

Introduction

Kate Foster, a white woman in her forties who grew up in the South, came out as a lesbian in the late 1960s, before the Stonewall Rebellion marked the birth of the gay liberation movement in 1969. She first suspected that she might be a lesbian in the late 1950s, when at age twelve she “had a mad crush on a woman who was thirteen years older than [she) was.” As Kate recalled, “It seemed to be out of proportion to what I was supposed to be feeling about anybody other than boys my age.”

Despite the persistence of these strong feelings for women, Kate did not consider herself a lesbian until much later. “I made a pact with Jesus at the time,” she said. “I was from a very religious family, and we went to church three times a week, and this woman happened to be in the church choir. So this one particular day when I was very obsessed with my potential perversion, I was waiting until the church service began. And I started praying, and I said, ‘Dear God. If I’m queer, give me a sign.’ Of course, I picked the sign, and that sign was that G. would not appear in the choir that Sunday morning. Well, it was pretty easy to get my wish, my confirmation

of my normative status, because G. appeared in the choir every Sunday morning almost with the regularity of the sun coming up. So it wasn't exactly like asking wine to come from the rock. Nevertheless, she walked in. I felt relieved, and I didn't think about the issue again until I was eighteen."

At age eighteen she found herself "passionately kissing another woman": "It occurred to me that the problem had not entirely been resolved. . . . And my reaction to that first encounter, that passionate kiss, was to get up out of bed, brush my teeth vigorously, walk back to the bed, and say, 'I'm not that kind of girl.' And the next night I was that kind of girl all over again!"

"Between the ages of nineteen and twenty there was a year-and-a-half to two-year period in which I was quite convinced that my affair with M. had been just a mistake, one of those biological bleeps that occur. I did not doubt that I was heterosexual and felt that I simply, for whatever reason, had gotten my sexual orientation slightly confused. I did not at that time discredit my feelings about M., but was convinced that once she was gone and I was over that breakup that I would pick up and go on my merry heterosexual way, which I proceeded to do. It was only when I realized that I was attracted to women other than M. that I could no longer ignore the fact that I was in fact probably predominantly attracted to women. . . . And from that point on with rare exception I considered myself homosexual."

When Kate became involved with feminism, her interpretation of her sexual identity began to change. "Up until 1975, I described myself as gay. And when I began to understand the political significance of my sexual preference and my choice to be exclusively homosexual, I began to use the term lesbian. Because for me it described not only my private life but my stance in the world and how I viewed . . . my life as a type of social critique." Kate said, "As a lesbian, I was not in any way having to either at an economic level or a social level or psychological level put myself in a position of subordination to a male relationship."

Looking back, Kate says, “I had some encounters with men that made me believe that in a different society I would perhaps be bisexual. However, I didn’t [make that choice], because I felt there was something fundamentally a part of my essence that I had to honor, in my own psychological health. Socially, I could have been heterosexual. Psychologically, I think I have always been homosexual. I’ve always been a lesbian. . . . And at this point in my life, my lesbian identity is absolutely clear. It’s as much a part of me as having brown eyes.”

Kate’s story documents just one of the ways in which women may arrive at a lesbian or bisexual identity. There are many other identity accounts. Some see their sexual identities as basic, fixed, not open to change or reinterpretation; whereas others see their identities as essentially fluid, changing over the life course in response to changing contexts and circumstances. Some see their identities as something unwelcome, painfully acknowledged, and only with great difficulty transformed into a source of pride. Yet others see their identity as a gift or blessing, and a source of great joy.

Although nearly five years older, Joan Borman, a Jewish feminist, came to define herself as a lesbian over ten years after Kate had. Joan recounted, “I got married as soon as I graduated from college, and I had been married for eleven years. And then I left my husband, my former husband, for another man. I fell in love with another man, . . . and I lived with him for almost five years. And then I decided to leave him and be on my own. . . . But I think that part of the process of leaving him was a recognition that I wasn’t going to be with any other men in my life. That I had no desire to be with another man in my life.” This led her toward a lesbian identity: “There have certainly been times in my life that I have been celibate, but since I understood that I was going to be a sexual person, and since I was very serious about not being involved with men, it seemed that there was nothing else. There was only one alternative.”

For Joan, who had long been involved in progressive politics, coming out as a lesbian was not a decision about her sexual self: “I didn’t come out because I had always been miserable as a straight woman, as far as sex was concerned. I had always been miserable as a straight woman as far as emotion was concerned, and so it was very hard, sort of testing out the lesbian world. . . . There were times when my sexual relationships with women were either not as satisfying or differently satisfying, and so it took quite a while for me to sort through that. . . . I was not someone who spent all of my life thinking ‘I really must be a lesbian and what am I going to do with this.’ But [I] saw it as an opening up of possibilities for my life, and the reason that I saw that is because other women had created a world that I could see.”

Joan’s lesbian identity is clearly related to her feminism, her progressive politics, and the visible lesbian culture and community that women had begun to create in the 1970s. Her identity account seems clearly rooted in choice. Yet in reflecting on the years that she has lived as a lesbian, she has come to a somewhat different understanding. When she came out in the early 1980s, she said, “I felt at the time as if I were making a choice. On the other hand, I felt as if I couldn’t continue to live the life that I had been living—the straight life. I couldn’t do that anymore. The more that I knew, the more that I questioned, the more that I read, the less palatable it was for me, the less I could find ways of pretending to myself that I was enjoying what was going on. . . . Now when I look back on it, I sort of see this inexorable pull toward something that I now define as a lesbian existence, because what’s clear to me now is that whatever the ups and downs of daily life, whatever the problems, . . . I am not crazy the way I was when I was straight.”

Kate’s and Joan’s stories represent only two of the identity accounts women offer. This book focuses on the variety of stories lesbian and bisexual women tell about who they are and the commu-

nity they live in. An open lesbian, I lived in a small eastern community from 1986 to 1991. From 1988 to 1991, I conducted interviews and surveys with approximately 120 lesbian and bisexual women in this community. In 1994, I returned to see how the community had changed, to reinterview some of the original women, and to conduct new interviews. Based on the interviews and my experiences in the community, this book examines the stories lesbian and bisexual women tell about who they are, how they come to see themselves as lesbian or bisexual, and what those identities mean to them. Yet identities are not constructed in isolation. Their meanings arise in part from the social and historical contexts in which people find themselves. This book thus examines as well the community in which these women live. In interviews and surveys, women describe “the” lesbian community they live in: how they see its structure, its social groups, its informal rules and norms for behavior, and their places inside —r on the margins of—the community.

Although technically a city, this community has the flavor of a cosmopolitan small town. Despite a relatively small population (less than 35,000), the city, like many other college towns, supports numerous environmental, political, and social groups; food cooperatives and credit unions; and an array of bookstores, movie houses, restaurants, and small businesses. The city tends to elect more progressive politicians and to enact more progressive legislation than many other cities of its size and location. In 1984, for example, the city passed a fair practice ordinance prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, and, in 1990, the city passed a domestic partnership ordinance, which allows lesbian and gay couples (as well as unmarried heterosexual couples) to register their partnerships and gain access to some of the privileges accorded to married heterosexual couples. For these reasons, the city attracts a fairly large lesbian and gay population.

The community has many resources for lesbians and gays (and far fewer for bisexuals). It supports a number of political organizations,

support groups, businesses, a mixed lesbian and gay bar, and a women's book store. The Lesbian and Gay Task Force (which changed its name in the early 1990s to the Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Task Force) holds monthly meetings and sponsors coffeehouses, concerts, lectures, and other social events. For a brief time, branches of Act Up and Queer Nation, both dedicated to direct-action politics, were active. Lesbian and bisexual women are active in the Task Force and other organizations. They gather socially in a number of places: at the bar, at concerts produced by a women's music production company, at softball games during the summer, at card games, and at private parties.

Over the period of the study, the lesbian community had changed relatively little. New women moved into town and others moved away; some groups folded and others became larger and stronger. Over the six-year period, a lesbian "baby boom" became very much in evidence. A number of women gave birth to children or adopted, and a mothers' support group was started. Ideologically, the community seemed to become looser, a little more tolerant. Yet in key ways, the community seemed much the same. There were still fairly deep divisions between those who were associated with the university and college and those who lived downtown. The Task Force was still the center of lesbian/gay political life downtown, while those who were involved in women's studies, in one way or another, were at the heart of lesbian life on campus. Although there was, increasingly, crossover between the two groups, many long-time residents were suspicious of students and other transient residents.

Lesbian communities are not constructed unproblematically; nor are they monolithic. For some women, especially bisexual women, lesbian community is a painful myth. Faced with rejection or demands for conformity from those whom they feel should be most accepting, some lesbians and bisexual women have abandoned the notion of community. Yet others see lesbian commu-

nity as a lifeline and source of camaraderie. Some drift in and out of the community, at times pushing to be near the “center,” and at other times drawing back. Highlighting the stories of all three groups of women, this book explores both sides of lesbian and bisexual community life.

Presenting the women’s accounts in their own words is a major emphasis of this book. But the book also attempts to move beyond storytelling, seeking to understand how these women’s accounts of their lives resonate with social science theories of identity and community. Much theorizing about lesbian and gay identity takes place outside the realm of empirical research, and **up** until very recently, little attention has been paid to bisexuality.’ Few have attempted to explore lesbian and bisexual identities simultaneously. This book seeks to do both.

Drawing loosely on social constructionist approaches to identity, the book argues that identities are multiple and contingent. Created within the context of specific communities and within specific relationships, identities are ways of sorting through experiences of desires and attractions, relationships, and politics. And their meanings change over time: as women grow older and have more varied experiences, as their communities and sociopolitical environments change, and as life circumstances alter.

The women whose narratives are presented in this book understand their attractions to women—and to men—differently, depending on their own life situations and on the discourses about sexuality and sexual identity available to them. They used a variety of words and images to describe themselves, and these changed over time as they came to understand their sexual histories in different lights. In sharp contrast to the 1950s and early 1960s, the growth of a women’s movement in the late 1960s and 1970s allowed women to claim explicitly feminist lesbian identities. As Kate clearly recognized, the lesbian feminism that she claimed in the mid 1970s was simply not possible when she first came out in

the late 1960s. Similarly, Joan felt she simply would not have come out were it not for the feminist movement. And some years later, when Marcela Reyes, a young Latina lesbian, began to embrace the word *dyke* to describe herself, she did this as a conscious reclamation enabled by feminists and sex radicals writing and organizing in the 1980s.

Not all of the women interviewed saw their sexuality as an outgrowth of their feminism or changed their understandings of their sexuality in response to a feminist movement. Bonita Brown, an African American graduate student from a working-class background, grew up in a major urban area during the height of the women's movement. Yet her coming out was marked by isolation, fear, and loneliness. "I had read lesbian books and literature, but I had no idea that other lesbians existed. For some reason it did not click to me that if someone's writing these books, then there are other people like me." Meeting women was difficult "because I wouldn't identify myself. Because I wouldn't know how—I didn't even know how to go about it." Whether her isolation from feminism and other lesbians was due to the movement's seeming irrelevance to poor and working-class women and women of color, or to her own personal and family history, is not apparent. What *is* clear is that she did not experience the heady sense of liberation that some women expressed coming out as lesbians into a feminist movement and community.

As the women looked back during the interviews, they interpreted their histories through their present understandings of themselves. If interviewed at different points in time, the women may well have offered different life stories. This became particularly apparent when in 1994 I reinterviewed thirteen women who had initially been interviewed in 1989. For several, their accounts had changed dramatically. Perhaps most dramatic is Sally Zimmerman's story. At the first interview, she was working through the breakup of a long-term relationship with a woman and strug-

gling to maintain the connection as their relationship changed. At that time, she felt herself to be strongly lesbian. At the time of the second interview, she was married to a man and still struggling to maintain connections with her former woman lover. But she did not feel herself to be heterosexual; nor did she feel strongly about the term bisexual. She felt, instead, like a lesbian involved with a man.

Changes in identity accounts such as these do not mean that Sally or any of the other women are on their way to discovering a “true” self: that their past accounts are somehow false or unreflective of who they “really” are and that the researcher, as privileged interpreter of their experiences, is the arbiter of the “true” meaning of those experiences. The interviewees’ accounts do not tell us about some “objective” or reified process of coming to identify as lesbian or bisexual. But women’s subjective understandings of their life histories are important in and of themselves, for these histories tell us how women, at least in one small community, over one period of time, came to situate themselves in a changing and complex social world.

How social science theories construct sexual identities is an important part of that landscape. These theories not only shape how researchers articulate the nature of sexual identity—even the notion that people *have* sexual identities—but they also determine what researchers see and hear when they solicit lesbians’ and bisexuals’ accounts. Through pop psychology and self-help books, such as JoAnn Loulan’s popular series of books and lectures (1984, 1987), and through therapy and counseling, academic theories filter into lesbian and bisexual women’s own accounts. Although this may be more the case in university communities and among those with higher levels of education, it also occurs more broadly.

For this reason, the book begins by examining social science theories of sexual identity. Over the last few decades, theory and research into the nature of identity has grown substantially. As

Philip Gleason (1983) documents, references to the concept were rare prior to the 1950s. Since that time, however, theories abound, not only in the fields of psychology and sociology but in literary theory, history, anthropology, and the growing field of queer theory. The term *identity* itself, as Gleason notes, is both “elusive and ubiquitous” (p. 910). Thus, a comprehensive review of the general literature on identity is well beyond the scope of this book. Even the literature on lesbian and gay identity is substantial. As Vivienne Cass characterized it in the early 1980s, the literature on homosexual identity is like “an overgrown garden, badly in need of pruning” (1983/1984, p. 106).

If the literature on lesbian/gay identity is an overgrown garden, then the literature on bisexual identity is a packet of seeds and an only partly sown field. Relatively few have conducted research into the nature of bisexual identity; and even fewer have attempted to theorize lesbian and bisexual identity simultaneously, without seeing bisexuality as lesser or merely a step along a lesbian path (Paula Rust [1992b, 1993] and Carla Golden [1994] are notable exceptions; see also Marjorie Garber [1995]). But bisexual women’s identity accounts call into question the dual categories of sexuality created in modern Western societies. Although bisexuality has often been seen (at least by many lesbians and gay men) as a transitional stage prior to adopting a “true” lesbian or gay identity, for some women a lesbian identity is merely a transition point to a more stable sense of self as bisexual. The recent emergence of bisexual identity and, perhaps, a bisexual movement offers insight into the construction of sexual identities.

The first chapters of the book explore questions of sexual identity. Chapter 1 examines the social science literature on sexual identity, focusing on theories drawn from three major areas: developmental psychology, sociology, and, in a much more limited way, poststructuralism and queer theory. Throughout, theories of identity are grounded in women’s accounts of their lives. Chapter

2 focuses more explicitly on the stories people tell to account for or explain their sexual identities. This chapter examines how women define their sexual identities, how they came to understand themselves as lesbian or bisexual, and so on. The identity accounts show that identities are not constructed in fixed, invariant ways; nor are they completely idiosyncratic. Using information from five-year follow-up interviews with thirteen women, Chapter 3 looks at some of the changes women experience over time. For some women, sexual identity is fluid. For others, sexual identity is more stable.

Chapter 4 focuses on lesbian style: the “performance” of lesbian identity and the shifting boundaries that interviewees drew between themselves and heterosexual women. This chapter examines how the women create a distinctive lesbian presence in the world, how they recognize others, and how their senses of what a lesbian “looks” like draw on and transform traditional formulations of masculinity and femininity.

Sexual identities may be among the most important identities individuals hold; yet they are certainly not the only identities. Although middle-class and white lesbians may not think of themselves as having specific race and class identities, race and class importantly shape individuals’ life circumstances. Chapter 5 examines the multiple identities that lesbian and bisexual women hold, paying particular attention to race and class, and setting sexual identities within a larger social and political context.

Chapter 6 explores some of the historical and theoretical dimensions of lesbian/bisexual community and describes the somewhat contradictory meanings of community held by the women in this community. Instead of seeing community as a stable, geographically bounded entity, the chapter examines the meanings community holds for participants and the ways in which individuals fashion meaning out of a shared social category (di Leonardo 1984). Chapter 6 sets forth a notion of community as a set of overlapping

friendship circles and explores the implications for women who are different.

Chapter 7 examines the rules for behavior—subtle and unspoken as well as more overt—that arose in this particular lesbian community. The chapter considers this paradox: How sometimes restrictive rules for behavior develop in a community based on principles of individual freedom and nonconformity to the mainstream society. Chapter 8 explores the variety of ways in which bisexual women define their sexuality, the difficulties in creating an autonomous bisexual community, and the limits to lesbian community posed by bisexual women. Yet not all lesbian and bisexual women experience their senses of themselves in the context of a community. Chapter 9 **looks** at the possibilities for creating identities outside the confines of a lesbian community. Some of the limits of community life are explored, and possibilities for reconceiving it in a less limiting way are offered.