This dissertation is a qualitative study of women who consider themselves to be both rural and non-heterosexual which examines the perceived effects of living in a rural environment surrounded by rural people. Since rural areas are noted in the literature as lacking resources for diverse populations and lacking resources in general for all persons, this project was focused upon the perceived costs of living a rural life and strategies that the women employ to navigate their home environments.

The behaviors that emerged in reaction to the women’s perceptions of rural areas and rural people are perhaps best understood as coping strategies which allow them to deal with their marginalized status in the communities where they live. It is also important to note that these strategies are not individual responses but processes that arise when one group is less powerful than another. Furthermore, it is possible as evidenced in the data, that these strategies can perpetuate the inequality as well as creating situations where social change can occur.

Data for this project is the result of 26 face to face interviews conducted over about a year and a half in a southeastern state. The study is the result of data gathered through open-ended questions utilizing an interview guide of orienting questions (Lofland and Lofland 1995) and interviewing by comment (Snow et. Al. 1982). The data was analyzed in inductive fashion as themes and patterns emerged through the coding process.
BIOGRAPHY

Beth Wright grew up in Brighton, Tennessee and graduated from Brighton High School. She earned a baccalaureate in sociology from Union University in Jackson, Tennessee in 1984 with a minor in speech and theatre arts. She continued her training in sociology at Memphis State University (now The University of Memphis) in 1986 where she earned a master’s degree. For the next eight years, she taught sociology on a part-time basis at Union University and served the local community as a caseworker for at risk families through a child abuse prevention agency.

She has been awarded several teaching honors including the CALS graduate student teacher of the year in 1999. She also participated in the Hewlett Teaching Fellows program at North Carolina State University where the scholarship of teaching and excellence in classroom instruction was emphasized.

While completing her degree at North Carolina State University, she served first as a graduate teaching assistant and later as a visiting instructor. She taught principles, social problems, women and men in society, and co-taught the sociology of sexuality.
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Each of us becomes who we are against a particular social backdrop. That backdrop is a complex, seemingly solid, yet malleable configuration of patterned behaviors, shared beliefs, and intricate social dynamics and arrangements. Our lives are shaped, molded, and in large part, pre-destined based upon where we are positioned within that arrangement and the opportunities and limitations that accompany that position.

My own particular position in the larger social arrangement was extremely important in shaping my consciousness of social inequality. Having grown up on a small farm in rural west Tennessee, I was the youngest of four children in a family that was part of the white, working poor population. My parents were dedicated members of a Southern Baptist church and we all attended all services. The majority of my extended family lived in this community as well. It was in this environment that I began to recognize that my sexual feelings, desires, and attractions were not like those of most of my friends.

Throughout my high school years, though not in an intentional or directed way, my social consciousness began to develop. Because I did not know what else to do, I entered college upon high school graduation. As an undergraduate, I began to explore sociology and eventually earned a bachelor’s degree in the field. Immediately following graduation, I entered a master’s program where I completed a degree as well focusing upon the sociology of institutions, religion and family in particular. With several years of teaching experience between masters’ work and beginning the Ph.D., my consciousness around inequality that attracted me to the study of sociology re-emerged and became a major focus of my interest.
As I read, listened, and learned more about the social processes that create and sustain social inequality, I began to see patterns.

Because of my personal interest in and the relatively small amount of work that has been done, I began to feel myself being drawn to the topic of rural lesbians. As the literature will attest, the amount of work on lesbians is small relative to the amount of attention given to gay males. It is also clear that urban queer populations are more readily available and have been given much more research attention than their rural counterparts.

In our society, hierarchies are clearly defined and for the most part, tend to fall into dichotomous categories. That is, we are a racist society where whiteness is valued. We are androcentric where maleness and masculinity are held in much greater esteem than femaleness and all things feminine. Furthermore, we are increasingly a nation of have-nots. Finally, as evidenced by discriminatory laws, policies, and beliefs, we are heterosexist as well, privileging heterosexuality over all other forms of sexual expression. Given these social arrangements, the lives of rural lesbians, while virtually ignored, offer a tremendous opportunity to gain insight about the complexities of social inequality.

With this group in mind, I began to allow myself to wonder about the possibilities of such a research project. After discussing the idea on several occasions with members of a qualitative writing group to which I belonged, the beginnings of this project were in place. Though my final sample does not reflect as much diversity as I initially hoped, I set out to interview a wide range of women who define themselves as both rural and non-heterosexual. This process eventually culminated in face to face interviews with 26 women who consider themselves both rural and non-heterosexual. In addition to the interviews, I had overnight stays with three interview subjects where I was able to observe the surroundings on my own.
On all three occasions, my hostesses gave me tours of their communities while two women had informal gatherings with the intention of introducing me to other local lesbians.

In addition to the interviews and field notes, I spent time reflecting on each interview as soon as possible, recording my thoughts, feelings, and “gut level” reactions. After transcribing all twenty-six interviews, I began to read each one with an eye to patterns that emerged and anything of particular interest or concern. Following, I compared across interviews for themes and patterns. This dissertation presents the findings of this research.

The relevant literature is discussed within each based upon the topic covered. In the first chapter following this introduction, I will discuss the methods that I used to collect and analyze my data. I will also describe the sample of twenty-six women who became my research population. In Chapter 3, I will discuss the subjects’ perceptions of both what a rural place is and who rural people are. This chapter is important since the subjects are self-selected and since their impressions will undoubtedly influence their actions as well. Chapter 4 is entitled “Living Rural: Perceived Costs and Benefits” and explores some of the initial questions that sparked this study such as, are there really particular costs for lesbians who choose a rural environment? If so, what are the costs and how do these individuals navigate them? Following, in Chapter 5, I explore the perceived connections of the women themselves among sex, gender behaviors, and sexual orientation that emerge in my interviews. This was not intended as an original focus of the project, but several patterns emerged during the analysis. In Chapter 6, we hear from the subjects themselves, the advice that they give on producing greater tolerance among rural heterosexuals and non-heterosexuals. In the final chapter, I interrogate my study in terms of its contribution to sociological theory and/or research.
Chapter 2
METHODS AND SAMPLING

In the following chapter, I describe my study in terms of sample and method. I begin by reviewing the sample techniques in the literature. I then describe sample selection, data collection methods, data analysis and the sample of twenty-six women who became my research population. Finally, I discuss the usefulness of my project and its limitations.

Sample

Techniques in the literature

The means of deriving a sample of gay people is similar in the quantitative and qualitative literature. Most researchers have relied on networking or a snowball strategy (Kehoe 1988; D’Augelli 1987; Jordan 1998; Lynch 1987; Hall 1986; and Kahn 1991). Nearly all samples are purposive. Each qualified respondent is asked to recommend or suggest others who might be willing to participate in the study. This is a common strategy when the population to be studied is hidden or difficult to establish for any reason.

Other common means of securing a sample of homosexuals have been the use of advertisements in gay and/or lesbian publications, the use of posters or flyers placed in gay and/or lesbian establishments such as book stores and bars, and letters to Women’s Studies organizations at colleges and universities and appeals to academic caucuses (Hall 1986; Kehoe 1988; and Jordan 1998).

Sample selection

Following the examples in the literature, I used a purposive, snowball sampling technique, targeted advertising, word of mouth referrals and responses to requests for interviews that I posted on local lesbian sponsored list serves  (See Appendix A for a copy
of the posted request). I also made requests for referrals through local lesbian activist groups and religious organizations and posted ads in several state-wide lesbian and/or gay (or gay “friendly”) newspapers. Additionally, I visited local lesbian and/or gay shops and posted flyers for subjects. Finally, I networked with other sociologists doing research on similar populations and sponsors for student organizations on surrounding college campuses.

My greatest success was in response to requests generated on internet list serves. In fact, I received no responses from the fliers and written ads in lesbian posted publications. All subjects were word of mouth referrals or those who responded to the ad through internet list serves.

Since the sample truly is snowball, the trail to each subject gets more difficult to discern in the later stages of interviews. Three of my subjects were direct acquaintances of mine. In addition to those three, another five women responded to my original posting on a local list serve sponsored by a lesbian organization devoted to the health of women who partner with women. Two women posted my ad to other list serves. Furthermore, one of the original word of mouth contacts posted the ad on an internet list serve for lesbians as well. Consequently, ten interviews were gathered through at least three additional list serves dedicated to non-heterosexual women. The remaining eight interviews were word of mouth referrals by partners or friends of women who came to know of the study through an internet list serve.

Describing the community

I spent roughly a year and a half interviewing twenty-six women from one southeastern state. I attempted to secure a diverse population of women, yet all my subjects are white and most are college educated. There is some diversity of age, with a range from
25 to 56, with a mean of 39. Nineteen subjects hold at least a four-year college degree with three of those nineteen having completed Master’s degrees and two more with specialty certifications. Only one subject did not finish high school and one completed her high school equivalency exam.

Concerning their early socialization, sixteen of the twenty-six women in the study claimed rural childhoods, whereas two had lived in small towns with populations of 40,000 or less. One woman describes her childhood residence as sporadic, moving here and there, six were raised in non-rural areas, and one woman was raised in the city but has “felt” rural all her life. Therefore, while all claim rural residences now, sixteen were “originally” rural.

Concerning community connections and involvement, nine of the women have no idea where their closest lesbian neighbor lives. Three of the subjects have lesbian neighbors. Finding lesbian neighbors was unexpected for two of these three women, but one woman intentionally bought property close to a lesbian friend. This indicates that the women choose their residence for reasons other than lesbian networks.

An important part of the interview process centered on questions about how “out” the women in the sample are to others, especially to heterosexuals. I asked questions about the degree of “outness” in work, community, and family. Fourteen of the twenty-six women claim to be out at work. Six of the subjects answered with a resounding “no” to the question of being out at work and three said they are out to “some” people at work. Two of my subjects were unemployed at the time of their interviews. Sixteen respondents are totally out with all family members with six more disclosing their sexual orientation to one or more family members. In this group, siblings rather than parents, are more likely to be privy to the information. Concerning relationships, nineteen of the women are in current relationships.
with other women. Six of the women have children, all of whom have current, full custody. Two more are in relationships where they are helping to raise their partner’s child or children.

Limitations of my sample

There are some limitations to my sample. There is an element of self-selection since respondents defined themselves as rural. Furthermore, 25 of 26 participants chose their current rural environment. Since they live in self-defined rural areas by choice, it seems likely that even if they have fears or perceive that there might be problems, there is obviously a perceived value to these areas more positive than any anticipated concerns. In that sense, the sample probably does not represent women who feel trapped or distressed in their rural homes.

There is another element of self-selection that is limiting as well. That is, all of my respondents were word of mouth referrals or those who responded to internet list serves. Therefore, even though I anticipated a purposive, snowball sample, I ended up with a very homogenous, select portion of the rural, non-heterosexual female population. More precisely, I have no poor women in my sample, nor any women without access to the internet.

As stated, 25 of 26 participants choose their rural environment while the remaining woman compromised in order to be with her partner. However, only one of those women lives, even loosely defined, in her own kin or community network of origin. Since one of the major perceived difficulties in the research and in my data of living in a rural area is the insularity of communities and kin networks, it is difficult to conclude that these women face the same sorts of dilemmas and concerns as rural women who live in their own communities.
of origin might face. It would be helpful to locate a sample of women who live as non-heterosexuals in the communities in which they were raised.

Another limitation is inadequate data available to compare specific questions and topics with urban counterparts. For example, in the chapter about future trends and the effects of the internet and mainstream media, there is no comparison group of urban, non-heterosexual women who have voiced opinions about the effects of these mediums. Consequently, I do not know how the opinions and perceptions of my subjects compare to their urban counterparts, specifically, if there is a unique rural effect or not concerning their perceptions of these outcomes.

In summary, my sample is homogenous in that all my respondents are white, mostly college educated, and self-selected as rural. Furthermore, since most of my respondents found out about my study over internet list serves, there is an element of sample bias that excludes those without internet access. Additionally, since twenty-five of the women chose their rural environments, there may be some bias towards those who appreciate the more appealing aspects of rural life. While I am certain that my sample is not representative of all non-heterosexual women who live in rural areas, they do represent an interesting group, women who choose rural communities despite their reputations for intolerance and conservatism.

The Data

I chose this project for two reasons. One, I have a personal interest in hearing what others have to say since I came to realize my own sexual orientation in a rural setting that mirrors the rural traditions of strong religious foundations, resistance to outside interference or diversity, and clearly defined gender and sexual behavior expectations. Second, there is a
clear under-representation of work regarding rural lesbians in the literature. There are potential concerns with the first reason and I will interrogate those and explain my strategy for addressing those concerns. Given the fact that I have a clear personal interest in this topic, I employed several techniques to ensure the integrity of my work which will be addressed in the data analysis section of this chapter.

Data Collection

I conducted semi-structured interviews with 26 women with open-ended questions to allow for flexibility and probing. The original interview schedule was the result of my own interests and those of fellow members of a qualitative research support group. I also used, as examples, interview schedules found in the literature, primarily from Blumstein and Schwartz 1983; Dunne 1997; and Kehoe 1988. (A full interview schedule can be found in Appendix C.) Although I used an interview guide of orienting questions as described by Lofland and Lofland (1995), I found that the conversations tended to be concentrated in specific areas as I followed the technique of interviewing by comment (Snow et al. 1982) and using probing questions around responses of particular note. Therefore, each interview was unique as I followed topics and subsequently omitted others resulting in guided conversations (Lofland and Lofland 1995).

The interviews ranged from 45 minutes to one hour and thirty minutes. Twenty-five of the 26 interviews were completed in the subjects’ homes. The other interview was conducted in a small coffee shop in the basement of a bookstore in a town about 30 minutes from the subject’s home. The intention of interviewing each woman in her own home was to increase the comfort level of the respondent and allow me to observe, first-hand, her lifestyle. I taped each interview conversation. As soon as possible, I recorded my own thoughts,
feelings, and impressions in a post-interview memo for later analysis. Later, I transcribed each interview, assigning pseudonyms and masking other identity markers to insure the confidentiality of my subjects. This process is described in greater detail in the following section.

Data Analysis

Using the guiding principle, “everything is data”, I started the analysis process when I first began to explore this topic as my dissertation project. Following suggestions from Kleinman and Copp (1993), I began to answer a series of self-reflexive questions concerning my ability to complete this project, my expectations of what I might find, and potential concerns that I could encounter as the result of my personal interest in the topic.

In addition to addressing my own preconceptions about the project, I asked for help and suggestions about how to manage emotions and personal interest from other members of a qualitative research writing group to which I belonged at the time. All of the members of the group were graduate students who were at different points in the research process. My advisor was also persistent in questioning me about my own assumptions encouraging me to be extremely careful about inserting my interpretation rather than letting the data speak.

Though there are techniques that I employed that are not specifically stated in the text, I used the scheme outlined by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) as my primary guide from reading fieldnotes to the end result of producing theory from fieldnotes. After interrogating my own preconceptions and biases, I began the interview process. The process was basically the same for each interview. After conducting the interview, I would immediately record my thoughts, emotions, and observations about the interview, the subject, and the surrounding environment. I would record these observations in my micro-cassette
recorder as conversation to myself which I would then transcribe as part of the interview transcription. Upon completion of transcription, I would re-read the interview and record as a post-memo any thoughts or observations that seemed to “stand out” as important from that interview.

Following, I would read the transcript passage by passage coding for general codes and observations. I originally coded for indicators of social class, biographical data, labels and coming out issues, degree of outness, survival strategies, indicators of rural life, rural persons, “tactics” and/or tradition utilized by rural persons to discourage any queer visibility; these issues were reflected as major topics in the original interview guide.

After completing the original coding which reflected major themes in the data, I began the process of more focused coding by identifying themes and patterns within the larger scheme. Four major areas of sociological interest were derived and are analyzed in the following four chapters. They are the subjects’ perceptions of rural life and rural persons; the perceived costs of living in a rural environment and strategies employed to defray those costs; the perceived connections among sex, gender, and sexual orientation among the women in my sample; and, the perceived effect of the internet and media on rural life and advice to rural individuals for increasing tolerance between rural heterosexual and non-heterosexual persons.
Chapter 3

WHAT IS RURAL? RESPONDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF PEOPLE AND PLACE

Introduction

My goal in this chapter is to analyze the themes and patterns that arose in response to the following questions: (1) What makes a place a rural place and, (2) are there particular traits or characteristics that define a rural person. All of the women in my sample define themselves as non-heterosexual and currently rural with 25 of 26 respondents living in their rural homes by choice. Therefore, I asked each subject to describe for me, in her opinion, what makes an area a rural one and what makes a person a rural person.

Review of Literature

With the enormous amount of attention given to urban homosexuals and to gay males across a range of social environments, the lives and voices of rural lesbians have been virtually ignored. Researchers agree that the information and research concerning rural lesbians is limited. The literature does describe the conditions of rural life but does not examine fully the non-heterosexual residents’ perceptions of their environments.

Two major reasons have been cited for this inadequacy: urban bias and demographic barriers. There is minimal knowledge about homosexuals in rural areas due to the urban biases of empirical research (Bell and Valentine, 1995; D’Augelli and Hart, 1987). Stated another way, the lives of rural homosexuals have been ignored because “urban stereotypes have interfered with recognition of the existence of rural gay people resulting in nearly a complete absence of empirical research on their exceptional circumstances” (D’Augelli, Collins, & Hart 1987). In fact, Kramer (1995) charges that the “study of rural homosexuals has almost been totally ignored”.

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Furthermore, information regarding rural lesbians or any other non-heterosexual group is limited due to demography. It is not only the notions of metrocentrism or an urban bias that produce limited knowledge. In fact, large numbers of non-heterosexuals do live, by choice, in larger, more urban areas where networks and similar others are more readily available.

For these reasons, assessments or conclusions about the lives of rural lesbians have been largely the result of speculation based upon reports of those who have fled to urban areas as the standard for measurement. In other words, the tendency has been to assume the realities of a rural experience based upon the information gathered by those who now reside in urban areas. Furthermore, the limited information that has been gathered concerning rural lesbians points out the limitations in social networks and support services which may result in difficulties in creating and sustaining lesbian identities.

For the purposes of this study, I am interested in the perceptions of my sample concerning the environments in which they choose to reside. Perceptions are equally as important as documented realities since, in a purely constructionist view, if we believe situations are real, then they are real in their consequences. Therefore, it is important to determine how my subjects see and approach their communities of residence.

Though some of these charges of exclusion of rural voices are dated, the fact remains that little research has been done that carefully examines the lives of rural lesbians. In my research, I am attempting to hear from rural lesbians themselves what rural means to them, if they perceive that there are particular consequences of living in a rural area as a non-heterosexual person, and if so, what strategies or techniques have been employed (either
consciously or not) to navigate this unique rural experience. In this particular chapter, I am exploring the subjects’ perceptions of rural places and rural people.

Methods

In order to determine my subjects’ perceptions of what a rural place actually is, I asked the question, “In your opinion, what makes a place a rural place?” In order to hear their perceptions of rural people, I asked, “Are there traits that characterize rural people in your mind? If so, what are those traits?” By probing, I could also determine if these responses were simply perceptions or if the respondents had experienced these behaviors and conditions that they perceive as typical of rural people and places.

After transcribing each interview, I coded each subject’s responses by keywords looking for words or phrases that captured the sentiment of the response. Then, I coded the passages by the keyword responses, collapsing answers into categories. For example, keyword responses to the question, “what is a rural place?” such as “lots of open space” and “farm land” were included under the heading, terrain. In the same fashion, I coded responses to the question, “what makes a person a rural person?” I also recorded my thoughts and impressions of each person’s residence, my perceptions of the authenticity of the interview material, and my observations of the surrounding geographic area in my post-interview memos. Though the subjects’ homes reflected difference according to characteristics of what might determine rural, each subject perceived and defined her residence as rural.

Though the answers varied, there were major themes that appeared as well as several minor themes. The two major themes in the data are safety and isolation in rural areas and will be discussed more fully in the findings section of this chapter. The patterns in the responses are recorded in the following findings section.
Findings

The most frequently cited response to the question, “what is rural” was “a lack of amenities, services, and/or support” with roughly one-third of the subjects utilizing this response. The second most cited response was that rural is “an open area or an area with lots of space” while the third most frequently cited responses were subjects reporting that rural is “anything not city – small town” and six more responses that rural is characterized by a “lack of ‘culture’ or entertainment”. Just over half of the respondents characterized rural as lacking “culture, entertainment, services, and support” while 15 of 26 identified rural as an open area or anything not city.

Both are significant. The subjects are willingly living in areas that they report as being deficient in support and service. This fact, of course, begs further questioning such as why these women choose the areas in which they live. Secondly, to define rural as anything not city also shows that there is indeed a population of lesbians who choose to knowingly and willfully live in non-urban areas. Utilizing their responses, I have coded the subjects’ answers to the question, “what makes an area a rural area” into five categories (terrain; mindset; rural community values; closed systems in rural areas; and, work, culture, and services) that are discussed in the following section.

Subjects’ Perceptions of Rural Areas

Terrain

The first category of responses reflects the respondents’ perceptions of population density and spatial attributes and is listed as terrain. This category represents the most typical popular views on rurality as a geographic category. These responses include the following five key concepts: isolated; undeveloped and/or farm land and/or nature; open
area/lots of space; and anything not city/ anything small town. There were a total of twenty-three responses that fall into this category of describing rural according to spatial traits again reflecting a popular definition of rural as a geographic category.

The characterization of rural in terms of spatial traits reflected two trends. One of the major trends was the description of rural as open, lots of land, not city etc. making reference to the actual terrain while the other major response in this category was isolation. This feels important because the isolation was often mentioned as a negative or downside to the rural area as well as a perceived benefit due to the subject’s sexual orientation.

In other words, the isolation is both an advantage and a disadvantage. Of the 26 women in the sample, sixteen reported that they feel generally safe in their home environment. It seems to be an advantage in that three of the sixteen subjects who reported feeling safe in their home environments actually reported feeling safer in their rural environments than they did in a more urban area. Of these three women, only one had lived in an urban area beyond her college experience emphasizing again the importance of perception.

The following excerpt from Sara, a 39 year old, white graphic designer, expresses her feelings of safety and comfort in her rural home that are due, in very large part, to the isolation that rural areas can provide.

Fewer people, no traffic, more isolated, you don’t, everybody doesn’t know your business. I don’t feel as self-conscious as I would say if I walked out the door in the morning, where I used to live was a duplex, and my neighbor could be sitting right there in his underwear….Here, I don’t even think there’s going to be somebody outside and I feel freer in this rural setting than when I lived in the downtown area of (larger city about 30 minutes away).
Ten of the respondents said they did not feel completely safe in their rural environments, but the isolation that their “land” provides serves to make them very safe in their own homes. The three women who reported feeling completely safe in their home environments have two things in common. They are all out to families and co-workers and none of the three live in their own family kin networks. Only one of the three had actually lived in an urban area.

Therefore, the wide-open spaces that the subjects in this study describe as rural can be both inviting and intimidating and almost always geographically isolating. Not only did my subjects have strong, frequent feelings about the isolation that rural areas provide, they also had very definitive thoughts about a particular way of thinking that I have characterized as a rural mindset.

*Mindset*

The second subset of responses includes only two indicators: slower pace and state of mind and is referred to as *mindset*. For example, Veronica, a veterinary hospital administrator captures both the emotional and physical aspects of rural in the following response to my question, “what is rural?”.

> I think rural can be either physical or emotional and I’ve come to, I like to not be in the mainstream and the heart of things, just because emotionally, it’s not my gig. For me, rural is more emotional than physical and so, I enjoy going to out in the country and that’s what I consider real rural where you, you know, it’s an hour away from the store and things like that.

Stacy who lives with her partner describes rural in the following way:

> Being away from cities, the hustle and bustle of city, the noise, the people, the pace of city life. Having space and peace and quiet, too….Yea. More laid back. More easy-going.
This slower pace, or rural mindset is closely connected to the next subset of responses that has to do with my subjects’ perceptions of a unique rural value system. This perceived and experienced value system includes notions of community and specific ways of interacting with others and is overwhelmingly perceived as positive.

*Positive rural community values*

Following the rural mindset, there are responses that hang together around notions of community and values. This category is referred to as positive rural values and includes the four following keyword responses from a total of 10 respondents: sense of community or willing to help one another; attachment to the land; different set of values (than urban counterparts); and a religious- or faith-based way of interacting.

Three persons associated a rural area with a sense of community or a willingness to help one another. The data suggests that the respondents perceive this sense of community as resulting from isolation and lack of other resources although this seems to be a positive outcome. For example, after having just described the place where her maternal grandmother continues to live and where she herself spent a great deal of her childhood, Summer commented “people in the mountains embrace everybody (in the mountains) because to help anybody is to help yourself.”

Values concerning the treatment of neighbors may be closely related to values that two respondents described as faith-based or religious-based interactions with others. Louise, a 50 year-old chaplain who lives in a rural area and drives to her job answered the following query, “I’m interested in what makes an area rural to you?” with this insight:

“Well, there’s a ……different sense of values that has less to do with money than, uh, the family and there’s a lot, a huge (emphatically) religious base here. And I think that ties in more than you would see in many city areas.”
Two subjects simply described the rural values as simply different from their urban counterparts without being able to pin down exactly what makes it different. For them, it seemed to be a perception or more of a feeling that they get.

Finally, three respondents described rural areas in terms of the attitudes expressed by residents about the land. For example, Louise captures this attitude and attachment to the land in this way: “Well, there’s a mindset that is still attached to the land. And then, even if people aren’t currently involved in agricultural practices, there’s still the whole gardening and a sense of what to grow in a particular season.”

Hannah, a 37 year-old distribution manager had this to say about the attachment to the land: “I think space and I think community, smaller communities. People are sort of more spread out (pause) different types of opportunities for people working at home or working their land, you know, people working out of their homes. I think a lot of people out here don’t leave in the morning like I do. I drive in the morning and I think a lot of people don’t go anywhere- that their work is here. (pause) I wish I had a tractor.”

Therefore, attachment to the land seems to capture a way of thinking about the land as well as physical, ownership ties to a piece of land that sustains you – that is, an economic attachment as well as an emotional, perhaps need-based interaction.

Closely related to Summer’s sentiment that “helping others is to help yourself” is the fourth category has to do with social homogeneity. On the one hand, close interaction and mutual dependence or unique rural values has been described as a benefit. In the following section, the data show how this close interaction and mutual dependence can also be potentially threatening or harmful to those who live outside the boundaries of close, rural networks.
Closed Systems in Rural Areas

The fourth category has to do with the closed social systems perceived and attributed to rural areas by my interview subjects. The following five responses were collapsed in a category called indicators of closed systems that denotes resistance to any type diversity and insular kinship networks as well. Included in this subset are the following: lack of anonymity; no tolerance for diversity in general; no tolerance for racial/ethnic diversity; close proximity to kin; and high degree of kinship networks. This subset of responses emphasizes the well-documented themes of lack of tolerance for diversity, a high degree of insularity among community members, and a strong feeling of potential exposure (D’Augelli et.al.1987). For example, concerning the lack of anonymity, Martha, an administrative assistant at the local public library conveys a story about looking for a roommate in the tiny, mountain community where she lives. Here she describes what she believes is a small town trait, “knowing everybody’s business.”

Whenever I moved in with Pam and she asked and she was looking for a roommate, I said, Pam, is there anything I can tell you about myself that, that would make you not like me? She goes, you mean that you’re gay? and I went, “duh”. Well, see, because I was going to live with her, well hell, once again, I don’t want to move up there with somebody, they find out I’m gay, or if I wanted to have someone spend the night or whatever or it gets out or word gets around and in a small town, this is a gossip, you know, news travels fast.

Closely related, Terri, a loss prevention manager for a national chain department store replied with the following when I asked her what makes an area a rural area: “I think that the lack of availability to express yourself in a, in an environment that’s tolerant. That makes everything rural to me.” When I asked her what made the environment feel intolerant, she replied,
“Lack of tolerance for being your individual self. Not falling into the box, not fitting into the box, being different from people around you, not having a support group, not knowing exactly what’s going to come out of it, whether you’re going to be appropriate in what kind of setting.”

As she was relaying this message, she talked faster and faster with more and more emotion. It was apparent that she felt both the potential for exposure in her environment as well as the intolerance for diversity. Closely related to this sentiment is an opinion expressed by Gwen, a 25 year-old graduate student as she talked about her rural roots.

So, I consider myself rural pretty much. Uh, it’s very isolated. But, I played a lot of sports and in our conference, I don’t think there were any minorities. No blacks, no Jews, I mean everyone was white and pretty much the same.

Another aspect of this homogeneity is the presence of strong kinship ties, both emotional and geographic. This seems to intensify the sense of isolation for outsiders as well as present the picture of insularity among long-time community members and local family networks. Marge, a 45 year old daycare worker who is also working on an advanced social work degree talks about this insularity as a rural trait that distinguishes rural interactions from urban ones and her particular difficulties breaking in to a community in order to do her job as a social worker.

I think they interact more in the rural areas. I don’t know how deep it is because they’re still not going to like trust you if they don’t think you’re from around here. There’s eleven day care centers in Obion and I’d like to go visit all of them, but, the woman who was doing my job before me wants to go with me the first time to introduce me. They know (Vonda) even if they’ve only talked to her on the phone, she’s a known entity to them and that will make it easier and that’ll be to smooth this thing out if I go with her the first time- an example of getting an “in.”

Therefore, my subjects acknowledge the closed systems present in a rural area. They, however, express at least some of the same major fears and concerns that would be expressed
by anyone who falls outside rural, traditional boundaries, not simply those who are sexually marginalized. So, seemingly, the effects of homogeneity are present for these women in both positive and negative ways; yet, the effects are not only due to sexual orientation.

The last set of responses that characterize my subjects’ perception of rural places affects them, but not only because they are queer. Rural, for them is characterized by a lack of resources, the kinds of work that are available, and the lack of services that are readily available in most urban spaces. That is, the women in my study feel the effects of having a lack of queer resources, but it seems secondary to the lack of resources and services in general.

*Work, Culture, and Services*

The fifth and final category is called work, culture, and services and includes the following keywords: the work that people do; types of businesses present; lack of “culture”/entertainment; and lack of amenities, services, and support; and great distance from services. This subset contains a large number of responses (N=23) relating to work, culture, and services. In fact, the most frequently cited response to the question, “what is rural” is found in this subset. That is, 8 of the 26 subjects responded that rural is characterized by a lack of services and support. If you add the third most frequent response to this question (also found in this subset), lack of “culture” and/or entertainment, we find that over half of the respondents classified rural as having to do with a lack of services, culture, and support.

Gwen had this to say about living in a rural environment and the lack of services and support in response to my question concerning her perception of what makes an area a rural one:

> For me, I think a lot of it is the work that the people do. In my hometown, a lot of people are farmers. My grandfather was a farmer, my dad was a farmer,
until my parents got divorced when I was nine, then he sold the farm, but, uhm, most people farm. There are two small factories where people work, you know, 7 or 8 dollars an hour. Mostly, the kinds of jobs that people do make it seem rural to me, the kind of businesses that are in the town. A couple of gas stations, a blinking stop-light, that’s about it. So, I think the lack of any kind of entertainment, there’s no bowling alleys, no movie theaters, nothing like that. Having to basically drive to just about everything to get groceries.

Gwen speaks of rural as lacking resources - period. It was only when I specifically asked about queer resources that she mentioned the lack of anyone to talk to about sexuality or issues surrounding them. Similarly, Brenda defines a rural area: “Off the beaten path and difficult to get to, well, what I call civilization, places that seem, grocery stores even.”

Stacy captured the lack of support services in her response to this question, *what makes your town feel rural to you:*

I think that’s the major thing, just the lack of availability to uhm, find a support group that you could fit in to.

As stated above, the women in my sample definitely acknowledge that rural areas are lacking in resources. However, they did not immediately define this lack of resources as an issue determined by sexual orientation. That is, the women did not make a clear distinction that their sexuality and the presence or absence of resources around that defined their environment for them.

When I made the distinction between defining rural areas and defining rural persons, some overlap emerged. One of the most intriguing patterns was that homogeneity as a trait of rural areas seemed problematic for my subjects; however, when they talked about traits of rural persons, this homogeneity played out as something that the women perceived as very positive.
Subjects’ perceptions of rural persons

Again, there are interesting and somewhat convincing numbers regarding social homogeneity around the question, “what makes an area a rural area”. However, this homogenous aspect of rural life becomes even more telling when the question was posed, “what are traits of a rural person”.

Insularity as a trait of rural persons

One of the most obvious patterns in my data is the description of rural persons as homogenous and insular. A total of 23 respondents (missing data from three subjects) produced seventeen (17) responses indicating that rural persons are more homogenous and insular. That is, almost 75% of the subjects perceived rural persons as living in closed systems. This number was derived by collapsing the keyword responses “neighbors will stick together”; insular or internal structure; and closed-minded or “doesn’t want to be exposed to difference”. If you add the response category, “self-sufficient and independent”, the total response category reaches twenty-one, just over 90% of those who responded sample. As previously noted, the response concerning the close networks and perceived (and experienced) insularity of rural persons was the most frequently cited response to the question, “what are traits of rural persons”.

For example, concerning the insularity of rural people, Marge had this to say, “What I’ve found is that there’s a lot of insularity and independence, and, I don’t want this to sound stereotypical, but distrust of strangers.” Closely related, a very interesting comment on both the insularity and the distrust of strangers comes from Winnie when I asked her about identifiable traits of rural persons:

Sure. Definitely. You know (county of residence) has a name for being unique, separate from the rest of the area. People here are different…and in
having lived here for six or seven years, I really believe that....they’re more close-minded, they’re not as aware of the world in general....And there’s more of a, uh, internal structure. Everybody knows everybody else. So, you have to establish some sort of connection to become a part of, otherwise, you will be left out. Not mean. Just, they don’t associate with you....They don’t trust you.

Another telling response in this category, “traits of rural persons” is the response denoting closed-minded and the notion that rural persons “don’t want to be exposed” to difference. Brandy, a 27 year-old administrative assistant, comments on what she perceives as willful lack of exposure.

I think they don’t want to be exposed to it (difference). I think that they would, they know it’s there and they live their lifestyle or they live the way they want to, you know, like you said, they grew up, you know in the rural area and they stay there. They know what’s on the other side, but they’re not willing to open that door.

My subjects definitely perceive rural persons to be insular and homogenous. However, what is not present is the notion that this is horribly different from urban counterparts. That is, they perceive this about rural persons, acknowledge it, and deal with it. In that sense, life among rural persons appears to be a matter of figuring out the patterns and adjusting to them. This does not seem to be drastically different from the emotion work that other, non-rural queer people are forced to do. That is, the set of obstacles may be different, but not unmanageable in light of the choice to live in a rural area.

Discussion

As indicated, the responses from my subjects concerning what is rural and who rural persons are leads us to the conclusion that what they define as rural is both enticing and potentially dangerous. Concerning what comprises a rural area, again, the most frequently reported characteristic was the lack of amenities, services, and/or support. However, it
appears that this lack of services is balanced by more appealing features of a rural area since 25 of 26 women interviewed are willingly living in areas that they report as being deficient in support and service.

One of the most intriguing questions to ask is, given all the difficulties, both perceived and real of living in a rural area, why do you stay? Part of the appeal, even given the perception (and reality) of a lack of resources apparently is the wide-open space and privacy that a rural area can provide. Of particular concern to this study, these women who define themselves as both rural and non-heterosexual are drawn to rural areas for the same reasons that any other individual might find a rural area appealing.

These reasons become even more readily apparent when the responses to what are characteristics of rural persons. That is, even though the subjects perceive rural areas as deficient in services and isolated from support, they also perceive rural persons as giving, willing to help one another, and mutually dependent. Only two persons report having been harassed to the point of feeling uncomfortable in their rural environments and this number is matched by those who reported having felt unsafe in an urban environment. Therefore the sentiment that emerges is this: My subjects are aware of potential dangers and deficiencies of living in a rural environment. However, these dangers apparently are no more daunting to them than living in an urban environment. In addition, it appears that the same elements of wide open spaces, the feeling that rural life brings, and mutual dependence on one another as rural residents is appealing for the same reasons that they would be to any other individual who chooses to live a rural life.

There are, of course other questions to be explored such as, what, if any unique circumstances do these women confront based upon sexual orientation? Are the costs and
benefits of rural life actually significantly different for non-heterosexuals than they are for
the heterosexual inhabitants or rural areas? Who/what circumstances constrain you most or
generate the most anxiety in you? These and other questions will be explored in the
following chapter, *Safety Issues and Survival Strategies: Guilty Until Proved Otherwise*. 
Introduction

In this chapter, I address the subjects’ perceptions of the effects that living a rural lifestyle have for them as lesbians and/or bisexual women. I will present an overview of the literature and then focus on three particular areas: (1) the subjects’ perceptions of the benefits of living in a rural area, (2) the subjects’ perceptions of the costs of living in a rural area, and (3) strategies employed by the subjects to navigate particular concerns they encounter as a result of their sexual orientation.

The research is clear that lesbians in rural areas face distinct disadvantages due to fewer helping resources of all kinds. The data in this chapter affirm that fact and point out other concerns that rural, non-heterosexual women encounter. Additionally, since 25 of 26 interview subjects choose to live in an area that they perceive to be a rural one, this chapter also explores the perceived benefits of living in a rural area. In other words, I will be outlining the costs and benefits of living in a rural area as perceived and reported by my interview subjects. Furthermore, I will outline the coping strategies and behaviors employed by the subjects to negotiate the particular concerns they perceive and/or encounter as a result of living where they do.
Review of literature

*Rural life*

Rural values and traditions are holistic and functioning in the community is the social “yardstick” of mental health (D’Augelli and Vallance 1987). Therefore, help-seeking patterns of rural individuals differ from those of their urban counterparts as well. Rural people have traditionally turned to family, friends, ministers, and physicians for help with problems (Kenkel 1986). The use of formal resources such as mental health professions is relatively low when compared to these other avenues. This appears to be especially true in rural areas where the people avoid mental health services because of their suspiciousness of mental health professionals or their fear of being stigmatized. Furthermore, research shows that rural communities are more likely to be resistant to any sort of mental health assistance or the presence of mental health facilities in the community. Bell and Valentine (1995) explain the lack of health services as resulting from extreme homophobia and heterosexism. Therefore, rural is also characterized by a world-view that does not welcome outside assistance, more likely to be termed outside *interference*, in negotiating individual or family concerns. This resistance to outside assistance also translates to lesser availability and accuracy of locally obtainable information about homosexuals and homosexuality (Kramer 1995).

Furthermore, rural values are distinct from urban or metropolitan world views which translate to fear of outside help, a general lag in technological and informational advances, and strong traditional gender roles, especially those that enforce patriarchal, androcentric structures and beliefs.
A lack of accurate information is also a constraint for rural individuals who are attempting to resolve identity issues. As a result of this lack of information, homosexuals may internalize more of the stigmatizing values of the larger culture (D’Augelli and Hart 1987; Kenkel 1995). As a result, internal dissonance is intensified, self-depreciation is increased, and self-esteem is lowered. Ultimately, this internalized stigma may lead to general feelings of hopelessness, inferiority, and depression (Kramer 1995; D’Augelli, Collins, and Hart 1987; D’Augelli and Vallance 1987; Kenkel 1995).

Specific concerns for lesbians

The literature both directly and indirectly demonstrates the unique position of rural homosexuals while highlighting problematic circumstances for lesbians at least through inference. Some major factors contributing to the situation of rural homosexuals are the geographic demographics that result in isolation, lack of role models, and limited social opportunities. Social opportunities for friendship and relationship development are more limited in rural areas, especially for women (D’Augelli, Collins, and Hart 1987; D’Augelli and Hart 1987; Kenkel 1986; Kramer 1995). The chance of running into “like” others is low. This disadvantage may be exacerbated for women because of our society’s predilection towards separate spheres for men and women (Reskin & Padavic 1994). D’Augelli and Hart (1987) report fewer opportunities for networking for women than men and the least amount of support for rural women and their families. Additionally, if local networks do exist, they are likely to be very close-knit and secretive.

In addition to the closed and secretive networks, rural lesbians face strong religious ties that combine with pervasive homophobia and heterosexism to manufacture potentially strong feelings of fear, denial, secrecy, and depression. Local attitudes are likely to be
heterosexist and homophobic, plus, most rural people have had little direct contact with lesbians, and thus remain uninformed (D’Augelli, Collins, and Hart 1987). Pervasive homophobia, strong religious reactions, and local discrimination produce invisibility due to fear of gay bashing and discomfort because of affectional status (Bell and Valentine 1995; D’Augelli & Hart 1987; Kenkel 1995). D’Augelli and Vallance (1987) say that this constant pressure to remain invisible translates to the need to be publicly asexual, to act in a way that’s not “too gay”.

Lesbian women’s organizations, informal networks, and communities are traditionally less visible than gay men’s groups and networks, even in urban areas. In rural areas, women’s social networks are usually invisible, taking the form of small, highly interdependent social groups that are likely to be very close-knit and secretive. This invisibility provides protection, but also makes it very difficult for others to locate and break in. “Both single women who are isolated from a network and women who are still determining their personal identity are likely to experience high levels of stress because of the lack of social support and helpful others…” (D’Augelli, Collins, and Hart 1987)

In addition to the structural and demographic concerns resident in rural communities, there are related social-psychological difficulties or costs that lesbians face as a result of their sexual orientation and accompanying lifestyle. Women especially are still taught not to stray from the socially prescribed goal of family and compassionate, heterosexual marriage (Kramer 1995). As already stated, this emphasis on family and heterosexual pairing is even stronger in rural areas. Lesbians challenge this dependency upon men and adherence to traditional gender roles. This intense pressure to conform to a heterosexual, patriarchal model in relationships causes many difficulties for rural lesbians.
For one thing, there is a great deal of isolation accompanied by a lack of role models in the community (Kramer 1995; D’Augelli and Hart 1987; Kenkel 1995). Kramer (1995) goes on to explain how isolation and lack of role models produces a “behind the times” identity. He reported that rural homosexuals who are able to reconcile feelings and identities display a resultant identity that resembles a “time capsule” of homosexual life in 1950’s America. In addition to a lagging identity, isolation and lack of role models also produces what Susan Krieger (1983) calls the mirror dance. The mirror dance occurs when there is a lack of alternative roles available from which to form one’s identity. Therefore, individuals mirror one another leading to a difficulty in developing a sense of self that is separate from the stigmatized, homogenized group identity. This mirrored image becomes especially true for rural lesbians where isolation and secrecy is the rule and alternative personalities and sexual expressions are stifled.

In terms of social support and informal networks, rural homosexuals, especially lesbians, are more likely to form and/or remain in incompatible relationships (D’Augelli and Hart 1987). Rural lesbians are also more likely to rely on social networks with people who have little in common except for sexual preferences. Because of the stigma of their affectional status, asking for help in rural areas usually leads to distancing and advice to move to a larger city (D’Augelli and Hart 1987; Bell and Valentine 1995; Weston 1995). This in itself is oppressive since one can never be home (D’Augelli & Hart 1987).

Therefore, loneliness, isolation, and lack of role models plague rural lesbians because of rural traditions and values. Forced invisibility and fear of gay bashing make support systems difficult to locate. As stated before, high rates of anxiety and depression are likely under these circumstances. Furthermore, D’Augelli and Hart (1987) report elevated rates of
alcoholism, drug abuse, and other “socially deviant behaviors”. Consequently, rural lesbians are likely to have less coping strategies than are necessary.

Conversely, the benefits of social support and informal networks have been documented in the development of a competent, mentally healthy self. The support does not necessarily have to come from other lesbians, but can come from those who know about the person’s sexual orientation of affectional status (D’Augelli, Collins, and Hart 1987). However, it is also true that disclosing one’s affectional status is risky to say the very least leaving the majority of social support to come from a homogenous, stigmatized group. Barerra also demonstrates the power of social support in mitigating anticipated and unexpected life stress (Barerra 1986). The research shows that rural lesbians are disadvantaged at both the structural and interactional levels when it comes to creating and sustaining healthy self-concepts and identities.

Methods

My data for this chapter are derived from several questions from the original interview schedule and conversations originating from those questions. The interview schedule evolved over the data collection process as certain questions “worked” and others did not. However, the bulk of the data for this chapter is drawn primarily from three major groups of questions listed below. Many of these questions provoked interesting stories or examples that I probed for details.

Questions asked


Are you out?

Are you out to any family members? If so, which ones?

Are you out at work?
How do you decide whom to tell?

**Work related issues**

Has your sexual orientation ever been problematic for you on your job?

What are the most important factors for you in choosing a job?

**Community life and sexual orientation**

Do you feel free to be authentic in your community?

Would you hold your girlfriend/partner’s hand in the grocery store?

Is there a particular type of person or group that causes anxiety or fear in you regarding your sexual orientation?

**Discovering themes and patterns in the data**

As in the previous chapter, I coded each passage in the data by keywords and phrases so that there were patterns in responses to the questions. This process produced two broad categories of information. These are: (1) benefits of rural life, and (2) the costs of rural living.

**Findings**

**Benefits of Rural Life**

**General Safety**

The women I talked to perceive that there are unique dangers associated with living in a rural environment among local, rural people. There is also, obviously, at least a segment of the lesbian community that chooses to reside in a rural area as evidenced by my sample where 25 of 26 women expressed a strong desire to be living in their rural communities. Therefore, the question arises as to why one would remain in an area that is perceived as hostile. One answer is that the rural area actually feels safer to some respondents than urban...
counterparts. Winnie volunteered this passage where she shares her feelings about living in an urban area as compared to living in a rural one when I asked her what she dislikes most about living in the city.

I didn’t like all the people. I didn’t like all the noise…I think people are much more rude in the city….I think there’s more fear in the city that people are going to encroach on your space or steal your things. I think there’s the drug possibility, uhm, is much higher, crime rate is much higher. Doesn’t sound like a fun place to be to me (laughter).

Peace and pace of the country

Another frequent response to the question, “why rural?” is the peacefulness and slower pace of the country. Lois, who lived without electricity or running water for a year and a half spoke emphatically about her need to flee the city.

I need to be with the trees and the mountains and a place where I don’t hear engine noise and that’s an incredibly difficult thing to find these days. …I’ve got 150 acres and I ain’t going anywhere else……I believe god made me gay…. So, I can’t change who I am and so, does that mean that I need to live, because I’m gay I have to live in an urban environment like you know Key West or San Francisco or DC or Provincetown? No, I can’t do that. I won’t be able to be a sentient being. I wouldn’t be able to be happy in a place that’s so frenetic and crazy. Whereas out here, it’s a you know, simpler way of life.

Once again, Lois summarizes the paradox of rural living and emphasizes the choice she made and the costs she incurred to live in a rural environment, even to the point of accepting celibacy as a consequence of living in the rural serenity she chooses.

So, I moved here for a lot of the serenity and spiritual issues and playing old time music and being near my family and just kinda’ said, okay well lifestyle’s going to be the one thing that’s just going to have to suffer, it’s going to take an extra effort to be you know, to be willing you know, what are my choices, to be gay or to be celibate, you know? And so, the past, I don’t know how many years, now, I’ve just been celibate.
Just as the women report benefits of their rural homes, they also report the costs associated with their residence of choice. The following section examines four concerns that the subjects associated with their rural status.

*Costs of living rural*

The first of these four categories details choices, behaviors, and strategies that the women have employed concerning their jobs.

*Navigating work and career*

Marge’s partner Brenda had this to offer about the necessity for secrecy and the complications that arise due to secrecy as she responded to my question about the kinds of activities and organizations in which she is involved in her community of residence.

Oh, pretty much anything having to do with social justice, children’s rights, uhm, of course working at the mental health, and various agencies that work with kids. And, it has been a concern of mine that, you know, how well I’d be received from some of these people when and if they find out that I’m gay. There is some fear of someone saying “oh my god, don’t let her around my children”.

Later in my conversation with Marge, I asked if she had ever felt a turning point or made important life choices based upon her sexuality.

I think if I, I never intended to stay at Kid’s First (day care) forever and uhm, and I couldn’t stay there because I don’t think I could be completely myself there…the principal at one point was talking about having a counselor position and I was like "humm”. But, I couldn’t…so, that would be one thing I wouldn’t do.

Winnie, a bi-sexual, single mother who is also very politically involved in her community, speaks of the dilemmas she faces because of her sexual orientation and the added responsibility she feels as a mother for protecting her children. She told me that she had come out in church as part of her church’s effort to discuss the possibility of sanctioning
same sex unions in their church. After this, her children received some verbal abuse and she received some threatening letters. I asked her of other effects or long term consequences that she felt in her community as a result of coming out.

Well, no, uhm, there, that would be one thing, that in this county, no matter how much my children, no matter how much I want to run for any sort of public office, that would be totally unacceptable for me to do in this environment…I’m real tempted to go back into teaching but it could cause some severe problems…..I thought about opening a day care center, but, no, that’d be too dangerous, for me to be a girl scout leader? no, that would be too dangerous. So, I’m careful as far as career, like in career choices for sure.

Terri, who works currently as a loss prevention manager at a national retail chain, talks about her career choices and consequences as a gay woman. Here, she describes her working environment and subsequent choices.

It’s definitely been affected ….It’s been an obstacle being a gay woman and working in those environments, especially when I worked for the women’s prison…the very first day, I went in to my supervisor’s office and let her know that I was a gay woman because I knew that I was going to be working in a women’s environment and I didn’t come there looking for a relationship, so, I didn’t want to have any of that hostility over my head, that that could possibly be something that might come out. In the work force, the work place, I have to be censored simply because it wouldn’t be the same if I said some of the things that the heterosexual people say. I would be looked upon as a sexual harassment or some type of inappropriateness in the work place, you know. I just don’t want to go there. I’ve been burned in that before.

Loneliness and invisibility

Winnie also captured the oppression of secrecy when she spoke of the isolation and loneliness she feels in her rural community. The following is her reply to my question, “is there anything you’d like heterosexual people to know about how it feels to be non-heterosexual in a rural place”?

Certainly I would say, the sense of isolation. In the big city…..there’s stronger social networks in the city that we don’t have in the country and it
would be nice if we could have them, but, we don’t. So, the isolation is real out here. I guess that, that’s one of the strongest things that I feel, lonely …. the other thing is the difficulty in finding other gay people.

Peggy, a 53 year-old medical lab tech spoke of the loneliness she felt when I asked her if there were any resources for her in her rural community when she began to question her sexuality.

(Laughing as if that was a stupid question.) The isolation was real. Even in girl scouts, you know, there were the tomboys and I guess, in girl scouts, you were pushed to that uhm, female end. Let’s get a badge in crocheting and child-care and I wanted to get a badge in building fires and stuff.

Louise, a 50 year old, white minister shares the invisibility that she felt when her church conducted a survey asking members if they know any lesbian or gay people.

And you know, when we do questionnaires and they ask how many lesbian and gay people do you know or how many do you think you know and it’s “none”. And you do that in a church, like “there aren’t any in our church” and you know that there’s twenty-five sitting there….“there aren’t any in our town” and you know there are a hundred people you can name like that.

Carly, a mathematics and computer graduate gives a different slant on the invisibility she feels when I asked her how free she feels to be who she is. She answered emphatically, before I completed the question, “not at all”. In response, I asked, “What are some of the things that you have to do in order to make it here where you live?”. Her reply, “Just act straight”.

Just minutes later in the conversation, Carly returned to her thought and repeated, “yea, it’s just better to act straight”. I asked her to fill me in on why it’s better to just act straight and she replied, “So, the better you fit in, the better it is, because then you can go on
with your day and feel like ‘oh god, someone’s going to look at me’ and you know, you can say it doesn’t bother you, but it bothers me.”

Brenda had stated that she felt authentic and free in some spaces, but not in others. She further elaborates the need for secrecy or invisibility in public spaces when I pushed her by asking the following question: “So, in general, do you feel okay in the grocery store in (the closest town)?

Not with Marge. Not when she starts putting her arm around me and you know, I immediately start scanning for, you know, where are the clients and will find myself kinda’ moving away or suddenly needing to look at something else down the aisle to pull away.

As evidenced in the above passages, some subjects feel frustrated because of the invisibility they feel. In the following, four subjects give us good insight as to one way this invisibility is perpetuated.

*Fear of losing family and friends*

Peggy, a 53 year-old med tech laments the fear she felt and the need to hide in her small community because of the religious training she received in the local churches.

I remember a lot of hellfire and damnation at the revivals and some of that was geared towards sexuality. I also remember that all the Baptists would drive to Charlotte to get their liquor instead of going to the ABC store at home, so, I got to visibly watch what I considered to be a lot of hiding….I think it was my fear and it probably still is my fear of losing those wonderful family friends.

Carly, a 28 year-old woman who is helping to raise her partner’s daughter had this to say about her fears concerning her own family of origin and the embarrassment they would feel if her sexual orientation was revealed in the small town where they live. She was relating to me how a big city provided cover and anonymity that her community could not.
…it’s not so much for my purposes, it’s for my family’s purpose because my mom’s the postmaster in Overton. My brother, my dad started his own plumbing company and my brother took it over and then it’s this huge outfit based in Overton, I mean that’s where they live. So, everyone knew him. Like I didn’t want to embarrass them.

Terri, who is in a new relationship with a partner who is the mother of two young teens, talks about the fears and dangers around coming out in her rural community.

I would never do anything that would cause the children to be put through the trauma and drama that I’ve been put through in my life. The smaller we can remain, the better for them.

This fear of losing family and friends became even more telling when the subjects spoke of the type of person or group that generates the most anxiety in them concerning their sexual orientation. The following section describes the two major responses to that question.

“Redneck” men

The fears about coming out and who/what groups generate the most anxiety around my subjects’ sexuality center in two areas. From the twenty-one women who responded to this question, two patterns became apparent. There was missing data from five interviews since I added the question after some patterns became apparent. One of those patterns points to “conservatives” or Christians as anxiety provoking. The other pattern, the most frequently cited source of fear and anxiety, is “redneck” men. In two cases, women who cited “rednecky” men also expressed fear of their own brothers. In the following, Peggy establishes a clear trend that continues throughout the data.

I’m not out to my family (sort of as an announcement)….I think more than my mother, I’m worried about my brothers, you know, they get that sorta’ rednecky attitude down there and things are said and I’m not sure they’re meant, you know….You know, that queer did this or you know, that nigger did that and the kind of language terms they use even though some of their
better friends and co-workers are black and probably gay….

Lois, a 40 year-old stained glass artist who lives on 150 acres, echoes this sentiment as she talks about the danger of living where she lives in response to my question, “Have you ever felt threatened or afraid in any way because you are a lesbian in this area?”

People say, “aren’t you afraid living all the way up there by yourself, the bears, the snakes and the this and the that?”…I guess my fear is, I’m not afraid of critters, I’m not afraid of spiders and snakes. My one fear is that a drunken truck full of rednecks is going to come up my driveway one night and not want to leave. So, I am armed and dangerous and I know how to use them. And, I let my neighbors know that I am armed and dangerous.

Brandy, a 27 year old mother of one daughter had just told me that she would not hold hands with her partner, Carly, in the grocery store because she would be afraid that people would point and whisper. I asked her what other things are going on in her rural community that would discourage her from being open with her partner.

Rednecks… we went to the (names a local bar). And we went there New Year’s Eve and the place was packed and outside people were walking past and they knew that in there was a lesbian or gay bar, so, you’d get that chill down your spine, like could somebody come in there and just shoot up the place? But, rednecks just don’t seem to, they, to me, they don’t seem like they can accept it….I mean, they’re like gang members to me. That’s how I feel.

In a separate interview, Brandy’s partner, Carly had this to say about redneck men when I asked her if she had ever felt afraid for her safety.

I would like to be away from, I call ‘em rednecks…They’re threatening to me because they just don’t have any couth and it’s not, I don’t really think I’m physically threatened, it’s just, I don’t want to associate with them… I’m sure that they’re homophobic and of course….I think the rednecks feel threatened or something, I don’t know, but, they become violent and I can see them becoming very virile and violent and you hear of that around here, I mean.
Coping strategies of rural living

*Staying closeted, omitting markers, and “not flaunting it”*

One of the most apparent concerns with living in a rural area is the lack of role models and like others. This lack of role models or obvious support networks forces secrecy on the part of my rural, non-heterosexuals. Even though many report being out to neighbors, they are quick to qualify that coming out only happens after they are certain that it is “safe” to do so. As stated before, one of the particular concerns with this forced secrecy is that tolerance and change is postponed. Again, many subjects believe that close, personal relationships between rural heterosexuals and non-heterosexuals would produce greater tolerance. However, the lack of available support networks and the accompanying secrecy perpetuate the intolerance and invisibility of rural non-heterosexuals.

Marge, a 45 year-old daycare worker, captures many of the particular problems of living in a rural area while simultaneously asserting that she’s “okay”. Most of her closest friends are lesbians with her nearest lesbian neighbor being seven miles away. I asked her how she determines whom to come out to in her rural community. After a slight pause, I rephrased the question as, “is there anyone or any group that you absolutely do NOT come out to”.

Everyone, until I know a little bit more. I don’t try to hide. You know, like, I’ve never had boyfriends just so people thought I was straight. But, I guess, I wouldn’t say, “this is my partner” or “this is whatever”, but, now, living here, uhm, I work, I work in day care (Christian) and so, I don’t, I haven’t made a big deal out of it at all there. I guess I’ve never really been worried about it until I moved out here.

Many of my subjects remain closeted and subsequently choose to omit markers of their sexual orientation. Considering avoiding markers, for example, one
of the things that seems too dangerous for many of my subjects is to display a rainbow pride flag on or near their home. Without any prodding or probing, the subjects would add a qualifying statement or an account as to why they did not display the marker, whatever that marker might be. The identifying markers could be “known” as identifiers such as rainbow stickers, pink triangles, the Greek Lambda, etc. Other indicators could be style of dress and hair or commonplace omissions such as not having a picture of a partner or partner and children on the desk at work.

After asking Marge if she feels safe and able to be her authentic self in the rural area in which she lives, here is how she replied:

Yea. I wouldn’t put a big rainbow flag in front of the house, uhm, or wear my Province Town Pride T-shirt or something you know, not that they’d know necessarily what that was even. But, uhm, I feel okay being authentic, but not in flaunting it and I don’t know that I’d do it any differently if I was straight. You know, I wouldn’t flaunt the fact that I was straight, either.

Closely related, Marge’s partner Brenda shows how congruence is achieved when negotiating the insular nature of rural networks and exclusivity of rural heterosexuals. I asked, “Do you think that rural networks are closed and tight-knit?”.

I think they are. I haven’t experienced exclusion but, then a lot of people here don’t know about my being a lesbian. I don’t know if that would exclude me if they did. It’s not that I hide it, I just don’t announce it.

Winnie, a 48 year-old social worker and educator had this to say in response to my questions about the possibility of real danger for herself and her children in living in a rural area and being an activist for rights of non-heterosexual people. The following is in response to my question, “Given the possibility of danger, how do you navigate around your community?”.
Quietly. Yea, again, network. Subversively, you’ve got to be able to figure out a person’s lifestyle before you would ever commit to anything.

As you will read in another passage in this section, Winnie is politically active through her church in organizing and advocating for rights for non-homosexuals. Consider this paradox as she talks adamantly about not coming out to her employers as a non-heterosexual and the justification she employs that “her private life is her private life”.

Any employment that I’ve ever had, no employer’s ever known that I was gay. That is not something that even when I worked, you know as a counselor in a woman’s resource center, I worked as a case worker up in (prior residence), where even the atmosphere might have been okay, no. No way. There were a couple (of co-workers) that I felt I trusted and we held each other’s confidences but my private life is my private life.

When I asked Louise if she had experienced in particular negative effects as the result of being a lesbian in a rural community, here’s what she replied, “Uhm, no, because I mean, basically what I did was keep it real quiet”.

Armed self-defense

Even though only two women spoke to me of being “armed and dangerous”, it is significant data since each has displayed her weapons after hearing shots fired near her rural home. Both Lois and Vanessa told me that they kept firearms for protection and to signal their neighbors that had guns, too.

Discussion

“Safety” is a relative luxury depending upon one’s presentation of self. Part of this relative safety can be negotiated by, in essence, categorizing one’s personal life into “appropriate” areas of expression. Another trend that seems apparent is that the “isolation” of the rural area is both a positive and a negative for many of the women I interviewed. It is
presented in a positive light when the women talk about the freedom to walk out of their houses in the morning with coffee and not be standing next to their duplex neighbor. Another type of freedom that comes with the isolation is the freedom to show affection to their partners in an insulated sort of privacy. Therefore, there might also be some variation in feeling safe according to whether or not the subject is in a current relationship.

Another theme that arises is the paradoxical tendency for the subjects to report themselves as “free” or authentic in their environments and then provide data that contradicts that statement. For example, many will say they feel authentic and then report things such as, “well, I don’t announce it” or “I wouldn’t flaunt my sexuality even if I were straight”. Another common occurrence is for the respondent to report feeling safe or authentic and then admit that she isn’t out in her work, family, or community. I have also heard one interview subject claim to live in a safe haven that she and her partner have created for themselves and make reference, not ten minutes later, to the possibility of having her throat slit by some ignorant redneck.

This is intriguing and seems to be a pattern across most of my interview subjects. They know the dangers of the areas in which they live. They focus on what they like, creating a safe place for themselves through strategies, convincing themselves that they are safe. These self-created safe feelings serve to hold back the thoughts of fear that might be overwhelming and immobilizing. Through this emotion work of categorizing and sorting, the subjects seem to occupy the front of their minds and thoughts with “I’m safe”, “I just don’t flaunt my sexuality – I’m not that way” or “they won’t run me off” to keep the very real possibility of being beaten, evicted, terminated, or possibly having their throats slashed in the back of their minds.
Another important piece to this story is the fact that my subjects live in the country for the very same reasons that anyone would want to live in the country. The two most frequently cited reasons for choosing a rural area are safety and the peaceful, slow pace of rural living. The only real difference that emerged is a type of insulated privacy where my subjects feel freer to express affection for their same sex partner.

My data confirm the perception of and actual reality of isolation, intolerance, and lack of available support and services as documented in the scant literature. However, my data also confirm that there are indeed non-heterosexual women who choose to live in rural areas despite the perceived and actual difficulties. In other words, my subjects are individuals whose sexuality is a very small part of the reported, perceived reasons that they live in a rural area. That is, the pull to the country seems to be greater than the push of perceived intolerance.
Introduction

In this chapter, I will look at passages in my data where respondents implied non-traditional gender behaviors as indicators of sexual orientation. Also included are passages where respondents told stories of same sex erotic attraction or childhood fantasies as indications of sexual orientation. Though several of the passages emerged around the topic of coming out to one’s self, the responses are in response to no particular question.

Even though this chapter does not appear to fit well with the flow of the study, I chose to include it for two important reasons. First, because this is a qualitative study, this data feel too important to lose. As I read, coded, and looked for themes and patterns, more and more stories, fantasies, and memories that the women shared seemed to link gender behavior and sexual orientation in an intriguing way. When I asked about first remembrances of sexual orientation, several women shared stories, fantasies, and memories that were about gender non-conformity. Therefore, I began to see that there was an implied link, at least in the perception of some of the women in my sample, between gender displays and sexual orientation.

Secondly, I chose to include this chapter to add to a growing body of literature that is investigating this very phenomenon (Boxer and Cohler 1989; Weston 1996). For example, Boxer and Cohler (1989) point out, we are always reshaping our life narratives to fit new evidence, reconstructing history to help make sense of the current situation. Lesbians, in reconstructing their self-stories and identities retrospectively, siege on early experiences that may explain their more recent turn of events – often the familiar “tomboy” or “crush on a
woman teacher” story. Heterosexual women who were tomboys or who had crushes on their teachers or best girlfriends do not later sexualize these stories and do not draw on them to explain their heterosexuality. As anthropologist Kath Weston (1996) suggests, as adults look for signs of homosexuality in their childhoods, they tend to reach for gender rather than sexuality stories, finding signs of male characteristics and activities. Reminiscences such as “I liked to fix things with my dad’s tools,” “I’ve always been aggressive,” “I was the son my father never had” confirm their statuses as lesbian must have always been present. According to Weston (1996) these stories and memories allows the individual to argue for the “realness” of her lesbian identity and allow for continuity in the ways she has gendered herself over the years.

Methods

The passages included in this chapter are derived from ten of the twenty-six women in my sample. As I transcribed each interview, I would note passages that caught my attention in bold type. After I finished transcribing each interview, I would read the transcript noting in the right hand margin key phrases and emotions both from the script and my own thoughts. Following, I would generate a post-transcript memo recording my strong impressions and points of interest from that particular interview.

It was from the passages in bold type and the post-transcript memos that these stories linking non-traditional gender behaviors and sexual orientation emerged. Two of the stronger impressions I recorded were “it seems very important for her to link her childhood behaviors to her present identity” and “she seems very focused on what a lesbian ‘looks like’”. As I re-read the transcripts, I looked for any passage of conversation that linked gender behaviors, sexual orientation, and assumed markers of sexuality.
I have included thirteen passages provided by ten women that link non-traditional gender behavior and sexual orientation. I had originally included only the passages reflecting this link that emerged in response to the question, “when did you first come out to yourself” since eight of the original passages were in response to that question. I soon discovered that narrow frame excluded data that felt important to include. Following, I began to look at the passages as childhood accounts of gender and sexuality versus adult representations. This was confusing since three women provided more than one passage each and the lines were not always clear between teen-age and “adult” recollections. Looking again at the data, I began to see two distinct categories – childhood stories that connect non-traditional gender behavior to sexual orientation and fantasies or same sex erotic feelings as connected to sexual orientation. The third category was not as clear. It contained stories about high school, coming out to particular family members, and several other sources. A common theme was present in that each woman was reporting others’ perceptions of the connections between non-traditional gender behavior and sexual orientation.

The three final categories are passages that reflect: A) non-traditional gender behavior as an indicator of one’s own sexual orientation, B) fantasies or same sex erotic feelings as indicator of sexual orientation, and C) perception of others’ as connecting non-traditional gender behavior and sexuality. Interviews from three women produced multiple passages. The following table indicates who contributed which passages.
Respondents Who Implied Links Between Non-traditional Gender Behavior and Sexual Orientation

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Findings

As noted, I divided the passages into three categories which I will discuss in the following section.

*Non-traditional gender behavior as indication of link to sexual orientation*

The following two passages are accounts about first realizations that they were lesbians. The subjects offer stories of non-traditional gender behaviors as early indicators of their sexual orientation.

Peggy, a 53 year old medical laboratory technician, is relating the following story in a roundabout response to the question, “when did you first come out to yourself?”.

first time I wore a pair of jeans with the zipper in the front, my mom said “why are you wearing boys’ jeans?” (laughs) So, I used to get little
innuendoes like that...even in girl scouts, you know, there were the tomboys and I guess, uhm, in girl scouts, you were pushed to that uhm, female end. Let’s get a badge in crocheting and child care and all this stuff and I wanted to get a badge in building fires and stuff and not that I don’t have heterosexual friends that like to build fires either, but, and then of course in church, in GA’s I guess the last thing I remember there was a little book that was our send off to college with how to be in love and sex, it was all heterosexual.

Peggy’s account acknowledges that other little girls may have liked “boy” things as well; however, she incorporates her masculine stories into her coming out remembrances. That is, she connects unconventional displays of gender with her own recognition of her sexual feelings. She also makes reference to traditional gender expectations and training and subsequent lack of alternatives.

Lois gives this response to my question, “when did you first realize that you were gay?” She also connects both her crushes on girls and her non-traditional gender behavior as a child to her own realization of her sexual orientation.

I knew all my life (emphatically with strong assurance). All my life.... just having these crushes on the girls, on the women on TV….I grew up with three other boys on my little street and I was like the ring leader boy.

Connie who thought at one point that she might be bisexual before claiming to “stop hiding behind that” describes herself in non-traditional gender terms when I asked her about where she lived growing up making another implied connection between gender non-conformity and sexual orientation.

We lived, I lived, you know, in a regular neighborhood. I had two older sisters and one younger. I was the tomboy of the family. I was the one always out in the back yard playing baseball and playing army with the boys in the neighborhood.
Connie shares this story about gender non-conformity on the heels of her comment that she finally gave up the label of bisexual and decided to claim herself as completely lesbian. Connie’s responses demonstrate that she perceives a strong connection between non-conforming gender behaviors and her sexual orientation. In a similar passage, Hannah recounts this story around her 8th birthday party and her remembrances of growing up.

Tomboy, sure. Definitely. My napkins that we had at my 8th birthday party had a little boy on a bicycle on it and my mom wrote “Hannah’s 8 year birthday. She’s such a tomboy”. There were little boys on my napkins. Hello! Is anybody paying any attention? I played with boys. I think I probably identified myself as a boy. I mean, I think I probably thought, I mean I knew I was a girl, but I did not do the other girl things.

Hannah’s question, “Hello! Is anybody paying any attention?” is similar to Connie’s declaration, “So, I guess it wasn’t that far of a stretch” where both imply that their non-traditional gender behaviors were indicators to them of their sexual orientation and should have been to others as well. In other words, there is an implied relationship between behavior that is not gender appropriate and sexual orientation that Connie and Hannah see very clearly for themselves. Additionally, they imply that this connection should be or should have been evident to others who observed them affirming their perceptions that the connections between gender displays and sexual orientation are widespread and pervasive.

_Fantasies and Same Sex Erotic Feelings as Indication of Sexual Orientation_

There are certainly heterosexual women who were tomboys as girls and there are many lesbian women who never engaged in “boy” activities as a child. However, a demonstrated difference in lesbians and straight women, when comparing gendered behaviors, especially as youngsters, is the emotional energy and sensual memories around other girls. For example, Hannah who just talked about her memories of “boy” birthday
napkins also describes her memory of her first broken heart at age 16 by a woman whose hair
she loved to smell.

At some point, I don’t know that I’ve said, I’m gay but I loved the way Gayle Brown’s hair smelled (laughter) so, I don’t know, I felt like that unnatural feeling…. I definitely had an attraction for a woman that was not like anything else I had ever had. It made my stomach kinda’ turn – made it flip, like butterflies, like (sharp intake of breath) you know. It was exciting, but I don’t know that I even really knew that it was sexual until later.

In addition to Hannah’s recollection, three more women volunteered accounts that were heavily accented with same sex erotic feelings and description. Summer recounted the feeling that she really “got off on” shaving her cousin’s legs along with her desire to smell the scent of her best friend in high school reporting that she had “palpitations” and could not get enough of being close to her.

Judy described her first realization that she was gay by telling about her attraction to the preacher’s daughter saying that she “knew” it was not friendship reporting that she gets “sweaty” just thinking about it. She clearly associated these feelings with an early recognition of her sexual orientation saying she was sure that her feelings were not about friendship, but more certainly her feelings were sexual.

Additionally, Terri recounts her memories when I asked her about her first realization that there was “something going on” with her. She relates the memory of being infatuated with another little girl in her Brownie (predecessor to Girl Scouts) troop. She clearly stated that she knew she was attracted to women from a very early age.

One woman contributed a fantasy that she maintained as a young teenager. Her fantasy shows a clear link in her perception between gender non-conformity and sexual preference.
Thinking back, always in the fantasy, I was a guy. I didn't, you know, in the small town, we didn't have the PE teacher living with the English teacher. There were no role models. I just - so that it would be okay to go out with them - to pursue the little girls that I had a crush on….Like I said, I was a huge tomboy. I hated dresses - to this day, I hate dresses. I think there for three or four birthdays, all I wanted was the cowboy suit out of the Sears catalog. So, I guess it wasn't that far of a stretch.

In this fantasy, Connie makes reference to three important points. First, she points to a lack of role models for same sex relationships; therefore, she fantasizes about being a male to make the attraction “okay”. Secondly, she relates that she had “crushes” or sexual attraction to other little girls, and finally, she recounts non-traditional gender behavior as evidence that her sexual orientation “wasn’t that far of a stretch” making the two things connected in her perception.

In addition to these accounts offered by subjects pertaining to their earlier years, there are also accounts that emerged where subjects made explicit and implicit connections between gender displays and sexual orientation as adults. In the following section, I will explore these accounts that reflect subjects’ perceptions of themselves as well as their perceived accounts that are socially imposed.

**Relating others’ perceptions as linking non-traditional gender behaviors and sexual orientation**

Kelly who describes herself as “femme” is responding to my question, “did you know any other lesbians prior to your first realization of your own orientation?”. Here again, she connects a masculine appearance with a recognizable lesbian identity.

I did. I know that part of me was interested, but I never really perceived it and part of it is the lesbians I knew were very butch and I didn't feel like I was very butch and I wasn't attracted to butch women so the only, you know, recognizable, at that time, lesbians were butchy-dyke girls and I wasn't attracted to them and I didn't think I was one of them. So, there was less clues for me to identify on.
In this passage, she is describing “butchy” dykes and herself as femme. In my perception, she is more feminine by social standards than her partner, but not feminine by the more widely accepted or traditional depictions of femininity. These passages give us insight as to how notions of sexual orientation and gender are connected as evidenced in the reactions of others and the interpretations the subjects offer of those accounts. Another passage from Kelly reaffirms her notion as she describes her seventh grade teacher. Kelly claims that she “knew” the teacher was a lesbian because she looked like a man. Furthermore, this teacher wore men’s pants and had “no butt, definitely a very male kind of body, male mannerisms and all that”. Kelly uses the masculine or non-traditional gender appearance of her seventh teacher as evidence of her sexual orientation.

Carly, who has been around her parents with several prior partners had this to say in response to my question about her relationship with her parents:

We’re the closest we’ve ever been and Brandy’s (partner) helped out with that because she’s, she’s different from everybody I’ve ever dated. She’s more the feminine type and more, you know, she doesn’t look gay and I think that, you know we’re raising a child together and she’s very stable.

In this passage, Carly is benefiting by fitting the couple model more closely since her partner is more feminine than her past girlfriends. It is also interesting that Carly is more masculine in her appearance and demeanor than Brandy, thus emulating a more heterosexual couple. In another response, Carly connects a feminine appearance with “passing” thus reflecting a strong influence of heterosexual ideas about who can partner. I asked her what some of the strategies are that she employs in order to be able to make it where she lives.

Just act straight. Yea. I mean, that’s it….People normally stare. I’m just now letting my hair grow out, you can glance at the pictures around here, I
mean I had short hair. I find that the longer my hair is, the less people stare. Yea, the more feminine I look, the less people stare because they can go, “oh yea, that’s just two sisters going blah blah blah”…. and it’s a lot less stares when we have Amanda (partner’s daughter) around versus just Brandy and I going somewhere…..Yea. Definitely not act gay.

Hannah is telling me more about her feelings and fears around her perception that she is extremely recognizable as a lesbian. She has told me that she could hold her girlfriend’s hand in the community in which she lives, but she would not. I asked her why.

I see myself as so identifiable, like I feel like people look at me and they’re like “dyke, big old dyke”….I think the way I dress probably, I’m, my build (pause), I mean my hair is short and people call me “sir”.

Terri, who says she is more cautious around a redneck man went on to explain why she feels these men are threatened by her connecting the more socially defined masculine trait of strength to others’ perception of her.

That I am just as strong and just as verbal and just as talented as he is and that threatens him that a woman might be - I’m the closest that he can come to his match and not be a man. I could get his girl, too, if I wanted her.

Peggy had this to say in response to my question, “is there anything more that feels important about being a rural lesbian that you’d like to say?”

Well, I feel a lot of expectations from growing up that I had to be a certain way, to do certain things, but, it didn’t mean I did it. My aunt, you know, you’re supposed to, for your high school graduation, give a list of china and things you like so you can carry that on when you get married and I said, you know, why would I want china? I got these subtle messages about what I was supposed to do, and they didn’t like it, you know that I played drums in the band, why don’t you play a clarinet or something, you know…..But, uhm, you know, why would you ever want to be a veterinarian, women just aren’t veterinarians.
Finally, Marge connects her first realization of her sexuality to an exchange she had with another lesbian. She claims to have been “picked out” by a woman who was “obviously gay”. When I asked her why the woman was “obviously gay”, she replied, “She looked like a fullback for the football team.

These passages indicate clearly that these women connect the violation of traditional gender expectations with sexual orientation. While ten women employed this type response, sixteen did not. A comparison of the two groups follows.

**Gendered Versus Non-Gendered Responses**

*Women who employed gendered responses*

Ten of twenty-six women, or about 38% of the sample, volunteered accounts of themselves that illustrate their perceptions of the connection between gender non-conformity behaviors and sexual orientation. Furthermore, four of the women, Connie, Lois, Hannah, and Peggy believe that others should have made the connection as well. This indicates that these four women perceive connections between non-traditional gender behaviors and sexual orientation not just for themselves but as being an indicator held by the larger population as well.

The average age of those who describe gender non-conformity is 41, barely older than the average of 39 for the overall sample. Therefore, there does not appear to be an age difference between the groups who utilize gendered language and those who did not in the ways that the subjects describe themselves and their experiences. Without the two youngest women in this subset of those who use gendered language to suggest connections to their sexual orientation, the average age of the respondents does rise to almost 44 years. This, however, does not appear to be a significant trend.
The women with gendered responses were different from the other respondents, however, in terms of where they grew up. Ninety percent of those who used gendered responses grew up in rural areas while only one did not. Of the sixteen other women, only 44%, are originally rural.

I also compared the women who used gendered responses to those who did not on three other dimensions: the labels they choose for themselves; whether or not they are in current relationships; and, when they first came out as lesbians to themselves. No significant differences arose on the basis of these comparisons.

Upon closer examination of my post interview notes, another trend arises. Of the ten women whose responses are included in this chapter, eight of the interviews had prompted me to write about the connections between gender deviance and sexual orientation. That is, my impression of these women immediately after their interviews was that they exhibited or talked about some implicit link between gender behaviors, gender expectations, and their sexual identities.

Discussion

These responses have indicated several themes concerning gender, sexuality, and the expression of both for lesbian women. For those who did give gendered accounts, the following connections appear.

When asked about sexual orientation, subjects responded to me in gendered terms showing their perceived connection between sexuality and gendered expressions of that sexuality. They also reported describing themselves as boys or men in fantasies in order to make their sexual attraction understandable to themselves. Often, the accounts imply heterosexual models for partnering.
Perhaps the best explanation for these responses is to place them within the larger social context. Therefore, when these women describe themselves in masculine terms and describe their childhoods in masculine terms, they are doing one of the only things possible to do when you are faced with desires that are not socially sanctioned, suppress, deviate, or reconstruct to fit the scenario your society has given you.

The stories we tell, the memories we shape and manipulate, the language we use - all represent attempts to create congruence between our selves and a socially acceptable self, even if that self is only marginally acceptable.

Another explanation for the use of gendered language and memories among some but not all women might be a stronger connection to traditional gender expectations in rural areas than urban areas. All but one of the women who believed gender conformity and sexual preference were a package, were socialized in rural areas, or 90% versus 44 percent. This expectation of gender conformity is also expressed in the chapter concerning who and what is rural where many of the respondents talked about lack of tolerance for any sort of non-conformity, sexual or otherwise.

None of these stories or passages suggest that the subjects feel their non-traditional expressions of gender behaviors caused their sexual orientation; however, ten of twenty-six women, again, about 38 percent, used non-traditional gender responses to describe their coming out experiences, their attractions to other girls or women, others’ perceptions of them, or to talk about their perceptions of self. In this sense, they certainly imply a connection between recognizing sexual orientation and the presence or absence of gender non-conforming behaviors and feelings. I will interrogate these ideas and others in the conclusion.
Chapter 6
FUTURE TRENDS AND ADVICE TO THE STRAIGHT WORLD

Introduction

As I listened to my respondents talk about the dangers of living in a rural area, I also
heard them express joy and excitement about the kind of life they overwhelmingly choose. I
did however, wonder about their thoughts and feelings concerning the future as more non-
heterosexuals come out and as technology changes the face of our perceived realities.

In this chapter, I intend to examine the responses of my subjects to the following
three questions: (1) Will the internet have an impact on the way rural heterosexuals perceive
non-heterosexuals? (2) What do you think the effects of mainstream television and movies
will be on producing tolerance for non-heterosexuals among rural heterosexuals? (3) What
would your advice be for creating greater acceptance for non-heterosexuals among rural
heterosexuals?

Literature Review

While reviewing the literature for the effects of mainstream media and the internet on
rural attitudes toward homosexuality, I found several related articles that indirectly address
this issue.

In an article entitled “Lonely Gay Teen Seeking Same” by Jennifer Eagan (2000), the
author asks one basic question, “is the internet hurting or helping?” Though not able to
compare directly because of age and sample, some comparisons can be drawn. One glaring
similarity remains: Gay teens, like adult homosexuals, suffer from ridicule, homophobia,
isolation, and despair. Given this shared plight, the question arises, can the internet provide
help? This becomes, for my sample, a very important question since my respondents state unequivocally that their rural environments are plagued by a lack of services and resources.

In response to the question, can the internet help, some potential benefits arise as well as some potential dangers. Some of the potential positives are that individuals can “be themselves,” anonymity, and discovery that they are not alone. Some potential negatives of internet access are that the interaction is not “real,” the presence of dangerous predators, unequal access to the web, and sites containing pornography. Particularly concerning younger individuals, children are more computer literate than parents making monitoring difficult. Though the potential dangers are not the same for teens as they are for adults, there certainly are similar dangers to be navigated.

In addition, Egan (2000) believes that the internet does help in labeling and identifying the teens’ sexual feelings. The findings and assertions of this article are consistent with data produced by my subjects: (1) the web is a place to “hook up” or meet other queer individuals, (2) my subjects believe they may see a bigger impact on tolerance in the next generation as a result of web involvement of teens, (3) and the web also provides a mixed bag of potential good and bad outcomes for teens and adults alike.

In a related article, Marquerite Moritz (1995) contends that no media source is neutral but can be and certainly is influenced by organizations perpetuating negative stereotypes. This happens because groups compete to privilege the message that will benefit them most. The way to privilege a message is to establish the framework within which societal debates and discussions will be held and judged. As a result, marginalized groups such as gays and lesbians continue to be marginalized and negatively stereotyped while heterosexism and homophobia are endorsed and upheld. An example of a way that the framework in which an
issue is discussed can bias an audience is discussed by Moritz in her article: She points out that when reporters discuss topics that affect Jews or African Americans, no one like the KKK or another white supremacist group is called to represent the ‘other’ side – not so concerning sexuality (Moritz 1995). Moritz shows how mass media images have been selected and constructed in the following ways as well.

One way that media misrepresents marginalized groups is through rendering those groups either invisible or outrageous. In virtually every area of mass media mediated by popular culture through 1960’s, homosexuality was absent, marginalized, or erased altogether (Hartley 1982). The accounts that did exist were negative in the extreme. Media practitioners are products of the culture just as much as they are producers of it. Therefore, “the marginalization of and bias against homosexuality in all mass media are hardly surprising” (Moritz 1992a).

Another way that the depiction of marginalized groups is affected is by the presence or absence of media advocacy. Historically, the pendulum is swinging. Depending upon public sentiment, the ability of networks to act freely and the level of agreement among media officials and audiences concerning a topic have much to do with the depiction of marginalized groups in the media. For example, the growing gay rights movements of the ‘70’s made media advocacy a critical issue.

During the ‘70’s, increasing urban audiences helped with progress in making visible groups that had previously remained invisible. However, the 1980’s brought the Reagan years, Anita Bryant, and the rise of the Moral Majority that, in turn, stifled some of the progress. As the ‘80’s progressed, cable TV, VCR’s, and Fox all pushed major networks to be more competitive. Non-network shows have more freedom than their network
competitors. Another factor that contributed to the pendulum swing was the advent of talk shows where political issues around sexuality make for great topics, although there are problems with that format as well. At any rate, fictional and factual accounts are constructed in accordance with prevailing professional practices and embedded in an industry that is always impacted by economic imperatives (Moritz 1995).

Finally, Mortiz points out that newsrooms are selective and biased in their choice of topics as well. Furthermore, news codes flow out of the hierarchies in society at large. Given that system, it is hardly surprising that gays and lesbians were not considered worthy of coverage well into the 1980’s (Moritz 1992a). To reiterate her point, Moritz points out that both *Time* and *Newsweek* ignored the gay rights march in Washington D.C., the largest civil rights demonstration in the capitol since 1969 (Freiberg 1993). The paradox is that coverage can be as potentially harmful or perhaps even more detrimental in that when coverage of topics surrounding homosexuality does occur, it is often framed as psychological sickness. Stories about gays and lesbians are often cast as “morality tales, with the homosexual being the negative reference point in a discourse that reaffirmed society’s sense of what is normal” (Fejes and Petrich 1993).

To summarize, heterosexism remains a prevailing norm in the newsrooms. These biases resulting from heterosexism surface as the result of many common news room practices such as, (1) reporting on individuals who are gay as “openly gay,” the notion is reaffirmed that being identified as gay (against one’s wishes especially) is still a stigma, and thus, still problematic, and (2) running editorials where individuals speak in favor of queer rights or whatever the topic will be, the paper will add a statement such as “this does not mean we endorse this lifestyle,” and (3) creating and selecting images to represent gays and
lesbians – most rely on extreme, stereotypical images and lesbians are virtually absent. In these ways and others, the format and frame of media representations of gay and lesbian topics are very much dependent upon the social, cultural, and moral climate in which the situation occurs.

Another article that echoes the piece by Moritz is “Loves Labours: Playing it Straight on the Oprah Winfrey Show” by Debbie Epstein and Deborah Lynn Steinberg (1997). In this chapter, Epstein and Steinberg show how even well intentioned programs can be detrimental to the audience that is presumably being helped. They examine a particular episode of the Oprah Winfrey show and the framework of talk shows in general.

Upon examination, the authors say there is “a significant disjuncture between Oprah’s explicit goals for her show and the contradictory effects of its framework – i.e., the framework and format of the show can easily subvert the challenging educational objectives of this kind of socially responsible television and can disempower precisely those people whom she is aiming, through the show, to empower” (Epstein and Steinberg 1997).

These authors show how chat shows or TV talk shows open a venue whereby we can be voyeurs into others’ “real lives.” The outcome can translate to cruel exploitation of the sideshow or serve as a forum for collective education – that is, format and framework help to shape the outcome so that even well intentioned shows can have powerfully detrimental consequences. These format and framework processes are influential. The include: (1) frequency of shows – enormous range of topics – the host must get familiar with issues and be able to pack them in a one hour format (minus commercials) – therefore, complex issues are reduced to simplistic issues and explanations, (2) shows taking liberal/individualistic points of view which ignore issues of power, allowing individuals and groups to be presented
as equals when in fact, there is not equality among people in terms of social power, (3) formats allowing for addressing critical issues without a critical eye. For example, the show schedules episodes about racism, poverty, sexism, etc. but does not make links or connections between them and (4) especially regarding sexuality, the presumption of and pursuit of heterosexuality sets it up as both normal and desirable through tremendous focus on heterosexual relationship problems, emphasis on family reunions, heterosexual matchmaking, etc.

Therefore, the potential for good is present in the talk shows; however, the format and framework can seriously damage the progress of marginalized groups as easily, or perhaps even more easily, than benefit them in any sort of powerful way.

This literature is helpful and leads to better understanding of issues related to power, the impact of mainstream media, and perpetuation of socially constructed behaviors and attitudes. However, I found no queer people talking about their ideas concerning the impact on heterosexuals through viewing mainstream media or being exposed to images of queerness via the internet.

**Methods**

I asked the subjects to tell me if they thought access to the web could create greater tolerance by straight people towards non-heterosexuals. I also asked them their perceptions of mainstream television and the impact that would create in rural areas concerning change. Finally, I asked them what, if anything would create greater harmony among heterosexuals and non-heterosexuals in rural areas – that is, I asked them for advice to the straight world about tolerance.
In the following, I will explore the perceptions of my subjects as to whether or not mainstream media and the internet will have any impact on creating greater tolerance among rural people concerning non-heterosexuals. Following, I will share their advice concerning how positive change could be facilitated.

Findings

Future Trends

Perceived Positive Effects of the Internet

I asked respondents about their perceptions of the effects of the internet and mainstream media on rural heterosexuals. Their answers reflect perceptions of the effects on both heterosexuals and non-heterosexuals. Of the twelve women who responded to this question, five were very clear that they believe internet access is a viable tool for producing positive change. Joan, a 34 year-old mother of two, was adamant in her opinion that the internet could help normalize non-heterosexual relations for heterosexuals. This will be accomplished by showing the ordinariness of the daily lives of non-heterosexual people. This echoes the sentiment in Egan’s article where she posits the potential good of the internet for teens through exposure to others and discovery that one is “not alone.”

I think it’s helping….Yea. Because, I mean, I think that people, it’s more open to be able to find out the information that we put our pants on just like everybody else does, you know what I mean? We’re the same people. We take care of our kids, we get up every morning and we go to work, we do homework when we get home and make dinner and do baths and showers and do all of those things just like everybody else does and I think with it being on the internet, I think that helps people see that.

Closely related, Louise, a 50 year-old hospital chaplain who is closeted on her job and Connie, who is currently unemployed, responded with a resounding “yes” that internet access would be a good thing in that it would provide education and information for everyone. She
was aware that different people would use the internet in different ways and added that she thought the greatest good would be seen in the future as homosexuality is normalized. Her application to rural use of the internet is telling:

Now, what it does offer is, in the privacy of your own home, you can get information that you might not otherwise have access to….that is, rural “Joe Jones” might look at corn prices, but Joe’s son might look at sites about being homosexual.

Hannah, a 37 year old, warehouse distribution manager is clear on the effects of the internet in one area – it provides a way for individuals in situations that are seemingly impossible to come out a way to come even if it is a “virtual” way. She is also clear, however, that there is no way to control all the negative images that are portrayed on the internet as well. This “mixed bag” feeling came through in four of the women’s responses.

Mixed Bag

The internet, like most other venues of ideas, can be a double-edged sword. This notion was conveyed by stating both perceived positive and negative effects of the internet on non-heterosexual people. Consider the following four responses:

Summer, a 25 year old camp cook who likes to describe herself as queer when she’s “being political” saw the effects of the internet in this way. She enjoys and appreciates the benefit of “hookin’ up” or meeting other women via the internet, yet also acknowledges the negative impact that the internet could produce. In her opinion, the porn sites that feature “girl on girl” action or chat rooms that are invariably invaded by male voyeurs serve to reinforce negative stereotypes about lesbians and present lesbian relations as glamorous or for male gratification.
Brenda, a 41 year-old social worker and mother of a teenage son, sees the mixed bag in this way. She sees the internet as invaluable for networking in that it helps to educate everyone and to lessen isolation that queer people might feel. She also feels that the internet can be overwhelming and that the greatest amount of change will be felt in the future as more of us become computer literate and our children grow up with new images.

Winnie who describes herself as bi-sexual and has a master’s degree in social work also sees the internet as an invaluable networking tool. However, she is more pessimistic in her view that it will not help to change the attitudes of heterosexuals towards non-heterosexuals reflecting the notion that rural folks are “behind” and there’s a lag in the effect of technology and information.

Terri, a prevention loss manager for a large retail corporation, sees the mixed bag in a similar way as Summer. That is, the internet is tremendous for relieving isolation; yet, it is also inundated by “weirdoes” who present images of lesbians that are beyond control. Finally, Martha, an administrative assistant tossed the idea around and seemed to come to a mixed bag conclusion as well. She said she “really didn’t know” what the impact of the internet would be. She was sure that the internet relieves isolation but also seemed relatively sure that “you can’t teach an old dog new tricks” meaning that the greatest change might occur in the future.

These women who perceived the effects of the internet as a mixed bag are reflecting the ideas of Moritz (1995) and Epstein and Steinberg (1997) in that they realize there is potential good and bad outcomes of this exposure. Good can come from exposure and from education; however, they also realize that non-heterosexuals generally have less control over
the depictions and outcomes than more mainstream heterosexual who are more likely to be reflecting cultural and social morals and ideals.

Perceived negative effects of the internet

Of the twelve responses concerning the perceived effects of the internet on relations between heterosexuals and non-heterosexuals, only two were assuredly negative. Leslie, a free-lance writer, believes that the internet will not affect those who are already intolerant because “we’re creatures of habit and stick with what we know”. In other words, the information is there, but resistance on the part of those who are intolerant will preclude any good that might come through access to information. Elaine, who owns her own landscaping business, echoes the sentiment that no positive change will occur through internet access but not because of resistance on the part of heterosexuals, simply because “it’s (media and internet) all unhealthy”.

Therefore, of those who did have something to say about the effects of the internet, the prognosis is good, overall. Concerning mainstream media, especially television, and the impact on rural perceptions of non-heterosexuals, again, the responses are a mixed bag.

Effects of Mainstream Media

The beliefs about the effects of mainstream media, especially television, are both similar to and different from the projected effects of the internet on changing rural attitudes towards non-heterosexuals. That is, most of the women who responded to this question saw potential good effects, a few realized the potential good and bad of the exposure, and two clearly saw negative outcomes due to exposure on mainstream media sources. Concerning mainstream media, of the sixteen women who responded to this question, nine women were certain the effects would be good, two were certain there would be no positive effect, four
women saw the effects as potentially both good and bad, and one woman, Judy, a physical therapist thought there were “possible” good future effects but that current good is still overshadowed by prevailing religious beliefs and tradition.

*Positive Effects - Normalizing Queer Individuals*

For those who were certain that the effects of having more gay, lesbian, and bi-sexual people on television would be good, there was also agreement over what that good outcome would look like. Five women agreed that the effect of having more non-heterosexual people on television would be to normalize those characters as being ordinary people with ordinary lives, thus diminishing the focus on sexuality and enhancing the emphasis on similarity.

Joan, who works for a printing company said it like this:

I think that those shows are great! Like Will and Grace, we love it….You know, they show them. They’re gay, but, they don’t focus just on that, I mean, they have lives other than Jack, he has no life (laughter). But, you know, they have businesses and work and friends and they have friends both heterosexual and homosexual friends. You know, I think that sort of thing is good.

Louise, who is a hospital chaplain, not out in her work, echoed the sentiment in her response:

“…you know in the same way that ones of different ethnic backgrounds started to appear, it’s like, it normalizes it. It’s not like Ellen or you know the character is psychologically deranged. I mean these are people who, you know, have lives, have jobs, have relationships, have a mother and father.”

Clearly, at least these four women see television as an avenue that can lead to the normalization of non-heterosexual orientation. This would be accomplished, at least in their perception, by showing similarities between people of all sexual orientations – basic human similarities such as feelings, jobs, children, and wishes.
Additionally, of those women who thought the effects of television would be good, four of them mentioned the positive effect of creating new role models for queer people and were in agreement that television shows open up conversation about sexuality that will allow more and more people to come out of the closet.

*Providing New Role Models and Opening Conversation – New Ways to Come Out:*

Concerning the production of new role models and it’s importance, Gwen had a personal note to add as she talked about her younger sister whom she suspects to be a lesbian as well. (Gwen should be good at this by now since her only brother is also gay.)

And so, I think that even though my sister wouldn’t admit it, or you know, or that might say, I don’t watch that show because it’s gay, you know, but at least they know it and you know, they dress cool and they talk cool and so, I think that every time I see a little, I feel like it would be easier to come out to my sister because I wouldn’t have to say like, you know, the gym teacher, she’s gay, I’m like her, but I would say like, Ellen, she’s so cool and Anne Heche and you know, and go on and talk about those people you know, and maybe she would fit me in with those.

Therefore, Gwen’s assessment is clear. Mainstream television shows have the impact of adding new role models to the prevailing stereotypes, normalizing non-heterosexual individuals, and opening avenues of conversation that have long been silenced. Read on as Kelly, a 40 year-old graphic designer, makes the comparison between today’s mainstream television depictions of homosexuals versus older innuendos.

I think it has to be greater tolerance, just because the whole big deal if you look at where the gay movement has come from the fifties, from "thou shalt not speak its name" - (in very dramatic fashion) "the love that shall not speak its name" and those kinds of books to the feminist movement, the explosion and the novels there… I didn't even know they had a gay club at state (university) which apparently they did have, but it wasn't you know, it was secluded and put away and all that kind of stuff….but I think if you look at the youth today of how different they are at their age compared to what we were like at that age. I think that's where you'll see that the same comparison with urban versus rural.
Clearly, Kelly also sees mainstream television as a tool that can open up conversations and produce new role models.

*Potential Negative Effects / No Effect At All*

On the other hand, two women saw the effects of mainstream television as potentially bad or ineffective to produce any sort of change. Respectively, Elaine who owns her landscaping business, sees no sort of good coming from mainstream television because, like the internet, “it’s all unhealthy” and Terri, who is in a new relationship with the mother of two, sees no potential good from mainstream television depiction of non-heterosexuals because “they’re (rural straights) in denial…they can change the channel”.

Taken together, these women’s perceptions of the overall effects of mainstream media and the internet is that good things are happening. That is, exposure normalizes the presence of non-heterosexuals, produces new role models for everyone, relieves isolation, provides new role models, and opens up new avenues of conversation. However, these positive effects are balanced with the knowledge that no one can control all the images that are portrayed nor can anyone force someone to watch or log on. These women also recognize that the most amount of good will probably occur in the future and have the greatest positive impact on our children and future generations.

But, is this positive effect going to be felt in rural areas? Will mainstream media depictions and access to information on the internet be enough to produce greater tolerance and harmony among rural heterosexuals and non-heterosexuals? I asked my subjects to help me tell the rural straight world what they needed – in other words, what did they see as a major factor(s) in producing greater tolerance.
Advice for Increasing Tolerance

What my respondents told me, upon analysis, fell into two broad categories – what my subjects wanted from heterosexuals and what my subjects demand from themselves. The pleas to rural heterosexuals did not surprise me, but the call to action on the part of other rural, non-heterosexuals did. I will discuss the suggestions for straight persons first and end with the subjects’ call to action to other non-heterosexuals.

Advice to Rural Heterosexuals

The message to rural heterosexuals was clear in the voices of my respondents. Three related categories of advice emerged in the data. They are be self-reflexive; don’t put me in a box; and, “face it – I’m just like you”.

Be Self-Reflexive

The first to emerge is a plea for heterosexuals to take the role of the generalized, homosexual other. The women who made this suggestion also seemed to doubt that it would actually happen. They phrased their advice in ways such as “think about what it would be like” or “ask yourself, wonder if it were me.” In other words, the subjects were asking others to be self-reflexive. It was Carly, a 28 year-old computer programmer, who captured the importance of being self-reflexive and the less than optimistic prognosis of its occurrence.

And, I don’t know, I want heterosexuals to actually stop and think to themselves, what if they were in the situation (more and more emphatic...with emotion) then they’re all like, “I wouldn’t be in that situation because I wouldn’t choose that” you know. That’s typical of what you’re going to get and it’s just ignorance……I don’t think that people, on the whole, are intelligent (laughing a little) because they’re not going to stop and say that what they’re doing is actually wrong or their opinion actually may not be the biggest and brightest one, you know. They’re not going to stop and say, “hey, you know, what if” you know, they’re not going to do that…..how’re you going to get people to actually do it? I think that may have worked on my sister. I think the comparison of lives, you know, because I’m living a stable life, stable relationship, I think with her, it may have made a difference. With
my brother-in-law, because he already has that, he doesn’t, I don’t have anything that he would ever need, so he’s not going to look at himself in comparison. You know what I’m saying? I think if people don’t have it, they might look in comparison, but if they do have it, they’re not going to ever consider it.

So, even though self-reflection is a tool that is perceived to generate positive change, the respondents do not count too heavily on its implementation. The second piece of advice that emerges is similar in that my subjects asked rural heterosexuals to give them a chance to be people first, not stereotypes.

_Don’t Put Me in a Box_

This particular suggestion, like others in this section, was spoken with a sense of urgency and frustration at being sorted, labeled, and tied very neatly in a small, stifling, rigid box. Listen again to Terri, a prevention loss manager for a large corporation as she articulates her frustration and pessimism concerning change:

Maybe they could learn something if they instead of the label that they stick on me. (pause) I don’t know anything that I can do to change their, to change their outlook. I know that they know me as a lesbian first. My reputation has always preceded me. Maybe they could learn something if they got to know me as a person instead of the label that they stick on me. That’s what I’d say.

Martha, an administrative assistant at the local, public library stated it this way:

I’d say, just don’t put us in a box. I mean don’t put anybody in a box. It’s not a box thing. I think the biggest thing is, look at the bigger picture. There’s a bigger picture out there, I mean it’s not what we paint it, we paint it this and that.. It’s black here and these, you know, it’s a coloring book and everybody colors in these lines black and these lines white and there’s a little bit of gray over here but we don’t want to look at that, you know, just don’t paint it, just let us be…. I mean, I think the bigger picture is that people are just people. They have emotions, they bleed, they hurt, they cry, they laugh, you know, they have emotions, they think, they have children, they don’t want children, they have dogs, they have cats, they like this and they like that. You know, some like coconut and some don’t. Some want peanuts in their this and that and others don’t want peanuts, but that’s so what? That’s not a box thing.
Don’t put lesbians in a box basically is what it boils down to. Because that’s what people do, they act or react to another person according to perceived and real ways that other people are or situation and perception is just as big a reactionary thing as reality, you know.

Elaine, who had been in a long-term heterosexual marriage before entering her first same sex relationship in her thirties had an interesting take on this theme. She agreed that getting to know non-heterosexuals as individuals is a necessary step in producing tolerance. However, her wording explicitly places responsibility on all participants in the process.

I think just living next to them and seeing that hey, you’re doing the same thing they are. You know, just like we didn’t really immediately come out to our neighbors. They kinda’ got the idea but they also know that we love to garden. They know that I landscape if they’re looking for a certain plant, I say, “oh, if I see it, I’ll pick it up for you”. We have much more of a connection just that we all like living in this kind of environment from canning to, plus Judy (neighbor) loves the fact that I make soaps and she does some herbal remedy things, too, and so, I think just by living next door and just being open and talking about things. We don’t talk about our sexuality like, we just don’t really kinda’ put it on them. We let them get to know us as individuals…..So, you know, just talking about, you have more things in common than you have in differences.

In this way, Elaine describes a reciprocal process of getting to know one another and focusing upon commonalities versus differences.

*Face It – I’m Just Like You:*

The final theme that emerged in the advice to rural heterosexuals was simply, “we’re just like you.” In words very similar to one another, seven women readily replied that change and tolerance would increase when heterosexuals are able to think about non-heterosexuals as people with the same needs, wants, and desires as heterosexuals. Furthermore, two of these seven women added that they are certain that rural heterosexuals “already know and love a queer person.” Therefore, the
belief is that if others would get to know a non-heterosexual person, and temporarily suspend the stereotypes, then positive change would occur by exposing the ordinariness of lesbians’ everyday lives. Brandy, a 27 year-old mother of one has this advice:

And, I think if people would just stop, if they’d learn about it and know who people are. You know, that’s all you can do. We’re all human. We all came from the same place. We’re all here together and we have to make it work.

Sarah, who lives with her partner in a wooded, secluded area about 30 minutes from the nearest city, summed up this sentiment well.

We want space and solitude and peace of mind in our home just as much as you do. I think people who move out here want that. Like, they don’t want to be amongst noise and hectic and so, let’s all just have our little two acres and we don’t need to mess with each other. Let’s just have our little plot and wave to each other and get our community needs met and I’m sure for some people, this is their community and they just do where they are. I like having a place to go into and have my life and my social away from here and I can bring it here. I can have both.

In sum, the advice or suggestions that came from my subjects to their rural, heterosexual counterparts is simple, yet certainly not easy. They basically understand that getting to know individuals breaks down stereotypes that in turn break down a world of misinformation. This does not appear significantly different from advice to urban heterosexuals. The difference, as I hear it from my data, is that they also perceive that rural traditions create and sustain boundaries such as tradition, conservatism, and a lack of tolerance for difference that are not easily overcome and not as glaring in urban areas. Interestingly enough, when I asked what advice they would like to give as rural lesbians to rural heterosexuals, 6 of the 16 women who had a response to this question answered in ways
that placed the responsibility on rural lesbians themselves to create greater tolerance and harmony in rural areas.

Advice to Rural Non-Heterosexuals- Take Responsibility for Change

The message came from six different voices with slightly different contexts, but the meaning was clear. Take responsibility for change yourself. Joan, 34, who is helping to raise a total of four children, took this deferred gratification stance concerning when and how change would occur in rural areas:

Gay and lesbians are not going to be accepted out where the KKK just took the sign down ten years ago, you know? That’s how people are going to be and it’s going to take generations to change that. So, we change our children, not change them in who they are, but change them in viewing other people and then, they change their children and let their children view people as who they are and that’s how it’s going to end up being so that you don’t grow up thinking that what you do is bad and you don’t have these teenagers committing suicide.

It’s clear that she sees change as gradual and as originating from within. Closely related, Peggy, a 53 year-old medical laboratory technician, who is not out to her family captures both the necessity and the potential problems of coming out in responding to the question, what will produce greater tolerance.

If each person had a family member who was homosexual (she laughed). I don’t know. I really don’t know. Hum, I guess people coming out might help that because there’s still a problem in the school systems. You know, if they find out they’ve got this wonderful teacher that the kids love and all is homosexual, then uhm, you know female or male, it could be a real problem because the school board, people have that expectation, the people are afraid that they’re going to be a pedophile and I think those things are still, but the more people who can come out when people know already who they are and what they’re about, you know, they find out, “oh, you know, this person’s really a lesbian or gay” and “wow, these are real nice people”!
Perhaps Hannah, a 37 year old who also has a lesbian sister, captured the notion most succinctly. She describes a reciprocal process whereby rural lesbians make themselves known and valuable by actively involving themselves in their communities.

And I think the best way for people to, for rural communities to become more open to their gay citizens, for the gay citizens to become more active, you know, lose your fear. It’s hard to do. But, you know, if that’s what you want, in that rural community, I think that’s what you’re going to have to do. I’m a nice person, and I can be very outgoing, I love the church up there, I mean, I don’t love to go to church but I would paint a Sunday school room or I would go and you know, sometimes, I like to go to church. And, I like to interact with people and I wouldn’t want to have to drive 35 minutes to go do that all the time. I could go right down there if there was a basketball game or a rodeo, you know, I could do that...... And for the heterosexual community to claim it, too. And I have heterosexual friends who are a mile or two from here, too, you know, I think a sense of community is powerful. I think the gay community has a lot to offer a community.

Although she admits this is both hard and frightening, the alternative seems even less attractive. “Every time we act like we’re ashamed, they treat us like we’re shameful.”

Discussion

In conversations regarding the effects of the internet on changing rural attitudes, the prognosis was good, overall. However, the subjects were astute in their observations that the internet and mainstream media could be quite a “mixed bag.” The feeling was one of caution, citing good results for rural lesbians such as relieving isolation, networking, and having an invaluable source of information. However, on the other hand, the subjects expressed their fears and concerns around having no control over the images that are presented. That is, even though the majority of my subjects view internet access to information and increasing mainstream media depictions of lesbians as a good thing, they still acknowledge the double-edge sword potential of this relatively new phenomenon.
Furthermore, many subjects also recognized the cultural and technological lag in rural traditions and projected that the greatest amount of change via these avenues would occur and be felt most in the future. This will happen as more and more people become computer literate and as our children grow up with normalized images of non-heterosexual persons depicted in mainstream TV and movies.

When asked for advice concerning positive change and advancing technologies, the women who had something to say were very clear on their thoughts and opinions. As stated in this chapter, the advice fell broadly into two camps: advice to heterosexuals and a mandate to rural lesbians.

The advice to heterosexuals came as a resounding plea to stop and think. Think about what it would be like to be a non-heterosexual person, to think about examining stereotypes and labels, and to think about commonalities among all people versus difference.

Again, interestingly enough, when asked for advice to rural straight persons, six women immediately talked about the responsibility of rural lesbians to come out, to make themselves known as ordinary and valuable, and to “lose the fear.”

For these women, coming out forces discussion, exposes non-heterosexuals as ordinary people, and challenges existing stereotypes and labels. Breaking silence, for these women at least, is the first step towards acceptance. They acknowledge the danger but feel it is the price you pay if you want to live in a rural area and take full advantage of the richness that rural life can also provide.
Paradoxes in the Data

In this conclusion, I realized that I wanted to capture what “felt” important after having talked to twenty-six women about their perceptions of life as a rural lesbian or bisexual woman. In order to convey the essence of what I discovered, I re-read transcripts, coded my post-analytic memos, and reflected on conversations that I had with friends and colleagues. I also wrote unedited memos to capture my thoughts about what felt important. During this process of reflection, what felt most important concerning the actions of the women in my study was that most of their actions were seemingly paradoxical in some way.

The behaviors and interactions among and between rural heterosexuals and rural non-heterosexuals can be better understood if we look at them as patterns of behavior that arise when a person or group is negotiating a marginalized status. In that sense, I am not attempting to make generalizations about queer, rural women, I am attempting to make generalization about what happens when people are marginalized and experience inequality as subordinates in a social system.

My data clearly indicate that these women use strategies to deal with their marginalized status. The behaviors and patterns that are observable yield good sociological information about how inequality is created and maintained. That is, some of the strategies employed by the women in my sample clearly reproduce the inequality (Schwalbe et.al. 2000) while others create crisis moments where dominant patterns can be challenged and social change is a possibility (Connell 1987).
The behaviors that I have observed and coded fall into categories that represent three major paradoxes in the data. The first major paradox that I observed is called *safety in isolation*.

These women perceived clearly that the isolation they felt was the biggest negative about being a rural person and the safety that comes through the isolation is the biggest advantage to being a rural person. They also pointed out the lack of access to lesbian specific services such as networks, support groups, and a place/way to meet other lesbians as being complicated by both the geographic and spatial attributes as well as the rural traditions of insularity and hesitant to accept change and diversity. The isolation seems to be both an advantage and a disadvantage. In fact, the paradox is that the isolation is what they were seeking and certainly does not *feel* like a terrible thing. The data show that the women are able to recognize and enjoy the benefits of rural life and rural folks while carefully negotiating and, in some cases, concealing or at least downplaying their sexual orientation. They reap the same benefits of rural life as anyone else, private space in which to express their same sex attraction, but at the cost of minimizing their difference from anyone else. My data suggests that the same elements of wide open spaces, the feeling that rural life brings, and mutual dependence on one another as rural residents is appealing for the same reasons that they would be to any other individual who chooses to live a rural life.

The second major paradox that emerges is *fear among family* which outlines behaviors by the women that “protect” their family members while simultaneously expressing fear of their family members’ reactions to their sexual orientation. A rural environment might exacerbate this fear by focusing upon strong traditional notions of gender and family. Furthermore, living in one’s community of origin, if it’s rural, may make it
virtually impossible to avoid many small town concerns such as repercussions for your family, having “everyone” know you already, etc. This sentiment is reflected loudly by women who have great fear of losing their families and friends as a result of their sexual orientations. Only one woman in my sample lives in her community of origin. In my data, the women have moved to other rural areas to capture the peace and safety they perceive; however, at the cost of leaving their families of origins. Again, the paradox is this: the women claim to have left their families to protect them while knowing that they will not be protected by those same family members.

The final paradox is hiding out which basically captures the women’s reactions to gender and sexual orientation expectations in that they distance themselves from any public indicators of their sexual orientation while they indicate that they are proud to be non-heterosexual. That is, none of the women in my sample have sought any kind of emotional assistance for “being gay” or indicate a desire to be different. However, many take careful action to conceal their sexual identity. Most are “out” of the closet and yet, to some extent, they hide being out from the rural community.

Paradox 1: Safety in Isolation

The general answer to the question as to how the women are able to feel such safety is that the women carefully negotiate their subordinate status in ways that allow them to reap the rewards that rural life offers. Given the fact that they clearly perceive rural as a distinct, conservative environment that is intolerant of diversity, what does this proclamation of safety tell me sociologically? Most importantly, how is this feeling achieved and at what cost?
Strategies that reproduce the inequality

Remaining invisible in the community

This feeling of peace and the slower pace that their rural homes provide does come with a cost. The subjects perform an incredible amount of emotion work and navigating in order to present themselves as “free” or “authentic”. This navigating is not always a conscious act as evidenced in the data in exchanges such as the following. I would routinely ask a subject if she felt safe or free to be herself in her community. Without exception, for each woman who replied in the affirmative, a follow-up question later in the interview would reveal a different slant. If the subject was in a relationship at the time of the interview, I would also ask, “do you feel safe in the grocery store in your town?” the answer would be, “yes, if (my partner) is not with me”.

Remaining invisible at work

For those subjects who have jobs in their rural communities, in similar fashion, the subject might respond that she certainly has no trouble at work due to her sexual orientation when questioned about work dynamics. On follow-up, however, it would become apparent that the subject was not out to anyone at work. In each of these cases, the women were behaving in ways that both accommodate and perpetuate their subordinate status.

The most frequently given accounts for not coming out were “it’s nobody’s business”, “my private life is my private life”, and, “I’m not secretive, I just don’t flaunt it”. These are clear examples of defensive othering, that is accepting the status as a stigmatized one while behaving in ways that would conceal their membership in this group. They share the notion that to be non-heterosexual is socially less acceptable and there are certain framing
rules in effect for the system of inequality to run smoothly. In order for heterosexuality to be privileged, non-heterosexuality must be disadvantaged.

**Strategies that create crisis moments**

*Resistance through language and alternative subcultures*

I saw veiled evidence of alternative subcultures in my sample. I had driven several hours and scheduled four interviews over the course of two days. My hostess had invited several friends over for a cookout. Among them were four women who deflected my requests to be interviewed. Two of the women made polite excuses such as “that’s just not me”. One of the three women did let me schedule an appointment for the following morning, but called to cancel because of illness. She said she did not want to reschedule. The fourth, who seemed to be the organizer of the proposed group simply shook her head “no” to my request to interview her. They all seemed curious about the project, yet almost intentionally secretive.

From across the deck, I overheard a conversation about a new group they were trying to form whose purpose was to learn to use firearms safely and effectively. It was clear to me that I was not to be a part of the conversation, however, I did overhear such sentiments as, “they drive around with guns in their trucks, I’m going to, too” and “you never know when you might have to protect yourself”.

Though their statements did not directly implicate rural men, it was certainly implied. In this case, the women are rejecting more traditional feminine notions of powerlessness and creating an alternative form of power for themselves. The fact that the women had a name for their group before it was even formed is further evidence that they women saw themselves as unique and worthy of separation in some ways.
Another indication of some bent towards an alternative subculture and resistance was the language that was used when women would blatantly refer to themselves in ways such as “I’m a clit-lickin’, pussy-eatin’ dyke”. Two women used statements such as the previous one when I asked them to label their sexual orientation. However, there are several instances in the data where women would choose rather bold and explicit sexual language perhaps in attempts to embrace an alternative status.

**Resistance through integration**

The women reported that they felt safe and accepted in the rural communities in which they live; yet, they were completely surprised when heterosexuals treated them as community members. One reference point for judging whether they were safe and accepted in the community kept arising and struck me as good evidence of oppression. That is, when the women reported being asked to a social event such as a holiday or birthday party, or when straight people accepted an invitation to a social event of theirs, the excitement in the recounting of these times was as if the subject had won the lottery. In other words, the evidence of oppression in rural areas is there. The subjects acted both delighted and surprised when heterosexuals treated them kindly or with the same respect that others are afforded without question.

There were certain standards that showed you have “arrived”, that is, to show you have achieved dominant group status, or at least temporarily deflected the stigma of belonging to the subordinate group. “They’re cool, they treat me *just like anybody else*”, or ”they came to our Christmas party, can you believe it?” or ”our family came here for holiday, and it really went okay” were statements that showed both surprise and delight at having been, at least temporarily, tolerated, if not accepted by members of the dominant
group. The resistance to the stigma occurs when the women cross the boundaries, whether to invite heterosexuals to social events or to attend those hosted by straights.

**Paradox Two: Fear Among Family**

Families keep appearing in the text as problematic when one of the universal functions of family is to protect. A significant number of women report feeling anxious and desiring to remain closeted from their brothers versus any other family member. Moreover, many of the women talked about remaining closeted in order to “protect” family members who remain in the small towns or communities where the subjects grew up. It was also common, when women had children from previous relationships, to express a great deal of concern over possible custody issues. In other words, negotiating family ties and networks proved to be as problematic, if not more problematic, for my subjects than relationships with strangers or community members.

These strategies and adaptive behaviors are also present in relationships with family members where the paradox is this. The women in my sample expressed this fear as a need to “protect” their current relationship, their family of origin, and/or their children while also recognizing that they would not be protected by their family members. Only one of the 26 women in my sample still lived in her community of origin at the time of our interview and she was in the process of leaving her husband for her first female partner. She expressed a great amount of fear concerning her children, both young teenagers at the time. Her fears were centered in whether or not she would be “allowed” to see them, whether or not they would still love her, and whether or not they would like her new partner.
These fears around family and children are very real to the women as evidenced by their responses when I asked them about family relationships. Statements such as “I didn’t want to embarrass them” and “my being closeted was more about them, than me” show again that the women certainly recognize their subordinate status as morally and/or ethically devalued and sought to protect their families from experiencing that stigma. A significant number of women report feeling anxious and desiring to remain closeted from their brothers versus any other family member. Moreover, many of the women talked about remaining closeted in order to “protect” family members who remain in the small towns or communities where the subjects grew up.

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My data shows that my subjects who are out to some family members most often express fear about coming out to their brothers. Living in a rural area presents different framing rules that intensify the masculine/feminine dynamic. It seems that redneck men and brothers become the gatekeepers for heterosexuality in rural areas. The threat of violence by redneck men serves to limit queer’s access to resources that would enable them to challenge heterosexual majority in power. Additionally, it is possible that rural areas tend to emphasize the more traditional gender expectations and that masculinity is emphasized more acutely.

An example from my data that this emotional conditioning is effective is through the ways in which the women interacted with and around their family members. One woman
passed along a stance her brother and sister-in-law had taken regarding their children regarding visitation with their aunt. Her brother said to her that “they (brother and sister-in-law) don’t want my nieces and nephews to think that what I do is okay”.

*Strategies that create crisis moments*

It is important to note that 16 of the 26 women reported being out to family with no qualifications. That is, they are “completely” out. However, it is also important to note that none of these 16 women who are out to their families live in the same community with their families. Furthermore, several women made comments that suggest they are raising their own children to be more tolerant of diversity. This can be understood as an act of resistance whereby these women pass along different beliefs and values to the next generation of their family.

To better understand the dynamics between families and lesbian members, it is important to see the relationship as one between subordinates and dominants in an unequal social arrangement. Many women in my sample acted in ways towards their families that were protective of them as the result of conditioned emotional subjectivity. Conditioned emotional subjectivity is an individual’s acquired habits of interpretation. That is, the way an individual responds to or *feels* about other people or events depends upon the meanings they have learned, through interaction, to give to those people or situations. For the dominant groups’ claims of superiority to remain intact, an inferior group has to not only be created, but sustained through interaction and adaptive practices. For subordinates to be complicit, subjective emotional conditioning must uphold the inequality as well. In other words, the smooth reproduction of inequality depends upon everyone managing the emotions of their particular status, lesbian family members included.
For example, when flight attendants are taught by employers to disregard and not be angered by the sexist behavior of male passengers, the flight attendants are then accessories in the reproduction of gender inequality (Schwalbe, et.al., 2000). In similar fashion, if we know that the presence of homosexuals is likely to elicit anger and heckling from heterosexuals, we manage that anticipated emotion, in most cases, by not evoking it. That is, the person might attempt to “look straight” in that situation. When families inspire fear around sexual orientation, then remaining closeted is a way to manage that possibly dangerous, at least uncomfortable, social situation.

In this way, families are complicit in the reproduction of inequality as well. Inequality inevitably produces situations where we are all oppressed and we are all oppressors. That is the importance of looking at the processes that produce and maintain the inequalities.

**Paradox Three – Reactions to gender rules and sexual expectations**

The subjects perform an incredible amount of emotion work and navigating in order to present themselves as “free” or “authentic”. That is, they clearly indicate pride in their sexual orientation and none of the women report having ever sought therapy or help as a result of her sexual orientation. Yet, their behaviors would indicate that they are not as authentic as they claim since many take explicit action to remain closeted.

*Strategies that reproduce the inequality*

The strategies that most often reproduced inequality about gender could be defined as defensive othering. Defensive othering is identity work done by those seeking membership in a dominant group, or by those seeking to deflect the stigma they experience as members of a subordinate group (Schwalbe, et.al. 2000). Several women in my study talked about other queer women “looking gay” and expressed how they never thought they “looked gay”. They
also reported knowing other women who were gay because they “looked like a fullback for the football team”. Statements such as, “I don’t look gay” or “I don’t look butchy” indicate acknowledgment of the stigmatized status and in essence denying its applicability to one’s self. This behavior is the result of oppression and unfortunately adds to its perpetuation.

It is important to remember that defensive othering does not define into existence a group of exploitable Others. It is a reaction to an oppressive identity code already imposed by a dominant group. Though defensive othering is an adaptive reaction, it nonetheless aids the reproduction of inequality. That is, when members of subordinate groups seek safety or advantage by othering those in their own group, the belief system that supports the dominant group’s claim to superiority is reinforced. Thus, when some subordinates break solidarity and seek to fashion powerful, or at least creditable, selves by embracing and enforcing the identity code of the dominant group, they inadvertently aide the reproduction of a larger system of inequality.

The rural area produces a cyclical dilemma – knowing a queer person would help to produce greater tolerance in rural areas. Rural areas are steeped in strong tradition and conservatism making coming out very difficult for most lesbians. Therefore, the personal contact with a non-heterosexual person that would produce greater tolerance never happens and the intolerance is perpetuated along with the oppression of the non-heterosexual person. The first step in producing inequality is the creation and/or maintenance of difference followed by the unequal valuing of those differences (Schwalbe et.al. 2000).

Strategies that create crisis moments

In the same way that complicit silence upholds the inequality, indicators or markers of one’s sexual orientation serve to challenge the social order, possibly through simply
making one’s presence known. Though there were no discernable patterns of those who chose to fly rainbow flags or place their partner’s picture on their desk at work, there were women who claimed the markers and identifiers of their sexual orientation.

For example, one woman told a local neighbor that she did not have a “wife or young’uns” which elicited quite a shocked look from him. One woman told me that she intentionally put her rainbow sticker back on her car because she was convinced that it was her place to help open dialogue with the locals. Another woman told me of advertising land for sale to other lesbians, thus indicting herself and making her presence known in the community.

Even though these may feel like isolated events, they are important events for building strategies of resistance. Each time relations between heterosexuals and non-heterosexuals are negotiated in a peaceful, mutually satisfying way, the road to better communication and relationships is widened and lengthened.

Reflections on the Project

Strengths

The most beneficial outcome of a study such as this one is that awareness of the processes that produce and maintain inequality can be identified and perhaps used to help reduce them. This kind of research can help build pressure for social change by identifying the mechanisms that help to create and sustain inequality. Finding patterns in the reproduction of inequality empowers those who are in subordinate positions act in particular and meaningful ways that resist the inequality versus an unknowing compliance with the reproduction. Many of the women in my sample are eager to read the “results”. I have e-mail addresses for these women and plan to make the study available as an attachment online. I will also utilize the results of my project in the classroom to aid in discussions
around the creation and maintenance of inequality of all types. Furthermore, I will ask local lesbian and/or lesbian friendly publications that aided in the recruitment process to print a short summary of the results of my study.

Utilizing this approach disallows reification and the “naturalization” of outcomes and instead discloses the behaviors and motives of the social actors. If we only look at outcomes, we miss what’s really going on with these women. If we ask them what it’s like to be a lesbian in a rural community in terms of outcomes such as “have you ever been attacked” or “have you lost your job” etc., then we fail to see the work that goes on in holding these boundaries and inequalities in place. If the woman answers “no”, she has never been attacked, we might assume that rural, non-heterosexuals are in no danger. However, when we ask the women about how they feel or take a closer look, we find that the outcome has been avoided by a variety of other behaviors and practices that both mask and perpetuate the inequalities. So, while it is important not to blame victims for their own subordinate status, it is imperative that we point out their practices that contribute to the inequality.

The reduction of social inequality requires that we adequately understand the mechanisms by which it is reproduced. This study forms a foundation for a closer analysis of those mechanisms that reproduce inequality among rural, non-heterosexual women.

Weaknesses

Access to a marginalized population is difficult, even when you are a member of that population. As discussed in the methods and sampling chapter, it was difficult to find a population “as rural” as I had hoped. I found that I had strong preconceived notions about what rural was even though I did not have definitive criteria. However, I did have a notion of what I thought rural looked liked and continued to search for those women.
One of the most frustrating aspects of the project was feeling on three separate occasions that I was about to break in to a network where the women were more hidden, more rural, and less connected to internet technology. On all three occasions, I was told by a subject that she would check with some women she knew to see if they would be willing to talk with me. Their uniform response was “no” and another common denominator was that they “didn’t know me and weren’t comfortable with talking to me”. A future study might use a smaller initial sample and work out from those few subjects into networks versus casting a broader net for respondents through list serves and news postings. An ethnographic approach such as living in a community where rural lesbians reside would also provide for greater rapport and network building. Through closer, more personal, sustained contact, the more difficult to reach population might become more accessible.

Suggestions for Future Research

I did find a population of women who consider themselves both rural and non-heterosexual and who were willing to talk about their experiences while showing that not all queer folk head to and/or stay in urban areas. It is clear that my subjects perceive the potential dangers of their environment. They also report a lack of amenities and support for lesbians in rural areas. However, the dangers and drawbacks that have been cited in the literature do not appear to be of paramount importance to my population. For one reason, many of the women say their “communities” are present in their workplaces or nearby cities where they drive for socializing with others and enjoying services and/or cultural events. Therefore, to become rural is one aspect of their lives rather than a defining status. It might be useful to replicate this study in a rural state where there are no urban areas within easy driving distance.
Another area for future examination is the role that these women see for the internet and for media in their own lives. I asked them, in particular, what they thought the effects of these mediums would be on the heterosexual, rural population. While they offered some good insights, I realize that perhaps better use of the data would have been to ask how these channels function presently for them in their rural situations. I do have some data that was offered voluntarily in this area. A more detailed study of this would be helpful.

Another avenue that could yield interesting and helpful results would be to pursue the connections between sex, gender, and rural traditions. Since the connections and relationships among sex and gender were of secondary interest to me in this study, the questions asked and data collected were not specifically designed to interrogate that relationship. However, the subjects did use language and stories that suggested a connection between the ways they think about and express gendered selves within both communities of origin and present residence.

Furthermore, the traditional hegemonic masculinities and emphasized femininities they report as still predominant in rural areas is an intriguing area that I would like to further investigate. The fear of traditional men, brothers, and rednecks is obvious in these situations. A closer, more explicit look at these perceptions of traditional men and how rural lesbians negotiate these relationships would be useful for the further study of heterosexism as social inequality and how it is played out in a rural setting.

Final reflections

This study, which began as an open-ended investigation into the lives of women who consider themselves both rural and non-heterosexual, has provided rich data, interesting findings, and more questions to be considered. By examining the women’s perceptions of rural persons, rural life, and their behaviors related to rural life, I found that the women in my
study find great peace, and safety in their rural environments. This joy and safety seems to be a product of the isolation that others’ might perceive as a negative. However, in the case of the women in this study, the isolation is a bonus.

Furthermore, this peace and safety does come with a cost in that the women employ strategies to negotiate their marginalized status in the rural community. The strategies may be as blatant as choosing to possess firearms or as seemingly benign as “not flaunting” one’s sexual orientation. These strategies, in my data, fall into three major categories of paradoxical behaviors. The behaviors can either serve to reproduce the inequality or create crisis moments where the inequality can be challenged.

The first major paradox, safety in isolation, captures the behaviors of the women, such as remaining in the closet, that allow them to move about in relative safety in their rural environments. While these behaviors provide short-term peace and safety for the women, these same behaviors perpetuate the isolation and secrecy that other marginalized people must endure.

In like fashion, the second major paradox, fear among family, points to the navigating that the women in my sample must accomplish in order to protect their families of origin while finding ways to live true and authentic lives with their partners of choice. Only one woman lives in her rural community of origin, showing that, in this study, this protection of family members generally comes at the cost of leaving one’s family.

The final paradox, hiding out, investigates the coping that accompanies a healthy sense of self in a less than accepting environment. That is, the women in my sample, without fail, claim to be happy and peaceful with their sexual orientation. However, this claim must often be suppressed in order to gain the safety in isolation that they feel in their rural homes.
My study shows that the perceptions of non-heterosexual women of their own rural environments does not necessarily focus on the shortcomings or hardships of their rural lives. Instead, the women in my sample seem to fully acknowledge the perceived and real dangers of living as lesbians in a rural environment; however, they also navigate and cope in ways that allow them to reap what they perceive to be as great rewards of rural living. While some of their behaviors reproduce inequality and some challenge the status quo, all of their behaviors can be better understood as reactions to living in a marginalized status in a larger environment of social inequality.
REFERENCES


Appendix A
Call for Subjects

The following was posted in local lesbian and/or gay friendly establishments and placed on several lesbian operated internet list serves in order to solicit interview subjects.

Looking for rural lesbians to participate in an interview study. The study is my doctoral dissertation and addresses the particular needs and circumstances of rural lesbians. If you define yourself as a non-heterosexual woman and as a resident of a rural area, you are qualified to participate. The interviews last about one hour, are tape recorded, and are conducted as informal conversations. I assure you complete confidentiality and professionalism.

If you would like to participate or have more questions, please contact me at (web address and phone number). Your assistance will be valuable and appreciated.
Appendix B
Full Interview Schedule

**Background and Context:** The following will be in addition to demographics such as age, race, etc. for purposes of sample description and parameters.

- How would you describe the community that you spent the most time in prior to your twelfth birthday? possible probes: farm, rural area but not farm, small town (less than 50,000), somewhere between 50-300,000 people, large metropolis (greater than 300,000)
- How would you describe the community that you lived in from 12 – 18 years?
- How does your last place of residence compare to this one in terms of size?
- Do you have any lesbian neighbors that you know of? How close (proximity)? Tell me about your relationship(s) with this woman or these women?

**Sexual Background:**

- What word(s) do you prefer to use to describe your emotional and/or sexual preference?
- What is the sexual orientation of most of your closest friends?
- Are any of your family members homosexual?
- At what age did you first recognize your emotional and physical sexual attraction to women?
- How old were you when you had your first sexual relationship with another woman?

**Degree of “outness”:** I want to determine how freely lesbians are/feel they are able to be authentic in their everyday worlds.

- Who are you out to?
- Who are you not out to?
- How many lesbians work where you do? Are they (is she) out? If so, to what degree?
- Is there anyone who is important to you who does not know that you are a lesbian?
- In what way(s) is this person (these people) important to you (beyond the readily apparent)?
- How do you decide who to tell?
- Does anyone know that you are a lesbian that you wish did not know?
- Have you been “outed”?
- How has that affected your position in the community?

**Education:**

- Tell me about your early educational aspirations.
- How would you describe the role of education in your life?
- Has your sexual orientation contributed in any way to your educational beliefs and/or practices?
Partners / Relationships

- Are you presently in a sexual relationship with another woman?
- How do you / would you describe this relationship?
- How long have you been in this relationship?
- How did you meet?
- Are you living with your current partner? For how long?
- How long did you date before you began living together?
- Have you lived with any other women in a sexual relationship?
- For every live-in relationship,
  - How long did you date before you began living together?
  - How did you meet?
  - How long did your living together arrangement continue?

- How many women have you dated?
- How many women have you slept with?
- How many relationships that you have been in would you consider to be committed relationships?

Employment:

- Are you currently employed?
- What is your usual occupation?
- Do you feel that your sexual orientation has been a factor in any way concerning your employment/ career success?
- Tell me about your first job. How did you hear about it?
- Was your sexual orientation a factor in selecting this job? How?
- Was sexual orientation involved at all in your work performance?
- relations with peers?
- Was your sexual orientation in any way involved in your decision to leave this job?
- How do you decide whether or not to be “out” in your workplace?
- What are the most important factors for you in choosing a job?

Involvement in community of residence: If the individuals feel free to be authentic and genuine, I would like to know if this is the result of tolerance and/or acceptance in the community or the outcome of successful navigation around obstacles on the part of the individuals in the study. It may be that neither is true or that some combination is actually the case.

- Think of people you see and interact with every day. Who are they?
- What kinds of things do you do beside work?
- Take me through a week day. a weekend day.
- What do people do around here?
- Do you join in?
• What sort of community-based events are you a part of?
• What kinds/types of people are there?
• What kind of community events do you specifically avoid?
• What kinds/types of people are there?
• Do you participate in any events or frequent any establishments that are exclusively for lesbians? like what? how often? are these events in your community of residence or not?

Perceptions: I would like to know how the respondents feel that the community views them.

• How do you feel like other people view you?
• Has anyone changed the way they act toward you as a result of finding out about your sexual orientation? Can you tell me about that?
• Have there been any surprises living here in (subject’s town)?

Specific Rural Effects:

• Describe what it is like to be a rural lesbian.
• What are the differences as you see them in living as a lesbian in a rural environment versus an urban environment?
• How important are religion and religious beliefs in your community of residence?
• Are there any social support groups available to you as a rural lesbian? formal or informal?
• Do you see/perceive any changes in the way that homosexuals are regarded in your community over the past three years? past ten years?
• Describe the role of family in rural life as you perceive it.

Exposure to Others:

• Do you belong to any lesbian organizations?
• Do you receive or subscribe to any exclusively lesbian publications or web sites?
• Where/how do you meet other lesbians?
• How often do you attend mainstream movies?
• Do you feel that lesbians are being portrayed more today than ten years ago in mainstream movies?
• How do you feel about the portrayal of lesbians in movies? television? printed publications?
• How often do you attend independent films?
• How would you characterize the portrayal of lesbians in these films?
Other:

- How would you describe your physical health?
- How would you describe your emotional health?
- Have you ever sought therapy or counseling because of your sexual orientation? If so, tell me about that.