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**ETHNOGRAPHY OF A LESBIAN COMMUNITY
IN MICHIGAN**

by

Carol W. Burton

**A Thesis
Submitted to the
Faculty of The Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts
Department of Anthropology**

**Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, Michigan
April 1990**

ETHNOGRAPHY OF A LESBIAN COMMUNITY IN MICHIGAN

Carol W. Burton, M.A.

Western Michigan University, 1990

The purpose of this master's thesis is to describe the structure and workings of a community of women in a major western Michigan metropolitan area, who identify themselves as lesbians, and to describe how this subcommunity relates to the dominant American culture in the area. This study examines the ways in which these lesbians define themselves and their subculture.

To facilitate this research, the researcher participated in the group's meetings, both formal and informal, and spoke with individual members about the history of the group, organizational principles, problems and concerns, formal and informal rules of conduct, values, and any other topic group members cared to discuss that would contribute to an understanding of what it is like to identify with a female network which exists outside the mainstream of society.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to dedicate this thesis in loving remembrance of Dr. Richard E. Flanders, who instilled in me an abiding interest in anthropology.

I would also like to express deep appreciation to my major advisor, Dr. Erika Loeffler, for her insightful suggestions and constant support. I am indebted to Dr. Robert Jack Smith and Dr. William Garland for their critical review of this thesis, and to Dr. Robert Sundick for his assistance with the computer.

A very special thanks goes to my husband, Richard, for his endless patience with me.

Carol W. Burton

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

"Throughout America lesbians have chosen to band together to build their own self-sustaining communities. Most people, however, are unaware of the existence of these communities" (Wolf, 1979, p. 1). This study describes one such lesbian community, and examines the ways in which these lesbians define themselves and their community.

When referring to homosexual communities, Gagnon and Simon (1973) state, "This subcommunity does not require a formal character or even a specific geographical location. It is, rather, a continuing collectivity of individuals who share some significant activity and who, out of a history of continuing interaction based on that activity, begin to generate a sense of a bounded group possessing special norms and a particular argot. Through extensive use such a homosexual aggregate may identify a particular location as theirs" (p. 194). This study focuses upon one such subcommunity located within a major western Michigan metropolitan area. For purposes of clarification, during the course of this paper I will identify the community of the general population as the dominant community or refer to it as the Community. The lesbian community described here will, also, be called the group. The Lesbian and Gay Community Network, Inc. of Western Michigan will be identified as the Network.

The research for this study was conducted in compliance with the guidelines established for research with human subjects by the Western Michigan University Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. It was monitored by the Institutional Review Board

and by my thesis advisor. I have avoided using names of places or individuals in order to ensure confidentiality and anonymity of my informants.

My informants were middle class members of the lesbian community of a major urban center in western Michigan, who ranged between the ages of approximately 30 to 50 years. Over a four month period I attended the formal meetings and informal social gatherings of this lesbian group, during which time I spoke intimately and at some length with members of the community. I concentrated these discussions on problems and concerns of this lesbian community as a whole, as well as on personal data, dress codes, interpersonal relationships, attitudes toward the dominant culture, and terminology.

Different American subcultures, such as lesbian communities, develop their own terms and concepts when talking about themselves and their world. At all times in the course of this study I paid close attention to the terminology used by my informants in order to identify terms relevant to this particular community.

For the past several years I have had informal contact with individual lesbians through participation in various political and women's organizations. As I became aware of the sense of community and the support network exhibited by these women, I decided to focus more direct attention on the group as a whole and how it relates to the dominant American culture.

My first formal contact with this community came when I attended a meeting of The Gay and Lesbian Network of Western Michigan in November of 1989. This particular meeting was for women only, and there were about twenty-five present, ranging in age from approximately 30 to 50 years. At this meeting I was introduced, requested to describe my interest in this community and define my research objectives, and then I asked for volunteer participants. There were no black women at the meeting, which raised the question of the number of black lesbians within the totality of this community. When I inquired about this, I was informed that there are perhaps as few

as five known black lesbians in this community and they only occasionally interact with the others. Most lesbians in this community are of middle class status, and the number of black middle class women in the total research area is small. As a result, I did not have the opportunity to interview a black lesbian.

Meetings are held in a small hall rented from two male homosexuals. Rent is paid, in part, by donations from meeting attendants and it is felt that renting the hall from homosexuals financially supports the gay community as a whole. Rent payment is also accrued by parties and fund raisers. At an informal gathering following the meeting several lesbians offered useful suggestions for my thesis project, and three of these women later became primary informants with whom, throughout this study, I systematically checked my perceptions of their lifestyle.

The lesbians in this study represent a variety of interests, backgrounds, and positions in the dominant community, and have differing degrees of commitment to the lesbian community. Those interviewed included several educators, a retail sales manager, a non-traditional student, two social welfare workers, a former city official, two lesbian mothers, one homemaker, a dietitian, a psychologist, and a director of a non-profit organization. Four had previously been involved in traditional, heterosexual marriages.

The lesbian community described here is an unstructured, unified body of individuals, a body of women of common interest scattered through a larger, male dominated society. This thesis concentrates upon the cognitive world of lesbians within a limited geographical area. It has been restricted in so far as I have chosen to avoid the study of the teenage and college lesbian network. It is my understanding that these young lesbians will be a vital force in the future of the lesbian community. However, due to time restrictions, I leave that segment of the lesbian community to be analyzed in future studies.

The primary research method used for this study was that of participant observation, supplemented by various informal, unstructured interviews. Unstructured interviewing is the most widely used method of data collection in cultural anthropology, and participant observation, which necessitates establishing close rapport with the members of a community, is the foundation of anthropological research (Bernard, 1988).

CHAPTER II

THE POPULATION

Family Backgrounds of Informants

This study appears to substantiate Gagnon and Simon's (1973) statement, "One thing of which we may be fairly certain is that parents do not deliberately raise their children to be homosexuals, for in all known societies exclusive adult heterosexuality is an intended out-come [sic] of the child-rearing process" (pp. 200-201). All participants in this study were products of a heterosexual up-bringing, all were socialized in a heterosexual value system, and all were assumed by those involved with their socialization (parents, etc.) to be heterosexual. They were from diverse family backgrounds ranging from those with abusive parents to very stable upper middle class families of origins. One informant from an abusive background remarked that she hoped that lesbianism is not a result of any negative factor, such as childhood abuse, and indeed, it seems that for this group it is not necessarily the case. In this lesbian community there appears to be no direct correlation between family of origin and lesbianism. Homosexual role models within the nuclear family were either non-existent or not visible. All parents were either fully heterosexual in behavior, or appeared so to their children.

Origins of Homosexuality

According to Gagnon (1975), it has been argued that the sociological development of female homosexuality is directly linked to the development of normal

femininity and gender roles in the society. My research in this particular lesbian community does not substantiate that argument. Some of my informants said they displayed avid interest in traditionally male sports and outdoor activities at a very young age and were encouraged by their parents to participate in these activities. Others reported that they had been "typical little girls" who played with dolls and were encouraged to prepare themselves for future motherhood. Several women I interviewed explained that they were psychologically aware fairly early in life that they preferred females to males. One informant stated that as an adolescent she was unsure of her sexuality; therefore, she refused to address it at all. It was several years later before she approached the question of her sexual identity and became comfortable with her female orientation.

The lesbian mothers I interviewed expressed their gradual awakening to female sexual orientation in terms of "all along something seemed to be missing." For years these women led lives similar to the wives and mothers of our dominant culture until, at some point, they became aware of their preference for females. As with many other lesbians interviewed these mothers became aware of their preference through affiliation with the Women's Movement of the 1970s or other women's organizations. The Women's Movement, and its subsequent organizations for women, enlisted the support of thousands of assertive and politically active women, many of whom were lesbians.

One lesbian mother interviewed became aware of her lesbian tendency after her divorce, which was brought about by her husband's infidelity. She had been politically active in the Women's Movement during her marriage and, as she continued to participate in feminist organizations, she eventually became attracted to a lesbian acquaintance. These two women have now been living together as a couple for ten years and have jointly raised the mother's three children.

In the second case of lesbian motherhood the woman was aware of her lesbian tendency before her divorce. She was involved in a sexual relationship with another woman during her marriage and eventually found it too difficult to continue "pretending" with her husband. By keeping silent about her lesbianism she managed to retain custody of her children and raised them without the aid of a permanent partner.

In both cases of lesbian motherhood the divorced mother kept her children (male and female) with her and informed them of her lesbian orientation. All of these children are now young adults and are apparently stable individuals, who are in the normal process of establishing their own personal identities. As of now none has expressed a homosexual orientation. Specific problems of lesbian mothers dealing with the dominant heterosexual society will be discussed later in this study.

Attitudes Towards Men

In this lesbian community the attitude towards males appears to be one of ambiguity. Apparently, it makes little difference whether the male is homosexual or heterosexual, although it was often stated that homosexual men are considered to be less emotionally threatening and intrusive than heterosexual men. Informants' attitudes ranged from extreme dislike for men in general, such as: "I don't care if I never see one (man) again," to "I wish I had a good male friend." One informant expressed the opinion that men are "underdeveloped" in our culture. "Women are raised to be serving, supportive, trustworthy. We (our society) give men false notions. I like nice men and nice women, but you are more apt to find nice women." She continued by stating that she "tends to fall in love with women, not men. It has nothing to do with will; it would be much easier (socially) to fall in love with a man."

The relationships of most lesbians with male relatives (especially brothers) appear to be much the same as those of heterosexual females with relatives of the opposite sex.

In most cases, it appears that brothers are particularly important to the lesbians interviewed because, although the subject may never be openly discussed, they are generally accepting of their sister's sexual orientation. Much less accepting is the lesbian's father. Most participants in this study expressed an alienation from their fathers, but that was not so in every case. One informant reported a very warm and positive relationship with her father. After brothers, nephews are very important to lesbians. One's own son, if there is one, is likely to be the most loved male in the lesbian's life.

One informant expressed a strong affiliation with traditionally male activities (e.g., camping, rigorous team sports, rugged outdoor activity) and admitted that she genuinely liked and enjoyed a sense of camaraderie with some men who participated in such activities. Another lesbian stated that she "liked men o.k.," but she harbored a "fear of their intrusiveness into the lives of women." This "intrusiveness" she perceived as "male dominance and oppression." However, she expressed no greater an emotional distrust of males than she felt toward females. She views lesbianism not so much as an emotional turning away from men, but as becoming more emotionally accepting of women. A similar rationale was expressed very succinctly by another informant who stated, "Lesbianism is not about putting women forward by putting men down."

Attitudes Towards Women

Lesbianism was defined by every woman interviewed not in terms of opposition to men or male dominance, but as "woman-oriented woman." Lesbianism, within this group, has to do more with gender than with sex. These women are female-oriented in all aspects of their life; sexual, intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and political. Lesbians are seldom attracted to women solely on physical merits; they are hardly likely to follow an attractive woman down the street or ogle her legs or breasts. They like women

generally, respond primarily to a combination of physical and psychic attributes, to manner and personality (Abbott & Love, 1972).

The women in this group are just as accepting of most heterosexual females as they are of other lesbians. However, there appear to be some differences over the tolerance for "Harriet"-type females. "Harriet" refers to the traditional "Harriet Homemaker" woman, who has no identity other than that which has been bestowed upon her through the male dominated society. In most cases, informants reported a complete and total lack of affinity with "Harriet Homemaker." She is perceived as a woman who performs for, and is completely dependant upon, male attention. However, some respondents expressed an empathy for the perceived oppression of this type of female.

Most lesbians interviewed felt a strong affiliation with feminists and pointed out to me that, while some feminists are separatists and attempt to avoid all contact with men, many are not. Of all the lesbians interviewed I encountered no true separatist, although when questioned about their affectional preference, all agreed that they would still consider themselves a lesbian (a woman-oriented woman) even if sex were not a factor. Even though they are forced to live and work in a world of men, they identify in every aspect of their lives with women. According to Abbott and Love (1975), "The democratic system works on the assumption that the individuals who contribute their part to the whole benefit from the whole. But the lesbian's situation is quite the contrary. The lesbian participates in economic, political and social institutions that do not support, enhance, or protect her life in the same ways that they do for heterosexuals" (p. 202). The lesbians in this community are aware and resentful of this inequity, and have worked to establish a self-sustaining economic and social female network outside that of the dominant heterosexual community.

Attitudes Towards Religion

"The strong sense that homosexuals are "sinful" has persisted to the present day, denying homosexuals one traditional source of comfort and support in our culture--established religion, which has made a practice of excluding known homosexuals" (Wolf, 1979, p. 27). Because of this, many women in this community retain the cultural symbols of traditional religion but they reinforce them within the context of their lesbianism. For example, they sometimes hold small, informal gatherings in their homes to celebrate traditional religious occasions and there may be non-sexist prayers or poems presented for the occasion.

Many lesbians interviewed from this community expressed no commitment to a traditional religion, although a religious upbringing appeared to be the norm. Some felt they were religious, but stated that to them it was a very private matter and they had personalized their awareness of a spiritual being. I did not question them as to their belief in a male vs. a female spirit, but in many cases the Deity was referred to as the "Goddess" or "She." Quite often this was used in the context of a strong belief in nature and all that is natural.

Some lesbians within this community attend traditional church services regularly and are active participants in church affairs. These are mostly members of the Catholic faith, and their lesbianism is not acknowledged by the Church or the congregation. No informant regularly attends the homosexual church which exists within the city. The nationwide Metropolitan Community Church was established for homosexuals and has a local branch in the research area. The services are traditional in form, but they stress the brotherhood of mankind and perceive homosexuality as an example of loving one's neighbor. Very few lesbians belong to the congregation because they think it is sexist and reinforces patriarchal religious attitudes.

Terminology

All sub-cultures identify with and through their own specific terminology, and this lesbian community proved to be no different. The term I heard most often and which is immediately understood by all lesbians in this community is "out." A clandestine existence is the very essence of a lesbian's life, and the process of identifying oneself as a lesbian to oneself and to others is known as "coming out," from the term "to come out of the closet" (Wolf, 1979, p. 23). Once one has "come out" one must then answer the question of how far to "come out." To whom should they disclose their lesbian tendency? This question is a constant source of tension and pressure (Berg-Cross, 1982).

"Coming out" seems to be most difficult with one's parents. All of my informants were adults and most had never broached the subject of their lesbianism with their parents. Even in instances where two women had lived together for many years and both individuals' parents were aware of this situation, the subject of sexual preference was seldom openly discussed with the parents. The lesbian partnership is explained in terms of "house-" or "roommate", and the lack of boyfriends is rarely mentioned by the parents as time goes by. The lesbians fear parental rejection and feel a need not to disappoint their parents. According to the lesbian mothers interviewed the thought of identifying their female orientation to their children was less painful than broaching the subject with their parents. Although most of my informants maintained a working relationship with their parents, the parents involved with lesbian offspring of this community apparently prefer not to examine too closely their daughter's sexual orientation. Most informants reported that their parents probably suspect their daughter's lesbianism, but there is a very real avoidance of the issue.

According to Berg-Cross (1982), "Few (lesbians) ever entertain the idea of telling their fellow workers (of their lesbianism) for fear they will exchange the spontaneous

good feelings they have with their fellow workers for feelings of disgust, rage, and embarrassment. Many are rightfully concerned over being passed over in promotions or in more subtle ways experiencing discrimination" (p. 77). This appears to apply to this community as well. Most lesbians are confronted with the problem of earning a living and express the very real threat of unemployment if sexual orientation were made known at the work place. Therefore, very few of my informants were "out" at work. The few lesbians who were "out" at work were generally employed in female oriented positions or worked with co-workers (e.g., social workers) who traditionally display a tolerance for different lifestyles. For instance, one woman who was "out" at work was employed for a time for a women's organization which did not discriminate against women for their sexual preference. She later worked as office manager for a psychological therapist who also happened to be a lesbian. One of the social workers interviewed reported that some of her co-workers were aware of her lesbian tendency, but her clients were not.

Because of the Women's Movement of the 1970s, which subsequently led to affirmative action, women who choose a traditionally male job or a "masculine" mode of dress, are no longer necessarily labelled lesbians. Sexual identity at the work place is no longer questioned based upon personal appearance or job preference. One teacher stated that she often gave thought to her very short haircut: "At one time my short hair may have been taken as a sign that I'm a lesbian. Not so much anymore. A lot of women wear their hair short, so no one thinks anything of it now. Sometimes, though, I still wonder if people look at my hair and think I'm a lesbian, but I'm not concerned enough to change it." One informant reported that she was sure her co-workers were aware of her lesbian orientation, but no one ever openly addressed the subject: "My co-workers know I'm single and they used to try to set me up with some men. I kept finding excuses and finally I think they got the picture that I just wasn't interested in

dating men. They don't bring it up anymore." Apparently, in this community, lesbians who do not blatantly display their sexual persuasion are not harassed at work any more than heterosexual females. Lesbian teachers, however, are in a potentially sensitive situation and those interviewed reported a great deal of stress involved in concealing their sexual orientation from co-workers, but more so from students and students' parents. Being "out" at work or with one's parents is considered to be a luxury, a liberation from oppressive secrecy.

Although it was often questioned as to why a label need be given, all lesbians interviewed preferred the term "lesbian" over "gay" or "homosexual." The term "lesbian" has its roots in "Lesbos," the Aegean island where Sappho, a 6th Century B.C. lesbian poet lived; therefore this term is identified only with females, whereas "gay" and "homosexual" also include males. Members of this lesbian community are politically active and when involved in political actions which support the homosexual community as a whole they allow themselves to be labelled "politically gay." Many "politically gay" lesbians in this community are actively and financially supportive of the Michigan Organization for Human Rights (MOHR). Although this organization has no local chapter and is not necessarily affiliated with homosexuals, the lesbians in this study contribute funds, attend major events, and support any local political action promoting human rights.

Terms such as "butch" and "femme" are considered to be generally obsolete within this community. In years past, "butch" and "femme" were assigned to lesbians who fulfilled the roles of male and female respectively. Today, there is little or no gender-role-playing in this particular group of lesbians. Women in a sexual relationship establish a partnership based upon equality. Household chores are shared according to personal preference and the employment schedule of each individual: "Whoever gets home first cooks." There are no "male" or "female" job descriptions within the home,

and income is combined to meet the shared living expenses. The husband/wife scenario of heterosexual relationships does not apply to this group. These women feel no need to define their position in a relationship based upon models of the dominant culture. They are more interested in the relationship itself than in role-playing, and the term "lover" or "significant other" is used when referring to one's sexual partner. There are instances when "spouse" is used, but the general consensus is that "lover" better describes the partners in the relationship.

Terms of address or endearment between partners are similar to those in heterosexual relationships. "Honey" or "hon" are sometimes used when a lesbian is addressing her partner, but more often the partners use first names as a reinforcement of individuality and equality.

In the past any woman who acted assertively or held a "man's" job may have been labeled a "dyke" in an attempt to keep women in their place (The Boston Women's Health Collective, 1971). Today, the term "dyke" is not offensive to most lesbians interviewed. Some informants explained that "dyke" is merely another term for lesbian and can be used interchangeably. There were a few individuals, however, who found the term offensive, as they did any term other than lesbian. "Queer" was offensive to all participants unless it was used facetiously among the lesbians themselves. For many years "queer" has been suggestive of sexual deviation and the derogatory implications of that stigma are still very prominent. "Straight" is a universal term used to identify anyone who is not a homosexual.

The terms "choice," "preference," and "orientation" need to be clarified in respect to this lesbian community. "Choice" implies an alternative, an opportunity to choose. "Preference" suggests a special advantage given to one person, one idea, or one thing over another. "Orientation," however, is a lasting direction of thought, inclination and interest, and it is with this term that these lesbians identify. They don't perceive

lesbianism as a chosen, alternative lifestyle, nor do they consider themselves lesbians simply because they sexually prefer women to men. It is a deep commitment to the woman-oriented woman, the lasting direction of thought, inclination and interest with women with which these lesbians identify.

Throughout the research undertaken for this study I found several instances of female-oriented spelling in feminist and lesbian literature. Women became "womyn" or "wimin," woman was sometimes spelled "womon." These spellings reinforce the lesbian's definition of lesbian woman as a woman-oriented woman, as opposed to a heterosexual woman who defines herself in relationship to men.

Personal Presentation

Within this group little thought seems to be given to fashion "fads," and dress is conservative and suitable to middle class employment. Make-up appears to be not a top priority, but all the women with whom I interacted would be considered naturally attractive by any standards of our society. There were a few, however, who went to some effort to appear "feminine." Quite often this had to do with their concept of how they should appear at work ("dress for success in a male-dominated society"), and sometimes it was just a personal preference of the individual woman. The health worker interviewed reported that she liked to dress "nicely" whenever possible, because she was required to wear a "boring" uniform to work each day. Apparently, there is no specified mode of attire, hairstyle, or ornamentation that would denote one as a lesbian in this community, and one dresses mainly to suit oneself. As discussed previously, gender-role-playing is no longer practiced; therefore, intentionally dressing "butch" or "femme" in order to fulfill a role within the lesbian community is passé.

Occasionally a lesbian couple, who wish to symbolize their lasting commitment, will exchange wedding rings to be worn either on the traditional third finger of the left

hand or, optionally, on the third finger of the right hand. When I questioned this option, I was informed that it was often a "hassle at work to explain a wedding ring and no husband," especially for a woman who has a female room- or housemate. Therefore, wedding rings are seldom worn by either partner.

Interpersonal Relationships

With these lesbians most sexual relationships are considered to be durable. One informant cited the national average for the durability of lesbian relationships to be approximately three years, and the durability of a heterosexual relationship to be about seven years. At least three years or longer appears to be the norm for this community. Partnerships are generally established in much the same way as heterosexual coupling, and the partners are hopeful that the commitment is permanent. When two lesbians meet, whether it be at an organized function, in a bar, or at an informal social gathering, and there is a mutual interest expressed, a period of courtship begins. Unlike heterosexual dating, which focuses largely upon sex appeal, lesbians are intent upon establishing a friendship based upon common interests. It is on the basis of this friendship that a sexual relationship may be established.

There have been commitment ceremonies performed between lesbians from this group, but most couples interviewed chose no official ceremony, the rationale being that commitment ceremonies are too "ownership oriented and reflect what traditional marriage has meant for women: loss of identity and self." Commitment in this community is based upon mutual trust and is selectively given and received. All the lesbians interviewed expressed a sincere desire to establish an enduring love relationship, and those who enter into one do so with the expectation that it is a lifelong commitment.

Cultural structures and values sociologically placed upon traditional heterosexual marriages (e.g., taboos against sexual infidelity, emotional support from family of origin) are not inherent in the lesbian experience. "Lesbian liaisons are not sanctioned by an institution or by the mores, nor are they regulated by conventions; hence they are marked by especial sincerity" (Daly, 1978, p. 383). Although this lesbian community lacks the dominant social structure which supports monogamous relationships, sexual ethics within this group are quite high. One night stands are virtually non-existent within the age group interviewed, and it was speculated that they are extremely rare even among younger lesbians.

Our society is structured such that it is difficult to be alone, and it is no different in this lesbian subcommunity. Sexual partners are selected from within the community, and most lesbian sexual relationships terminate only because another has begun. Other reasons for lesbian partnerships to dissolve are also found in heterosexual patterns for terminating a relationship. Sometimes one partner will be transferred to a distant city and it is infeasible for her lover to go with her. Occasionally, the women will simply grow apart. This is likely to happen, just as with heterosexuals, if there is a great difference in age between the partners.

This community of lesbians is a relatively small, emotionally supportive population and the interchange of partners, even though it is rare, has vast repercussions on the community as a whole, as Gagnon and Simon (1973) suggest, "The population from which the individual lesbian is likely to select her friends is the same population from which she also is likely to select her lovers and sexual partners. The community is stressed by the fact that friends are often ex-lovers or are current or recent rivals" (p. 207). One informant stated, "There is a lot of pain and emotional repercussion in the community when there is a break-up. We are such a small community that we need each other very much, and we are forced to interact with each other if we don't want

to be isolated." It was also expressed that there is "unreal and unnatural emphasis placed on being friends after breaking up, but in such a small community there is no choice. There is very little choice in terms of staying angry and avoiding your former lover. In a group this size you have to be friends." Friendships established with heterosexual females outside the community offer little emotional support during the severing of a lesbian sexual relationship. The heterosexual female, if she is aware of her friend's lesbianism, is usually close friends with both partners and it is difficult for her to support one and not the other. This serves to reinforce the need for inter-communal friendships to continue after a love affair terminates.

The breaking up of a long term lesbian partnership is much the same as a divorce in heterosexual unions. Often the couple owns joint property (house, furniture, automobiles), and sometimes they have raised children together. It is a traumatic experience for everyone involved and, in some cases, the couple enters into joint counseling as an attempt to keep the partnership together. If, in fact, the partnership is dissolved, property settlements must be arranged to the satisfaction of both parties. However, despite these problems of community instability, most of the lesbians interviewed reported managing their friendships very well and felt a sense of having friends with whom they could enjoy a social life as well as depend upon during times of emotional stress.

CHAPTER III

THE COMMUNITY

Lesbian Organizations and Newsletters

According to Warren (1974), "Homosexual identity is distinct, it sets one apart from mass society and makes the homosexual community a kind of haven" (p. 164). The lesbian community initially serves to protect the lesbian from mixed feelings about herself, while providing her with associates who are essentially accepting. It also provides her with an ideology that neutralizes the stigmatization of her identity on the part of the dominant society (Hedblom, 1972). "The community provides a source of social support; it is a place where the lesbian can express her feelings or describe her experience because there are others available who have had feelings and experiences very much like them" (Gagnon & Simon, 1973, p. 195). These concepts summarize very well the sentiments of the women in this study.

The lesbian group of this study is part of a network of other such communities throughout the country. Communication among these communities is primarily through national, state, and local newsletters. Many homosexual newsletters, periodicals, and books are available to this community through private mailings and through the local Network Center library. The Lesbian and Gay Community Network of Western Michigan (the Network) has been in operation since 1987 and is the primary homosexual organization available to lesbians in this community. The monthly Network News is an affiliate of the Gay and Lesbian Press Association and offers invaluable information as to state, local, and national homosexual concerns. It is widely read by members of this

lesbian community, even if they are not members of the Network and do not attend Network meetings. During the course of this study I perused many issues of the Network News (1988-), and found them to be a fount of information.

One typical issue (1989, 21 11) began by announcing a combination discussion and dessert potluck to address legal issues in gay and lesbian life. There were announcements for upcoming events (e.g., a political candidates forum, and an auction and garage sale). There was a section on finance which declared an annual Network operating budget of \$20,000. Funding for the Network comes from sales and rentals, memberships, donations, advertising, and fund-raisers. The financial expenditures consist of programs and activities, telephone services, the Gay Pride Celebration, building, and the production of newsletters. The newsletter has a section entitled "Network Notes," which is reserved for newsworthy, specifically local events, past, present, or future. "Community Notes" addresses issues of the extended community as a whole. The section "National Notes" offers news on national events pertinent to the homosexual community. "Network Organization" lists homosexual organizations in western Michigan as well as southwestern, northwestern, and central-eastern Michigan. In one typical newsletter there were fourteen homosexual organizations listed specifically for western Michigan; one was for women only, one for young gays (teen to twenty-two), and one for parents and friends of lesbians and gays. Along with "Network Organizations" there is a community calendar of weekly events and special meetings, worship services, support groups, and social activities.

The Network News also carries classified advertisements. These may include advertisements for room- or housemates, bars, motels, print shops, psychological counseling, hair styling, other homosexual organizations, attorneys, banks, homosexual churches, and realtors, etc. This publication is free upon request and the mailing list is

strictly confidential. The Network News is also transmitted over GayCom, a homosexual computer network, which can be called into service at the Network Center.

The Lesbian and Gay Community Network, Inc. of Western Michigan was formed as a result of the October 11, 1987 National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gays Rights, when participants from western Michigan homosexual communities identified a need to encourage communication and participation of the many lesbian and gay service organizations. The Network sponsors weekly social events, business meetings and special interest groups, publishes the monthly Network News, provides a drop-in center (the Network Center), maintains a telephone information line and lending library of books and magazines, sponsors an annual Lesbian and Gay Pride Celebration, serves as a communication link for western Michigan activities, and encourages the organization of community activism. The LGCN has an elected Board of Directors composed equally of women and men, an active, involved membership, and eight standing committees. The Network publishes its meeting dates and times in the local public newspaper, along with a telephone number to call for directions to the Network Center. The Network holds meetings just for lesbians one night a week, and a different facilitator is selected each month. The monthly facilitator plans the month's meetings in advance, and every three months there is a planning session for the next three months. Meetings are sometimes formally conducted, with a guest speaker or speakers, but at other times meetings are simply informal gatherings. Generally, attendance is about 25-30 on weeknights designated for lesbians only.

One typical formal meeting consisted of three mothers of homosexual children sharing their experiences in adjusting to and accepting the homosexuality of their offspring. These mothers represented the Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (P-FLAG) of Western Michigan, a recently established branch of the national P-FLAG organization. A more informal meeting was devoted entirely to "coming out" stories,

and individuals shared their experiences of "coming out of the closet" to friends and loved ones. Many of those present had never before had the opportunity to discuss this topic openly, and it proved to be very enlightening as well as therapeutic. One woman shared her story of how she was forced, at the age of twenty-two, to come "out" to her mother. The mother was informed by one of her co-workers that her daughter had been seen with a known lesbian. When she asked her daughter about the relationship the daughter confessed that she and the lesbian were lovers. The mother reacted by informing the rest of her children, and attempted to prevent them from associating with their sister. The daughter was forced to move out of the house, and it was not until two years later that the mother finally relented and attempted to re-establish a relationship with her daughter. The estrangement from siblings did not last that long, and the lesbian's father had died before any of this happened.

Meetings are often devoted strictly to fun with the members bringing snacks and their favorite game to play. A favorite lesbian board game among this group is called "It's Only Natural." This game is manufactured by a women's company in Michigan and can be ordered, along with many other homosexual games, through various catalogues which are advertised in popular women's magazines. Many of the lesbians I interviewed are members of the Network and appreciate the opportunity for interaction with other lesbians on this more expanded scale. There are others, however, who prefer to maintain a lower profile than that permitted by active membership in the Network.

The Lesbian Connection is a nationwide forum of news and ideas for, by and about lesbians. It is published six times a year (more often if they can, less often if they cannot) and is free to all lesbians. It is totally dependent upon donations from readers and the suggested donation is \$18.00 per year (more if one can, less if one cannot). This publication states that it does not include poetry, fiction, or requests for penpals. The Lesbian Connection is widely read by members of this group, and covers topics of

special interest to lesbians. The publication begins with articles and news, continues with a section on reviews of books and videos. This is followed by bits and pieces of news contributed by lesbians from around the country, and letters and responses.

A very important part of this periodical is the "Contact Dyke Directory" additions and corrections. Contact dykes are lesbians who have agreed to be named so that they can provide information about their geographical areas to traveling lesbians or new women in town, and the Lesbian Connection publishes a directory listing these contact dykes. Following the "Contact Dyke Directory" there are various advertisements and announcements.

The Network News and the Lesbian Connection are avidly read by most members of this group. These publications are very important to the women in this community, not only because of the information on local activities and events, but also because they promote a cohesiveness among lesbian communities throughout the nation.

Participants in community activities consist of lesbian Network members as well as those who do not attend Network meetings, and any organized social or political activities are considered to be "celebrations." As one informant stated, "Anytime a group of oppressed individuals gets together it is a celebration, an affirmation of identity." During February the celebration was a Valentine's Dance sponsored by the Network. Other celebrations take the form of concerts featuring well known lesbian or feminist musicians, and the cost for concert halls and entertainers is covered by the admission price.

Lesbian Music

The lesbians in this community identify very strongly with their music, which is not considered to be "mainstream music" because it is always performed by female artists and generally recorded on a feminist recording label. This music can be ordered

from the Lady Slipper Music Catalogue (1989) or purchased at local record shops in the women's music section, and most lesbians interviewed own a vast collection of these recordings. Favorite female vocalists' recordings are played at all social gatherings, and these lesbians identify with the artists as well as the message in the music. Most songs are about lesbians and lesbian relationships, some are joyful, others reflect the oppression and isolation experienced by lesbians.

Each summer in northern Michigan there is an international outdoor women's music festival. This event generally lasts several days and is held on property owned by women. Only females are allowed to attend and, in some cases, male children under the age of five years. Women from across the United States and around the world attend this festival, and the lesbians in the research community are very active in this annual celebration. Volunteer car pools are formed to transport women, equipment, and supplies from the local airport north to the festival. Not all women who attend this festival are lesbians, but most identify themselves as such. Most informants in this study are active participants in the women's music festival and enjoy the freedom to be "out" with thousands of other women.

Lesbian Sense of Community

The lesbian sense of community in western Michigan arose out of the feminist movement of the 1970s. "Many lesbians were drawn to the Women's Movement; since they were not dependent on men for either emotional gratification or financial support, they had an interest in working for equal job opportunities for women, and they were not torn apart, as other feminists might be, by a commitment to feminism while living with a man" (Wolf, 1979, p. 62). Most informants in this study reportedly began to identify with a sense of lesbian community by becoming active in the movements for women's liberation, which later led to political actions in support of gay liberation. One

informant stated, "The feminist movement entailed a lot of philosophy, people talked and thought about things. Lesbianism is a social movement without lots of philosophy, but the two are interrelated."

Small informal social gatherings are the mainstay of this lesbian community. These gatherings are generally held in someone's home and usually involve fewer than ten people. There are three homosexual bars in this Community, none of which cater only to lesbians. Because of this, none of the participants in this study frequent these gay bars, and social interaction centers mainly around the home. If members of this lesbian community desire to meet at a local pub, they choose one of the regular public bars, but this is seldom done for entertainment purposes and most often for inexpensive meals. Occasionally, several lesbians will drive to a nearby city where there is a bar that serves only lesbians. These expeditions to the lesbian bar are made mainly for dancing, but also serve as a medium for contact with lesbians outside the immediate area. No special effort is made with regard to personal appearance, and there is no specific mode of attire one wears on these occasions. Personal interaction at this bar is similar to that in any heterosexual setting. Dancing partners are selected by mutual choice and, if there appears to be a developing mutual interest, names and telephone numbers are exchanged. Unlike heterosexual bars, there is seldom any display of aggression or jealousy.

Generally, it is more relaxing for these women to socialize within the privacy of their homes. It is here they can talk freely, enjoy their music, speak openly about issues confronting lesbians, and never have to contend with the inevitable approach of a "man on the make." Social gatherings in a home, also, cater to those members of the community on marginal incomes. Most of the informants in this study are homeowners, and many jointly own homes with their lovers. These women enjoy their homes and are

very hospitable. Their houses are scattered throughout the dominant community, and are in no way distinguishable from other middle class homes in the area.

Gay Pride Celebration

One socio/political event in which all homosexuals participate is the annual Gay Pride Celebration which is sponsored by the Network. There have been two celebrations in this Community, both without the official sanction of a mayoral Pride Proclamation. Although it appears to be politically inexpedient on the part of the city government to officially recognize the Gay Pride Celebration, the event is well organized and legally executed. Network members, along with the entire homosexual community financially unite to hire private police officers to work with volunteers and assist city police in ensuring a peaceful celebration. There have been no adverse incidents during these celebrations, and police support is obviously with the legal demonstrators.

The celebration takes place in the center of town, and the gay celebrants are generally joined by heterosexual supporters. Due to the participation of the many heterosexual activists, "closeted" lesbians feel no fear of exposing their sexual preference by attending this public demonstration. One is not automatically assumed to be a homosexual merely by supporting the rights of gay and lesbian individuals.

Articles and letters concerning the Gay Pride Celebration appear in the local press for some time prior to the designated day, and one unofficial analysis of media coverage reports that on twenty separate days there were either articles or letters about the Pride Celebration or the lack of a Pride Proclamation. There were seven days with articles and thirteen days with letters. Of twenty-three letters printed, fifteen were of a pro-gay rights nature, and eight were anti-gay. The Gay Pride Celebration is a day-long celebration recognizing that gay rights have become a timely topic in western Michigan.

CHAPTER IV

PROBLEMS AND CONCERNS

Media Coverage

Lesbian and gay media coverage is a major concern among members of this lesbian community. One informant asked, "When was the last time you saw a headline that read 'heterosexual person abuses children'? However, whenever [a] child abuse or murder is done by an identified gay or lesbian, the press always makes an issue of the individual's sexual orientation. It's as if such a horrific crime could only be committed by a homosexual!" The dominant community in which these lesbians reside is basically a conservative, fundamentalist one with little empathy for those who do not share their ideas, beliefs, and values. Lesbians in this group believe that it is discriminatory on the part of the dominant community to deliberately publicize sexual orientation only when it is one of homosexuality. The participants in this study view this as sensational journalism and a violation of homosexual's constitutional right to privacy. They are currently lobbying to persuade the necessary four of the seven city commissioners to support a human rights ordinance which would protect gay people in the city against discrimination in housing, employment, public accommodations and various other areas.

Employment

Due to the severely conservative nature of the dominant community, these lesbians face an unusually high level of anxiety concerning being "out" at the work place. Thanks to affirmative action, women can now enter into traditional male jobs without

anyone thinking they are necessarily gay. However, as interviews progressed, it became apparent that many of the lesbians in this western Michigan community live with a constant apprehension of exposure and loss of employment. They are resentful that, due to societal constraints, they cannot entertain co-workers in their homes without explaining their living arrangements and their lovers. Many informants stated that they refuse to allow co-workers to visit their homes because they "don't want to have to lie about anything at home." This rationale carries over into other areas of employment as well. Company functions which include spouses or dates are often not attended by lesbian employees. To attend these functions as anything other than a lesbian would place the lesbian in a position of further deception. Ultimately, the lesbian becomes more isolated from her co-workers which, in turn, increases her reliance upon the lesbian community for social and emotional support.

Most lesbians interviewed perceive the dominant culture as being oppressive to women and children in that there is a lack of job opportunities and training skills for women and a lack of government support in general areas such as child care. In response to this, lesbians in this community have established a network of female professionals and skilled laborers which allows this subcommunity to be basically self-sustaining. Within this community there are licensed physicians, attorneys, plumbers, roofers, painters, psychologists, psychiatrists, appliance repairwomen, landscapers, mechanics, dentists, and many other lesbian professionals, who are capable of meeting the needs of the community. Self-reliance is a central value in this lesbian community.

Parenting

Problems and concerns of lesbian mothers in this community are basically the same as those of other lesbians, but they are compounded by the additional pressures of motherhood. These lesbian mothers had their children within the framework of a

heterosexual marriage, left their marriages, and with their children (male and female) sought a different lifestyle. The children, three males and three females, are now young adults and appear to be very well adjusted and socialized in heterosexual gender roles. Although each of the lesbian mothers interviewed "came out" to her children, she remained "closeted" to her children's friends and teachers. During the child-rearing years one lesbian mother was involved in a durable sexual relationship with another lesbian who assumed the sharing of parental responsibilities. In both cases the former husband was aware of the mother's lesbianism, but did not pursue a custody dispute.

A major concern of these lesbians was that they not jeopardize the social lives of their children. One attended school functions as a divorced mother and participated in all activities involving her children. If the mother's lover attended, which was the case as the children grew older, both lesbians maintained a low profile and their relationship was never questioned. The other lesbian mother lived in a very conservative suburb of the dominant community, which allowed her no sense of freedom to involve her lover with any of her children's activities. She felt she would have been suspected of lesbianism if she were seen with her lover. Therefore, in order to protect her children, she remained more "closeted" than many others. These lesbian mothers were more reliant upon the lesbian community than most for emotional support. One of the mothers would often rely upon a consensus from a group of her lesbian friends for a decision she was faced with making concerning her children. "My children would come to me with some problem I felt ill-equipped to handle. A group of us would get together, I would bring up the problem, and we would discuss it and come to some decision. Much like two parents would do. My kids would ask, 'What did the committee decide?'"

Problems and concerns of the lesbians in this community appear to reflect those of most women throughout the nation. There is a consensus that women in general are

exploited and discriminated against personally, socially, economically, and politically, and lesbians even more so. In the United States, it is unlawful for unmarried partners, regardless of their sexual preference, to file joint tax returns or claim their partner as a dependent on most employment medical insurance. The women in this study consider a lesbian commitment to be just as binding as a heterosexual marriage, and they are resentful that they are not allowed the same rights as heterosexual married partners. The sentiments of this community are best expressed by Martin and Lyon (1972), "It is indeed time that society redefines and re-evaluates homosexuality as a preference, an orientation and a propensity for a certain lifestyle which is equal to and on a par with heterosexuality--with all that entails" (p. 309).

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

In this thesis I have described the world of a lesbian community within a major western Michigan metropolitan area. Over a four month period I collected data through participant observation and informal, unstructured interviews in order to determine how this subcommunity relates to the dominant culture and how these lesbians perceive themselves and their community. These lesbians strongly identify with a woman-oriented woman concept and have established a relatively self-sustaining female network within the confines of the dominant community. With this ethnographic description of an urban lesbian community, I have attempted to provide data that will foster an understanding of what it is like to identify with a female network which exists outside the mainstream of society.

The members of this lesbian subcommunity are derived from diverse family backgrounds and various fields of employment, but their lesbianism and the resultant isolation from the dominant culture have strengthened their sense of lesbian community. These women have formed a network which allows them to maintain a self-sufficient subcommunity outside the dominant culture. They have established an emotional support system from which they choose their friends and sexual partners, as well as political organizations which are actively involved in promoting gay rights. These lesbians have coped with traditional patriarchal religious concepts by celebrating important religious occasions in a non-sexist manner in their own homes.

Most members of this lesbian community are forced to lead a clandestine existence at their places of employment, worship, and at the schools of their children. Organized lesbian functions and informal social gatherings are the only relief offered these women from the constant tension of concealing their sexual orientation.

The sense of lesbian community is a direct result of the Women's Movement of the 1970s, which led to political and social promotion of homosexual rights. Many lesbians within the research community became aware of their female orientation through interaction with the Women's Movement and subsequent feminist organizations. This local lesbian community is part of a network of other such communities throughout the country with which contact is maintained through newsletters and computer programs. Organized meetings are held weekly to address current lesbian issues: state, local, and national.

All lesbians in this subcommunity realize that they must function within the confines of the dominant society. It is, however, with their lesbian community that they most strongly identify. Steinhorn (1983) summarizes the sentiments of the women in this community when he states, "Lesbianism implies involvement on all levels of consciousness: social, emotional and physical. Loving a woman as her sexual object choice is but one level of expression for a lesbian. Lesbianism refers to a total life experience--the special fears of being considered different are critical elements in that experience. Lesbians have to cope not only with the multitude of ambivalent cultural pressures all women are experiencing today, but also with their devalued status because they differ from their heterosexual counterpart in their choice of life mate" (p. 36). To these women lesbianism does indeed refer to a total life experience, and they believe that their full potential as individuals cannot be realized until the barriers of repression, suppression, and oppression are lifted.

Appendix A

Approval Letter From the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board

WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

Date: February 12, 1990

To: Carol W. Burton

From: Mary Anne Bunda, Chair *Mary Anne Bunda*

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research protocol, "Ethnography of a Lesbian Community in Michigan", has been approved as full by the HSIRB. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the approval application.

You must seek reapproval for any change in this design. You must also seek reapproval if the project extends beyond the termination date.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

xc: E. Loeffler, Anthropology

HSIRB Project Number 90-01-12

Approval Termination February 12, 1991

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