Break - check if it’s ok to go on.


Sexual relationships questions

Would you say you are/have been friends with your lovers? Do you think you need to be friends with a woman to have sexual relations?

Are you friends with your ex-lovers now? (Interview no. 4 on)

Are you happy with your past/current relationship(s)? What would you like to change now/in future relationships? What have you learned from past/current relationships? (Assure confidentiality)

Do/did you share a bed every night? (Interview no. 6 on)

In your sexual relationships, what value do you give to equality? What value do you give to difference?

How do power differences impact on your sexual relationships?

How would you place sadomasochism in your sexual relationship?

Has violence ever come up? How have you dealt with it?

What about issues around merging, dependency, togetherness, independence and separateness?

Where does feminism fit? Are you a feminist? Your partner(s)? Is there a difference if your partner(s) is or is not a feminist if you are or are not?

How important is sex in your relationship (Interview no. 13 on)

General questions

Do you put your friends into different groups? If so what are they? Do they fulfil different needs? Would you say you put them in categories?

Do you have criteria for friendship? Are there any types of people you would not choose to have as friends?

Do/have you or any of your friends see/seen a counsellor at any time? Has counselling had any impact on your friendships? (Interview no. 9 on)

Are you happy with the numbers and quality of your female friendships? Would you have anything different?

(If it hasn’t come up in section 1) Have you considered developing any of your friendships into sexual relationships? Why/why not? What happened? (Interview no. 10 on)
What are your visions for female love and friendship; how would you like to see women relating to each other?
What strategies can you suggest for this happening?

What do you think about the possibilities for lesbian community and networking considering we are all so different? How can we get along?

Is there anything else you would like to add?

*Evaluation*

What do you think about the questionnaire and these questions today?
Why were you interested in doing this questionnaire and interview?
What would you like to see come out of the project?
INTERVIEWS WITH LESBIAN COUPLES

Agree on time; identify tape code number

Please take a few minutes together to tell me the story of the relationship (ask these questions later if not already answered):

How did you meet?

What do you have to do to keep the relationship going?

How important is this relationship to you? Why?

How have you resolved conflict? Describe one or two instances of conflict and what you have done. In case it couldn’t be resolved, what happened then?

How do you deal with differences, eg. class, race, age? Describe some instances.

Are you friends? Do you think you need to be friends to have sexual relations?

Are you happy in your relationship? What would you like to change? What have you learned from past relationships? (Assure confidentiality)

Do you share a bed every night?

In your sexual relationship, what value do you give to equality? What value do you give to difference?

How do power differences impact on your sexual relationships?

How would you place sadomasochism in your sexual relationship?

Why do you think so many lesbians are into sadomasochism?

How important is sex in your relationship? What if one wants it and the other doesn’t? (couple interview no. 2 on)

Has violence ever come up? How have you dealt with it?

What about issues around merging, dependency, togetherness, independence and separateness?

Where does feminism fit? Are you both feminist? Is it an issue if one of you is and the other isn’t? Do you have disagreements over feminism? If so, how do you deal with them?

What is your position on monogamy/faithfulness vs. non-monogamy or an open relationship? Why? Does it work for you?
Do either of you see or have you seen a counsellor at any time? Has counselling had any impact on your relationship?

What are your visions for lesbian relationships; how would you like to see lesbians relating to each other?

What strategies can you suggest for this happening?
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