Can't See The Forest For The Trees...

Insider/Outsider Perspectives on the Wellington Lesbian Community(s)

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Contents

Abstract

Any collection of people who suffer common discrimination from those around them must work to define what they have in common, despite their in-group differences. This is focused by naming themselves, or dealing with names others give them.

(Kepner, 2006)

Lesbian communities are a complex network of women from diverse backgrounds, with multifarious belief systems and experiences of identifying as a lesbian. This paper examines the characteristics of the Wellington lesbian community(s) through the methodology of a focus group and on-line blog, and consequently puts forward an analysis of lesbian legitimacy, community in-group membership and the informal hierarchy of this community(s). The invitation to participate in this research was met with silence from the core, visible, lesbian subgroup of the wider lesbian community; instead, the lesbian participants are self-identified as outsiders to this core subgroup. The need to find a working definition of the Wellington lesbian community(s) has not come from within the core, visible, subgroup that meets at bars, plays in sports teams, attends lesbian events; it has come from outside this subgroup of the community(s). This thesis identifies the insider/outsider binary that exists both within the Wellington lesbian community(s) and in the maintenance of a community of self-identified lesbians from those outside its amorphous boundaries.

Acknowledgements

The body of work in this thesis has arrived at a readable state very quickly, due in no small way to the assistance and supervision of Dr Jeff Sluka. Jeff has guided me with a gentle hand from the infancy of this research, suggesting changes in direction when I met with hurdles that seemed insurmountable. I was reminded at the initial stages of preparing this thesis that an appropriate supervisor was paramount in producing a sound piece of work that contributes original thought to the field of study. Thank you Jeff, for your wisdom, guidance, and lack of knowledge about the inner workings of a lesbian community! My thanks also to the participants in the focus group discussion for this research. You both offered valuable insight into your truth about the Wellington lesbian community. It took courage to take part in this research, and I am grateful for your honesty and commitment. Likewise, my thanks also to the on-line blog contributors for this research. You raised some interesting and challenging points that were gratefully received. I would also like to acknowledge the lesbians of the Wellington lesbian community core, visible, subgroup who did not speak through this research; your silence has been heard. Thanks also to my partner and family who have put up with my moaning and whinging for over a year. Love is patient and kind indeed. Lastly, I would like to thank those of you who have assisted me from Massey University in Wellington. Jasmine Robins and Fred LeBlanc, in the administration offices, and Christy Parker, your patience, guidance and advice have been ever forthcoming and mostly received with grace. A special thanks also to Dr Robin Peace. Although it was somewhat frightening to have you read a very small section of this thesis and offer your opinions, your wisdom of lesbians and lesbian communities, and the support you have offered me in continuing with this thesis has been invaluable and is greatly appreciated.

Glossary

There are terms used throughout this research that may be unfamiliar to the reader. This glossary is a reasonable explanation of these terms in a simple and generalised manner. It is important to acknowledge however, that each of these terms involves complex identity issues and the explanations given should be viewed as simplified guidelines rather than definitive definitions of their meanings and symbolism.

Baby-Dyke: A young or inexperienced lesbian, particularly of high school or college age.

Bisexual: Someone who is attracted to both males and females. Some may prefer the terms omnisexual or pansexual instead, because "bi" means two, and there may be more sexes than two (see transsexual, transgender, queer).

Bull Dyke: A very tough, usually butch, lesbian.

Butch: A masculine woman, usually a lesbian.

Butch-Femme: Describes a relationship in which one person is femme and one is butch, and describing the dynamic between them. Butch-Femme is also the social structure prevalent in working-class lesbian bars up through the early 1970s. This structure was strictly enforced by peer pressure. One had to be either a butch or a femme, and butches only dated femmes and femmes only dated butches. There was a lot of backlash against this structure in the 1970s when lesbian feminism emerged, and for a long time butches and femmes were absolutely politically incorrect, and were likely to be shunned by the feminist lesbian community.

Closeted: A person who does not wish to be known as gay, lesbian, bisexual etc, is often said to be "in the closet".

Corporate Dykes: A woman who may identify as either butch or femme and who would usually participate in the corporate world wearing attire that is common for that workplace.

Diesel Dykes: A very truck-driver-like butch.

Femme: A feminine woman, usually a lesbian.

FTM: Female to Male Transsexual.

LGBT: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered.

Lipstick Lesbian: A lesbian who behaves in a feminine manner and presents as 'straight' in both lesbian and heterosexual environments. These women may not even like the word "lesbian" and may be very closeted.

MTF: Male to Female Transsexual.

QBNL: Queer but Not Lesbian.

Queer: Gay, lesbian, bisexual, omnisexual, pansexual, transgendered, or transsexual.

Sports Dykes: A usually butch woman who plays and enjoys sports.

Stone Butch: A very masculine woman, usually to the point that she is frequently mistaken for a man. The term comes from African American slang, in which "stone" means "very". It has come to have other meanings as well. A butch can be sexually stone, as in not being able to permit herself to be touched on the genitals for sex; emotionally stone, meaning that she has locked away her emotions and has trouble acknowledging or expressing them; or physically stone, having trouble being touched at all. A stone butch is usually some combination of all of these.

Stone Femme: A femme lesbian who never tries to change or "melt" her stone butch lover, but prefers to pleasure her lover by taking

a passive role in sex. And/or a femme lesbian who does not like to be touched, much like a stone butch.

Transgendered: A person who crosses gender boundaries, including, but not limited to, transsexuals and transvestites. And/or a person who lives mostly or completely in the gender not associated with their birth sex, but who does not identify as a transsexual.

Transguy: A term for a male crossing gender or sex boundaries.

Transsexual: A person whose birth sex is viewed by themselves as incorrect or incompatible with the image of themselves, and who takes steps (including but not limited to physical and/or hormone therapy, and surgery) to make their outer self match their self-identification.

Transwoman: A term for a female crossing gender or sex boundaries.

Figures

Chapter 1 Introduction

Do lesbians have a community? The simple answer to this is yes, although in what form this community is perceived and experienced varies greatly between women within it. The aim of this thesis is to explore the concept of *community(s)* amongst lesbians in the Wellington region of New Zealand and to assess what can fairly be described as that community(s). The *lesbian community* is a term in common usage throughout the lesbian community itself and mainstream society, yet there appears to be little agreement, either academically or amongst lesbians, as to what defines or characterises this community. Throughout this thesis, the term 'community(s)' is used extensively to acknowledge the internal plurality that characterises this community. The Wellington lesbian community(s) is not simply restricted to geographical location, but is a complex structure of subgroups, and multiple community groups that can be fairly described as sitting under the banner of 'the Wellington lesbian community'. What follows is a thesis which discusses the many varying definitions of community from an anthropological and sociological viewpoint, through exploration of the intricacies of the lesbian community(s), including community membership, privacy, legitimacy, hierarchy structures, and boundaries. The invitation to participate in this research was met with silence from the core, visible, subgroup of the Wellington lesbian community, and therefore prompted an in-depth discussion of the purpose of trying to define the lesbian community(s) and to whom this purpose would best serve. To investigate the complex nature of the insider/outsider binary of the Wellington lesbian community(s) there are two central questions asked in this thesis in order to ascertain what characterizes this lesbian community. Firstly, and in appearance a simple question; who can be part of the lesbian community(s)? This question appears simple but is riddled with enormous complexities, none of which may be more important than the bias of lesbian researchers who research within their own community(s) and establish

lesbian status from the outset in their selection process for research participation. It became apparent throughout this research that this is exactly what I had done. As a member of the community(s), from the outset, I had categorized what and who characterized the *core*, visible, group in the Wellington lesbian community(s) based on my own knowledge and experience of this community(s). This bias and the notion of researching within ones own cultural group is discussed extensively throughout this thesis, exploring both the limitations and benefits of lesbians researching lesbians. Secondly, this thesis investigates who or what is a lesbian? This question lays at the crux of the idea of a lesbian community, for in order to establish whether a community(s) exist and in what form, we first must investigate the individuals that are likely to make up and sustain this community(s). In order to answer these questions, we first need to take a brief look at the historical context of lesbianism and the changing nature of gender roles.

The Historical Construction of Lesbianism

Arguably, the earliest documented knowledge of the existence of lesbianism began with Anne Lister, a Yorkshire gentlewoman in the early nineteenth century (Clark, 1996). This is not to suggest however, that lesbianism did not exist prior to this time, a notion I would strongly disagree with. Historically however, Lister appears to be one of the earliest *documented* women to publicly identify herself as having sole romantic and sexual interest in other woman. Furthermore, as a gentlewoman, Lister was in the advantageous position of moving relatively freely throughout the gentry of the time, and one of the crucial freedoms of Lister's sexual identity was that as an heiress she did not have to marry (Clark, 1996). It is worth noting at this time that due largely to the dominance of heterosexual identity roles in the early part of the nineteenth century, lesbianism was not even perceived as being possible.

Figure 1: Anne Lister 1791-1840

Women who loved women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were thought to have followed the model of "passionate friendship". Nineteenth century women, it was thought, could not even conceive of sexual desire for each other, having no words for such feelings. Instead, they kissed, embraced, and exchanged intensely romantic letters, but rarely if ever progressed to genital sex. As a result, society regarded such friendships as perfectly respectable, even touching. ...the judges believed such behaviour was impossible between women. Women, therefore, could not develop a lesbian identity because no such notion existed in their culture.

(Clark, 1996:26)

Lister's diaries (Whitbread, 1988) clearly illustrated her attachment to women, and her many conquests. What is also noteworthy was her apparent isolation from other members of the aristocracy, a consequence of her eccentric lifestyle. In this way, Lister was not part of any lesbian community that we would identify in contemporary society; she instead for the most part, maintained a relatively solitary existence. Clark's research into the existence of lesbian subcultures in nineteenth century Europe led her to suggest that lesbian subcultures probably existed amongst theatre people and prostitutes in France (1996:28), but that no evidence found suggested that such subcultures existed in England prior to this time.

Anne Lister did not become part of a lesbian subculture, only a fragile network of lovers, ex-lovers and friends. The fact that Anne seduced so many women reveals how much lesbian potential lurked among the unhappy wives and proud spinsters of middle and upper class Yorkshire. There may have been many other women whose lesbian relationships have gone unrecorded. At the same time, seducing such women required careful, protracted campaigns in which Anne had to explain and justify her lesbian nature. And Anne Lister was not able to create a lesbian

network, let alone a subculture, because of her chronic concealment, and duplicity tangled her love relationships into webs of deceit and competition.

(Clark, 1996:44)

The supposition by Clark of no evidence found to support the existence of lesbian subcultures in England before the Nineteenth century, may in fact be a little hasty. There are numerous references to the existence of lesbian "affairs" throughout much of the historical data (Donaghue, 1993; Everard, 1986; Halwani, 1998; Kraakman, 1993). These "affairs", whilst not all overtly characterised as lesbianism, were certainly prevalent in societies well before the late Nineteenth Century and may well have developed at the time a *network* of women who preferred the romantic and physical company of other women. For example, as stated in a document detailing the proceedings of the Old Bailey[1], Hitchcock and Shoemaker (2003:1) state:

In contrast to the relatively full record of male homosexuality available from the ***Proceedings****, lesbianism is not substantially recorded here. This is largely the result of the fact that sex between women was not illegal, and does not reflect a lack of sexual activity. There are a small number of fraud cases in which women, cross-dressed as men, pursued sexual relationships with other women, but these are relatively rare.*

The Proceedings, dating from the late Seventeenth century, provide a small number of 'fraud' cases that alluded to a relationship between two women. However, as Hitchcock and Shoemaker observed, any reference to illicit behaviour between two women was cloaked in conspiracy of other kinds, for

[1] The *Proceedings* contain accounts of trials that took place at the Old Bailey. The crimes tried were mostly felonies (predominantly theft), but also include more serious misdemeanours. The first published collection of trials at the Old Bailey dates from 1674, and from 1678 accounts of the trials at each session (meeting of the Court) at the Old Bailey were regularly published. With few exceptions, this periodical was regularly published each time the sessions met (eight times a year) for 160 years. In 1834, it changed its name, but publication continued until 1913.

example fraud and theft. This may well have simply been due to the well-documented assertion of the era, that women were not capable of having sexual relations with each other. To support the findings of Hitchcock & Shoemaker the following entry in The Proceedings identifies two women who would almost certainly have been categorized as lesbians in contemporary society. Of interest is that they were charged with the lesser offence of theft, as lesbianism was not illegal because it (apparently) did not, and could not exist.

> *MARIA CHILDS, ELIZABETH KING, theft: specified place, 3rd December, 1806.*

(Hitchcock & Shoemaker, 2003:1)

The article then proceeds to describe that the women arrived at the tavern together, took the same room with only one bed, and lodged together[2]. Apparently, the two women then stole a sheet, which ended them at the Old Bailey under the charge of Fraud and were both imprisoned for a period of six months. Whilst there were a couple of vague references to women stealing men's clothing for the purpose of personal use, there was, as attested by Hitchcock & Shoemaker (2003) very little information provided about lesbianism between women, and by comparison, a spectacularly large number involving homosexual activity by men.

Without documentation to support that a network of women in lesbian relationships existed in England prior to Anne Lister's account, I suggest it is impossible to deduce from the *lack* of documentation or memoirs that a network did not exist. In Jonathan Katz's *Gay American History* (1976), evidence suggests that as early as 1656 the 'New Haven Colony prescribed the death penalty for lesbians' (Katz, cited in Rich 1982:201). Whilst America is clearly not England, it would appear somewhat rash to assume that no evidence is available to suggest

[2] Lodging with another person of the same sex could arguably have been considered 'normal' for the time. However, this still needs to be placed in context of a time in history when the society considered lesbianism impossible.

the existence of lesbian subcultures in England prior to the Nineteenth century. Especially when Clark (1996) herself raises the notion that personal writings from eras past could have been written in some form of code to obscure what was deemed socially unacceptable at the time (Katz, 1982; Clark, 1996; Hitchcock & Shoemaker, 2003). Furthermore, the extensive historical research of Emma Donaghue (1993) clearly demonstrates that as early as the late 1600's, lesbianism and self-aware small communities of lesbians often existed, and that conscious lesbian identity was evident in many cases. Alongside this, where other researchers appear to have found only innocent references to relationships, Donaghue also identified that some of these relationships were sexually expressed. Donaghue opened the door to viewing late 17th Century lesbian culture in a new way that overrides the previous held notion of attachments and intense friendships between women of this time, and established the possibility of lesbian identities and communities as being richly active throughout this time in history. It would also appear equally possible that lesbians (and other marginal subgroups) may have used varying idioms to denote issues relevant for the society of the time. I think the issue that Clark (1996) raises however, that lesbian identity may not have existed as we know it in contemporary times, may be accurate; therefore, the idea of Lister and her apparent confused gender is certainly of important historical note in the development of lesbian identity. As far as the historical context of lesbian communities, if they did exist in Lister's time and prior, they would most certainly have been somewhat underground (alongside the Molly-houses[3]), and not recognised by the society of the time as communities of women living and loving together.

This by no means suggests that lesbian communities did not exist. My suggestion is that in historical times, lesbian communities as we have come to

[3] Molly houses existed from the early Sixteenth to mid Seventeenth century, were mostly taverns or private rooms, and served as important meeting places for men sexually interested in each other. These venues comprised one of the first modern homosexual subcultures. Molly houses provided mollies a space in which to act on homosexual desires and develop a sense of community. The most famous Molly House was that of Mother Clap, raided in the 1720's.

know them in the twenty-first century did not have either the societal acceptance or the freedom of expression to develop a community of lesbians that we would identify as such in present times. What may have appeared instead was a network of women who were in a position to remain unmarried (therefore suggesting some wealth), and whose close relations with each other was not under suspicion from a society that believed heterosexuality to be the dominant form of romantic attachment. Alongside this the considerable attention paid to the complex issue of sodomy and the belief that "such behaviour was impossible between women" (Clark 1996:26) clearly displayed a notion of the time that only men were able to fully engage in sexual activity. A cynic might suggest that in over two hundred years, not a lot has changed.

Figure 2: Amy Bock/Percy Redwood

Historical Lesbianism in New Zealand

Arguably, the life of Lister may have been mirrored to some degree here in New Zealand in the life of Amy Bock (1859-1943), commonly known for her impersonation of a man and marrying a local Dunedin woman in 1909 under the guise of 'Percy Redwood'. Bock was well known as a trickster and a con, but her marriage to another woman made her famous. Whether she was a lesbian is still debated today, however her actions certainly suggest some inclination towards preferring to live as a man and courting the affections of another woman.

> *No one can explain why Amy dressed up as a man and continued to do so throughout her life, even when she wasn't pulling "a trick". Some people claim it's because she was a lesbian, her lifestyle does suggest this. But once, during a conversation with a policeman, she remarked that she found men too soft and*

easy and would find more of a challenge in the deception of women so she decided to appear as a man. Others say life was easier for men in that era, so women who wanted to get on in life would dress up as males... Perhaps we'll never know.

(Puke Ariki, n.d.)

The Hidden Lives of Lesbians

Another significant era for lesbianism, lesbian subculture, and lesbian communities was in the mid twentieth century. Of particular note were those women labelled as 'butch-femme'. Whilst much of the data collected over this period relates to homosexuality in the United States, the issues raised would certainly have been relevant for lesbians in 1950's New Zealand. This was a time in history when overt homosexuality was heavily discriminated against and societal pressure to remove 'perverted' behaviour was high.

Particularly in the 1940's and 1950's, gay men and lesbians were systematically harassed, jailed, fired from their jobs, and subject to involuntary incarceration in mental hospitals. Until gay liberation, riding the wave of the radical politics of the late 1960's, galvanized a nascent formulation and representation of homosexuality, cultural depictions of homosexuality as anything other than a shameful, pathological condition leading to isolation and misery were censored and hard to come by outside certain (usually urban) areas. As a consequence, the most readily available homosexual identity was a stigmatized one; moreover, while the homosexual subculture, which thrived in many cities and barely survived elsewhere, offered gay men and lesbians some respite from an isolated and insecure existence, it too was driven by the language of stigma. That "overt" homosexuals were discriminated against on almost every level was a constant reminder of the futility of leading anything other than a secret and secretive life.

(Rosenfeld, 2003:1-2)

The term 'butch-femme' developed during the mid twentieth century as a way in which women could live their lives with other women in a society that oppressed and discriminated against homosexuality. In a fantastically simple example, women lived their lives as men in order to date, court, love, and live with other women. Couples appeared physically to be a man and a woman and were able to move freely within a society that could not and would not accept homosexual behaviour as anything other than deviant.

The complex issues surrounding butch-femme, particularly in the mid Twentieth century, have certainly influenced the way in which butch/femme, transgender roles within lesbian community(s) have evolved over the past 50 years. From the necessity of having to survive in a hetero-dominated society where discrimination and violence against non-heterosexuals was rife, butch-femmes helped develop a network or community(s) where gender roles took on a new meaning. In its broadest sense, adopting a male/masculine persona eased the way into living a life that lesbians wanted, in societies that were unable to accept such difference. Even as early as Anne Lister in the Nineteenth century, lesbian women have adapted their lifestyles to *fit in* to the societal norms of the time.

Amongst these adaptations and identities is an example of a more distinct identity that has become known as Stone Butch. Stone Butch is a woman who prefers not to be touched sexually or emotionally by a partner; she is a giver rather than a receiver. A Stone Butch may even prefer to disassociate from her femaleness entirely and not even acknowledge the existence of her female anatomy. At this moment, I am aware of my outsider role, because having never experienced Stone Butch I feel unable to do justice to the complexity of all this lifestyle expresses. It is appropriate then to place in this thesis the words of Stone Butches (those individuals who identify and live as Stone Butch) themselves. The following are the words of Big Dog, a self-identified Stone Butch.

*I am a Stone Butch. Stone in this case meaning "very". I was born female but Butch is my gender; the two gender system described by the word "woman" does not fit me at all. "Man" fits much better but it is not a perfect fit either. I am not a male but you can call me "sir" and use masculine pronouns of "he" and "him". Don't call me woman, wimin, womyn, gal, lady, girl or ma'am. Ever. I am transgender. This is different from transsexual. I do not want to change my body to become male. But most people call me he and "sir". Very few people call me she. I am much, much closer to what most people would call "man" than "woman". I am not a male but in my own way, I am a man. A Stone Butch man. I am not a woman in any sense of the word that most people understand. My identity defies conventional description. Butch is an energy all its own, an identity unique unto itself. That is why Butch is my gender and I walk through life as the Stone Butch man that I am. It is hard to find a language to describe a transgender Stone Butch like me that will be universally understood. I dress in men's clothes down to my boxer shorts. My hair is what you call masculine, a regular guy's barber shop cut...I am 6'2" and have a naturally deep voice that does not give away my biological sex. I walk, talk, eat, love and live as the Stone Butch that I am. Femmes rock my world. Andro dykes are my sisters. Other butches and Stone Butches are my brothers. Butch is not a word that "describes" me. It *is* me. I am Butch the noun, not butch the adjective. My identity as *a* Butch is sacred to me. I walk the walk and I talk the talk. I live with it everyday. It is *NOT* a role that I choose to play. I have no more choice in this than I had a choice in my biological gender. I live it 24 hours a day, every day of the year. I can't ever put it away, nor do I want to. I am *proud* to be a Stone Butch. Butch is not identified by what you do. Heck, I am Butch when I cook or sew on a button. It is an energy, an amalgamation of action, thought processes, look, desire, tastes and interests.*

(Big Dog, 2007:1)

The example of a Stone Butch, and conversely a Stone Femme[1], identifies the many diverse ways in which lesbians over time have adapted to meet their own needs in societies that may view their personal identity as unacceptable or *deviant*. Stone Butch is, in essence, a more radical identity that may even pose as a way of shunning or rebelling against a heteronormative dominant society and culture.

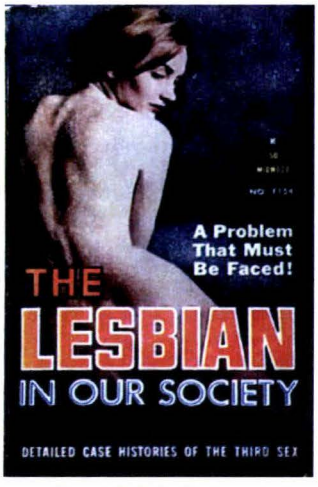

Figure 3: Pulp Fiction Cover 1962

Lesbianism: A 'Deviant Problem' in Society?

The mid Twentieth century was also a time for Pulp[2] literature that, for many lesbians (and queers of the time) provided the only glimpse into a community or network that existed outside of their own private worlds. Jo Duffy, a 74-year old volunteer working for The June L. Mazer Lesbian Archives[3] relayed her memories of this time to Lesbian News journalist Lori Medigovich (2001:28).

> *Duffy remembers being a lesbian in the 1950's when the word "gay" only meant cheerful. Lesbians and their lives were hidden, never referred to openly and certainly never a cause for celebrations of pride every summer. In fact, the best that lesbians could do to get any information about themselves was to read the pulps – inexpensive paperback novels that dared to explore their lives. Duffy remembers secretly buying these novels and devouring them, as they were the only sense of "community" that she had. Yet she also remembers feeling betrayed by how cruelly and inaccurately they portrayed her life.*

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[1] Stone Femme is a woman who commonly prefers to company of a Stone Butch. She understands the needs and desires of a Stone Butch, who may not wish to be touched at all. A Stone Femme is most likely to be the receiver in this woman-woman relationship.

[2] A magazine or book printed on low-quality paper made of wood pulp or rags, and usually containing sensational and lurid stories, articles, etc.

[3] The June L. Mazer Lesbian Archives in Los Angeles is "dedicated exclusively to preserving lesbian history and to guaranteeing that those who come after us will not have to believe that they "walk alone." The Archives is committed to gathering and preserving materials by and about lesbians and feminists of all classes, ethnicities, races and experiences." (Faderman, 2007).

Whilst this pulp literature was inadequate in many ways, it provided a much-needed sense of community(s) for lesbians and queer women. It allowed a glimpse of an external community(s) that pulled together, in spirit if not in physical body, lesbians who may have felt isolated from other lesbians. I can only imagine the liberation of reading stories and articles (inaccurate though they may have been) about being lesbian at a time in history when such activity was grossly unacceptable in mainstream society. In New Zealand, Alice and Star described the situation of hetero-normativity and lesbian invisibility in the 1970's.

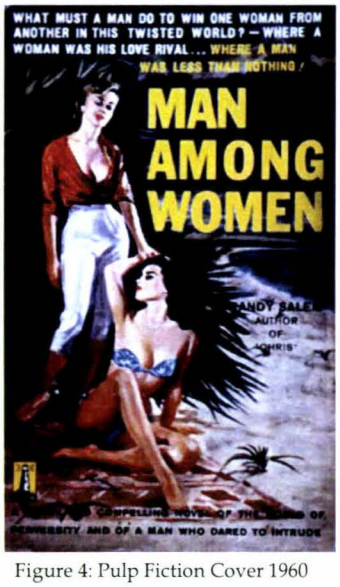

Figure 4: Pulp Fiction Cover 1960

What was to become and remain contested 'queer' intellectual and social movements arguably originated in Aotearoa/New Zealand in the 1970's. New Zealand at that time still featured male-only bars, and the end of six o'clock closing was only a recent change. Lengthy public debates about decency and community standards included the tour of rock musical 'Hair[1]*' being adjudicated by a jury, and the arrest of Germaine Greer*[2] *for saying "bullshit" during her promotional visit for 'The Female Eunuch'. Male homosexuals could be imprisoned and were often the target of bashings or blackmail. Lesbianism was largely invisible and, for many women, shaped by butch and femme roles and a largely assumed heterosexual normativity.*

(2004:7)

[1] Hair was "the show that first came into public view in October 1967, a story of a cross-section of young people in New York City's east village who banded together as a tribe and tried to change the world. They found their own natural aesthetic and, because they were so hip (yet in a different style from the earlier hipsters and beatniks), a new word was coined to identify them. They came to be called 'hippies'."(www.hairthemusical.com/hair.html)

[2] Germaine Greer is an academic, activist and author. The publication of her classic 1970 book *The Female Eunuch*, made her a household name. Although the book never articulates anarchism directly, it is a ground breaking book, which draws upon anarchist ideas."

Lesbian History in Context

This historical outline demonstrates the enormous struggles of lesbians to establish and maintain their own sexual identities, but also the struggles to develop enduring communities of women that were safe places to meet and enjoy the company of other lesbians. The historical construction of lesbianism has profoundly influenced the way in which contemporary lesbian communities have maintained a sense of togetherness through inter-group differences and interpersonal differences. When an understanding of how lesbians have been hidden throughout history evolves, the culture of contemporary lesbian community structures can be better acknowledged and accepted by both its members and the wider community. Through the establishment of butch-femme roles, perceived gender insecurities, and literature that inadequately depicted the lives of lesbian women, contemporary lesbian communities have developed their own places of safety in which to define that which they have in common. The following chapters are not easily contained because they interweave with each other and mirror the lives of women in lesbian communities who have developed complex and varying subgroups of communities within the larger community. Like the lives of lesbians in a dominant heteronormative culture, this thesis is a complex series of interlinked relationships.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

> *To characterise such a development as the formation of a 'community' is an inadequate and unsatisfactory conceptualisation. Given the complexities of individuals identifying themselves as gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered, it is more accurate to visualise a changing population of people across locations and across time (given that some within this population will remain exclusively in these groups while others may belong to these groups at different points in their lives). ...(t)his trend is likely to continue as the gay and lesbian subcultures continue to negotiate difference and diversity from within, as well as continue to influence and be influenced by a wider societal consciousness about homosexuality.*
>
> (McNab, 1997:135-136)

As previously stated, the Wellington lesbian community(s), like many groups sharing similar characteristics, is difficult to define because it is multifarious in its members and structure, and has a diversity that renders representative research most difficult. Therefore, because the Wellington lesbian community(s) is not easily defined, it should not be relegated the rigid definition of one single group or subgroup. It is a community(s) that has both extreme diversity and unity in a relatively localised geographical area. But in order to examine the concept of community it is firstly practical that the notion of lesbian also be examined in some detail, as the idea of a lesbian community(s) is deeply embedded with the issue of lesbian legitimacy, lesbian identity and lesbian in-group membership. The following section will explore a myriad of literature on the subject of lesbian identity, in direct relation to the concept of community(s), with the complex premise of this discussion being; *who* can be part of the lesbian community(s)?

What Is A Lesbian?

No one identity will fit all lesbians, and what it means to be a lesbian varies greatly from woman to woman. As Ferguson (1982) and Wiseman (1996) suggest, differences exist not only in the ways women understand what it means to be a lesbian and how they define it for themselves, but in the centrality of lesbianism for their sense of self. The following two examples highlight the difficulty that Ferguson is referring to:

> *A lesbian is a woman who has sexual and erotic-emotional ties primarily with women or who sees herself as centrally involved with a community of self-identified lesbians whose sexual and erotic-emotional ties are primarily with women and who is herself a self-identified lesbian.*
>
> (Ferguson, 1982:153)

> *In the end, a lesbian must simply be any woman who calls herself one, understanding that we place ourselves within that category, drawing and redrawing the boundaries in ever-shifting ways. For there is no essential and timeless lesbian, but instead lesbians who, by creating our lives day by day, widen the range of possibilities.*
>
> (Whisman, cited in Savin-Williams and Cohen, 1996:60)

The first of these examples identifies what is profoundly problematic in defining lesbian, and by association, a lesbian community(s). The use of the word 'primarily' indicates that exclusivity is not necessarily required in order to self-identify as a lesbian. From experience of many lesbian communities, I would suggest that the issue of lesbians occasionally having intimate relations with men is a deeply controversial issue for many women who would identify as lesbian. Similarly, as I come to understand my own bias as a lesbian, this ultimately influences my reaction to this statement by Ferguson, whereby the idea of a lesbian having 'primarily' erotic-emotional ties with other women who have

'primarily' erotic-emotional ties with women in the form of a community(s) is a slightly foreign, if not unacceptable notion to me.

The second of these examples again raises the idea of a 'changing lesbian', whereby the range of possibilities is ever widening. My immediate reaction when reading Whisman was to disagree that there is no timeless lesbian. What appears from Wiseman's statement is the notion of lesbianism that evolves over time and place. Whilst I would agree with this in part, it also seems relevant to suggest that the physical appearance of a lesbian may alter depending on their environment and place in social and cultural groups yet the inner self-identification of a lesbian may be enduring of these situations. For example, the way in which Anne Lister in the 19th Century carried out her life as a lesbian in an environment largely unaccepting of lesbianism, differs only by her appearance and choices due to her situation in historical context that required her to remain isolated and secretive about her lifestyle as a lesbian. The essence of her lesbian identity appears by all accounts to be similar to that of present lesbian culture. Lister preferred the company, socially and intimately, of women. As Everard (1986) asserts, the notion of a homosexual is a relatively recent historical construction dating from the late 19th Century (Lister's time in history), yet the conceptualization of lesbian is not restricted to any one historical category. Whilst the possibilities of lesbianism are certainly widening as Wiseman (1993) suggests, for some women however, the notion of a timeless lesbian may in fact be a very real internalized concept. Not withstanding the importance of historical context, for those women who identify exclusively with other women for romantic and intimate relationships, the concept of a 'timeless lesbian' has come to signify the epitome of lesbianism, regardless of environment and societal norms.

So who is it fair to describe as a lesbian? The answer to this complex question lies in the understanding of each individual woman and her self-identification of

what she believes a lesbian to be. For some this involves exclusivity to other women, for others lesbianism is a predominant attraction, social, physical, emotional, and spiritual to another woman. A *Google* search on the worldwide web (in May 2007) for definitions of "lesbian" suggests that the most commonly used definition is *a woman whose sexual orientation is to women, or a homosexual female.* However, no single definition will placate and fit all lesbians. As political, social, cultural and spiritual differences interweave through the lives of lesbians, no holistic definition can, and arguable, should be reached. On this basis, the concept of a lesbian community becomes fraught with diversity and difference surrounding what may be the one commonality of any group of lesbians, and for some communities the issue of lesbian legitimacy becomes paramount in the development and sustainability of that lesbian community.

Lesbian Legitimacy

The issue of lesbian legitimacy has undergone extensive research, particularly in the United States. Rust, researching American lesbian communities surrounding bisexual and lesbian legitimacy and definition, concludes that the primary reason bisexuality arouses such controversy in lesbian communities is because "lesbianism, not bisexuality, is the real issue" (1994:122). What Rust suggests, is that it is *lesbians* who have differing opinions within their communities as to what constitutes being a lesbian, and consequently what signifies a lesbian community. It appears problematic then, that without being able to agree and/or define amongst ourselves what being a lesbian actually is, it follows that finding a working definition of lesbian community is riddled with enormous difficulty and a myriad of mixed opinions and emotions.

Being so open to debate, lesbian legitimacy has led to immense dissention in numerous lesbian communities. Hoagland and Penelope express the following view of women, whose sexual relations were not exclusively limited to women:

We feel a great deal of hostility toward these women because they have the privilege to experiment with our lives, because they have betrayed us when being a lesbian became no longer fashionable (or politically correct) and they went right back to fucking men.

(Hoagland and Penelope, 1988:36)

In addition, Golden (1996), having written extensively on this subject, suggests that arriving at a definitive meaning of lesbian could restrict women's sexuality, and prefaces her research with the following:

Despite active and ongoing debate within feminist and lesbian communities regarding who is and is not a lesbian, most people believe they know the answer to this apparently simple question. To them, lesbians are women who are sexually attracted to, and involved with other women.

(Golden, cited in Savin-Williams and Cohen, 1996:229)

Although Golden goes on to develop a complex argument surrounding self-identification, the clear supposition that lesbian identity cannot easily be defined, further demonstrates the enormous difficulty in identifying a lesbian community, among whom the sexual orientation of its members may be the one point of sameness that binds the community together. To complicate further an already complex debate, arriving at any agreement as to who can be described as a legitimate lesbian comes under the guise of the *unspoken rules* that have been referred to by respondents in this research. These unspoken rules by all accounts require some form of proof of lesbian legitimacy from women who would choose to label themselves as lesbians. These women then become part of evolving and fluid subgroups of a larger community of lesbians who may find more in common with each other than their sole identity as lesbians.

Lesbian Community(s)

Lesbian communities are essentially communities of likeness. They are communities where individuals seek (and often find) a common identity with other women. They are communities of intimacy, friendship, support, and communities of disagreement, diversity, and difference. Yet lesbian communities by all accounts maintain an informal structure that enables the community to prosper and accept diversity from within its own core. Lesbian communities are fluid, as women come and go from visible (and invisible) lesbian subgroups at various times throughout their lives. The membership of these communities is therefore continually changing. The notion of lesbian community membership is a central point of interest in this thesis. Whilst there is no formal membership structure as an organisation may define, there are clearly membership rules that are followed and enforced within lesbian communities. The issue of membership will be discussed in more length in the following section, but firstly, Susan Krieger, author of *The Mirror Dance* (1983), has written extensively about a small lesbian community in the United States of America where she undertook extensive interviews with over 70 women surrounding lesbian legitimacy and community. What Krieger encountered was a community of women that was extremely diverse and made up of varying subgroups of women throughout the community at large. Krieger's respondents narrated to her at length their understanding and descriptions of how they characterised their small community of women.

> *(Ruth) saw several different lesbian communities in town, though she understood what people meant when they said 'the community'...it was a group of women who were almost exclusively lesbians, who had been out or around...these women were the women who were the lesbian community almost because it was important to them and because they found a sense of belonging, fellowship, and sharing.*

(Madeleine) suggested the community was a whole culture, camaraderie, a support system, a network, shared understanding, and shared vision. Then within that there were strong friendships and people who met each other in cluster arrangements.

(Carol). There had to be an idea of wanting to be part of a community for it to exist. Then that was built on core activities, newsletters etc...she thought there were maybe fifty to a hundred people in it on different levels, a core group and those who were more peripheral.

(Harriet) thought the community was made up of people who found solidarity and comfort in participating. She did think you had to consciously join but that there weren't any rules about being in it. It was basically an open association except for the one requirement that, you had to be supportive of women who were trying to build healthy relationships with other women.

(Krieger, 1983:7-9, 16)

Krieger's research into this small American town and the lesbian community within it is work I have drawn from extensively in this thesis. Her participant observation of this community over a period of one year led her to draw several important conclusions about the lesbian community she studied. Krieger identified a community of women who struggled with their personal identities whilst trying to fit into the community of which they belonged, to find a comfort and acceptance in an environment filled with diversity and difference. This struggle, while not isolated to lesbian communities, is an issue that must face all communities where personal identity is both crucial and contested.

Individuals enter the community and draw back, become involved with each other and pull apart. Their transitions from one time to the next are often painful. They are frequently more vulnerable in their chosen group than in the outside world, and more easily hurt by rejection. Yet they persist in efforts to understand

and to overcome, to provide their own world with its own rules and boundaries and its slowly evolving sense of safety.

(Krieger, 1983:169)

The final statement in Krieger's book is a powerful example of her findings within this community of women. She states:

Like the women of this study in relation to their group, we are all to some extend outsiders in the communities to which we belong. Yet we need our communities to take us in when we are uncomfortable and ambivalent as much as we need them to welcome us when we seem to fit in, when we merge and conform. There is perhaps no more worthy endeavour in social life than the struggle to build communities that might be truly accepting of their members. This study has recorded that in a Midwestern town, in their own way, a small group of women attempted to create such a community.

(Krieger, 1983:169)

Krieger's research became one of lesbian identity within a lesbian community as much as it was about the community itself. Likewise, in this research, the complexity of personal identity amongst lesbians is deeply entwined in how the community(s) addressed in this study is perceived and experienced. What Krieger identified in her research is a powerful example relevant to the community(s) identified in this research also. The Wellington lesbian has a core and a peripheral structure, and is a community(s) of women striving to find acceptance with each other, building their own sense of community and finding safety with each other in a feeling of likeness. Whether or not the membership of this community(s) is continually changing, the structural integrity remains steadfast as new women enter, and old members return.

Membership in Lesbian Communities

The concept of membership in lesbian communities is a widely accepted notion that does not in appearance have any rules associated with it. There is no formal membership criterion that is overtly issued in order for women who are lesbians to join this community(s) and there is no letter of agreement for them to sign to say they have joined and are now a member. What exists in its place is an informal, unspoken set of rules that women learn through experience and being part of the community(s). This is especially apparent in the core, visible, bar subgroup within the greater Wellington lesbian community. This subgroup is arguably one of the most fluid, that I suggest is due to its size and composition as a public area into which many varying subgroups (including heterosexual, bisexual, transsexual, and transgendered) have access.

Membership in the Wellington lesbian community(s) has striking similarities to the work of Michael Roguski (2004) and his research into the 'policing' of gay men and queer culture in New Zealand. Roguski states:

> *Gay men, and queers in general, are understandably forced by our societal position to form and reinforce our individual and collective normality by creating criteria that determine in-group membership. If the criteria are met, whether political, social, iconic, affiliative, or the suitable use of queer vernacular, in-group membership is gained. Card-carrying members are perceived as safe and are therefore free to interact socially, and are given voice. Those who are not deemed safe or worthy, while possessing club membership on a broad scale, are not given a platinum card and remain outsiders by suspicion. Notably, in the realm of false negatives and positives, these criteria are also used to exclude potential card-carrying members of the community.*
>
> (Roguski, 2004:135)

With this statement, Roguski strikes at the heart of the issue of membership in lesbian and gay communities. Although he refers to gay men, he draws an analogy that any card-carrying or non card-carrying lesbian in community subgroups would both understand and most likely have experienced. The in-group membership that Roguski refers to, symbolizes the insider/outsider binary that exists within the Wellington lesbian community(s). In simplistic terms, lesbians must prove themselves worthy of being a "cardholder" in order to develop the relationships that sustain this diverse community of women.

What Counts As Data?

At the completion of the data collection for this research, I found myself making a decision that has become a large portion of this thesis discussion. The two women who took part in the focus group had, I believed, no *real* or *raw* experience of the Wellington lesbian community(s), and therefore I dismissed their data as being invalid for the purpose of this research. I began to think I had no data at all. What I have in fact discovered, is that as the researcher, I discredited data based on my own perception of what I believed to be 'the lesbian community', or certainly the visible, *core* of this community, and more importantly, *who* was/is part of that core community(s). For the purposes of this research, the *core* subgroup of the wider lesbian community is identified as the visible bar culture that exists within the larger community as a whole. It is by all accounts the visible face of the Wellington lesbian community(s), a fluid and interchanging group of women. The Focus Group participants simply did not fit into my preconceived ideas of the core lesbian community subgroup. It was drawn to my attention (by a colleague), that I should remind myself that the participants for this research were in fact self-identified lesbians, and therefore, did meet the criteria I originally posted to be part of this research. What has emerged is a critical assessment of the insider/outsider binary within the Wellington Lesbian Community(s), as perceived by myself as both a member of this core subgroup of the community(s) and researcher.

Lesbians Researching Lesbians

As a lesbian researcher, I am not detached from this community(s), and consequently neither am I entirely objective. This research is therefore based on James Clifford's concept of *experiential authority*. Experiential authority is based on a 'feel for the foreign context, a kind of accumulated savvy and sense of the style of the people or place' (Clifford, 1988:29) and as such allows the researcher full participant observation status through rapport and understanding of the culture within. The authority I speak from in this research is phenomenological; my lived experience in the Wellington lesbian community(s), my observations and day-to-day experiences. Kitzinger (1987) cites a number of researchers who have all identified experiential authority as an invaluable means through which information about exclusive groups can best be obtained and interpreted. For example, Krieger (1983) claims 'as an insider, the lesbian has an important sensitivity to offer'; Porter (1984) further describes how he is able to 'draw upon fifteen years experience in the Gay world'; and Anthony (1982) states that 'my particular lifestyle gives me an advantage in understanding and establishing rapport with lesbians' (cited in Kitzinger 1987:29-30). Furthermore, Reinharz (1992) raises further support for lesbians conducting research with other lesbians as an effective means through which to provide an accurate and meaningful collection of data that, when undertaken by an 'outsider' to the lesbian culture, may not yield the depth of knowledge that might be obtained from insider-knowledge. Reinharz states:

> *Feminist researchers argue that studies of women in a particular country should be done by women of that country. For these people, an author is an authority insofar as she is also the subject about which she speaks. These researchers adopt the view that even an empathetic outsider cannot know women the way women know themselves. Del Martin and Phillis Lyon, for example, write that it is impossible to be definitive or objective about lesbians. But, it is possible to be knowledgeable. In their case, they argue that their expertise is the fact that they*

are lesbians, have lived together as lovers for 19 years, helped found the Daughters of Bilitis in 1955, have been deeply involved in the homophile movement, and have talked to, counselled, and been friends with thousands of lesbians.

(Reinharz, 1992:261)

However, the practicality of lesbians researching lesbians is not all a bed of roses, and there are both benefits and limitations to this form of ethnography.

Limitations of Lesbians Researching Lesbians

There are clearly a number of key issues facing lesbian researchers when they engage in research in their 'own back yard'. For many lesbian researchers the most prevalent of these issues is that often the lesbian community know the researcher, either personally or through reputation. Whilst this is not an issue that is likely to inhibit the initiation of data collection, it is an issue that raises key concerns in relation to bias, objectivity, trust, and representation. Researching within the boundaries of ones own cultural group 'violates the conventional expectation that a researcher be detached, objective, and value neutral' (Reinharz, 1992:261). This is a valid concern raised by Reinharz, and whilst bias free research is unlikely to be achieved (Krieger, 1983), the issue of detachment is something to be considered carefully when lesbians research within their own lesbian community(s). For example, writing with some objectivity about research subjects involves observing with bias free eyes, interviewing with few preconceived ideas about the respondents and their 'role' within the community(s), and recording results with accuracy and impartiality. Within a lesbian community(s) this impartiality can be extremely difficult to maintain as the lesbian researcher is both insider and outsider to the research process. The limitations that influenced this research within the Wellington lesbian community(s) are somewhat unknown due to the lack of participation, and are therefore primarily speculative on my behalf as the researcher. The question this

then raises is whether those speculations are accurate when one takes into account researcher bias. This limitation can be minimized when the researcher is able to reveal more about their subjects than their own position within the community(s). In this way, the bias of the researcher can be reduced and the voices of the respondents heard through the research. In the case of autoethnography, the voice of the researcher becomes just as important as that of the respondents, but the researcher must always be mindful of the bias they bring through personal experience and knowledge. This leads to the next limitation of lesbians researching lesbians, wherein the researcher being an established member within the community(s) they seek to research may contribute to the lack of participation.

The lack of participation in this research, which is discussed in the next chapter, could be attributed to my being known to other community(s) members just as much as any other speculative reason. This obviously poses a number of limitations for conducting research within one's own community. Of the six women who did contact me, I was personally unknown to all six, suggesting that my knowledge of both the community(s) and its members may have had a significant influence on community members' decisions as to whether or not to participate. Whilst the initial reaction from lesbians I spoke with prior to the commencement of this research was extremely positive, the lack of participation, while not unusual for lesbian research, does suggest this may have been a factor. Equally, it is well noted that lesbian communities are notoriously difficult to enter by researchers who do *not* identify as lesbians or whom respondents do *not* know. Krieger (1982), having experienced first hand the difficulties of joining lesbian community(s) states:

> *Despite wide variation in the literature, the subject matter of much of the recent research can be subsumed under the heading 'Exploration of Lesbian Identity'. Only a small amount of it deals with lesbian community... This is, in part, a*

function of tradition in this area; the study of lesbianism began not as a study of women in relation to each other but as a study of isolated, deviant individuals. It is also, in all likelihood, a function of the self-protectiveness of lesbians in society and of the fact that lesbian communities have only recently emerged in a form that is both accessible to researchers and not easily ignored by them.

(Krieger, 1982:97)

Benefits of Lesbians Researching Lesbians

As there are limitations for researching within ones own social and cultural group, there are also many benefits to this form of ethnography. The first and most obvious of these is the ability of the researcher to gain access to the intended research group, in this case the Wellington lesbian community(s), those seen and unseen. The distribution of over 300 flyers in and around the Wellington lesbian community(s) was a relatively simple exercise as I was aware of what events were on and where the most beneficial and high profile events were taking place to deliver flyers. This type of insider knowledge is of clear benefit when initiating interest in any given topic. Secondly, the knowledge a lesbian researcher can bring to the experiences and complexities of a group such as a lesbian community(s) can come from both the experience and understanding of what it means to be a lesbian. For lesbians researching lesbians, the ability to empathise with respondents can be crucial in obtaining meaningful and authentic data. For example, as the respondents for the focus group of this research began discussing their frustrations at being unable to access the *core* visible bar sub-community, I was able to contribute directly to the discussion with experiences of my own difficulties in accessing various communities. The discussion began to run into deeper areas of frustrations and experiences that may not have been uncovered had I, as the facilitator and researcher, not been able to fully engage and understand the meanings and implications of the inability to access a subgroup within a lesbian community.

Therefore, being a lesbian has both limitations and benefits when researching within lesbian communities in general, and within ones own social community. It is clear that being mindful of the limitations and making the most of the benefits is paramount in conducting effective research of this kind. The limitations and benefits for this research left me feeling uncertain of my place at times, unsure of where I stood as an insider and as an outsider to the Wellington lesbian community.

Where Does the Researcher Fit Within the Insider/Outsider Binary?

Trinh Minh-ha identifies the concept of 'Inappropriate Other', a notion I believe is relevant to this research. Minh-ha states:

> *The moment the insider steps out from the inside she's no longer a mere insider. She necessarily looks in from the outside while also looking out from the inside. Not quite the same, not quite the other, she stands in that undetermined threshold place where she constantly drifts in and out. Undercutting the inside/outside opposition, her intervention is necessarily that of both not quite an insider and not quite an outsider. She is, in other words, this inappropriate other or same who moves about with always at least two gestures: that of affirming 'I am like you' while persisting in her difference and that of reminding 'I am different' while unsettling every definition of otherness arrived at.*
>
> (Minh-ha, 1988:71)

Certainly I have struggled with the insider/outsider binary of this research. To position myself as an outsider to this community(s) of women would be entirely incorrect. Yet I am aware that I also assist in the creation of this binary by observing the interactions and shared experiences of my fellow community members and I therefore come to this research as both an insider and an outsider. I am an insider to the Wellington lesbian community, a member, self-identified as a lesbian who has been an active participant in Wellington community(s)

events for over 14 years. Yet I identify in a dual role, as an outsider to my own community through the eyes of a researcher. This is not a community(s) that requires me to develop from infancy any prior knowledge and form experience and bonds in order to study, in fact, it is almost the opposite. As well as researching this community(s) from observations and participation in events, I am also the 'other' looking at my own actions and beliefs as a *member* of this community(s) of women. I have shared experiences with women who are my friends, and as such, I have a responsibility to my own community to research this community(s) with fairness, understanding and integrity. When I conclude this research I will not simply leave this community(s); I will continue on a daily, weekly basis to live, work and play amidst the women of whom I write. In this situation, I do not see the community(s) that I observe as the *other*, because I too am intimately entwined in the issues that are raised and discussed. I too am the 'other' that an outsider may refer to in participant observation research of this nature. With this in mind, the issue of researcher bias has remained prevalent in my consciousness as this thesis has unfolded.

Researcher Bias

The bias I bring to this research has been a crucial factor in my representation of the issues raised and discussed in this thesis, and my own experiences within the Wellington lesbian community(s) have undoubtedly influenced the questions I have asked and the interpretation of results. At this point, it is important for me to acknowledge that not all of my experiences in the Wellington lesbian community(s) have been positive and I have at times been perhaps too judgemental of subgroups of women with whom I state an alliance of sexual orientation. Indeed the very issue of lesbian legitimacy has been one of the factors that has caused me discomfort as a self-identified lesbian in the Wellington community(s). I have at times questioned the legitimacy of other women who have labelled themselves as lesbians, but who have also openly and/or covertly maintained intimate relationships with men. However, it is well

documented that a researcher is not entirely capable of achieving completely bias free research (Krieger: 1983, Bernard: 2006, Wolf: 1992). Nor is the expectation of bias free research practical, honest, or reasonable. What is reasonable is to acknowledge the biases that a researcher brings to their project and to examine the ways in which to minimize the impact of this bias through appropriate and effective use of methodological frameworks.

Chapter 3 Methodology

The primary methodology for this research was participant observation, using a combination of focus group discussion and anonymous on-line blog, whereby both the experience of observing lesbian communities and being a participant in them has been the central research path. Respondents for the focus group were selected using non-probability sampling, specifically purposive or judgement sampling. The Wellington lesbian community(s) is an example of a minority group within a larger, arguably more dominant group in society. The Wellington lesbian community is difficult to identify, locate and access, therefore participants who met specific requirements for this research were purposely sought.

Purposive or Judgement Sampling

There are essentially two forms of sampling methods, probability sampling and non-probability sampling (Babbie, 2001:178-179). Probability sampling seeks precise, statistical information about certain populations and often uses large-scale surveys to obtain enough information to make a quantifiable analysis. Whilst this type of sampling can be used for subgroups of a larger community(s), it would be most difficult to obtain the high volume of participation needed to form a representative sample. In light of this, and of the time and financial constraints of this thesis, non-probability sampling was a more appropriate and effective means through which to obtain the data desired for this research. For example, there is no list of names identifying all the lesbians within the Wellington lesbian community(s). In practice, any such list would be extremely fluid, ever changing within short time periods as women moved in and out of the lesbian environment. For this reason and those mentioned above, participants were obtained using purposive sampling, whereby the sample was selected based on knowledge of the community(s) and the purpose of the study.

This methodology is particularly useful when populations are difficult to find, and "in participant observation studies this method has been proven as an effective means of obtaining specific data" (Bernard, 2001:183).

Although this method does not always provide a representative sample (as is the case with this research), the use of *intentionally* biased methods is recognized as valid means of information gathering in such populations as a lesbian community. For example, this method was used by Mahaffy (1996) to locate respondents suitable in finding out how lesbian Christians dealt with cognitive dissonance that came from being rejected by mainstream Christian churches. Mahaffy also used flyers in and around the lesbian community(s) and a questionnaire to obtain practical and relevant data for her area of interest. Likewise, respondents for this research were selected to meet the specific criteria of being prior or current members of the Wellington lesbian community(s) and to have some knowledge and/or experience of the community(s) through active or peripheral participation. Respondents also needed to self-identify as lesbians. As the Wellington lesbian community(s) is not unitary it provided some challenges in obtaining respondents for this research. The community(s) is not so much geographically divided, as ideologically, politically, and socially constructed of many varying groups of women, and therefore unlikely to provide representative research unless *all* women in *all* subgroups were able to provide input. Yet, whilst this research stopped short of direct selection, there was an element of selection bias on my behalf as the researcher, as I made decisions about what constituted lesbian community involvement based on my own knowledge and experience of participation.

In addition, the participants for this research straddle a fine line between respondent and *informant*. The basic premise of an informant is the ability to talk specifically about a social or cultural group. For example, when researching informal networks within a social or cultural grouping, seeking individuals who

have knowledge and an understanding of what the researcher seeks, can assist greatly in obtaining accurate data about the group. Babbie states the following about an informant as opposed to a respondent.

> *When field research involves an attempt to understand some social setting... much of the researcher's understanding comes from a collaboration with some members of the group being studied. Whereas social researchers speak of respondents as people who provide information about themselves, allowing the researcher to construct a composite picture of the group those respondents represent, an informant is a member of the group who can talk directly about the group.*
>
> (Babbie, 2001:181)

I believe this is a fine line to follow when conducting research in a subgroup such as a lesbian community(s). Respondents are clearly offering narratives about their own experiences within the community(s), yet may also talk directly about the lesbian community(s) as a whole. In this light, the participants for this research were **both** respondents and informants. Babbie concludes his discussion on nonprobability sampling by raising a valid concern about the use of both respondents and informants in research.

> *Nonprobability sampling does have its uses, particularly in qualitative research projects. But researchers must take care to acknowledge the limitations of nonprobability sampling, especially regarding accurate and precise representations of populations.*
>
> (Babbie, 2001:182)

One of the difficulties raised in this research by using respondents who could also be fairly described as informants is the issue of marginality, whereby individuals willing to work with 'outsiders' may often be atypical within their

group, and therefore their data may be misleading about the group as a whole. The idea of an informant in lesbian communities is, I believe, an extremely difficult area to negotiate. It would not be unusual to have a larger than average number of atypical individuals given the diverse nature of the community, and that sexual identity may be the only thing that binds them together. Add to this the complex issue of self-identification and lesbian legitimacy, and it is clear that finding informants, or even respondents who fairly represent the group as a whole is extremely difficult, if not impossible. Alongside this, given the multiple subgroups that collectively make up the community as a whole, and the irregularity of women meeting for lesbian orientated events, it is entirely probable that many women who may identify themselves as being part of the lesbian community(s) were simply unaware that this research was taking place over the 8 weeks flyers were distributed. Indeed, from my own experience in the Wellington lesbian community(s), many women may spend extended times away from the *core* subgroup, choosing to come and go randomly rather than attend events on a regular basis. It is therefore most difficult to address the issue of marginality when members of this community(s) are continually fluctuating in participation and experiences. The subsequent marginality of the focus group and on-line respondents was an issue at the forefront of my mind whilst recording data. Yet, this marginality is a complexity in its own right for the Wellington lesbian community(s) when 'atypical' may in fact be the norm.

Autoethnography

This thesis, whilst based primarily on the principles of participant observation, is auto ethnographic, whereby much of the information contained within this research is based on my own description and experiences as a member of the community(s) in which I am studying. Cunningham & Jones make the following case for the use of autoethnography in academic writing:

Autoethnography is, literally, the creation of an ethnography focused on the self; the author is both informant and investigator. While it is an autobiographical genre of writing, the autoethnography is not simple narrative. Instead, the author adopts an objective (or rather, as objective as possible) stance to the personal, when interpreting his/her own actions, thoughts and behaviour. ...Done badly, autoethnography can be justly criticized as embodying the worst excesses of post-modernism, as the author creates a self-indulgent, un-generalizable, impenetrable individualised narrative. At its best, the autoethnography shares voices that might not otherwise have been heard, and present insights that might otherwise have been too subtle to elicit.

(Cunningham & Jones, 2005:2)

There has also been extensive literature on feminist methodologies calling for the value of passionate and personal accounts of the researcher within their own research to be recognised as a valid form of academic writing. For example, Reinharz (1992) writes at length about the involvement of the researcher as a *person* in their research, presenting experiences and insights in the first person. For feminist researchers this does not contaminate the project's objectivity, but enhances its value and authenticity by raising the consciousness of the reader to the position of the researcher within their research. This 'experimental'[9] form of ethnography is supported by Reinharz who states:

Passion is a disruption of conventional research etiquette. It requires courage to violate the norms of dispassionate research. Political scientist Jean Bethke Elshtain, for example, wrote about starting her book many times, each time trying to work up greater courage "to be more provocative and less abstracted from the

[9] An argument coined by James Clifford (1988), identifying the way in which ethnography has evolved from traditional participation and observation to reflexive and narrative based research, although his work largely excludes that of feminist writing.

wellsprings of my own thought and action."[10] *Feminist research then reads as partly informal, engagingly personal, and even confessional.*

(Reinharz, 1992:259)

This thesis incorporates those ideologies by writing extensively from the first person, identifying and discussing my own position within the community(s) of lesbians, of whom I write, and engaging in (confessional) mindfulness of the bias and preconceived ideas that I bring to this research about lesbians and the Wellington lesbian community(s). As the bounds of participant observation continue to be stretched within the field, this thesis follows the guidelines for autoethnography outlined by Susan Bennett (2004) who has made a significant contribution to the work of autoethnography, and sets out the following characteristics for what does and does not constitute autoethnography:

An Autoethnography is:

- *An analytical/objective personal account*
- *About the self/writer as part of a group or culture*
- *Often a description of a conflict of cultures*
- *Often an analysis of being different or an outsider*
- *Usually written to an audience not a part of the group*
- *An attempt to see self as other might*
- *An opportunity to explain differences from the inside*
- *Sometimes a traditional essay answering the five Ws (who, where, when, what, why)*
- *Sometimes a typical essay with topic sentence and three to five supporting examples*
- *Always an attempt to explain one element of self to other*
- *An explanation of how one is "othered"*

[10] Jean Bethke Elshstain's (1981) *Public Man, Private Woman: Women in Social and Political Thought.*

An Autoethnography is not:

- *A traditional personal narrative*
- *A single event, incident, or experience*
- *Written to the self as the major audience*
- *A simple description or story*

(Bennett, 2004:1)

This research clearly identifies with a number of the characteristics Bennett lays out as autoethnography, and as such is an analysis of otherness from both myself as researcher, and from the community(s) that is the focus of this research.

Participant Observation

Participant observation is a field method that involves 'immersing yourself as researcher into a culture and then learning to remove yourself from that immersion so you can put it into perspective and write about it convincingly' (Bernard, 2001:324). It is an effective method to obtain sensitive information about people's lives, and record life through ethnography. Bernard goes a step further however and describes participant observation as the following:

> *It involves getting close to people and making them feel comfortable with your presence so that you can observe and record information about their lives. If this sounds a bit blunt, I mean it to come out that way. Only by confronting the truth about participant observation – that it involves deception and impression management – can we hope to conduct ourselves ethically in fieldwork.*
>
> (Bernard, 2001:322)

This picture Bernard paints of participant observation may not be the one that we as anthropologists want seen, but I believe it is at times accurate. Observing and participating in the inner workings of a culture or social group for the purpose of academic advancement requires ethical balance from the

ethnographer. However, as anthropologists I think we also move one-step further by gaining the trust of our respondents so that we might obtain insider knowledge not always available from participation or observation. I refer specifically to narratives that are obtained from respondents. In my own experience in the Wellington lesbian community(s), I am acutely aware of my continuing observance of its members in multiple situations. Are these women aware that I am observing from a research point of view as well as being part of activities and rituals? I would speculate that the answer is no. The complexity of this insider/outside binary has been discussed in the Introduction to this thesis. In this light I could be seen as being deceitful to the very community(s) of which I am a member. I see these as extremely difficult balances for anthropologists (and other social scientists engaging in participant observation) who conduct research within their own cultural group/community(s)/family. Yet these seemingly covert observations also allow the possibility of a more accurate picture of this community(s) than those observations recorded by someone visiting another culture for a short period. In essence, the observations I made whilst conducting this research are influenced and enhanced by my observations and experience of the community(s) spanning 14 years of active and peripheral involvement. As Krieger states in her review of *Lesbian Identity & Community*,

> *Many of the studies report that access to lesbian populations has been affected by whether or not the researcher was a lesbian; access and trust were viewed as problematic because of the secret and stigmatized nature of many lesbian populations*
>
> (Krieger, 1982:96-97)

Whilst this report was written in the 1980's, there are still elements that remain relevant for lesbian populations today. The issue of trust was crucial in the methodological choice for this research. I needed to have access to lesbian events for observation and flyer distribution, as well as knowledge of lesbian

communities to conduct both the focus group and on-line blog. However, being known within the Wellington lesbian community(s), has, in all likelihood, also been a limitation for some women wishing to participate in this research. Had I been unknown to the community(s), a greater number may have been willing to participate more freely in this research. A recent American study by Reddy, Flemming, Howells, Rabenhorst, Casselman, and Rosenbaum, has investigated traditional methods for collecting sensitive data in comparison with methods where anonymity was central to data collection. A summary of their findings indicate:

> *Several significant differences in data collection methodology and topic area were found, including greater disclosure of sensitive information via the automated telephonic data collection system (ATDC) than via face-to-face and paper-and-pencil conditions. Participants who were assigned to the ATDC condition felt significantly more comfortable answering questions compared to those in the face-to-face interview condition. Participants in the telephone interview condition reported answering significantly more carefully than participants answering via written questionnaire. Taken together, the results of this study and the previous one it replicates suggest that the ATDC produces disclosure rates that are at least equivalent to, if not greater than, those generated using traditional methods for collecting sensitive data.*
>
> (Reddy, et. al. 2006:499)

It is for this reason that part of this research included data collection via an anonymous internet site, whereby participants were able to comment freely and anonymously, providing a rich source of raw data. The predominant concern this method raised however, is the issue of validity. The following discussion will assess the limitations and benefits of the methodologies selected for this research.

Target Group

The methodology of focus groups was discussed at the beginning of this research to be a valid and appropriate way of gathering data from women surrounding the topic of defining lesbian community(s). It was a methodology that would encourage discussion about experience of lesbian community(s), opinions about its characteristics, and in theory, present a cohesive representation from within the local lesbian community(s). Focus groups were therefore more appropriate than individual interviews or surveys (Wilkinson, 2004b), which would serve only to collect data from respondents in isolation from each other, and would encourage active participation in discussion surrounding this topic.

Spanning a period of two months in June and July 2006, over 300 flyers inviting women to participate in the research were distributed around Wellington central city at high profile lesbian events, and widely distributed by friends through word of mouth, as well as being available through the Wellington Lesbian Activity Website (www.wellington.lesbian.net.nz). At the final due date for participation in the research, there were six women who responded to the 300 flyers and who expressed an interested in taking part in the research. Of these six women, two withdrew prior to the focus group being organised, one withdrew an hour before the focus group was expected to commence, and one did not show up for the meeting. In total, only two women were present for the focus group discussion, which took place at the Massey University Campus in Wellington. Of these two women, one was from another country who was visiting New Zealand for just a few months, and the other had (self-identified) minimal involvement in any core lesbian sub-community(s). Amidst this significant limitation, the focus group did take place and analysis of that meeting is provided in the results of this thesis.

Focus Group

Focus group discussions have a distinctive structure that makes them a valuable tool in the collection of qualitative data (Wilkinson, 2004a). This structure involves a number of characteristics identified by Krueger and Casey as:

> *(1) people who (2) possess certain characteristics and (3) provide qualitative data (4) in a focused discussion (5) to help understand the topic of interest. Other types of processes used in human services may also have one or more of these features but not in the same combination as focus group interviews.*
>
> (2000:10)

Focus group discussions can have both benefits and limitations. The limitations of this data collection process are discussed by Krueger and Casey (2000). Whilst identifying when this process should not be used in research, they also discuss the unpredictability of results and stress the importance of the researchers' ability to conduct this potentially difficult interviewing technique. Krueger and Casey state:

> *It is hard to predict how focus groups will go. Groups vary greatly. Throughout the discussion the moderating team members should remember that they are visitors in the world of the participants, and for a brief time, they are sharing the reality of the participants' environment...(A)nticipate that things can go wrong.*
>
> (2000:119)

Indeed, the focus group for this research was as unpredictable as any Krueger and Casey could have described. At the beginning of this research, it was anticipated that an appropriate number of focus groups would be two or three groups with, on average, five or six women in each. The focus group study was intended to follow the traditional Single-Category Design, whereby information-rich participants who self-identified as lesbian and had some knowledge and

experience of the Wellington lesbian community were sought. The objective of this Design was to reach saturation of a particular topic, specifically to determine how or if a lesbian community definition could be reached. The focus group discussion would then be analysed for common themes or differences across the groups. However, this saturation could not be achieved in this research.

Limitations of Focus Groups

Krueger and Casey offer some detailed examples of when Focus Groups should not be used, supported also by the work of Wilkinson (2004b). The limitations of this qualitative research method appear to relate specifically to the issues of confidentially, consensus, and whether or not statistical projections should be made. Where an environment is charged and/or sensitive information is sought, a focus group is not the most appropriate way to obtain data for research, as it is inappropriate to ask and expect participants to share sensitive information that may be harmful to themselves or other members of the group (Krueger and Casey, 2000:25). Furthermore, if the intention of the research is to reach a consensus about a certain topic, again a focus group discussion is less likely to provide this data as participants should be encouraged to share their experiences, not conform to the opinion of others.

There were significant limitations in the focus group methodology for this research. Although a large number of invitations to participate were made available throughout community events, only a fractional number of women made contact to express interest in participating. Of these women, all who pulled out, for various personal reasons, were those who had had extensive experience within lesbian communities and who were perceived (by myself as researcher) to be those able to offer significant input into the discussions for this research, they were *information-rich* participants. The two women who did take part had self-identified limited knowledge and experience with the Wellington lesbian community(s) and were unable to offer specific experiences to support

their generalised understanding of community(s) within this geographical region. Due to the last minute notice of two women who withdrew from the focus group, I did not think it appropriate to cancel or postpone for the two women who did take the time and effort to attend. Therefore, the focus group was pursued, although limited in knowledge base. With the benefit of hindsight, I would seriously question this decision and would find after the focus group was assessed that the information-rich participants I originally sought for this research may have added valuable insight into the topic of *community* within the Wellington lesbian subgroups and wider community groups. Had participants that withdrew or did not show up give more notice, the focus group would have been postponed to try and include a larger number of respondents. Having said this however, the identification of biases as a lesbian researcher may not have become so apparent had the smaller focus group not taken place.

A potential limitation in running focus groups within a small social and cultural group is the issue of confidentiality. Even though the Wellington lesbian community(s) *is* enormously diverse in its subgroups and networks, it is still highly probable that at some point a lesbian woman from one specific subgroup will meet or be in the same location as another woman from a varying subgroup or at the very least have mutual acquaintances. This is, simply put, the nature of the 'community(s)'. Whilst there was significant interest voiced in the concept and topic of this research during the planning stages, and the topic of this thesis did not raise concerns of sensitive information being sought, it is possible that the physical reality of seeing other focus group respondents at lesbian or gay events was and is relatively high, and may well have been a hindrance for some women's decisions in whether or not to participate in this research.

Benefits of Focus Groups

Focus Group discussions were identified at the planning stages of this thesis to be the most appropriate way of achieving active discussion within a small group

of women about experiences and opinions of the characteristics of the lesbian community(s). These benefits are important to acknowledge as they form the basis for the decision to proceed with this form of data collection, specifically in place of conducting individual interviews. There is a substantial collection of literature identifying the numerous benefits of conducting focus group discussions in qualitative research (Krueger and Casey, 2000; Wilkinson, 2004b; Okley & Callaway, 1992; Kitzinger, 1994; Frith, 2000). Not the least of these suggests that disagreements and debate can in fact be beneficial in creating a productive environment for participants to explore their own thoughts and feelings about related topics (Kitzinger, 1994).

The focus group offered the women participating in this research a more informal environment to discuss the issue of community(s). Throughout the focus group both women agreed and disagreed on issues surrounding community(s), explored ideas with each other, and instigated a valuable discussion surrounding their personal narratives and involvement with the lesbian community(s). There was also more opportunity for myself to participate in the discussion, as well as maintain a facilitator role. Therefore, due to the small number of participants, it was more manageable to guide the direction of the discussion, and draw the participants back onto the topic when it occasionally ventured away. Had the focus group been too big, it would have been exponentially more difficult to maintain a clear focus on the discussion at hand.

The focus group method also allowed a more in-depth observation of the women interacting together. It became easier to judge whether a level of communicable comfort had been reached. The two women participating in the focus group clearly adjusted quickly to the environment and settled into a constructive discussion about their involvement with lesbian community(s). These respondents also discussed issues about the subgroups within lesbian

communities that had influenced their views and beliefs about their sexual identity.

On-Line Blog

The on-line component of this research was both a crucial and exploratory collection of data. Submissions made to the blog were moderated by myself as researcher, and were to maintain control over any abusive or inappropriate comments that may have been made due to the nature of the research, i.e. lesbianism and sexual identity. However, I found no occasion to control or edit comments and I therefore posted all submissions made. The blog entries could be made either anonymously or by registering a user name on the blog site. For the most part, blog submissions were made anonymously, and I have discussed the validity of anonymous emotive data collection earlier in this chapter. An additional element of this data was that it became open to anyone, anywhere internationally. As with all aspects of this research, it was impossible for me to determine whether submissions were made by women who self-identified as lesbians, or by people simply interested in this topic. The issue of lesbian legitimacy is, at its core, a fundamental aspect for all researchers in this field, as the defining characteristics of what constitutes being a lesbian have already been identified in this thesis as undetermined and contested. However, from the content of the blog submissions it would appear that all of the (self-identified) women who chose to comment were very interested in the topic and had some knowledge and experience of lesbians and lesbian community(s). Nevertheless, as with focus group discussions, there are both benefits and limitations to this form of data collection.

Limitations of On-Line Blogs

As with the focus group discussion, there were significant limitations to this method of data collection for the research. The most important of these was the lack of knowledge as to who was contributing to the discussion, and from where

their experience was based. The data from this source was therefore not limited to Wellington, or from New Zealand. This data was uncontrolled from its destination and may have included women from lesbian community(s) that had significantly different structures than those within New Zealand. Indeed, it was virtually impossible to determine that the contributors were women, let alone self-identified lesbians. Nevertheless, there were a small number of contributors who did identify themselves as being previous or current members of the Wellington lesbian community, and the calibre of comments suggests that contributors had thought carefully and deeply about their comments before making a submission.

The second limitation to this form of data collection is availability and access. By inviting contributions over an internet address, contributors were limited to those who had both access to and knowledge of computing and internet systems. It is entirely possible that this contributed heavily to the lack of responses posted on the internet site.

Benefits of On-Line Blogs

Alongside limitations of validity and access, there are clear benefits to conducting data collection over anonymous internet sites. The first of these is the capacity for contributions to remain anonymous, which allows contributors to express in more detail and with more confidence that which they may have felt restricted to say when in a face-to-face interview with a researcher. The methodology for this research was passive collection (Birnbaum, 2001; Reips, 2000, 2001a, 2001b), whereby those interested in this topic would locate the on-line blog through search engines and key words on the Web.

Ethical Constraints

There were a number of ethical constraints identified prior to and throughout this research. The Wellington lesbian community(s) has already been identified

as an enormously diverse group of women, and therefore raises concerns over misrepresentation. I cannot stress enough that the respondents in this research, and I as researcher and a member of this community(s), do not represent the entire Wellington lesbian community. Whilst there are some themes that appear from the narratives of respondents, they are still not enough to suggest that all members of the community view situations and events in the same light. What arises in its place is a snapshot into the lives of some of the women who identify as being a *part* of this community(s). Furthermore, trusting the researcher is an issue that has been paramount in the work of anthropologists and will undoubtedly remain a crucial element of the ethical problems associated with anthropological research in the future. Being both a member of this community(s) and an outsider to this community(s), the following issues of trust, anonymity, and self-censorship warrant discussion.

Trust

When a sub-group in society has close networks, the issue of trust becomes paramount when conducting research within this group. This is doubly so of the Wellington lesbian community, whereby the fluidity of this community(s) membership enables information to become widespread in a very short period. The likelihood of identification is extremely high in such a closed network of *core* lesbians; therefore, the vulnerability in participating is also high.

Anonymity

Anonymity for respondents is an issue I believe to be crucial for the success of research involving personal narratives. I found it interesting however that the respondents in the focus group section of this research were both happy to use their real name and be identified openly within their community(s) of peers and acquaintances. Although respondents have been assigned pseudonyms in the write-up of this thesis to protect their identity, I found it interesting in and of

itself, that anonymity was not something sought or expected by those participating in this research.

In addition, because the Wellington lesbian community(s) is by all accounts a reasonably close network of women, it would be both irresponsible and inappropriate to offer complete anonymity to any participant in this research. Even offering confidentiality can be riddled with difficulties. For example, if I were to hypothetically describe a respondent as being 36 years old, living in Wellington for 19 years and currently single, this seemingly innocuous description would not only allow other members of the community(s) to narrow down the possibilities to a handful of women, but in some cases would be as good as actually naming the person. This issue compliments the notion of there being an understanding within this group of women when 'the lesbian community' is spoken of, and although the community may be made up of numerous subgroups, the interconnection and crossover between them is considerable, making anonymity and confidentiality most difficult to maintain. In this research, I have minimized this concern by assigning a pseudonym and omitting any demographic or familial information about each respondent.

Self-censorship

Alongside anonymity for respondents, I had some concerns around the fact that I am identifiable as a community(s) member. I have therefore limited some comments I may have otherwise been more forthcoming to explore had I been solely a respondent in this type of research. The issue of self-censorship is one that I would attribute strongly to the compact network of the community(s) being discussed, and more broadly the fact that New Zealand is such a small country where the notion of six degrees of separation[11] has sometimes been

[11] Six degrees of separation is a hypothesis derived originally from Hungarian writer Frigyes Karinthy in the late 1920's, whereby all humans can be connected to each other through as little as five to seven people. This hypothesis has subsequently undergone extensive sociological research to determine its validity.

humorously described as only two degrees of separation. Under this hypothesis, it could be argued that the Wellington lesbian community(s) is closer to only one degree of separation, a notion which supports the idea of a 'Labyrinth of Talk' that I will discuss at length in the following chapter.

At a more in-depth level, participants in this research probably also employ a degree of self-censorship, due in part to the possibility of identification from within the community(s) itself. However, I would attribute self-censorship from myself as researcher and participants to the larger issue concerning protection of the community(s) from outsiders. Roguski (2004) tackles this issue in his research within New Zealand gay and lesbian communities by stating:

> *I have been confronted by a series of conflicts over issuing a critique of gay/queer existence. I acknowledge that this conflict is founded in our need to engage in self-censorship to prevent outsiders from gaining access to and knowledge of our existence...rarely have I seen queer-generated comments that discuss issues of exclusion, domestic violence, suicide, chemical dependency, or isolation from gay/queer communities. Rather, our normality is maximized and any indications of deviancy or social ill-health are downplayed or ignored.*
>
> (Roguski, 2004:141)

Whilst I agree in part with Roguskis' statement, my own experience and observations of the Wellington lesbian community(s) lead me to a position of suggesting that this self-censorship is also engaged in to minimize the further stigmatizing and stereotyping that minority groups have to face. In essence, it is the social attitudes of outsiders towards the lesbian community(s) that fuel the need for self-censorship from within.

Chapter 4 Results & Discussion

Like many fieldworkers who return to their place of research, I too have come and gone from the lesbian community, yet always feel a sense of belonging and welcome when I return. I meet with old friends, make new friends, and look with different eyes upon this group of women with whom I have one precious thing in common. As relationships change, so too does my perspective about the lesbian community, and whilst I participate in this community(s) lifestyle, I seek to understand its inner workings. In a recent social conversation with a friend, I was extremely entertained by her explanation of how she viewed lesbian relationships and their longevity. As we sat at a relatively new lesbian bar, she asked how long my partner and I had been together now. When I offered her the number in years, she laughed and said that relationship longevity went from 'gay bar to gay bar', not by how many years. For example, were we together since Alfies, Caspers, Ruby Ruby, Bojangles, The Pound, or Our Bar?[12] I found the thought process behind this wonderfully simple, as many of my friendships in the Wellington lesbian community(s) go back to Alfies and Caspers and we regularly reminisce about the times we shared at these places. It would appear fair to suggest then that for women 'coming out'[13] into the *core* community subgroups, their experiences of the Wellington lesbian community(s) will be reminiscent upon which bar was open, and not necessarily the life events that occur outside of this.

[12] These are all names of gay and lesbian bars that have been, or are currently open in Wellington Central City. These bars, for the most part, were/are one of the central sites for the *core* visible gays and lesbians to socialise. These bars span a period of more than 15 years and have a linear progression whereby only one or two may be trading at any given time.

[13] "Coming Out" is a term commonly known to the lesbian (and gay) community(s) as a time in which a person begins to identify themselves as homosexual, queer, lesbian etc, or who now chooses to let other people know their sexual orientation preferences. It frequently involves disclosure to friends, family, work colleagues etc.

Focus Group Discussion Results

For the respondents in this thesis, both focus group and on-line, their lesbian community(s) experiences have varied greatly depending on their age, stage in life, and friendship/relationship circles. Focus group participants have been given a pseudonym to protect their identity, and the identity of others throughout this research. Their voices speak of their own experiences in the Wellington lesbian community(s), and therefore do not represent the community(s) as a whole. Both Stone[14] and River[15] spoke candidly about their experiences with the Wellington lesbian community(s), and for reasons of confidentiality explored previously in this research, I have not included lengthy quotes to protect their identity within this close-knit community(s) of women. What is captured is the ethos and eidos of their thoughts and experiences to provide a generalized feeling for the discussions that took place. To begin the focus group discussion, it was important to try to identify what each woman defined as a lesbian, and to explore this identity and its characteristics. Both women found this difficult to put into a few words, and felt that to summarize such a vast concept in one or two sentences was in a way belittling to the enormity of the reality. Yet, both women managed to define what it meant to them to be a lesbian, stating:

> ***Stone:*** *I think a lesbian is a woman who has emotional and sexual relationships with other women. I'm not sure if this totally excludes men.*

> ***River:*** *You can't be a lesbian and have sexual relationships with men too. It just doesn't work that way. A lesbian is a woman who only has sexual relationships with other women.*

It was interesting from the outset to have such differing views as to who could be identified as a lesbian. In a way, this beginning to the focus group discussion

[14] Pseudonym for participant 1 of the focus groups discussion.
[15] Pseudonym for participant 2 of the focus group discussion.

epitomized the views that may be shared within the Wellington lesbian community(s) as a whole. There was, simply put, no one definition that felt 'right' for both woman, and it became a discussion about personal choice, rather than a group decision. On this basis however, it is clear that being unable to define or agree on what a lesbian is, therefore requires an enormous amount of tolerance and acceptance from a large group of women with vastly differing opinions and beliefs about one of the fundamental elements of their social and cultural grouping. In contrast to this, when we discussed the idea of a community and what characterized a community, both women were able, at a simple level, to find common ground on what could be fairly described as a community. In their opinion, the following statement was what they each identified as best fitting their experience of the Wellington lesbian community:

> *The word community can refer to a specific group of people (a geographical community, a church congregation) or it can describe a quality of relationship based on certain values and principles.*

The point of interest in asking both of these questions during the focus group was to highlight the irony that exists when trying to find a working definition of the Wellington lesbian community(s). Whilst it appeared relatively harmonious to characterise the term community(s), when it came to the characteristics of a lesbian, the diversity was significant. Throughout our discussions, we all found a point of interest to note that what may often be the single thing of sameness that binds the community(s) together, i.e. sexual orientation and identity, was also the one thing that had the potential to disunite the community(s).

> ***Stone:*** *A community is people who are somehow related. The lesbian community is women who are connected by their sexuality. I think we all represent each other in some ways.*

River: *The lesbian communities I have been involved with all have heaps of difference. The lesbians who are in the main bar group are usually really easy to spot. They look like dykes. I think sometimes this is the only thing that keeps the community all together.*

Stone and River also discussed at length with each other the *cliques* that they felt were clearly visible within the Wellington lesbian bar subgroup. Whilst this is certainly not an issue in isolation to this community, both respondents felt that the Wellington visible bar scene was extremely difficult to enter if you were an outsider to the group. They discussed what they both felt were unspoken rules and an unspoken hierarchy structure that existed within this visible lesbian subgroup. The spirit of this discussion was based on the premise that you had to prove yourself in some way to be a lesbian before you could be accepted into the group.

Stone: *I find it really hard to meet new women. It seems like all the women at the bar are already in their groups and there is no room for anyone new to come in. If you're trying to come in it has to be the new person who makes all the moves.*

River: *I've been involved with lots of lesbian communities throughout the world, and they're all very much the same in my opinion. Unless you know someone or you get involved in some all-lesbian event, it is tough to just 'fit in'. It's like I can't just say I'm a lesbian, I have to prove that I'm a lesbian. How the hell do you do that? I shouldn't have to sleep with a woman just to be accepted as a lesbian.*

The discussion surrounding this issue was reasonably extensive throughout the hour-long meeting. The issue of acceptance into a community of women who you felt you had something considerable in common with was not always an instant ticket for admission. As the participants for this research stressed, they

thought there was a definite unspoken hierarchy in lesbian communities, and some need to prove oneself as a lesbian to other women. What is unclear from this discussion is whether this need is perceived by the women in the community, or solely by those women wanting to become part of the central events. This discussion led to the topic of membership within lesbian communities and whether the respondents thought that there were rules surrounding potential membership. Both respondents clearly identified that they believed there was some form of membership structure to the Wellington lesbian community(s), but it was unspoken and very informal. They felt the concept of membership tied in with the issue of lesbian legitimacy.

> ***Stone:*** *Yes, I think there is membership to the community but I couldn't tell you what it was. It's just there, unseen, but you can feel it.*

> ***River:*** *I think there's membership too. For me it's still about having to prove that you're a lesbian. Otherwise you can't get really close to the other women. I think you also have to spend lots of time doing lesbian things to be considered a member of the community. If I just popped by once or twice a year then I wouldn't be a member.*

For both participants the issue of membership was primarily redundant as neither of them identified themselves as being members of the visible core lesbian subgroup that met at the bar and other lesbian events. Yet they both identified what they perceived to be a form of membership that was evident within the core visible lesbian subgroup.

The remainder of the time during the focus group was spent discussing how we all felt about lesbian communities in general. For each respondent and myself, the myriad of experiences we each had spoke to a generalized feeling of support and acceptance from other women, despite the feelings of having to prove

eligibility as a lesbian. For the most part, the Wellington lesbian community(s) was perceived as a place of safety and support by the respondents in this research, sentiments I would support from both my own participation and observation of this community of women.

On-line Discussion Results

As this research progressed and it became clear that the focus groups were going to be very small, I started an on-line blog to try to encourage further discussion around this topic that could be anonymous and as non-threatening as possible to women wishing to contribute. As discussed in the methodology chapter, the validity of the following data is indeterminable due to the anonymity, fluidity of the internet, and the lack of screening possible to ensure that contributors met the criteria for this research. In saying this however, the comments that were made are informative, passionate, and in all cases relevant to the discussion of this thesis. Contributors to the on-line blog appear to be of an international make-up, whilst a couple do specifically mention having knowledge of the Wellington lesbian community. Two of the contributors identified themselves as Wellington community(s) participants, but have not been identified in this research to protect their identity and the identity of others in this close-knit group of women.

The on-line blog followed a format of myself as moderator posting a comment or question on the website, and contributors were then able to make any comments they wished in relation to the original statement. What follows is a systematic results section that is uninterrupted and verbatim (where possible without identifying individuals).

Comment One Posted By Moderator:

So what is a lesbian community? Does a 'lesbian community' at a regional level exist? Can anyone be part of it? Thoughts welcome...

Four Comments Received:

Anonymous said...

A 'lesbian community' implies there is only one - and I think yes, lesbian communities exist, however there are many overlapping and interlinked communities that have members in common. Some communities are quiet and exclusive, others are loud and proud - and membership requires meeting the fundamental criteria for that group. Some are exclusive, some are inclusive - the difference for lesbians is chances are, past present and future partners are in all or most of your lesbian extended communities, which certainly adds another level of complexity :-)

(Posted Monday 19th June 2006)

Anonymous said...

I know lesbian networks exist in the form of support groups etc but I myself don't often engage in them except on occasion. I have found them at times to be helpful, safe, and supportive especially as a young women.

(Posted Tuesday 27th June 2007)

Katrin said...

As a woman attracted to lesbians I mix with lesbian networks which are connected to a lesbian community in my city. Some networks/ parts of the community are inclusive - allow queer but not lesbian(QBNL) women in - other networks are exclusive only. It can be difficult for QBNL women with lesbian partners at lesbian only events, and non-disclosure is common.

(Posted Friday 4th August 2006)

ee2psi said...

These comments relate only to lesbian communities in my local IRL geographical setting. I am aware of some local lesbian communities, but mostly the entry to these, associated as they are with drinking and sports, seems to be available for younger women. As a married queer woman coming out in later life, for me there was no community at a regional level. I guess that I could have gone along to events and pretended that I was lesbian and that I wasn't married, but I'm not inclined to pretend anything. I went through the hard stuff isolated and alone, and by now any local community seems largely irrelevant.

(Posted Thursday 17th August 2006)

Comment Two Posted by Moderator:

So who can be a lesbian? I know I have often been described as someone who has very black and white views on this subject. I am interested to know what other people think on this subject. Are you a lesbian if you occasionally sleep with men, but predominantly with women? Are you a lesbian if you are in a relationship with a man that does not involve sex and you seek intimacy from women? In order to look at whether or not there is a lesbian community, I think you have to first seek some ideas of what constitutes being a lesbian...

Three Comments Received:

Anonymous said...

I am in a long term relationship with a women which is open, loving, and respectful, but I consider myself bisexual because I also am attracted to men. I consider myself a feminist first and foremost.

(Posted Tuesday 27th June 2006)

Anonymous said...

I always have been ME to start with. I fall in love with people because I do. That they are female (I could say always, but don't want to), is because I am attracted to females. Do I need more reasons? Does that make me a lesbian? My former girlfriend used to say: ' I am not a lesbian, my girlfriend is', so what is the difference between me and her? Is it that I had been with more women? Is it that she didn't want to belong to a certain group of people within the society, those who call themselves lesbians? I am never sure, WHY I should call myself 'lesbian', even though, by definition (what ever that is) I am one: I am sexual attracted to women and am a woman myself. I am not secretive about my sexual life and attraction to women, i am conscious about that being around lesbians, the chance I might find someone, who is attracted to me likewise is higher, the sharing of relationship experiences might be more appreciated... but do i need to call myself a lesbian for that? Do I need to attend a certain group, a lesbian society? i also don't feel connected to my nationality and culture, so why should i to my sexual orientation? What is it good for? Doesn't it compromise ME in some way, since I have to 'fit in', follow rules in some sense, maybe look, appear, behave, speak, response in a certain way? Do I want that? I am not sure. So yes, I am who I am, which appears to be a woman loving women.

(Posted Tuesday 27th June 2006)

Anonymous said...

Hmmm, indeed... what does constitute being lesbian? People talk about 'coming out' like it's that simple... but I couldn't tell you for sure whether I'm hetero, bi, or homosexual... what age are you supposed to know this by? I have been attracted to guys in the past, but have a feeling I've also been attracted to other women.

(Posted Monday 14th August 2006)

Comment Three Posted by Moderator:

As a young woman coming out I was in awe of older and wiser lesbians I saw around me. I found the community (s) I was involved with exciting, safe, and extremely supportive. At the time I had no idea of all the different 'types' of women within the lesbian community (s), and it wasn't until I moved to a larger city that I realised how wide and varied this group of women was. What an eye opener:-)

One Comment Received:

ee2psi said...

> *The internet has enabled different groups of lesbians and queer women to share experiences and support. I found a supportive community on a board for married women and girlfriends of married women. It provides support and help for women from all over the world that is not available elsewhere. Virtual communities have some quite different characteristics to IRL communities. Not the least of these is that a degree of anonymity is possible; giving some semblance of security for women in the first stages of coming out.*
>
> (Posted Thursday 17th August 2006)

Comment 4 Posted by Moderator:

This next comment is looking to find a suitable definition for lesbian communities. This definition is one I really like. I think it also has some challenging concepts for women in lesbian communities. It tackles the issue of behaviour, something that I have sometimes learnt the hard way. ***"Reaching community is both intentional and challenging. The group process requires that an individual give up learned defences and habitual way of behaving. Through increased responsibility, risk and vulnerability of its members, a group develops into a "safe place" providing an environment of acceptance, appreciation of human diversity, and nurturance of personal growth, healing and self-discovery."*** *(Located from www.community4me.com/comm_definitions.htm). I like this definition because it is one*

that I wish lesbian communities would adopt. I have found generally the lesbian communities I have been involved with very safe places to explore my sexual orientation. However, at times I haven't felt fully accepted when I've 'stepped outside' what may be expected of me. Maybe that has just been my own perception, as I am not always willing to let go of habitual behaviour. Anyway, I like this definition a lot:-)

One Comment Received:

ee2psi said...

> *Definitions tend to depend on purpose. The definitions that you have offered for comment are quite formal theoretical ideas of what makes for a community in general. But do communities actually produce definitions of communities in general. Or even for the specific community, or is the requirement to produce a community definition imposed from outside, for example by funders?*
>
> (Posted Thursday 17th August 2006)

Comment Five Posted by Moderator:

One of the comments on definitions is that they are very theoretical. I could not agree more really. I guess when you are in academia it is the natural road to head down. Therefore, the next few posts will be from the heart and from the experience of being in and around lesbian community(s) for a few years now :-)
I have always been one of those 'real' lesbians, you know? I always joke you cannot 'come out' if you have never 'been in'! I told my parents at the age of 15. I knew much earlier than this that I was only attracted to women, but was not sure what that all meant to be honest. I lived in a smallish city where I searched high and low for anything even remotely resembling lesbian. I never found it until I was 19. Then I went wild! A little baby dyke in a woman coated candy store. This was my first look into lesbian community(s), and it was wonderful. I saw women much older than me and was in awe. I was also oblivious to the inner workings and politics of the community(s) I was in. It was easy to be accepted because I just naturally fitted the mould of a little butch dyke :-)

So, I think I was lucky in many respects. My introduction to community life was full and nurturing. Something I definitely took for granted at the time.

One Comment Received:

Anonymous said...

> *Hi*
>
> *I've read the different Community Definitions and think they're fine as descriptions of what we might like lesbian community to be - but they don't describe the lesbian communities that I know. Some of the lesbian communities that I have known in Wellington (from 1984 on) are varied and supportive to those they accept, but are fairly rigid in who they do not accept. Some of the boundaries have become a bit more flexible with time - e.g. accepting a bisexual woman while she has a lesbian girlfriend. Other boundaries are less flexible - not accepting a lesbian who gets involved with a man, not accepting a butch lesbian who transitions to being a transguy; not accepting a post-operative MTF transwoman if her former identity is known; not accepting a pre-operative MTF transwoman. Different groups / communities have different acceptance standards. Full LGBT groups don't distinguish - lesbian only groups usually do. Who decides? In more established groups there are usually a few older gatekeepers who set the standard. In newer groups, it will depend on the clearest speakers/ the most energetic or even who's the sexiest! Don't ask, don't tell - operates OK for some, but not for all.*
>
> (Posted Sunday 3rd September 2006)

Final Moderator's Comment:

The first community(s) I was involved with embraced me with open arms. Looking back I see this was because I was 'under the wing' of a woman very immersed in that community. I was introduced to other lesbians, taken to events, and at the time, spent most of my weekends at the gay bar as well as private parties. I was still young and was

simply having a good time. I was promiscuous, flirtatious, and generally out for fun. I was also fairly arrogant. I knew I could charm older women and took advantage of this. It never once occurred to me that the women in this community might not have accepted my behaviour. I think now, had I of been alone it would have been a lot harder to become involved in a very close-knit community of women. I did not stay long in this city, only 12 months before I moved to Christchurch, a larger main city in New Zealand. I found this lesbian community(s) very difficult to become involved in, as I had expected the same level of friendliness that I had experienced prior, and simply did not find it. I stayed here only 10 months before moving again, this time to Wellington. It is here, in Wellington, that I found a community of women that I really cherished. For the first 3 or 4 years, I practically lived in the only gay bar in the city and got involved with every lesbian event that I could. I became one of the locals.

The results posted by both the focus group participants and the on-line blog contributors clearly display a variety of feelings and opinions about what can be fairly described as a lesbian community, and who can be part of this community. The women who have shared their experiences have voiced unspoken rules, cliques, intolerance, but also support, friendship, and unity. Ultimately, these results reinforce the enormous diversity that exists within community boundaries, and the diversity of where those boundaries even lie. There has appeared at times an expectation that everyone in the Wellington lesbian community(s) will get along with each other because they may share a point of likeness. This is, ultimately, an unrealistic and unfair expectation. What has also emerged is a crucial point of interest to determine whether the Wellington lesbian community(s) and its members need to be defined at all. What purpose does it serve this community(s) to have itself and its members defined in a formal and structured way? As the discussion section of this thesis begins, I am mindful of this last question, to identify what purpose these definitions will serve the women of these community(s) and if in fact, such a form of 'pigeonholing' is even necessary or beneficial, and if it is, to whom.

Discussion

To define what is lesbian and ultimately lesbian community(s) has been under significant debate politically, socially, and culturally for decades, and most likely will continue for some time to come (Ferguson, 1990). In identifying myself as lesbian, I have come to think of myself in many different ways at varying times in my life. At the age of 15 when I first made known to my friends and family I was lesbian, I thought of a lesbian as being sexually and physically attracted to other women, particularly an attraction that was acted upon. Some 18 years later, I still think of a lesbian as having sexual attraction, but it also encompasses lifestyle, friendship, companionship, and an intense understanding of another woman that goes beyond sexual actions. Lesbian communities encompass women from diverse backgrounds and equally diverse beliefs and ways of living. Lesbian communities have cliques just as any other community(s) and these are arguably labelled some of the following; bull dykes, lipstick lesbians, butches, femmes, sports dykes, diesel dykes, and corporate dykes to name a few[16]. Many women however do not choose to label themselves in any way, and may be deeply immersed in community activities or remain quite separate from any events involving other lesbian women. The Wellington lesbian community(s), from my own experience can be a supportive environment, a safe place to meet and share time with other women. I have experienced it to be a community(s) of caring and loving women who would do anything to assist their friends when needed. It is also a community(s) that, because of its diversity, may at times have issues of a political or social nature that need to be worked out through discussion, tolerance and compromise. Whatever these situations may be, it is also a community(s) where for many, being lesbian may be the one thing that unites them and for some the only point of sameness common to this group of women. The women identified as *community(s)*

[16] These terms refer to specific identities within lesbian communities and represent predominantly physical characteristics of women stereotyped into these roles. For example, a Bull Dyke may be tattooed, wear leathers, be shaved or have very short hair, etc. Conversely, a lipstick lesbian may be characterized as having very feminine physical traits, high heels, wear make-up, etc. For other lesbians these identities will mean much more than physical characteristics and may include attitude, presence, and style.

members in this research are those actively involved in lesbian events, who attend dances, meet at the bars, play in sports teams, and those who generally have a visible presence within and around the Wellington lesbian community. These women, for the purposes of this research, are identified as the *core*, visible, subgroup of the lesbian community(s). It is crucial to acknowledge however, that there are many varying subgroups within the Wellington lesbian community(s) that make up the community as a whole. The lesbian community could be likened to an iceberg, whereby it is possible that only a small portion of the community(s) may be visible at any one time, but there are always larger, interconnected part(s) of the community unseen. On this basis, it is an important reminder that this research cannot and should not, be deemed representative of the Wellington lesbian community(s) as a whole. It is an ethnographic description of a core group of women who meet on a regular basis[17], who enjoy platonic and sexual relationships with each other, and who have created their own subculture within the larger lesbian community(s).

Insiders and Outsiders

Throughout this research, I have asked myself a fundamental question in relation to the insider/outsider binary that exists within this and other lesbian communities. Namely, what makes a woman an insider or outsider to the lesbian community(s), and what are they inside and/or outside of? The focus group respondents for this research discussed at length their feelings of inability to infiltrate the core visible lesbian subgroup within the larger community as both participants were essentially outsiders to the core membership of the group. As discussed earlier in this thesis, the notion of membership in the Wellington lesbian community(s) is both largely unspoken and informal, yet it is something that has an impact on women trying to enter into this community of women. Membership appears to be obtained through time and experience of attending

[17] The description of a 'regular basis' is subjective and will vary from person to person. For some, meeting on a daily or weekly basis classifies as regular, for others it may be longer periods.

events, making friends, beginning and ending romantic and platonic relationships, and generally having a visible presence within the subgroup in which 'membership' is sought. Yet, from my own experience of years within and around the Wellington lesbian community, once membership (for lack of a better word) is established, it is largely unmoving and timeless. There are women who may come and go from the community(s) depending on their stage in life, yet are welcomed back into the community(s) freely and in most cases without exception. The history that is created through shared events and relationships is therefore enduring of extended absences and changing patterns in lifestyle.

As discussed in the methodology chapter of this thesis, the perceived *core* lesbian community(s) had closed ranks in the lack of active participation in this research. There was simply no interest or perceived need to be an active participant in research that looked at identifying who and what was the Wellington lesbian community(s). The interest to participate came from outside the visible *core* lesbian community(s). This in itself is a fascinating insight into the workings of the larger community, existing outside the visible *core* lesbian subgroup. My question therefore becomes, what do the *outsiders* tell me about the *insiders* and vice versa? It has been well documented in the literature that lesbian (and gay) communities are notoriously difficult to enter for research purposes (Roguski, 2004; Krieger, 1983; Saphira & Glover, 2001). The reasons for this difficulty appear to be mostly supposition surrounding researcher bias, importance and/or requirement of the stated sexual orientation of the researcher, protection from within the community(s) itself to outside research, and possibly the most crucial element is the diversity of the community(s) members rendering representative research extremely difficult. Nevertheless, the results for this research indicate to me that the outsider status of lesbians from the core visible subgroup is largely due to the individual and their degree of willingness to spend time and develop relationships within this subgroup of the wider community. Alongside this however, are the enormous complexities of lesbian identity and the tolerance of

the core visible subgroup of lesbians to accept differences of that identity and the implications for the wider community(s) of this acceptance in an environment that is extremely fluid in its membership status. This idea links back to the perceived expectation that women within the core visible subgroup will all get along with each other, which I strongly suggest is both an unreasonable and unobtainable expectation. As stated, numerous subgroups throughout the Wellington region make up the lesbian community as a whole. Of these subgroups, it is clear that many have more than just sexual identity in common. For example, some of the subgroups visible within and around the Wellington lesbian community include bars, pot luck dinner groups, tramping groups, University lesbian communities, professional lesbian groups, lesbian library and literature groups, sports teams, theatre groups, etc. What binds these groups together alongside sexual identity is a commonality in lifestyle, beliefs, interests, hobbies, personality compatibilities and many other attributes that extend well beyond being lesbian. As researcher in this process, I am both insider and outsider to the lesbian community(s), yet I also identify as an insider to the core visible bar subgroup. In tandem with this, I am an outsider to many of the other varying subgroups that make up the community(s) as a whole. The outsider status I have is due largely to a lack of interest on my behalf in other subgroups that exist; I simply have not made the time to share experiences with lesbians from other groups within the wider lesbian community. The interconnectedness and crossover between these subgroups within the Wellington region is what enables lesbians to identify with a 'Wellington lesbian community', yet it is also what creates both insiders and outsiders to the various subgroups that exist within the larger community group.

The visible core lesbian subgroup that meets at public bars and cafés is also a safe haven for women identifying what they have in common with other women. For the large majority, this social environment is a very comfortable place for lesbians to feel safe from a wider community that may not accept or tolerate their

way of life. However, the visible lesbian sub-community has also become a safe haven for (largely) women who do not feel safe in the wider community bar scene, and who choose to frequent lesbian bars seeking the feeling of safety from within. Not only can this create a feeling of animosity towards 'straights/outsiders' from lesbians within their own community, but also it is an arrangement that is not reciprocated to lesbians or many other minority groups. Lesbian communities are not only faced with the intricacies of insiders and outsiders from within their own cultural grouping, but are continually challenged by the insider/outsider binary of the wider community who have the freedom to enter the lesbian environment that is not readily available to some lesbians in the wider community.

The Labyrinth of Talk

In chapter 2, I alluded to the notion of privacy within the lesbian community(s), and the idea that the way in which the members of the lesbian community(s) interweave with each other in a relatively small geographical location, may have contributed to the lack of participation in focus group discussions for this research. Having been a lesbian on the Wellington lesbian scene for over 14 years, I can attest that not once have I been to a lesbian event in the city where I did not meet or know at least one person in the room. Further to this, I have always been aware of the reputations of women in various subgroups, some of whom I have never spoken to. These 'reputations' are by no means shrouded in negative connotations; quite the opposite in the majority of cases. This knowledge of other women within the community(s) comes from what I have coined the 'Labyrinth of Talk'.

As mentioned earlier, Susan Krieger is the author of *The Mirror Dance* (1983), an ethnography that has greatly influenced the way I view anthropological fieldwork. Krieger spent the best part of a year living with a small community of women in the mid-west USA. Her interviews with these women are not only

revealing of the inner workings of this community, but can be paralleled in part to this research in New Zealand. For Krieger's participants, the idea of privacy in their lesbian community was something of a fantasy. The reality was that many knew a little about many women. Similarly, my own experience and observations of the Wellington lesbian community(s) lead me to a similar conclusion. One of Krieger's participants explained in detail an event that summed up how she felt their lesbian community networked. After reading this section, I saw immediate parallels within my own community(s) here in Wellington.

> *The basic rule you learned from experience in this community, felt Emily, was that unless you stated specifically that you didn't want information passed, it got passed pretty quickly. That was something she had come to resign herself to. As long as it was not malicious, as long as it would not ostracize her, she could take it. But, there had been a period during the spring when everyone was changing relationships when it had seemed to her just too much. She had slept with Gloria during that time and the very next day two people called her at work. She had slept with Melissa the night before Gloria and Gloria the next night. The two people who called knew about them both and she, Emily, was stunned because she had told no one... She assumed those people knew about Melissa because she had slept with her over at the house of Natalie and Jo who were central people in the community. Gloria knew about Melissa. The very next morning, Gloria confronted her with it when she saw her. Gloria, you see, used to be lovers with Melissa.*
>
> (Krieger, 1983:35)

Whilst this example is not limited to just a lesbian community, it is an example of how the network of a lesbian community can work. It may be that the Wellington lesbian community(s) is in fact only separated by one degree of separation, allowing information about the lives of women within the various

subgroups to spread quickly and efficiently through many circles of friends. The amount of knowledge others within our community(s) have about any one person is often determined by how willing we are to share what is happening in our lives. I would suggest that it is this disclosure and intimacy that leads to the idea of membership that is unspoken within this community(s) of women. For my own experience in the Wellington lesbian community(s) I have, by choice, a mixture of both friends and acquaintances. There are many women within the *core* visible bar group that I discuss only limited information with, and their knowledge of me extends primarily to what I do, who my partner is, and how many dogs we have. Yet there are other women with whom I have a deeper and more personal relationship, whom I have shared many experiences with over many years and through countless lesbian meeting places. It is through these last women that knowledge of who I really am is shared throughout the larger community(s), interweaving and crossing over subgroup boundaries.

For a large portion of the discussions in both the focus group and on-line blog, the idea of defining the Wellington lesbian community highlighted the immense diversity amongst this group of women. What has emerged is a fundamental question of whether such a community needs definition and to who such a definition is beneficial. From the lack of participation from lesbians within the visible core subgroup of the community, it would appear on the surface that there is no perceived need from lesbians within to try to place a definition on their own community. What has emerged in its place is interest from *outside* this visible core to try to find explanations for issues such as lesbian identity, legitimacy, and community membership. However, I would suggest that this is only a surface appearance from the visible core subgroup of the lesbian community, and that the lack of participation in this and other research surrounding lesbian communities can be attributed to a fundamental need for protection from within the community itself. In the following section of this discussion, the notion of lesbian community hierarchy and the desire for

protection of the community(s) is a pivotal issue in the question of lesbians participating in research about their cultural group.

Why Was There A Lack of Participation in This Research?

Ultimately, the answer to this question is speculative. Without the benefit of further research that involved detailed discussion from community(s) members, there is no access to information on non-participation. What follows is educated speculation on six reasons for silence from the core, visible, subgroup members in the Wellington lesbian community(s). These interrelated reasons include; the lack of formal hierarchy that allows endorsement to speak on behalf of the group, the minimization by lesbians of negative perception from outsiders to their community(s), fear of misrepresentation from lesbians about other lesbians, a desire to protect the community which offers acceptance and safety from outsiders, a reluctance to accept any other groups which may serve to dilute lesbian identity, and minimization of further justification about lesbian identity to outsiders.

Endorsement to Speak for the Group

Social acknowledgement of gay and lesbian existence at a governmental level is a very recent phenomenon in New Zealand culture. In 1986, the Homosexual Law Reform Act was passed (Laurie, 2004:13) allowing gays and lesbians equal rights to heterosexual citizens in New Zealand. However, this law does not automatically afford gays and lesbians equal social and cultural status or safety within mainstream society. As previously identified, the Wellington lesbian community has no formal hierarchy to allow or endorse any one member or group of members to say, "I am a leader in the lesbian community". Therefore, it is entirely possible that there is a lack of willingness to speak on behalf of the entire group or of individual experiences within the group that might be identified even as representative of the group. There might also be reluctance to

say anything that might influence the perception of the lesbian community from the wider heteronormative mainstream society.

Minimizing Negative Perceptions

In order to maintain the growing acceptance of lesbian existence in mainstream society, lesbians must minimize any negative perceptions about lesbians, for example, displaying confusion over sexual identity as a lesbian. I would also suggest that there might be a reluctance to publicise any information about the inner workings of the lesbian community(s) that could marginalize or push the community(s) underground again[18]. In the literature review of this thesis, it was stated that participants in this research became informants as well as participants. The women who did participate in this research were identified (and self-identified) as being *outside* the core, visible, lesbian subgroup in the wider lesbian community; they did not hold a platinum card of in-group membership, and therefore may have felt a greater freedom to explore their ideas about the Wellington lesbian community.

Misrepresenting Peers

Although there was considerable opportunity for lesbians within the core, visible, subgroup to speak about their experiences and understanding of the Wellington lesbian community(s), their silence was deafening and may be attributed to a fear of misrepresenting the community to which other women belong. To offer personal information about yourself is very different to offering information about an ephemeral and informal community.

Putting the Community(s) at Risk

It is possible that lesbians, at some level, may be fearful of being ostracized, feared and misunderstood by those who are not involved in and don't

[18] Refer to the Historical Construction of Lesbianism section of this thesis in chapter 1.

understand the unspoken inner workings of the community(s). There may be a desire to protect and not put at risk the lesbian community(s), the one place of acceptance for those who identify as lesbians. To involve oneself in research of this kind there needs to be some benefit to the participant. The lack of participation from in-group members of the community suggests that they perceived that there was more risk than benefit.

Justification to Outsiders

The historical context of lesbianism frames any understanding of the lives of lesbians. For many lesbians the community, and subgroups, offers a place of safety and acceptance that is not found outside of those circles. For many there is a process of justification for their existence to friends, family, and colleagues. The lesbian community becomes the one place where, for many lesbians, there is no requirement to justify who they are, but an acceptance and tolerance from a community of women who may only have this one point of sameness in common.

Diluting Lesbian Identity

Women identifying as bisexuals are not widely accepted in lesbian communities (Rust, 1994:122), and I suggest one of the reasons for this may be the issue of bisexuality diluting the 'lesbian community' and putting at risk the safety and identity of lesbians within. The risk I refer to is one of bisexuality involving intimate relationships equally with both men and women. For self-identified lesbians in a community that provides a safe and accepting place to be identified as a lesbian, accepting an element of heterosexuality into this community can essentially dilute the identity of the women within. This leads me to suggest that participating in research about lesbian community(s) may in fact be a further form of justification to outsiders and may invoke silence from the women within this community(s) who would not wish to put at risk their one place of safety and acceptance.

The above reasons, whilst speculative, can be summed up with an examination of whose purpose it may serve to research the inner workings and characteristics of this and other lesbian communities. The results of this research clearly illustrate that the interest to participate came from outside the core in-group membership of the Wellington lesbian community. It is appropriate to conclude then, that the members of this group perceived little or no advantage in research on this issue/topic, and/or that they believed that the risk associated with participation outweighed any potential benefit.

Chapter 5 Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to explore the concept of *community(s)* amongst lesbians in the Wellington region of New Zealand and to assess what could fairly be described as that community(s). Lesbians do have a community; in fact, there are multiple subgroups of communities within the greater lesbian community as a whole. This thesis has identified that the Wellington lesbian community(s) is not restricted to a single social group, but is a complex structure of subgroups and multiple community groups that can be described as sitting under the banner of the 'Wellington lesbian community'. Through the complex historical construction of lesbianism, whereby the dominance of heterosexual identity roles in the early part of the nineteenth century rendered lesbianism as not even being possible, to the contemporary notion of a multifarious community structure that has fluidity in its membership and structure, the existence of a Wellington lesbian community(s) has come about through convoluted networks of women working towards a similar acuity in their way of life. The complexity of lesbian identity discussed throughout this thesis, for example butch-femme, demonstrates an historical influence in the way contemporary lesbian networks have evolved. Alongside this is a perceived greater acceptance by mainstream hetero-normative society that relationships and lifestyles exist outside the definitive boundaries established by an historical and contemporary dominant culture.

The prevailing conclusion of this thesis is that the Wellington lesbian community(s) does not need to be defined in any rigid or pigeonholed way from *within* its own structure and that a level of protection for the community(s) and its members is present in the lives of in-group members. While this group arouses interest from both academia and its own members, it is a community of lesbians who have fluid identity, beliefs, lifestyles, and social groupings and is a

community that creates insiders and outsiders within its inner circles and across broader boundaries of subgroups. Through the interconnectedness of these subgroups within the Wellington region, a wider 'Wellington lesbian community' is established and maintained, and insider/outsider status within these groups helps create a diversity and wider acceptance for difference in a group of women who may only have one thing in common, their sexual identity as a lesbian. Whether or not there is disagreement about what characterises a lesbian, being part of a minority group in a larger dominant culture of hetero-normality gives this wider Wellington lesbian community an ability to sustain itself through adversity and difference. What has been central to this research is the issue of accessing and obtaining participation from the core, visible, subgroup of the Wellington lesbian community. The following conclusions are speculation, as there is no access to information about non-participation.

Data Collection Methodology

The methodology selected, namely focus group discussions, has been a point of intense scrutiny throughout this thesis. Whilst this methodology provided the most appropriate means through which to try to engage community(s) members in group discussion about their experiences, it has clearly posed difficulties in attracting women to participate. Alongside this, the documented difficulties in entering lesbian communities for this and other forms of research, identifies an area of interest for both future research in this field and for the lesbian community(s) itself. In trying to engage multiple community subgroups in discussions surrounding the identity of a lesbian community, focus groups are still an appropriate means through which to investigate this topic. What this thesis concludes, is a need for a more thorough exploration of what it would take lesbians to engage in research about themselves and their community(s). Simply conducting one-on-one interviews or individual surveys will not achieve the level of discussion required to determine the characteristics of a lesbian community, as information in isolation and without collaboration from other

women within the community will be both non-representative and individualized. Whilst I acknowledge that representative data for any community that has the level of diversity that is apparent in the Wellington lesbian community(s) is problematic, engaging lesbians in group discussions is one of the most appropriate means through which to try to minimize this. Alongside this, and exclusive of the literature detailing the difficulties in entering lesbian and gay communities for research, I had trapped myself in thinking that women would participate in this research primarily influenced by a perception of interest in the subject. The questions I asked at the initial stages of this thesis to indicate the levels of interest in this topic were incorrectly phrased. Instead of asking if a focus group would be an appropriate method to discuss a definition of the Wellington lesbian community(s), the right question would have become, "What would it take to get you to attend a focus group discussion about the Wellington lesbian community(s)". With the benefit of hindsight, had this question been investigated during the initial stages of this research, it is probable that a clearer understanding may have emerged as to what it would take to encourage lesbians to engage and participate in research about experiences and understandings of their own community(s). The question of appropriate methodology undoubtedly plays a large role in obtaining participants for narrative based research, and focus groups, whilst academically sound for the information sought in this thesis, may have influenced the lack of participation in this research, as issues of confidentiality, trust, self-censorship, and privacy within this intertwining group of women might have contributed to the reluctance to participate. However, it is not the methodology of this research that has controlled the lack of participation. It is instead the possibility of lesbians putting their community at risk that I believe has been the greatest deterrent to this and other research into lesbian communities.

A Safe Place For Lesbians

While there has been significant discussion surrounding the methodology as a potential reason for the lack of participation in this research, the following conclusions reached have stemmed not so much from what has been said from lesbians *outside* the core, visible, subgroup of the community, but from the deafening silence that exists from within.

When Outsiders Come In

The core, visible, lesbian subgroup that meets at public bars and cafés is a safe environment for a lesbian who might feel unsafe from a wider community that does not accept or tolerate their way of life. However, the core, visible, lesbian subgroup has also become a safe environment for women who do not feel safe in the wider community bar scene. Lesbian communities are therefore not only faced with the intricacies of insiders and outsiders from within their own cultural group, but are challenged by the insider/outsider binary of the heterosexual community who have the freedom to enter into and participate (often on the periphery) in lesbian environments. Lesbians have a need to protect their community from misunderstanding and an expectation to justify themselves to outsiders by remaining distant from research that seeks to probe the inner workings of the wider community group. In addition, the lack of formal hierarchy within this community means there is no endorsement for any single lesbian or group of lesbians to speak on behalf of the group as a whole. What results from this is a state of silence from lesbians that eliminates the potential for misrepresentation from other lesbians, but also from outsiders who might seek to marginalize an already marginalized group of women. On this basis, whose purpose does it serve to research the inner workings and characteristics of this and other lesbian communities? Clearly, it does not seem to serve any purpose for lesbians within the core, visible, subgroup, and might even present a greater sense of risk to individuals and members of the group. The main benefit of this insight is therefore to those who are *outside* the lesbian community(s), including

but not exclusive to, those lesbians who feel unable to access or be a cardholding member of the core, visible, subgroup.

To conclude that the Wellington lesbian community(s) should not be researched is both inappropriate and unrealistic. Let's face it, we're a complex and fascinating group of women. What is appropriate is researching this community in such a way that provides safety for the in-group members and reduces the possibility of misrepresentation, risk to identity, and the feeling of justification to outsiders for being lesbian. For future research that will cultivate a greater level of participation, a priority must be to assess what it would take lesbians to be actively involved in research about their communities, and what will ensure their safety, representation, and acceptance. The opportunity for lesbians within the core, visible subgroup of the wider community to discuss and identify the characteristics of their community was met with complete silence from the in-group members, of which there are literally hundreds of women. This silence has ultimately spoken louder than any words could have.

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Appendix 1

Lesbians Defining Their Community: Ethnographical Diversity

Information Sheet

Who is doing this research?

My name is Michelle Stevenson; I am a lesbian woman living in Wellington. My interests are in Anthropology, in particular the ethics of conducting research within defined communities/cultures. This research is part of my studies towards a Masters in Social Anthropology at Massey University, New Zealand. This research is being supervised by Associate Professor Jeff Sluka, Massey University, Palmerston North.

What is this research about?

The "Lesbian Community" is a term in common usage throughout the Lesbian Community itself and mainstream society. Yet there appears to be little agreement, either academically or amongst lesbians themselves, as to what defines or characterises being a "lesbian". Furthermore, similar issues arise in seeking to define the characteristics of the "community". It is the intention of this thesis to investigate the "Lesbian Community" within New Zealand, by speaking with women who self-identify as members of this sub-group of society. Approximately 20 women will be interviewed in small focus groups of 3-4 women from within the Wellington Region. Women will be invited to discuss their experiences of Lesbian Communities throughout New Zealand. However, the primary focus will be of the greater Wellington Region.

The Lesbian Community has no formal hierarchy structure (or does it?), making research within this group of diverse women difficult at the best of times. There has been however, enormous interest from women I have spoken to informally about this topic. What is the Lesbian community? Who are its members? And are there unspoken rules surrounding its existence. These are all questions I hope to shed some light on throughout this research. Particular areas of interest are the hierarchical structure of the "community", the attraction of the community to lesbians, benefits/disadvantages of the community, and discussion surrounding spoken/unspoken rules and expectations for 'membership' within the community itself. Therefore, the primary focus

of this research is to provide a working description of the Lesbian Community, and to offer any cautions and suggestions for future research.

What will you have to do?

If you agree to take part in this research it will involve being part of a Focus Group (3-4 women) discussing with the researcher your experiences with the Lesbian Community you are part of, or have been part of. This may include more than one community throughout the country. I would anticipate the Focus Group discussion would take at least 1 hour, most probably a little longer. There will be a number of starting questions to get focused, otherwise the Focus Group will be informal and open ended.

The Focus Groups will be audio taped and transcribed by the researcher. Due to confidentiality issues for Focus Group members, the tapes will be destroyed at the completion of transcribing and will not be given to members of the group. In saying this, it will be most valuable to have your input following discussions into the draft stages of the thesis, not only to ensure you are interpreted correctly, but to ensure that the 'spirit' and issues arising from the Focus Group have been recorded accurately. I would strongly encourage you to adopt a pseudonym as your identity in this research.

What are the benefits of taking part?

Participation in this research is completely voluntary, so you will be there because you have an interest in this topic. Having been part (active and peripheral) of Lesbian Communities myself for over 16 years, I have always been fascinated by its inner workings. The potential benefit to you is an opportunity to openly discuss your experiences of the Lesbian Community you are/have been part of, and to share your experiences with other women. This is also an opportunity to discuss what it is that holds this community of women together so tightly. As the Lesbian Community is a sub-group of society that receives reasonable research interest, there is also a unique opportunity to have your say about the way in which Lesbian Communities are studied, and share any suggestions you may have for further research.

Participant's Rights

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:

- Decline to answer any particular question;
- Withdraw from the study at any time;
- Ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;
- Provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used unless you give permission to the researcher;
- Be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded;

Project Contacts

If you have any questions about this project please contact;

Researcher

Michelle Stevenson

anthroethics@yahoo.com.au

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Massey University

Ph 06 3569009 ext 2512

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, Application 06/05. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Dr Karl Pajo, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, telephone 06 350 5799 x 2383, email humanethicsouthb@massey.ac.nz

Appendix 2

Lesbian Research Participants WANTED

Anthropology

This research is towards a Masters of Arts in Social Anthropology for Massey University, Wellington. I am seeking lesbian women currently or previously involved in Lesbian Communities to take part.

The purpose of this thesis is to discuss the characteristics of the "Lesbian Community" and to provide a working definition in research.

What is the Lesbian community? Who are its members?

The research will be conducted on a voluntary basis. Your identity will be protected in the research through the use of a pseudonym.

The study will be comprised of several focus group discussions with each focus group involving 3-4 women.

If you would like to be a participant in this research and receive an Information Sheet providing further details, please forward your contact details to me by:

Wednesday 17th May 2006

Michelle

anthroethics@yahoo.com.au

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, Application 06/05. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Dr Karl Pajo, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, telephone 06 350 5799 x 2383, email humanethicsouthb@massey.ac.

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Appendix 3

Lesbian defining their community: Ethnographic diversity

Guide questions for focus group

Preamble

The following list is a set of initial guide questions that will begin the focus group process. It is not my intention to restrict discussion to any major degree, as valuable data may be missed due to such restrictions. Furthermore, the 'lesbian community' under discussion is a group of extremely diverse women, who may at times have only their sexual orientation in common. Therefore, issues that arise will most likely be diverse also and questions need to be flexible to account for, and respect this diversity.

1. How long have you been involved with the lesbian community?

2. How would you define 'lesbian' and 'community?'

3. Is there 'membership' in this community? What it this? How is it initialised? Characterised? Is legitimacy of being a 'lesbian' an issue relating to 'membership'?

4. How do you think the lesbian community is represented by its 'members'? Are there expectations surrounding behaviour, politics, beliefs etc?

5. Are there spoken/unspoken rules surrounding membership? Are they flexible? Are there boundaries?

6. Does the lesbian community have any formal hierarchy structure? Informal? Discuss

7. What do you see as the benefits/disadvantages of the lesbian community?

8. What do you see as the attractions/seductions of the lesbian community?

9. How do you see the lesbian community being represented in research? Basis for reasons?

Appendix 4

Massey University
COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY
PROGRAMME
School of People,
Environment and Planning
Private Bag 11 222
Palmerston North
New Zealand
T 64 6 356 9099
F 64 6 350 5689
www.massey.ac.nz

Lesbians Defining Their Community: Ethnographical Diversity

Participant Consent Form

This consent form will be held for a period of five (5) years

I have read the Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I agree to the focus group being audio-taped.

I agree to not disclose anything discussed in the Focus Group.

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

Signature: ..... **Date:** .....

Full Name – Printed .....

Appendix 5

Massey University
COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY
PROGRAMME
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Environment and Planning
Private Bag 11 222
Palmerston North
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T 64 6 356 9099
F 64 6 350 5689
www.massey.ac.nz

Lesbians defining their community: Ethnographical diversity

CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

I ..... (Full Name - printed)

agree to keep confidential the identity of focus group participants and all information concerning the project Lesbians defining their community: Ethnographical diversity.

I will not retain or copy any information involving the project.

Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

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