



“I am very much a story waiting to be told”: An analysis of the ‘coming out’ stories of women making the transition from hetero-sexual to lesbian identity

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ABSTRACT

In traditional models of development, sexual identity is a reflection of an inherent sexuality, discovered through goal-oriented stages typically beginning in childhood or adolescence (Coleman 1982, Troiden 1989). For Women who take on a lesbian identity after a substantial period of heterosexual identity, the implication of such models is that they are conceptualised as either lesbians who have gone through a period of ‘repression’ or denial, or that they are ‘not really’ lesbians but instead alter their ‘natural’ sexual inclinations because of their ideologies (Kitzinger & Wilson 1995). A qualitative analysis of the ‘coming out’ narratives of 4 women was carried out to explore the process of negotiation of changes in sexual identity for such women at the level of individual subjective experience, with consideration of the ways in which historically based narratives of sexuality influence the development of individual sexuality. Three email interviews and one telephone interview were conducted and analysed using a thematic analysis within a phenomenological framework. The author explores the concept that sexual identity is better viewed as a process rather than a property of the individual, and that individuals draw from available discourses in constructing their own personal narrative. The implications for lesbian visibility are discussed.

KEY WORDS:	SEXUALITY	IDENTITY	LESBIAN	QUALITATIVE	NARRATIVE
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Introduction

The research presented here is based on an analysis of women's 'coming out' narratives, in particular women who have made a transition to a lesbian identity following a substantial period of heterosexual identity. In a sense all lesbian women have made such a transition because we live in a heteronormative society, in which heterosexuality is assumed as the unexamined norm and gay and lesbian sexualities are marked as 'other' (Jackson 1999). Yet traditional views of sexuality, in which changes in sexual identity are explained as examples of psychological immaturity hold certain implications for the ways in which women who 'come out' in adulthood (rather than adolescence) are perceived and in their own process of identity construction. The research will explore the process of negotiation of changes in sexual identity for such women at the individual level of subjective experience, with consideration of the ways in which historically based narratives of sexuality influence the development of individual sexual identity.

To be a lesbian is not a trans-historical position, though romantic relationships have existed between women throughout history, the ever changing social and cultural meanings ascribed to such behaviour mean that it is a perhaps incomprehensibly different experience, to be a lesbian in different places and at different times in history. Today understanding of lesbian desire is situated within the fairly recent historical construct of sexual identity (Weeks 2000). The idea of an identity based on ones sexuality was made possible through the dichotomisation of heterosexuality and homosexuality, the defining of the homosexual (and accordingly the heterosexual) as a distinct type of person (Weeks 2000, Kitzinger 1987). The formation of such an identity or at least the cultural representation of a lesbian as a distinct type of person is usually accredited to the late 19th Century literature of sexologists such as Kraft Ebbing and Havelock Ellis (Weeks 2000). These sexologists made a distinction between homosexuality as a sexual relation between two people and 'inversion' as a biologically rooted condition. The former being seen as an acquired corruption to be condemned, and the latter as involuntary and therefore tolerable (Weeks 2000). This led the way for the liberal discourses which would provide the framework for 20th Century sexual categorisations and politics, but also left the door open for discourses which placed homosexuality as the manifestation of a disease. Either way perhaps the most crucial effect of sexologists work was to replace the idea of homosexuality as a sin with the notion of homosexuality as pathology, and as such the concern of medical science (Wilton 2000).

Although in the main the concept of homosexuality changed from a religious to a medical problem it is important to note that religious discourses of homosexuality as a *moral* problem continue, indeed all major religions are intensely concerned with the regulation of sexual conduct (Szasz 1981). Despite the contradictions of each paradigm, the two can be understood as existing in "mutual interpenetration" (Wilton 1995). The connection between religious and medical discourses can be traced to the widely recognised observation of social historians that the locus of social control in western culture shifted relatively recently from the church to medicine (Weeks 1985). The legacy of which is the moralistic inference of medical authority, the priest was replaced by the scientist in the role of abater of socially unacceptable behaviour (Szasz 1971).

In a postmodern context ways of understanding the world are not a product of objective observation, but of the social processes and interactions in which people including scientists are constantly engaged in. Scientific accounts are a by product of communal construction seen as part of a cultural activity, inextricably bound with the interests and concerns of the culture within which they are produced (Ashworth 2000). As scientific accounts represent instances where 'particular discourses are given the opportunity to construct an event in this way rather than that'(Burr 1995:50), such accounts ought to be deconstructed to reveal the ways in which they present particular images of people and their actions and in whose interests it serves to do so. In this sense what medical and scientific accounts were 'doing' was to glorify andocentric heterosexuality, through the portrayal of lesbianism as morbidity. Kitzinger (1987) points out that the 'discovery' of women as sexual beings and metamorphosis of lesbianism into abnormality occurred as women's relationships with each other first began to be seen as a threat to heterosexual hegemony. As new social and economic forces gave middle class women the possibility of choosing not to marry, the effect of sexologist accounts of lesbianism was to coerce women into conformity through fears of abnormality (Kitzinger 1987). Or as Hallet (1998) puts it:

“...in other words the lesbian is born to sexologist parents who despise her, who conceive her only in order to teach their 'normal' children a lesson.”
(Hallet 1998:8)

So began the construction of the lesbian as someone with a specific 'essence' distinguishable from 'normal' women, and with it the traditional views of sexual identity as a reflection of an inherent or essential sexuality. The construction of homosexuality through medical, scientific and psychological discourses as a mental, developmental or physical pathology, meant that the lived experience of, along with the regulation of homosexual persons for at least the first 70 years of the 20th Century was one overwhelmingly driven by stigma (Rosenfield 2009). By the early 1970's a competing framework through which those experiencing same sex desire could identify had emerged; The efforts of second wave feminism along with gay liberation in the wake of the Stonewall uprising of 1969, offered the liberal humanistic conceptualization of homosexuality as a status; a lifestyle choice or journey to self-actualisation, an identity that demanded expression (Bernstein 1997). In this conceptualisation the pathologised behaviour becomes homophobia, manifest in those who persist in feeling disgust, hatred, or fear of lesbians or gay men, including those who respond inadequately to their own homosexuality (Kitzinger 1987). Psychology's adoption of this stance was reflected in the American Psychiatric Association's decision in 1973 to replace the former with the latter in their list of mental disorders; the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual. This is the model on which most modernist psychological research since then has been based (Kitzinger & Wilson 1995).

At around the same time sexuality became accepted as an appropriate field of academic scholarship (Wilton 1995). Mary Macintosh's 1968 essay the homosexual role questioned the tradition of believing that homosexuality was a condition that some people had and others did not, asking instead what were the historical circumstances that led us to believe that this was the case (Weeks 2000). According to Weeks (2000) the effect of the essay was to recognise the need to contextualise

homosexuality within a broader sociological and historical framework. This way of thinking took sexuality out of the realm of the 'natural' and questioned instead whose interests it served for sex to be proclaimed as a basic instinct in the first place. Writers on sexual identity such as Foucault (1978) were able to demonstrate the power of culture and history in the construction and legitimisation of sexual identities; that individual identities change over time as the construction of sexuality changes historically (Rust 2009). Within this paradigm identity is a *process* rather than a property of the individual, a process located in and produced by the interface between culture and self, and understood as a reflexive self narrative (Wilton 1995).

Social constructionist perspectives which posit that lesbian identities are cultural products, constructed and reconstructed within particular socially and historically dependent frameworks, may be welcomed by many lesbian and gay academics however such theories have not been accepted wholeheartedly by lesbian and gay communities (Weeks 2000). To whom the idea that homosexuality is socially constructed can seem to pose an annihilating threat to identity, and one which is seen as undermining arguments for equality, founded on the basis of protection against discrimination on the grounds of immutability of sexuality, or because of political choice (Wilton 2000, Jackson 1999). As well as this social constructionism can seem to run against common sense, sexuality is often experienced as immutable by lesbians and gay men; indeed the idea of 'coming out' itself can be viewed as an essentialist model of sexual identity (Plummer 1995). Thus although the social constructionist perspective was able to expose the inconsistencies within essentialising accounts of homosexuality and to show such accounts to be heterosexist and patriarchal, essentialist models of homosexuality remain popular within (modernist) social science, as well as within gay rights movements, and the concepts of lay persons both homosexual and heterosexual (Kitzinger and Wilson 1995, Jackson 1999, Wilton 2000). Consequently it has been argued that social constructionist accounts are somewhat divorced from the experiences of ordinary lesbians and that for such theories to be meaningful they must be rooted in subjective experience (Esterberg 1996).

The intention here of looking at the ways in which sexuality has been discursively constructed both in the past and at present is not simply to provide an 'up the hill' account in which science is presented as progress towards truly scientific understandings but rather to look at the discourses (and the context in which they are embedded) which have been and still are available to social actors, in this case women experiencing same-sex desire, as they negotiate shifts in their identities. The literature on sexual identity development then is dominated by either essentialist or social constructionist positions (Mosher 2001). In traditional models of development sexual identity is a reflection of an inherent sexuality, discovered through goal-oriented stages typically beginning in childhood or adolescence (Coleman 1982, Troiden 1989). Within such models psychological health is achieved through the 'discovery' of and eventual acceptance of an integrated sexual self (Mosher 2001). For women who take on a lesbian identity after a substantial period of heterosexual identity, the implication of such models is that they are conceptualised as either lesbians who have gone through a period of 'repression' or denial, or that they are 'not really' lesbians but instead alter their 'natural' sexual inclinations because of their ideologies (Kitzinger and Wilson 1995). Thus such women are viewed as abnormal or as developmentally delayed rather than as taking a different

developmental pathway (Larson 2006). In a review of the literature on this group of women, Larson (2006) found that despite this group making up an appreciable amount of the lesbian population, around 25 to 30 % (Kitzinger and Wilkinson 1995) only five studies since 1990 had focused specifically on this population (Chabonnaeu & Lander 1991; Jensen 1999; Kitzinger and Wilkinson 1995; O'Leary 1997; Strock 1998 and Wolfe 1998). The findings of these studies indicated that women often experience no same sex attraction in earlier life stages (Chabonnaeu & Lander 1991, Jensen 1999, Kitzinger and Wilkinson 1995, O'Leary 1997), that women often realised same-sex attraction within the context of an intimate friendship (Kitzinger and Wilkinson 1995) and that often other significant life events had been precipitating factors in their identity redirection (Chabonnaeu & Lander 1991, O'Leary 1997). Kinnish, Strassberg & Turner (2005) found that 52% of Lesbians reported multiple changes on dimensions such as identity labels, romantic attraction, sexual fantasy and sexual attraction, where 90% of heterosexual identified individuals had none or one point changes over the lifetime. Such findings suggest that this population do not fit easily into the essentialist concept of sexuality and a more complex understanding one which may account for the multiple aspects of the sexual identity process is called for.

Recently research from the perspective of sexual identity as a narrative *product* or *process* has examined the ways in which identity is produced through a continuous narrative process occurring at both individual and societal levels (Rust 2009). Within this paradigm a person develops a self narrative; an account of the relationship between self relevant events across time, and in doing so attempts to establish coherent connections between the events in their lives (Gergen & Gergen 1998). Thus rather than seeing one's life as just one occurrence after another, individuals attempt to understand life events as systematically related, one's identity then is not simply the result of mental processes or personal characteristics but instead is the logical result of a life story (Gergen & Gergen 1998), a *narrative engagement* with culturally available master narratives (Hammack & Cohler 2009). Plummer (1995) suggested that coming out stories were modernist tales of sexual struggle, culminating in resilience through coming out "now the central narrative of positive gay experience" (1995:84) , he pointed out that before this the coming out story was overwhelmingly one of tragedy, a moral warning often leading to suicide, madness or at the very least loneliness (Plummer 1995). More recently some have suggested the sensing of a shift from a narrative of *struggle and success* to a narrative of *emancipation* from society's social categorisations of sexual identity (Hammack & Cohler 2009, Savin-Williams 2005). Plummer (1995) himself noted that though modernist tales still predominate, there was a sense that new stories were already shifting, becoming more ambiguous, complex and contradictory. Such shifts may offer a new opportunities for women making a transition to Lesbian identity in midlife, to move away from essentialist accounts which implicitly cast their 'delay' in coming out as a developmental failure.

The aim of this research then is to gain an understanding of the coming out process through exploration of the subjective experience of those who have made the transition from heterosexual to Lesbian identity through the analysis of 'coming' out stories or narratives. The research aims to consider the role of narrative in shaping the identity of the women involved in the research, with the view that individuals utilise culturally shared (meta)-narratives in shaping their own (micro)-narratives, but

also that as individual micro-narratives interpenetrate within particular socio-historic contexts, they alter that context and in doing so create historical change (Rust 2009). Thus individual narratives are important in shaping our understanding of wider historical ones:

“we must always be aware that the makers of sexual history do not dwell in the ivory towers of academe but on the ground...., negotiating their everyday lives as best they can in the circumstances in which they find themselves” Weeks (2000:2)

It is worth pointing out that lesbian accounts and self reports have all too often been elicited and used in research with the intention of discovering ‘the truth’ about lesbians, from their behaviours to their childhood experiences. Kitzinger (1987) reveals how the majority of such research uses the rhetoric of scientific method and writing to elevate the status of science as the only legitimate form of knowledge, bolstering the authority of the writers own pronouncements and status as experts, or tellers of objective truth. The research presented here does not rest on any kind of search for facts about lesbians or about those who make transition from heterosexual to lesbian identity, but rather to seek an understanding of identity negotiation through the exploration of individual cases. The research in this respect leans towards the concept of research as provoking, not representing knowledge (Youngblood-Jackson 2008), of opening up regions of ‘truth’ rather than seeking to provide a definitive one (Freeman 2009). It is hoped that the research presented here may contribute to an understanding of particular individuals in society, but also that the research has the potential to increase compassion and a sense of connection to others, particularly as this group is identified as facing unique sources of strain in their identity transition (Larson 2006).

Methodology and Rationale

Dissatisfaction with the modernist quest for objective knowledge through the detachment of researcher and researched, and with the inability of nomothetic methodologies to reflect the complexities of human experience, led to the development of qualitative methods of enquiry within psychology. Methods underpinned by the assumption that there is no knowable objective reality or universal truth but rather that knowledge is context specific and that the researcher, along with the participants, other individuals, groups, social structures, and culturally shared ideologies forms an important part of this context (Lyons 2007). Qualitative methods allow researchers to attend to the complexity and fluidity of such context, through understanding of the impact of contextual influences on the individual subjectivities of research participants or (from a constructionist viewpoint) on the discourses that such contexts do or do not make available to them (Lyons 2007).

In challenging modernist notions of truth and reality we are invited to explore how identity is created through language, stories and relationships and to question our beliefs about knowledge (Etherington 2004). Furthermore the social researcher is able to investigate the histories, along with the social organisation of identities, and explore their boundaries and multiplicities (Ramazanoglu & Holland 2002). The approach taken in this research is primarily phenomenological in that the concern of the researcher (myself) will be to elicit individual experience in terms of meanings

with the aim of exploring the participants' personal and shared perceptions of the topic (Giorgi & Giorgi 2008). The choice of phenomenological approach was appropriate to the research question because it is an approach which values the linguistic and discursive structuring of 'self' but which at the same time is concerned with subjectivity and experience, how a person thinks or feels about what is happening to him or her (Smith & Eatough 2007). I am interested in the subjective experience of women who have made a transition in sexual identity, but equally I am interested in the ways in which their meanings are constructed discursively and in the way personal discourse can shed light on the broader context.

This research is further influenced by the idea that narrative is central to identity and development (Duarte and Lightfoot 2004). At its most basic level a narrative can be defined as 'an organised interpretation of a sequence of events' (Murray 2008:113). However more than this, narrative brings order and meaning to our lives and provides structure to our sense of self hood; it is through narrative that we define ourselves as having a sense of temporal continuity and as being distinct from others (Murray 2008). Thus rather than seeing one's life as just one occurrence after another, individuals attempt to understand life events as systematically related, indeed a person's ability to do so is fundamental to their belief in possessing an identity (Gergen & Gergen 1998).

A further point to be made in situating this research is to highlight that phenomenological research; including narrative psychology (Crossly 2007) is a hermeneutic mode of inquiry; one which involves processes of interpretation. Narratives deal with peoples subjective meanings; they are individuals perceptions of their past, their "interpretative renditions of the past from the standpoint of the present" (Freeman 2009:69). Furthermore the researcher uses their own process of interpretation to understand and go beyond the subjective meanings that come to light, to the social realities which are central to them (Freeman 2009:69).

Research Design

As well as my own philosophical beliefs leaning towards a qualitative methodology the research question itself demanded a qualitative approach. My aim; to understand my participants' particular transitions in sexual identity through the meanings which they attribute to events in their lives, is suited to an approach concerned with eliciting meaning and understanding rather than measurement and causal relationships. I felt that a narrative approach, based upon collecting, analysing and representing peoples 'coming out' stories as told by them, would be particularly useful for understanding and portraying how people experience their position in relation to the culture in which they negotiate their lives. I thought that exploration of peoples stories would allow myself and the reader to enter into the narrator's experience, whilst also allowing for consideration of how cultural patterns link with individual lives. As Etherington (2004) puts it: "providing pieces in a mosaic that depict a certain era or group" (2004:76). The collection of coming out narratives was carried out through the use of semi-structured interviews, the resulting textual data was then analysed for meanings using thematic analysis.

Data collection

Data was collected through 3 email interviews and one telephone interview. The interviews carried out were semi-structured, meaning that the interview is guided but not dictated by a set of topics or interview schedule (appendix J). This style of interviewing allows flexibility for both interviewer and interviewee as to what is covered in the interview, allowing exploration of novel areas and facilitating rapport (Smith and Osborn 2008). This was especially significant considering that as a researcher I would not get to meet those I was interviewing, it was important that I allowed both myself and the participants the freedom to enable the story or conversation to unfold. Although I recognise that the questions I asked inevitably influenced the shape of the stories producing a kind of 'co-construction' (Etherington 2004) between us, a snapshot of their past leading to their present situation, which will inevitably be reconstructed as stories constantly are.

The use of email interviews though did mean that I had further considerations to take into account in the development of the study. Most notably authenticity; in engaging in a dialogue through the anonymity of the Internet, the researcher does not know who the participant is, at least not in any tangible way. There is not necessarily a straightforward relationship between one's online identity and one's everyday life (Markham 2004). As well as this interacting in such environments results in difficulties with many of the taken for granted interactional qualities available to the researcher in face to face interviews such as the ability to 'read' participants and discern things like humour and sarcasm in the text (Markham 2004). Having said this conducting research through computer mediated communication (CMC) does hold advantages for the qualitative researcher. Firstly the anonymity and geographic distance ease ethical considerations for example the participant may very easily withdraw from the study, and can remain assured of confidentiality (Markham 2004). As well as this the main advantage of CMC is that both parties have the opportunity to take time to reflect on a question or message before responding at their own convenience. This ability makes for the collection of rich data from the participants as well as allowing the researcher to carefully consider and revise any questions during the interview, which can take place over longer length of time.

Participants

Participants for the study were recruited on the basis that they had made a transition to a homosexual identity following a significant period heterosexual identity, with the aim that that I could gain an understanding of how these individuals experience and negotiate such transitions. In all four participants were recruited through replies to posts on UK websites inviting people to take part in a study by sharing and discussing their own coming out story (appendix F) . All the participants were women aged between 33 and 51 and identified as lesbian or gay. Please see Appendix A to D for the participants' stories)

Ethics

In undertaking a qualitative approach the researcher is faced with special ethical issues of which one must be aware when making choices throughout the research process. In particular that qualitative research can mean particularly intimate

engagement with the lives and subjectivities of individuals, and that changing directions of interest and access during the course of a study may result in new and unexpected ethical considerations arising (Mason 1995). Such considerations take on even more importance when dealing with issues of a sensitive nature such as sexuality and transitions in sexual identity. Coming out is in general a momentous act in a person's life and interviewing a person about such important life events will most likely lead to an involved and intense dialogue. There was always a chance that exploration of the participant's experience may lead to an issue coming up that the participant did not feel comfortable with. It is vital that as a researcher I protected my participants from harm or distress, and at all times protected their psychological well-being and dignity and so I took certain steps to do this. Firstly participants were recruited with the knowledge that the research would involve sharing and discussing with myself their coming out story as told by them and that the purpose of the research was to explore their own individual experience. It was explained that the participants could contribute as much or as little of their story as they felt comfortable with, that they had the right to withdraw at any point without giving reason and that they had the right to decline any question they did not feel comfortable answering. Secondly the interviews were as much as possible participant-led, making the participant an active agent in shaping how the interview progressed.

As well as the right to withdraw and decline participants in psychological research have the right to confidentiality and anonymity, to assure this each of the participants were given a pseudonym as which they are referred to throughout the research process, and were made aware of this and that their identity would remain completely anonymous throughout and after the research process.

To ensure that the participants were giving their informed consent to take part in the research the participants were informed of all their rights, and what was expected of them during the study through being sent through electronic mail information sheet (appendix G). The participants were asked to read the information sheet, and to discuss any aspects of the research they would like to know more about, before stating clearly that they would like to take part in the research.

Participants were offered a copy of the transcription (or word processed document of email interviews) of their interview, but were informed that due to my university's rights of ownership I was not able to offer them a copy of the full dissertation, however they could receive a summary of the report if they wished. This is part of the process of easing any worries participants may have about being misrepresented.

As a researcher I was also concerned about the best way in which to represent the participants' data, I had decided to present the participants' data in a narrative form and this amounted to me putting our fragments of conversation into what seems like a more coherent story. The participants were then sent a copy of the storied version of their interview and invited to edit the story in any way they may wish, being informed that they could change/leave out any part you feel does not represent them and should feel free to add anything they like, as well as that they are also perfectly free to withdraw any or all of their data if they wish. One of the participants (Lily) indicated that she would prefer not to have her data represented in this way, and only one of the participants (Sian) decided to re-edit the storied version.

Following the interviews all participants were debriefed in which they were invited to ask any further questions about the research or any issues which may have arisen for them as a result of the interview. The participants were provided with information on organisations which offer support to lesbians and were reminded of their right to withdraw their data without explanation should they wish.

Procedure

Participants volunteered to take part in the study through responding to a request in Internet sites specifically for lesbians (appendix F). An information sheet (appendix G) was sent to the participants detailing what the study would involve. The participants were then asked to confirm that they would like to take part through email (appendix H) and which method of communication they would prefer to carry out the interview (phone or email). If they chose phone interview the interviewee was asked for consent to record and transcribe the interview, in which case a digital voice recorder was attached to the phone and switched on. Following the interviews all participants were asked if they had any questions and de-briefed using a debriefing sheet (appendix I).

Transcription and Data Analysis

As the purpose of the research was to elicit the participants particular transitions in sexual identity through the meanings which they attribute to events in their lives. It was decided that a thematic analysis (from a phenomenological framework) of the narratives that were produced in the interviews would be an appropriate method of analysis. Thematic analysis is a method of producing a detailed analysis of meanings through the organising of qualitative material into themes. One of the advantages of thematic analysis is that it can be employed within different theoretical frameworks (in this case a phenomenological) and can be applied to a wide range of textual data (in this case transcriptions of both phone and email interviews).

As recommended by Langdrige (2004) the texts were read and re-read in order for the researcher to become familiarised with the data. Then the process of coding the data began with 1st order coding (descriptive), second order coding (combining descriptive codes) and finally 3rd order coding which drew themes from across all four interviews (thematic analysis). This systematic process of coding the data was used to draw out the higher level themes. For example in the interview with Lily one of the topics which came up was how her coming out had been linked to greater assertiveness thanks to her experience of being somewhat freed from gender roles, for example in lines 323-325 she says: “how liberating to step out of the kind of,..it had taken me a long time to realise that I was just being typically girly, just being really nice and not assertive”. The 2nd order code that this is captured by is entitled ‘facilitating positive change’ and contains Lily’s other similar experiences. ‘facilitating positive change’ is then subsumed by the third order code ‘sexual identity a story of personal development’ which also included the participants’ experiences which linked sexual identity development to personal development such as the use of

therapy to achieve identity integration. It is felt that a lot of what is said in the interview can be understood in terms of the how participants perceived sexual identity development as intertwined with personal development.

Initial descriptive codes were written in the margins of the participants stories, these codes were combined to create second order codes (see appendix D). A colour coding system was then used to help draw out the overarching themes from all four participants (See Appendix A to D for copies of all four analysed transcripts).

Reliability and Validity

By choosing a qualitative approach one acknowledges the impossibility of remaining outside one's subject matter whilst conducting research and that the researcher contributes to the construction of meanings throughout the research process. Thus instead of trying to adopt an impartial view by eliminating bias' or factors which may skew ones perception, the researcher is required to make the research process transparent and accountable by acknowledging how they may have influenced the findings of the research (Yardley 2008). This is achieved through reflexivity understood as the capacity of the researcher to acknowledge how their own experiences and contexts affect the process and outcomes of enquiry (Etherington 2004)

Firstly I would like to point out that the theoretical position of this work as set out in the methodology is influenced by my own leaning towards social constructionist thinking and the implications this has on ways of understanding the world. Though I hope this is made clear in my methodology and throughout this report, it should still be noted that my own admittedly still evolving conceptions of what we can accept as psychological knowledge are driving my choices of methods.

I would also like to point out that this research is partly guided by my own personal interests in transitions in sexuality. When I set out to do this project my main reason was to try to understand what I saw as a gulf between sexuality that I was reading about and sexuality as it was understood (in my perception) by the people around me. That is both the heterosexual and lesbian and gay people that I was in contact with in everyday life. I felt that there was a gap between what was being written by social constructionist theorists on sexuality and lay views on the subject. I wanted to write about sexuality so that I myself could understand more about it, this partly accounts for the philosophical positioning of this study. I wanted to include a widened perspective which may be useful to myself but also to others reading about this subject matter.

I found the research process to be more difficult than I had first assumed. Recruiting participants was difficult, and this was compounded by the problem of my initial contact, whom I hoped would lead me to more, dropping out of the study. It took me a longer time than expected to recruit the participants and I felt this had a detrimental effect on the study as it reduced the time I could spend gathering and analysing the data. However I still feel the research and the data that I collected was useful and worthwhile. Looking back there is a lot that I can learn from this research process. My decision to change the narratives to story form before the analysis I feel contributed to a making my analysis fell somewhat 'messy'. I was new to email

interviewing and I think it is a skill which I would have to take measures to improve should I wish to undertake research like this again. I would also like to greatly improve my knowledge of theoretical and methodological paradigms available to social researchers in order to increase the impact of any future writing I may undertake. I am most interested in the post-modern and narrative turns in social psychology and the effect that research can have in challenging oppressive discourses.

Data analysis

On conducting a thematic analysis of the data from all four participants the following over-arching themes emerge for me, on how the women in the study experience and negotiate changes in sexual identity: (i) Sexual identity-a story of personal development, (ii) Essentialist sexuality?-choices, discoveries and denial (iii) Moving out of heterosexuality, (iv) Negotiating identity.

(i) Sexual identity- a story of personal development

The participants stories of the process of sexual identity change were very much individual, representing the unique situations in which the participants found themselves, yet for all of the participants 'coming out' seemed to be *linked to changes in their own personal development*. Typically their stories were understood in terms of *a path towards self acceptance, of a moving away from repressing their feelings to being able to express them*.

For Sandra this progression occurred very quickly when she fell in love with a woman, she describes her heterosexual life prior to this as 'reasonable' but characterised by a 'sort of denial' about her feelings:

Sandra: "I knew that denial and pretence had harmed me in the past. I was not prepared to hide anymore, I wanted to be so open, to shout it out really, I was so happy, so in love, so RIGHT at last I was very out and proud to just about everyone except my granny"

For the other women in the study the path towards self acceptance and expression had been more difficult, leading them at various point to turn to some form of therapy to enable them to explore and come to better understand their feelings and move forward. These women spoke about suffering through periods of isolation in their lives prior to coming out, and a reluctance or inability to deal with their feelings.

Lily told me about how she had experienced same sex desires from a young age but didn't know how to make sense of them, for her, same sex desire resurfaced at different points in her life, here she talks about having feelings for her classmates:

Lily: "I didn't want them at all, I was kind of totally appalled by them, and I just tried to suppress them, but the more I did the more it kind of kept coming up and coming up"

Lily thinks that this inner-conflict may have been related to problems integrating with her peer group; she felt unable to connect with people in her class and became a 'loner' for a while. Similarly her confusion as an adult led to problems in her working relationships:

Lily: "basically because I was very confused about my own sexuality, I got very confused about everyone else's sexuality...there were some really difficult work situation's there that lead me to go to my counselling because I couldn't cope with them, I had to sort my head out basically"

Lily talked throughout the interview about how she had tried to suppress or dampen down her same sex feelings for a long time and how this had led her to feel 'stuck', right up until she went into therapy which for her was a catalyst for identity exploration and change. Lily thinks that coming out has allowed her to develop personally, she believes that repressing her feelings prevented her from being assertive, and this has changed now that she feels freed from limiting gender roles:

Lily: "how liberating to step out of the kind of..it had taken me a long time to realise that I was just being typically girly, just being really nice and not assertive"

Lily still sees her sexual identity as developing; she has come out to most of her family and is starting to come out to people at work. She is in therapy and sees this as continuing for the foreseeable future; although she is now more comfortable with her sexuality she still sees this as complicated.

For Sian, who is married and currently trying to reconcile her identity as a wife and mother with her experiences of same sex desire, the process of gaining self acceptance is also ongoing. She initially felt isolated when she began to understand her sexuality:

Sian: "My initial feelings were of confusion and isolation. I felt I was the only person going through this experience. I kept my thoughts and my feelings private, convinced [hoping?] they would soon pass"

She also writes about same-sex feelings re-surfacing at various points throughout her life and an inability to suppress them. At one point Sian's determination to block out her unwanted thoughts led her to begin drinking heavily. Her behaviour and mood were deteriorating, until she met a woman that she was attracted to, which for her seemed to clarify questions about her sexuality and enabled her to make positive changes.

Sian: "I knew then that the feelings were never going to fit back into that box again. It was time to get some counselling and talk with my husband."

Sian sees a resolution of her struggles with sexual identity as inextricably linked to her development as a person, a path towards setting her 'real' self free, and that this journey is not over for her, she is about to start therapy again to consider aspects of her life and revisit her values:

Sian: "At times the lesbian aspects of my journey may be submerged beneath these new questions I need to ask myself, but finally I feel I'm doing the prep to set the real me free. I am still very much a story waiting to be told".

After 'discovering' that she was a lesbian at 24, Haylea also went through a period in which she felt isolated, though she did not suggest that she had repressed her sexuality or that she had tried to avoid her feelings but instead that she decided not to talk about it because she wanted to understand her feelings on her own terms:

Haylea: "Being quiet for two years was the hardest decision I made as I had no-one to talk to and felt very lonely. It was difficult not being true to myself and my feelings and I felt imprisoned, but I wanted to try and understand what I was going through and why"

She too sought therapy to help her come to terms with her sexuality, which she found helpful in 'moving forward' from negative experiences. Haylea feels that accepting her sexuality has liberated her in that she is able to be true to herself, and that her 'coming to terms' has had a positive effect on other aspects of her self concept.

Haylea: "I have a much better understanding and acceptance of myself and it has seen me become more emotionally stable and comfortable with my body and sexual desires"

In summary the participants seemed to link changes in the development of their sexual identity to changes in their overall personal development particularly with respect to their relationship to their feelings. Uncertainty about their sexuality was perceived as having a detrimental effect on their development, whereas an acceptance or moving forward of their sexual identity development was seen as facilitating positive changes in their lives and self concepts. Most of the women in the study had at some point turned to talking therapies to come to term with their feelings.

An analysis of the participants narratives with regard to development then would seem on the surface to support theories in which sexual identity development is seen as a task, one in which successful integration of ones sexual identity with one's 'whole self' leads to psychological health and developmental maturity(Coleman 1982, Troiden 1989). The women in this study then seem to be drawing overwhelmingly from a liberal-humanistic discourse one in which the role of mental health practitioner is to help facilitate a more healthy and mature outlook about their sexuality (Kitzinger 1987).

Plummer (1995) suggests that coming out stories are usually 'modernist tales' in that

they use causal language, have a sense of linear progression and talk of 'discovering a truth'. He notes that the coming out story in the early 20th century was often one of tragedy, and that this changed in the latter half of the century where coming out became the central narrative of positive gay experience. A story of self discovery and struggle, culminating in self actualisation and realized in the act of coming out (Hammack & Cohler 2009). This type of story certainly rings true for the women in this study, who represent different points in this process but certainly link their developmental progress to acceptance of their sexual identity.

(ii) Essentialist sexuality? Choices discoveries and denial

This theme is about the participants' understandings of their own sexuality, in particular about the *language they use* to describe such understandings, and what this infers about *the discourses that the participants draw from* in making sense of their same sex desire. In what ways did the participants' narratives support or counter the idea of identity as a process rather than a stable component of the individual.

The participants often talked about their sexuality in terms which suggest an innate sexuality which was 'discovered' at some point in their lives, or that they had been in 'denial' about or 'repressed' their lesbian self:

Haylea: "I was about 24 when I discovered I was a Lesbian"

Sandra: "I spent the previous 30 years in a kind of denial about my feelings"

Sian: "I've learned the hard way that repressed sexuality demands expression"

Such talk suggests that the participants experience their sexuality as innate, that their feelings may be ignored or pushed aside but eventually demand expression, here sexual identity development is analogous to discovering and becoming comfortable with one's 'true self'. Therapy then is seen as a facilitating 'acceptance' of one's true sexual orientation, hence Lily's statement that therapy had 'sped the whole thing up'. The participants in such instances are drawing from essentialist discourses of sexuality.

Although the participants drew from essentialist discourses they elaborate and complicate their versions of this discourse in a way which provides them with a fit between their lives and the identity categories that they belong to. Many of the women talked about sexuality as being fluid rather than fixed:

Haylea: "I think there is too much focus on labels, sexuality can be fluid and change"

Sandra "I think human sexuality is a continuum, and some of us are much more gay than straight and vice versa, but only a few of us are really very firmly fixed at either end, and lots more of us

can move between genders easily if we allow ourselves to, but most people prefer not to cos it's so much easier to conform and be straight"

Some of the participants talked about same sex attraction as a 'dimension' or as a 'potential' which has always existed in them but that for various reasons they had taken a long time to explore:

Sandra "I always knew there was potential in me but I didn't want to explore it...I was not keen to try it out, not keen to cross that boundary with any friends who might then run a mile"

Lily: "I think for me it's always been in the background, I've always had this dimension...and it took me till my early thirties to do something about it"

These same participants also recognise that although they have taken on a lesbian identity, this is not necessarily a fixed component of the self thus they discuss the possibility of heterosexuality as something that they could conceivably though not preferably choose to return to:

Lily: "I never know what's going to happen, but it's not something in my life where I am at the moment"

Sandra: "I never found sex with men impossible, and I often enjoyed it...but I don't fancy it anymore, which is partly to do with being in a monogamous relationship and partly to do with growing certainty on my part that men are not as easy to live with as women"

The language that the women use in constructing their narratives of sexual identity development reveal complex understandings of their own sexuality. All of the women seem to have spent an appreciable amount of effort trying to understand and give meaning to same sex desire, though some of the women seem to have arrived at more settled conclusions than others. Who are still struggling with constructing an understanding which reconciles multiple factors of sexual identity such as political alignments, gender roles and the transitory nature of their own development. This seems to lean more towards a narrative understanding of sexual identity as a process in which social actors engage in an interpretive labour with the discourses available to them, than towards an understanding of sexual identity as a set of as a set of stages one must pass through.

(iii) Moving out of heterosexuality

This theme encapsulates the participants' journey out of a heterosexual identity, from the *events and relationships which acted as catalysts* sparking a questioning of that identity to the ways in which the participants went on to *explore their evolving lesbian identities, and seek out lesbian communities.*

For each of the participants the questioning of their heterosexual identity was brought about by events or relationships which acted as *catalysts for identity exploration*. For all of the participants an attraction to another woman acted as a stimulus for questioning or clarifying of their desires.

For Haylea a physical reaction to the presence of a woman led her at twenty four to question her sexuality for the first time:

Haylea: "I was about 24 when I discovered that I was a lesbian. It started when I went to an autograph fair and was getting an autograph off an actress from a sci-fi show, seeing her gave me goosebumps..... and *noticed* after that time I was being more drawn to women"

Sian similarly felt a moment of attraction which opened her eyes to the possibility of being sexually involved with a woman:

Sian: "I met the most amazing girl at uni. My attraction to her was instant and totally overwhelmed me. For the first time ever my 22 year old self felt the need to be romantically and sexually involved with another woman and it confused me no end"

For Sian this pattern of attraction providing a catalyst for change happened again many years into her marriage when she found herself 'blown away' by another woman which led her to clarify her feelings of same sex attraction. Though Sian also recognises that perhaps the life event of reaching the age of forty has contributed to her recent questioning of her identity.

Sian: "Perhaps it is significant that active questioning of my sexual orientation coincided with turning 40; an age when we seem to step back and take stock of how life has gone so far"

Lily's story contains a moment of physical reaction in which she describes her feelings as 'trapped inside my stomach', she had an erotic dance with a woman in a nightclub which made her feel uncomfortable but afterwards led her to feel she had missed out by not pursuing it. For Lily life events have also had a role to play like Sian she felt that her age had a factor in her decision to come out she felt she was 'getting on' and it was 'now or never'. As well as this events at work, (not least that Lily had started working in an environment with openly gay colleagues) in which her thoughts about sexuality were becoming confusing and affecting her working relationships lead her to counselling which in turn provided a catalyst for identity change. Lily also saw this change in work environment as an opportunity to explore her sexuality:

Lily: "I thought, I've got this job and I've got to do something now about addressing my sexuality, you know exploring it, and you know this is the perfect opportunity"

Another factor that I understood as a catalyst for Lily's decision to leave heterosexuality was her dissatisfaction with her heterosexual relationships. She had had what she described as a 'string' of brief damaging relationships with men, except for one 'nice' relationship but she perceived this as lacking in some way.

For Sandra it was the feeling of being with her (now) partner for the first time that fuelled her decision to leave heterosexuality. She used a quote to describe this to me:

Sandra: "I read a great line in *Zami*, by Audre Lorde: "Loving ginger that night was like coming home to a joy I was meant for" ooooooh – I love that line! That's what it was like for me. Being with my wife is a joy I was made for and really, I don't give a shit what anyone else thinks."

These narratives seem to illustrate that same sex feelings are very much embodied. Social constructionism offers us a concept of sexuality as a process of describing ones social location within a changing social context (Rust 1993) but the narratives of the women here highlight the complex links between body, feelings and identity. The joy Sandra felt in being with her partner, the instant and overwhelming attraction felt by a 22 year old Sian, the 'goosebumps', which seemed to transform the trajectory of Haylea's sexual identity development. Embodied feelings acted as catalysts in the process of identity change, and though the women may then have drawn on the narratives available to them this was to make sense of such feelings over which they did not feel they had a choice.

Some of the women discussed other significant life events as precipitating factors in their identity redirection, turning forty for Sian had meant a reassessment of her life so far, and a deep questioning of her identity. Lily's reconsideration of her sexual identity had also coincided with changes in her working environment which she felt made exploration of her identity more realizable. These findings suggest a complex process of identity change takes place for such women. One which is often conceived in terms of exploration, and as dependent on social and cultural opportunities and limitations.

Once the participants had begun to question their sexuality or had made the decision to leave heterosexuality they used a variety of 'sites' or spaces to explore their *evolving lesbian identities* which involved them *seeking out different lesbian communities*.

For Sandra the taking on of her lesbian identity happened initially through her relationship which had begun as a friendship. Sandra and her partner explored their sexual identity as a couple, they visited the local gay scene and read lesbian fiction and history, to get 'a sense of what being a lesbian has meant to others'. One of Sandra's motivations was to understand the difference between her own views of herself and the stereotypes she had about lesbians.

Sandra: "I guess the stereotype of the butch/ dungaree wearer was in my head and I knew I wasn't really like that"

Like most of the participants in the study Sandra uses the Internet as a site for interacting with the lesbian community. Sandra began a popular thread on the website that she uses to provide a space for herself and other users to share their 'coming out' stories. Helping to provide a site for identity exploration, one which two of the other participants themselves found helpful in the beginning of questioning their same sex desire.

Lily says that for about a year before she did anything about her sexual feelings she used to visit the website just to read the threads, she says that going on the site helped to remove her stereotypes about what lesbians were like:

Lily: "Going on XX has taught me a lot about that...how amazed I was by the amount of you know normal inverted commas looking lesbians there were"

Lily uses the website to interact online with other lesbians and to read about other people's experiences in relationships. She also uses the Internet as a way to meet other lesbians and has had relationships with other women through meeting up with people from the online community. For Lily these relationships are also seen as a site for exploring or learning about her identity since coming out:

Lily: "(I'm) still learning a lot and I've had a couple of relationships and learned a hell of a lot from them"

For Sian the Internet has been a great resource for support and for understanding her story within the context of other similar stories. She compares her own to those whom she has read about online. Although this has led her to know that her situation is not as rare as she had originally thought it also leads her to question the validity of her own story. She feels that her story is hanging in the balance or waiting to be told. For her the website provides a space for honesty and to gain diverse perspectives.

Sian: "The support I've had online has been incredible, given the remoteness of Internet interaction. And yet funnily it has given rise to conversations that have been more honest than those I've had with my real life friends. My online friends are from diverse walks of life; each has given me their own perspective on life which helps me think through my own circumstances. These women accept me as I am; a gay woman who happens to be married. Finally I am part of a lesbian community of sorts [albeit virtual]"

Haylea identified a TV program 'The L word' as particularly important in her exploration and acceptance of her lesbian identity, being a fan of the show had also lead her to find a sense of community through meeting other fans:

Haylea: "For me personally the L word was one of the best things to happen to me. I felt I could identify with the characters and took comfort in following their journeys and seeing them evolve as people and feel comfortable with who they were...I started to

meet other gay women who shared a love of the show and felt more accepted into the LGBT community as a result.”

The participants then had all sought connections with lesbian communities either prior to, during or after their choice to take on a lesbian identity. A factor which stands out for me in all of the narratives was that this connection was often centered on the sharing of stories. The participants had connected with others through telling their own stories, reading about others, even bonding with others who shared an interest in the unfolding stories of characters on a television show. Haper, Bruce, Serrano & Jamil (2009) in a study on the role of the Internet in sexual identity development illustrate that the Internet has facilitated the sharing of sexual stories, providing a tool for human interconnection as people construct their identities. For Sian and Lily the Internet provided a site in which they could investigate lesbian identity with anonymity, which seemed to help them to develop a clearer understanding of their own sexuality at a pace which they feel comfortable with. The participants often talked about identity exploration which took place in a number of cultural spaces, in terms of learning, which points to process of constructing identity.

The experiences of the participants seem to highlight the role of narrative in identity construction, the participants engage with the narratives of others made available through the Internet or through television in constructing their own narrative of sexual identity development. For Hammack and Cohler (2009) the personal narrative is “best understood as a product of linguistic possibility; it always relates to some master narrative of identity accessible in a culture” (2009:454). The stories that are available to women experiencing same sex desire then are integral to their ability to constructing a coherent personal narrative. This process proves more difficult and seems to be more psychologically painful when other aspects of identity are not easily reconciled with same sex desire. According to Bakhtin (1981 as cited in Lightfoot 2004:36) “we experience ourselves within a liminal space between what is and what could be”. For the women in this study the process of identity change often seems to have been about a reassessment of what they could be, including examining their own stereotypes about lesbian identity and their conceptions about what it means to be a lesbian.

(iv) Negotiating identity

This theme represents the ways in which participants negotiate changes in their sexual identity, how they *place themselves within or outside of lesbian subcultures* and their *use of identity labels* in this process.

The participants each had different experiences of taking on lesbian identities which were unique to their situation. Rust (2009) discusses the way that identity labels vary in the degree in which they accurately represent peoples personal narratives. Thus as a person moves through cultural space it is possible for ones narrative to shift without causing changes in one’s identity label, so whereas narratives and identities are in a constant state of production and reproduction, identity labels display more discrete patterns of sudden change where the fit between label and narrative becomes too strained. For me the data illustrated the ways in which the women

negotiated the taking on of an identity label through an understanding of which labels did or did not match their identity and why. This was dependent on their perceptions of what that label represented to them, their interpretations of what taking on a lesbian identity meant.

Some of the women talked about a felt need to conform to stereotypical behaviours which they wanted to resist, Haylea for instance prefers the identity label of 'gay' instead of lesbian for such reasons:

Haylea: "Calling myself a lesbian made me feel like I was a definite 'role' and it was all 'final'....I found that labelling myself wasn't good either as it caused further confusion as it was like I had to conform in some way. I guess not being very educated about lesbianism at the time, the negativity stemmed from the stereotype of the butch looking woman or the fact lesbians were meant to be aggressive feminists and that wasn't the person I identified myself to be"

Lily also felt that to be a lesbian meant that she had to be or act a certain way, but for her this was something that she initially felt unable rather than unwilling to live up to:

Lily: "I didn't think I was good enough to be a lesbian. All I knew of what a lesbian was, was the kind of stereotypical, someone that you can identify, political.....and it was really difficult because, I thought I couldn't possibly be a lesbian because I wasn't like that, I thought I wasn't good enough that I won't be accepted"

Both Haylea and Lily perceived a difficulty in relating to the lesbian and gay subcultures which they came into contact when they first came out. Haylea said that she felt 'uncomfortable' as an older woman socialising with members of the LGBT group at her university. Lily said she felt 'stupid' when relating to other gay people of her age because she thought they had long settled into their homo-sexual identities and therefore could not share in the joy of her journey:

Lily: "I didn't feel like I could say, well I'm going to pride you know, cos I thought how juvenile, I felt like a kid"

Sian's contact with lesbian subcultures came exclusively from her online interactions. She had encountered derision from some quarters of the online lesbian community about the fact that she was still married despite identifying herself as a lesbian. Though, she resists being pushed into making a decision which will affect the lives of her children. For Sian then a major form of negotiation of her sexual identity occurs within her relationship with her husband, with whom she has an agreement over her online contact with women. Sian is interestingly the only participant who uses outward markers of appearance to make a statement about her sexual identity:

Sian: "I found the external me was no longer in sync with my inner persona. Outwardly I began to change. Although never particularly "girly", I gradually started to present strongly as a

tomboy, with razored hair, tattoo and androgynous mode of dress. With hindsight I recognise I was making a statement to friends and family about the changes going on inside me”

To Sandra the main implication of taking on a lesbian identity lies in being very open about her sexuality which she sees as an ‘equality issue’. She recognises that the label ‘lesbian’ does not accurately represent her narrative, and indicates that she would like to move away from using labels but for her ‘lesbian’ is the best fit.

Sandra: “how I identify myself, well I’m not very interested in labels, it’s factually accurate to say I’m bisexual I suppose.... but I’d never call myself that! I call myself a lesbian.”

Though the women in the study talk about the lesbian communities which they have sought out in terms of support, and learning it is clear that this relationship is not always simple for these women. Initial conceptions and experiences of interaction with lesbian subcultures can prove to be a barrier for women struggling with their lesbian identity. Some of the participants felt intimidated by other lesbians, or had been asked to ‘prove’ their ‘lesbianness’, at the very least the participants all felt a certain degree of pressure to adhere to some sort of conventions of being a lesbian, which they had either resisted or embraced in various ways. The participants use identity labels such as ‘lesbian’ and ‘gay’, in individual ways, and with varying degrees of coherence across cultural spaces; some are ‘out’ uniformly while some use labels in a more selective way, taking into account their interpretations of the social meanings that are attributed to such labels. This would support the contention that identities are not fixed and stable components of an inner-self but are multiple and remade in the context of social ties (Rust 2009).

For Plummer (1995) stories can be told once they can be heard; once a community has been fattened up and is willing to hear them. That for coming out stories to flourish an interpretive community of support is needed. For women trying to construct a post-heterosexual identity often there can be a perceived lack of interpretative support from both heterosexual and lesbian communities. For women in this position there is often a complex negotiation of roles and identity labels which requires an interpretive labour with the discourses available to them. Conceptualisations of sexuality as fixed can seem to make this process more difficult in terms of explaining their transitions in sexuality in a coherent narrative. Leading some from both heterosexual and lesbian communities, and in some cases the individuals themselves to question the validity of their sexual identity. At the same time the participants display an almost impertinent ongoing negotiation of identity which does not necessarily fit into the categories that they perceive as being expected of them.

Discussion

The women's stories have much in common and in many ways reflect familiar patterns found previous literature on ‘coming out’. The narratives could be understood as what Plummer (1995) called ‘modernist tales’, which have a sense of

linear progression and talk of 'discovering a truth'. They reveal discourses of a traditional understanding of sexuality as a reflection of an inherent sexuality, one which can also be understood in terms of a *developmental task*. This development was conceived in terms of moving from denial, repression or confusion towards an acceptance and expression of ones *feelings* and *true identity*. In conceiving of their sexual identity in these terms the women seem to be in accord with concepts which place them as developmentally *delayed* rather than as taking a different developmental pathway (Larson 2006). However as Hammack & Cohler (2009) point out the personal narrative cannot be analytically removed from the discourses of social identity available in particular cultural and historical contexts. In the west the personal narrative itself is characterised by the linear organisation of experience (Ricoeur 1977). For Freeman (2004) development is conceived as self interpretation, involving the fashioning of a new more adequate view of who and what one is. Arriving at understandings which are not an absolute endpoint but that are better or more comprehensive than the ones that had existed previously. A process of re-figuring the past and in turn reconfiguring the self and illustrating that "the backward movement of narrative is dialectically intertwined with the forward movement of development" (Freeman 2004: 77). From this perspective one's identity is not the result of mental processes or personal characteristics but rather identity represents a story constructed and reconstructed across the life course, and in relation to socially available discourses. In such a view development is not confined to a positivist informed onto-genetic perspective; one which pathologises or stigmatises those whose lives do not fit into preconceived structures, but is instead conceived as a sociogenic one concerned with social meaning and contextualised experience (Hammack & Cohler 2009).

The women drew from a liberal humanistic discourse of *struggle and success* however it was found that they *elaborate and complicate* their versions of this discourse in a way which provides them with a fit between their lives and the identity categories that they belong to. Plummer (1995) suggested in the 90's that stories were moving away from "authorities on sexuality" (i.e. Doctors, psychologists, priests) to the everyday person, and we can sense this from the way that women were making their own choices about the relationship between their desire and the discourses available. The participants here did not use any discourse of lesbianism of pathology, though three of the four participants had sought therapy to help them to understand and re-frame their same-sex feelings. It could be argued that in this way the women were giving back this authority to the 'experts'. Kitzinger (1987) for example argues that the liberal humanistic conception of the 'well adjusted' lesbian, defined by psychological maturity (like the pathologised lesbian before this) is itself an attempt to mould lesbian subjectivities. Implicitly representing value claims about preferred or desirable subjectivities, and functioning to reassert the need for mental health practitioners to assist in gaining developmental maturity as a lesbian, and to ultimately diffuse the threat of lesbianism to the institution of heterosexuality.

Such analysis is important in highlighting the role of power and history in understanding human development, yet what the narratives in this study remind us is that stories of sexual identity are also encounters with our *embodied feelings*. For the women in this study lesbianism was a result of the acceptance of embodied feelings which acted as catalysts in the process of identity change, and though the women

may then have drawn on the narratives available to them this was to make sense of such feelings over which they *did not feel they had a choice*. In this way the narratives are illustrations of the problematic relationship between essence and construct; sexuality is often experienced as immutable by lesbians and gay men and so social constructionism can seem to run against common sense. As well as this a degree of essentialism may be politically necessary for lesbian identity, in order to survive and resist marginalisation and stigmatisation, as Wilton (1995) puts it “Queerbashers and influential homophobes are not about to modify their behaviour on being told that their aggression is directed against a semantic chimera”. The narrative or life-course approach to the study of sexual identity development may then present an opportunity to transcend this division, as here the construction of a personal narrative serves the purpose of making sense of individual *desire* with recognition that individuals construct their lives to the extent that the exercise of agency is possible through the tools available in a given cultural surround (Hammack & Cohler 2009).

In moving out of heterosexuality the women in the study had connected and interacted with various lesbian subcultures often through telling their own stories, reading about or watching others stories and had learned about and developed their lesbian identity through such relationships. Though they did this in dynamic and variable ways, not like simply learning a script of what it is to be a lesbian. For Plummer (2009) stories are dynamic, political and constantly contested, he adds that many stories of lives can be seen as counter-stories, which work to break down or undermine any overriding consensus or claims for grand theories about lives. The stories in this study do illustrate the ability of individuals or groups of people to contest a master narrative from within, in the first case through contesting compulsory heterosexuality, then often through the questioning of dominant narratives of essentialist sexuality which remain popular within social science, and in the concepts of lay persons both homosexual and heterosexual (Kitzinger and Wilson 1995, Jackson 1999, Wilton 2000). The women in this study seemed to demonstrate that transitions in sexual identity come along with an intellectual labour in which individuals seek out, interpret and contest available narratives. Although it must be said that the women in this research do this only to a certain extent, essentialist discourse of ‘discovery’ and ‘denial’ still underpins most if not all of the narratives here. Recently some scholars have suggested the sensing of a shift from a narrative of *struggle and success* to a narrative of *emancipation* from society’s social categorisations of sexual identity (Hammack & Cohler 2009, Savin-Williams 2005). In this study there was an overriding sense from the participants, of the liberal humanistic story of struggle and success, of acceptance of sexual identity as a route to self-actualisation. Although there was also a sense in some of the narratives of a certain degree of emancipation from essentialist narratives, where the women’s conceptions about sexuality often contradicted this discourse with talk about the fluidity of sexuality.

Implications

The main implication of the study for me was to highlight the need for the proliferation of discourses which deconstruct the essentialist binary between hetero-

homosexuality. For Potter and Wetherall (1987) what a person is allowed to be and what they can envision themselves as being; that is the possibilities that the available discourses hold out for them, are serious political matters, as they are instances of the exercise of power. When essentialising theories of sexual development attempt to define what is the 'normal' course of homosexual identity development, and posit that sexuality is a stable component of the self, they implicitly pathologise those who lives do not fit into such structures. If one views identity as *process* rather than a property of the individual, a process located in and produced by the interface between culture and self, and understood as a reflexive self narrative (Wilton 1995), stories of identity transitions can be re-framed in ways which are not stigmatising of such individuals. Such sociogenic theories may have gained popularity in recent movements in the social sciences (Hammack & Cohler 2009) yet the women in this study do not look to academia to locate discourses of same sex desire they look to Internet chat-rooms, to television programs, to the voices of other lesbians. For these women stories about lesbian identity development provided them with comfort, and facilitated positive change in that it allowed them to move away from feelings of isolation towards a clearer understanding of their own desire. The telling of individual lives of lesbians is therefore important in constructing a cultural space in which women can negotiate the meanings and the possibilities of their own lesbianism. The visibility of "A plurality of lesbianisms" (Wilton 1995:62) is worthwhile not only because it defies the restrictive stereotypes of heterosexual prejudice and the often equally restrictive proclamations of other lesbians and lesbian subcultures but also because it is a route to explore and ultimately celebrate the many different ways of being a lesbian. The findings in this sense have particular implications for the portrayal of lesbian, gay and bisexual people in the print and broadcast media, as well as in educational settings as such institutions provide sites can be seen as providing discursive possibilities to individuals in charting their own developmental trajectories.

Conclusion

Traditional views of sexuality, in which changes in sexual identity are explained as examples of psychological immaturity hold certain implications for the ways in which women who 'come out' in adulthood (rather than adolescence) are perceived and in their own process of identity construction. The research here set out to explore the process of negotiation of changes in sexual identity for such women at the individual level of subjective experience, with consideration of the ways in which historically based narratives of sexuality influence the development of individual sexual identity. A qualitative approach was taken involving 3 email interviews and one telephone interview which were analysed using a thematic analysis within a phenomenological framework. Four themes were identified; Sexual identity-a story of personal development, Essentialist sexuality?-choices, discoveries and denial moving out of heterosexuality, negotiating identity. The author advocates *narrative* approaches to sexual identity development over traditional views finding that sexual identity development is better viewed as a *process* rather than a property of the individual. It is concluded the telling of individual lives of lesbians is important in providing a cultural space in which women can negotiate the meanings and the possibilities of their own lesbianism. The findings hold implications for the portrayal of lesbian, gay and bisexual people in the print and broadcast media, as well as in educational

settings as such institutions provide sites can be seen as providing discursive possibilities to individuals in charting their own developmental trajectories.

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