The Lesbian Connection: The Negotiation of Individualism in a Unique Community

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THE LESBIAN CONNECTION: THE NEGOTIATION OF
INDIVIDUALISM IN A UNIQUE COMMUNITY

by

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THE LESBIAN CONNECTION: THE NEGOTIATION OF INDIVIDUALISM IN A UNIQUE COMMUNITY

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Western Michigan University, 2004

This research explores the issue of how individualism is situated within and expressed through a progressive, alternative, and constitutive community. The Lesbian Connection, a lesbian owned and operated publication, will be considered as it relates to the individual-focused dialogue that recent radical theorists claim to be of great importance to the formation of “ideal” communities. Content analysis will be used to investigate how lesbians choose to shape their own community identity while maintaining a sense of personal individualism. Additional attention will be afforded to how lesbians use interaction through text to shape community norms and identify common goals.
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INTRODUCTION

The broadest focal point of this study is the underlying meaning of the term community, especially as it relates to personal identity and the increasing popularity of technology as a means to communicate with others. Through discussing and questioning our traditional understanding of the term “community,” this research introduces the investigation of lesbians as a way of learning about and making visible the proactive measures that individuals are taking to create their own ideal communities through grass-roots measures. More succinctly, the sociological notions of common locale and intimacy as the cornerstones of community is challenged and negotiated in light of what modern technology offers to individuals who have historically struggled to make personal connections with others.

Lesbian women have many unique standpoints that challenge traditional notions of community, and exploring these perspectives affords us insight into the rationale behind the construction of modern communities, particularly those borne of a desire for social or political change. Many lesbians, including those studied in this research, identify with a “lesbian community” which they may have no particular geographic reference to, and with which they may not necessarily experience intimacy in the conventional sense. Despite the fact that this concept is contradictory to the sociological definitions of community, this research argues that this dilemma does not invalidate the meaning of lesbian community. Rather I argue that we, as researchers, need to reassess our own understanding of community in consideration of these non-
traditional groups that have been created by lesbian individuals in reaction to the fear and alienation they experience in their broader social lives.

In addition to these challenges that lesbians place onto our understanding of community, their varied personal identities prove to be tricky in their own development of a community identity. As lesbians represent a broad spectrum of personal identities such as race, religion, socioeconomic status, political ideologies and the like, there is a notable negotiation process that occurs in the lesbian community. This study discusses how lesbians negotiate these varied differences within their community, and how they maintain these expressions of individualism without threatening the integrity of a group identity. Specifically, I consider how expressions of individualism create contradiction while simultaneously complimenting the development of a unique alternative community that thousands of lesbians have created through technology.

This research is grounded in understanding what it is to be a lesbian, the characteristics necessary for lesbian groups to be considered communities, and how lesbians organize their lives in today’s technologically advanced society. In contribution to this understanding, I present an expansive review of sociological, psychological and feminist literatures, touching on issues of community, technology, lesbian identity, and separatist history. Beyond this, a carefully constructed feminist methodology allows for lesbian voices to be captured in a manner that maintains the historical integrity and emotional sentiment of the data. Such a methodology has been chosen in order to demonstrate how and why the Lesbian Connection (LC), an
internationally accessible newsletter by and for lesbians, has continued to thrive through those who have shared their stories within it, because of and despite the contradictions that exist among the readers who have chosen to submit letters and articles over the course of thirty years.

The textual analysis used in this study illuminates the differences lesbians negotiate from non-lesbians, the differences they negotiate between themselves, and how the recognition of those differences serve to define the *Lesbian Connection* as representative of an ideal community. Specifically, as technology introduces new forums in which to express one's self, this research asks: how does individualism play out in a specific lesbian community, is it problematic or desirable to the attainment of the "ideal" community, and what does this mean for the wider lesbian community in general, sociologists, feminists, and social activists.
LITERATURE REVIEW

This research considers a broad array of theoretical standpoints and conceptual notions, including several oppositional perceptions of the meaning of community, recent statements about lesbian identity as it relates to technology, and a separatist focus in lesbian history. As such, this review of relevant literature has been divided into several sub-areas in order to demonstrate the myriad of issues that this research addresses. Note, however, that although community, technology and lesbian identity in modern community, and separatist “herstory” and the Lesbian Connection are discussed separately, the points raised in each section are often linked to issues raised within the other discussions.

COMMUNITY

If only as a byproduct of our interest in groups and group processes, the meaning of and what constitutes an ideal community has been debated among sociologists at great length (Bernard, 1973; Young, 1990). Entire books have been dedicated to the discussion of what defines community and what is problematic about attempts at doing so (Bernard, 1973). Two interpretations of community are often noted in the literature; on the one hand, we have community in reference to a central locale and, on the other “a high degree of personal intimacy, emotional depth, moral commitment, social cohesion, and continuity in time” (Nisbet, 1967: 47). It is common to consider the two as interrelated, i.e., that one precedes the other, but as technology evolves and people continue to build relationships without face-to-face interaction, it becomes necessary to question whether or not intimacy is actually
dependent upon a common locale and vice versa. Furthermore, as people continue to forge relationships for non-personal reasons (such as politics and common interests), sociologists must explore the possibilities of expanding on the classic understandings of the term "community."

One problem with sociological definitions of community is raised (although not directly addressed) in the psychological literature that concerns itself with groups. Brown (2000), for example, presents a definition of groups that fits the sociological paradigm of intimacy, but not necessarily locale, suggesting that given a particular height of intimacy, the word "group" can be interchangeable with "community" (Brown, 2000). According to Brown (2000: 4) "a great many groups can be characterized as a collection of people bound together by some common experience or purpose, or who are interrelated in a micro-social structure, or who interact with one another." Therefore, Brown (2000) suggests that we can consider Jews to be a group and, I imagine, would agree that Muslims and Christians would also be considered groups. The specific use of the phrase "a great many groups" is subtle, yet perhaps quite intentional and indicative of the fear of many researchers that, despite a grounded understanding in how groups and/or communities work, we refrain from providing concrete definitions because, by their very nature, both are evolutionary and perhaps even arbitrary terms. Evolutionary in the sense that advances in society allow for individuals to feel intimacy without face-to-face interaction, and arbitrary in the sense that one can identify with a "community" without ever having been active in it. Case in point: our definitional process gets very muddy with the introduction of
lesbians. We must question, is a closeted lesbian not a member of the lesbian community because she chooses not to interact with other lesbians, or is she a member simply because she can and, in fact, may self-identify as a member of that group?

I challenge how we use such terms to essentially homogenize individuals as members of one world community. Given that one can be a member of several groups and/or communities at one time, I question how expressions of individualism can be situated within a group without negatively affecting one individual group members self-identification with the “others” in a given group. In other words, to what degree can members of a group or community express their own individuality without alienating others in the group and rendering themselves an outsider? Some researchers have confronted the emerging popularity of “accepting” diversity (as opposed to the understanding) as problematic in the development of ideal communities because it threatens a potential focus on social change (Young, 1990).

When an individual is presented with a false sense of unity (i.e., that we are all equal), she or he is less likely to situate others in an honest light. As sociologists are well aware, it requires illustrating differences among individuals, time and space to inspire a sociological imagination.

Recent feminist research has suggested a need to further investigate factors of individualism that are of central concern to the meaning, construction, and the definition of an ideal state of community (Young, 1990; 1997). Common definitions of community and conceptions of what the “ideal” community refers to focus on unity
and group cohesion as primary characteristics. That is, the ideal community is based on mutual agreement and similarities between individuals and “...privileged unity over difference, immediacy over mediation, sympathy over recognition of one’s understanding of others from their point of view” (Young, 1990: 300). Young (1990; 1997) challenges this traditional ideal by insisting that, in fact, difference, mediation, and recognition of others’ differences build the foundations of ideal communities.

Hence, it should be recognized that two ideals are discussed here. First, the traditional ideal that situates unity and cohesion as a positive community characteristic and, second, Young’s (1990) new conception of the ideal in which consistent recognition of difference is the ultimate goal.

What is raised here is a fundamental concern to those studying communities formed around social or political movements (e.g., the feminist community). A contradiction exists and cannot be ignored between the desire for equality and the perseverance of individualism within progressive communities (Bystydzienski & Schacht, 2001; Young, 1990; Young, 1997). This becomes of foremost interest to researchers as communities change form and become more plentiful with the emergence of new concerns around which to form community identities, such as the growing recognition of sexual minorities. Advances in technology, such as the Internet, have provided worldwide forums for discussion whereby individuals who do not share a localized spatial bond can nonetheless forge relationships based on shared interests.
Radical theory has challenged these traditional concepts by suggesting that unity as an ideal ignores the necessary transition from a disaggregated society to a unified world community (Young, 1990; Young, 1997). In other words, the traditional conception of an ideal society (i.e., a unified community) paints a desirable picture of an end result, but does not provide a path, so to speak, from Point A (today's disaggregated society) to Point B (the unified community). Contemporary debate points out that the goal of unity within a community, while noble, can render the individual unimportant to social change if it leads people to believe that others have equitable opportunity when they do not (Young, 1990). Some sense of unity is infinitely important to creating positive communities, but is simply not a characteristic of the world community. Subsequently, it is counterproductive to paint a picture of equality where there are power structures that prohibit such. Instead, it has been suggested that activism should be rooted in appreciation for difference and individuals' perceptions of Point B. As Stoltenberg (2001: xiv) puts it:

Radical social-change movements—which are, after all, about changing hearts and minds—do not cohere without mindfulness of what is happening in the hearts of others. Demagoguery is different. Fascism works optimally when hearts are frozen in fear and hate. But for there to be common cause for egalitarian ends, there must be some moral resonance among those aspiring to communality. There must, fundamentally, be freedom to feel one another's un-freedom.

Because modern forums, such as the Internet and in-text communities (e.g. newsletters), allow for people of diverse perceptions to collaborate and deliberate ideas, technology must be considered as it relates to the development of the radical social-change movements of which Stoltenberg (2001) and Young (1990; 1997)
speak. As technology allows for individuals to make more connections with others, it is necessary to investigate the ways in which individual identities are negotiated to account for a greater understanding of others.

**TECHNOLOGY AND LESBIAN IDENTITY IN MODERN COMMUNITY**

Technology is increasingly providing more forums in which individuals can express their feelings of freedom or lack thereof, resulting in networks based on not only commonalities, but also on the differences between individuals. Hence, it is becoming increasingly common in the sociological community to study anonymous collaborations, such as Internet chat rooms, in attempts to illuminate their similarities and differences to what we consider to be traditional communities (Boyer, 1996; Calhoun, 1998, Crang, 2000). In addition to redefining community as not necessarily concerned with locality, such research has brought to light the changing meaning of self-identity as organized interaction becomes ever more anonymous in nature. Specifically, research of technologically based communities has raised questions about members of marginalized groups that become more visible as we investigate alternative communications. For example, in recent decades, researchers have shown a determination to reintroduce, reassess, and in many cases, redefine terms such as "lesbian," "culture," and "identity," both apart from and in relation to each other, in part because of the new connections that traditionally disaggregated groups can form via technology (Card, 1995; Schneider & Dalton, 1996; 1Zimmerman& McNaron, 1996; 2Zimmerman, 2000).
Specifically, my work considers the intricacy of lesbian self-identification and contradictions of individualism as they relate to a lesbian-specific space, i.e., a unique community. The significance of these observations becomes apparent if we consider how communities are currently referred to. Consider the common use of the term community in relation to religion, such as the “Jewish community.” The initially perceived connection between Jews - that would justify a “community” label - is the self-identification of “Jew” by its members. However, because the community is of the religious type, it is also understood that the term community is appropriate because religion provides a connection beyond identification; i.e., Judaism provides a generally agreed upon set of norms and values through which members of the “Jewish community” can also connect.

The quagmire that we face when defining a “lesbian community” is one we also face when deciding if a secular neighborhood (for example) could be considered a community. Being a lesbian, for those who are not, leaves very little beyond self-identification and sexual orientation to warrant the label “community.” What the dialogue in LC suggests, however, is that semblance in appearance, opinion, and even behavior does not necessarily equal the intimacy that earlier sociologists suggest is a distinctive paradigm of community. In fact, as the following descriptions and discussions suggest, intimacy between LC women is born of their willingness to constructively debate the differences between them.

Despite their differences, it is also apparent that many LC women do perceive norms in their community that are continuously being negotiated as the perception of
lesbians becomes more accepted in heterosexual society. As a result of its 30 year history, LC provides insight into the interesting changes that have occurred in the lesbian community in terms of acceptable norms of political opinion, dress, sexual behavior and gender expression, and how a community perseveres even when such norms are vehemently deliberated. In this sense, LC was found to be an applicable, contemporary example of the individualistic-yet-politically mobile communities of which radical theorists like Young (1990; 1997) have proposed as being ideal. On an individual basis, LC also illustrates the complex diversity of criteria by which lesbians self-identify.

Card (1995: 34) addresses this complex relationship between self-identification and the meaning of lesbian by noting that,

Self-identification as lesbian...is not simply on the basis of significant relationships but usually indicates having made lesbian relationships central to one’s life, having chosen to organize one’s life around lesbian experience and possibilities, being committed to certain orientations of one’s attention, energy flow, resources, etc.

Research concerned with the development of lesbian community identities should include exploring forms of expression or, rather, social artifacts, that purposely claim to be “for” and/or “by” lesbians and the lesbian community. Such expressions encompass all forms of lesbian-specific media, such as television shows, film, music, books, magazines and newsletters. Because newsletters allow for its audience to interact with the media (i.e., submit letters and editorials), they should be of major concern to our understanding of how a lesbian audience chooses to shape its own
community identity in light of the fact that lesbians represent a myriad of races, creeds, social classes, political stances, abilities, and ages.

Recently, scholars have argued that lesbian and gay-specific print media “…has generated a nonlocal space with which gays and lesbians can identify” (Joseph, 2000: 7). Presumably, this non-local space promotes an ideology of inclusion or worldly connection, suggesting to homosexual individuals that those experiences they have in relation to, and even apart from, their sexuality are of global concern. This, in turn, suggests that sociologists and feminist researchers should widen their inquiries of lesbian culture to include the global connections that lesbians are making. As Card (115: 14) points out, the discourse analysis of modern social artifacts can be important to understanding lesbian life because,

To appreciate their shaping of lesbian life, it is important to uncover writings, artifacts, and other records of lesbians and empathetic friends who take an ‘internal’ point of view, who see themselves as making choices in accord with (or in violation of) norms and values.

LC is not only a key modern artifact to consider, it is a historical timeline from which we can track social and political change in the lesbian community.

SEPARATIST “HERSTORY” AND THE LESBIAN CONNECTION

All modern lesbian artifacts are, in part, a reflection of the past and therefore, to understand the connections that lesbians are making today, it is important to understand lesbian history or “herstory” as it is often called. Perhaps the most telling chapter of lesbian history is that of the Feminist-Lesbian-Separatist movement. Despite the fact that, “Lesbians repeatedly testify to the transformative effect of feminism on their lives,” there has undoubtedly been a struggle between lesbians and
heterosexual feminists throughout the course of the women's movement (Wilton, 1995: 90). While the reasoning behind this particular conflict may seem quite obvious, i.e., because of the emotional attachments heterosexual women have to men, what constituted separatism or the proper behavior of a separatist was widely debated by academics and, as this research reveals, lesbians involved in grassroots activism.

The Lesbian Feminist movement of the 1960's and 70's evolved as a response to the differences that lesbians saw between their own experiences with oppression and that of heterosexual feminists (Shugar, 2000). Although a great number of lesbians actively aligned with broadly focused feminist groups, many chose to break free from such a universal fight against oppression to form their own exclusively lesbian battle against all forms of male privilege, including heterosexuality. The personal became more political, and activists began demanding complete change in the ways that women, especially lesbians, structured their lives, including with which communities they chose to self-identify. This included attempts by lesbians to completely disassociate themselves from anything remotely heterosexual (Whittier, 1995). As radical feminist Charlotte Bunch (1984: 147) put it,

Feminist-Lesbianism, as the most basic threat to male supremacy, picks up part of the Women's Liberation analysis of sexism and gives it force and direction. Women's Liberation lacks direction now because it has failed to understand the importance of heterosexuality in maintaining male supremacy and because it has failed to face class and race as real differences in women's behavior and political needs. As long as straight women see Lesbianism as a bedroom issue, they hold back the development of politics and strategies which would put an end to male supremacy and they give men an excuse for not dealing with their sexism.
Others shared Bunch’s ideas and felt that even heterosexual women were representative of patriarchal oppression by virtue of their inability to “love” women completely. Despite the fact that feminist-lesbians loathed how heterosexuals viewed their identity as purely sexual, they separated themselves from other feminists solely based on their heterosexual practices and emotional attachments to men. This philosophical dilemma is mirrored in the ongoing debate that lesbian-feminists had over how their movement should be structured; some lesbians felt that the best way to gain equal rights was through integrating with a diverse range of people fighting for one cause (i.e., the eradication of oppression in general), while others felt that reverting to matriarchal principles was the only way to remove themselves from heterosexism. For lesbian separatists, sexual oppression was of greater concern than say racism or ethnocentrism. Consequently, most separatists were uninterested in how heterosexual women were affected by sexism.

Even more striking than the attitudes that lesbian-separatist-feminists formed against anything representative of heterosexuality was how they sought to distinguish themselves from gay men. Despite their arguably similar experiences of sexual oppression, lesbian separatists reacted with equal fervor against the gay male liberation movement. To lesbian separatists, the gay liberation movement was understandably seen as being pursued with exclusively male interests in mind (Seidman, 1993). In contradiction with the gay movement, lesbian separatists insisted that lesbianism was not so much a sexual desire for other women as it was a political and social choice to affirm only that which was purely female oriented (Bunch, 1984).
Where scholars tend to disagree about the lesbian separatist movement is when it began and when it ended. While many contend that its entire course played out in the 1960’s and 70’s, exact years are still often debated (Seidman, 1993; Shugar, 1995; Whittier, 1995). This disagreement is likely because scholars depend on academic literature to situate specific events and social movements. Only a few radical scholarly manifestos, such as Charlotte Bunch’s work, continue to be re-published in feminist anthologies. For the most part, academic mention of the lesbian separatist movement has slowly dwindled to a few historical and occasionally reminiscent accounts of a presumably fading movement.

It would appear that even the most radical lesbian scholars have abandoned lesbian-separatist thought for the more inclusive “celebrate diversity” approach that was vehemently opposed by self-identified separatists. This lack of academic interest alludes to young scholars that separatist ideologies have been abandoned by lesbians in general society. To the contrary, many lesbians are still organizing lesbian-only publications, such as the Lesbian Connection, Raging Dykes and Michigan’s What Helen Heard. As recently as November of 2000, a lesbian separatist conference was held in Pennsylvania (Myers, 2003). Further, women only communes, such as the Egg Moon Farm in Ohio, are still operating with the intent of building positive environments solely for women. While a few contemporary researchers note such women-only spaces, including the Lesbian Connection, as being of great importance to feminist study, such observations are reserved for literature that is of interest to people researching lesbians, not feminists, political movements or communities.
The Lesbian Connection (LC), as depicted in gay and lesbian focused literature, is seen as so pivotal to lesbian culture that not only has it earned its own definition in Zimmerman’s (2000) Lesbian Histories and Cultures, an extensive lesbian encyclopedia, it is cited in several other texts as well (Card, 1995; McGarry & Wasserman, 1998; Streitmatter, 1995). Baker (2000: 455), the author of the encyclopedic LC entry, notes that it is the “Longest-running publication for lesbians in the United States.” Likewise, Card (1995) opens her book by mentioning LC as one of the lesbian movement’s more persistent and insightful artifacts. She continues promoting LC’s effectiveness as a research tool by adding a chapter about the possibilities of lesbian friendships, which was inspired by a 30 year-old letter published in the newsletter. Despite many honorable mentions in the literature, however, LC has been the primary data source for few, if any, research agendas.

LC’s persistence and insightfulness is, in part, grounded in its alternative nature. The Lesbian Connection is not a newsletter produced by mainstream media (Streitmatter, 1995). Rather, its founders introduced LC to fulfill their own desires of a lesbian-only space, suffering through meek funds, evictions based on sexual orientation discrimination, and even a fire that burned their original headquarters to the ground, all in the name of empowering lesbian women. Although never claiming to have been a separatist publication, LC has always been edited, printed, distributed, and even stapled together by women only. Recognizing the importance of LC in their lives, readers have time and time again rallied to support the newsletter, be it in monetary support or actual volunteer hours.
Streitmatter (1995) recognizes the temporary status of most underground gay publications due to lack of fiscal support, yet praises the fact that LC has continued to consistently publish for over thirty years, no doubt due to its immense reader support. In fact, Streitmatter (1995: 268) may have identified why when he noted that LC was different from other lesbian publications in that it “…contained the thoughts not of a single woman, but of the broadest collection of lesbians ever assembled.”

Joan Nestle, a well-known lesbian “Herstorian” and advocate for LC (as quoted in Streitmatter, 1995: 268) declares, “Lesbian Connection became Lesbian America’s town crier. It served like a printed town meeting--on a national basis. Lesbian women knew that whatever they wanted to talk about, they could send it to Lesbian Connection and…viola! It was news.” This is perhaps the most important recognition that should be made of LC; that the letters and articles found within it are not generated by scholars, journalists, or even determined by rigid editorial staff. To the contrary, they are honest stories, questions and opinions presented by lesbians exactly as they are perceived and experienced.

LC lends itself perfectly to this and many other feminist inquiries in that, “Feminist epistemologies suggest that personal perspectives are valid and perhaps even essential elements of any systematic attempt to know the social world” (DeVault, 1999: 105). LC offers valid personal perspectives of lesbians that cannot be ignored by any research community that wishes to embrace a sociology for women. According to its founders, the first issue of LC marked,

…the creation of a network of communication that would unite all lesbians on this continent. We decided to call ourselves the Ambitious
Lesbian community, at its simplest, can be described as, "...a group of persons and/or spaces that affirm same-sex sexuality and love between women" (Freeman, 2000: 190). Debate surrounding this common definition of lesbian community questions whether or not such is possible because of the diversity of lesbian women and the fluctuation of their self-identities across time, age, race, class, political stance, and the like (Freeman, 2000). What is important to the sociological study of the meaning of the term lesbian community is to consider how lesbians themselves identify and whether or not their changing self-identities eradicate the possibility for an exclusive community or simply alters the form that it takes.

This study explores how a diverse yet connected group of lesbians "...mobilize...at the grass-roots level to build a power base and engage in collective action toward a common goal," an action that many researchers would agree constitutes recognition as a community (Kozik-Rosabal, 2000: 194). The feminist methodology engaged for this study allows for the LC community to be understood from the standpoint of its members, therefore allowing my subjects to shape the findings of this research. By allowing for this, we can truly understand how lesbian women define their own communities, as opposed to how others define them.
METHODS

LC, a thirty-year-old internationally accessible publication, organized and edited by and for lesbians, is the data source of this project. Although the newsletter claims to be “free to lesbians around the world,” donations are encouraged and accepted. LC provides readers with news of lesbian friendly events and businesses, a forum in which to communicate with other lesbians, and a list of “contact dykes.” So named by LC, the “contact dyke” directory is a list of names, addresses and/or phone numbers of women who are willing to make themselves available to lesbians traveling in or moving to their geographic location. LC is available to anyone who wishes to subscribe, but is commonly introduced at Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered & Questioning (GLBTQ) events, and is marginally (if at all) recognized by a heterosexual audience. Within its current guidelines, which are printed in each issue, the publication does recognize that, “…non-lesbians do see LC,” but also insists that, “LC is a forum for lesbians (which to us means women-born-women who identify as lesbians)” (Lesbian Connection, 2003: 58). The mention of the “women-born-women” identification is, in fact, a change from earlier issues that are of importance to the discussion of intra-separatism in the “findings” section of this paper.

A significant portion of this newsletter (approximately 1/3, given the focus of the specific issue) is letters written and submitted by readers about a diversity of issues spanning from health care, to politics, to problems related to same-sex relationships. In many cases, the letters are not just statements, but inquisitions whereby the author seeks advice and reassurance from other readers. Because the
newsletter itself expressly prohibits requests for pen pals, these letters are responded to in later issues. This dialogue creates interesting patterns that can be explored in terms of the collective feelings of the group and variance in the writers’ perceptions of predicaments that, in many cases, are exclusive to the lesbian experience. In addition, it allows the development of a community identity to be seen as it progresses over time.

For this project, a convenience sample of every fifth volume currently available was chosen for analysis. Each issue within Volumes 1, 5, 10, 15, 20, and 25 was read for this project. With an average of seven issues per volume, the complete analysis amounted to a total of 35 issues. Every fifth volume (as opposed to five consecutive volumes) was purposely selected as a means of capturing ongoing discussions as well as a means of establishing a historical overview of LC’s development. Once all issues had been read, persistent themes were identified by the frequency at which they were raised within letters and articles. Having found that lesbian separatism/feminism, gender expression, politics, relationships/sex, religion/spirituality and issues of coming out were the most common focus of LC submissions, issues were then reread and coded based on these content specifications, and analyzed in coded groupings. Once coding was completed, it became clear that a theme of separatism dominated the data, and was visible within all of the topics. This discovery led to the distinction in the findings of separatism vs. intra-separatism. Separatism, being how LC women divided on issues surrounding heterosexuality, was a highly concentrated discussion in LC, and can be traced throughout its thirty years.
of publication. Intra-separatism, or how the LC women divided on issues within the community including gender expression, politics, relationships/sex, religion/spirituality and coming out, was found to be more applicable to the discussion of community than addressing each topic separately. Without the intention of undermining the importance of how the women of LC negotiate things such as sex and religion within their community, it was decided that the umbrella of intra and extra-separatism that overshadows the lesbian community must be addressed in this research to aid others in addressing specific areas of interest in the future. Hence, the end result of this project is an analysis of separatist issues within the Lesbian Connection. In doing so, this study addresses the most persistent topics raised in reader-submitted letters and articles while exploring the negotiation process of the community that this forum has made possible.

Despite having started with six categories of exploration (gender expression, closet issues, separatism/feminism, politics, religion, and love/sex) it is the overarching issue of contradiction that I wish to focus on in the discussion of findings. All of these issues serve to form connections between the LC women that I feel define them as a community. What is most interesting is how this community persists despite the avid differences in opinion that LC women have on even the most fundamental of issues. Subsequently, lesbian separatism is not only considered in the political sense, but also as a characteristic of the debates surrounding many issues exclusive to the lesbian community. It is discussed in terms of its importance to an ideal lesbian community that thrives on sharing and accepting difference. To disagree
is to separate one belief from another and, therefore, separatism is appropriately considered as an evolving issue in itself and a negotiation process within the LC community. Not only do I address the separation of lesbian feminists from heterosexual feminists as it is described in the LC submissions, this research also uncovers new forms of separation. Specifically, the women of LC express, albeit indirectly, separatist (oppositional) ideas in terms of all of the categories considered in this research. With this in mind, the findings of this research focus on how the women of LC separate on a myriad of issues while uniting on their need to address them. The common goal that defines the women of LC as a community is not in their agreement on how social change should look, but that it desperately needs to occur.

Central to this research is a feminist methodology that provides the highest possible degree of ownership to my subjects. Aside from the obvious dependence on radical feminist theory to guide a more complete understanding of what constitutes the “ideal” community, a feminist methodology has been employed here in that this research seeks to uncover women’s “voices,” purposefully “minimizes harm and control in the research process,” and focuses on social change for women (DeVault, 1999:30-31). DeVault (1999: 30-31) recognizes that uncovering women’s “voices” means simultaneously recognizing and negotiating your own voice and how it is or is not in some way representative of your sample, noting that, “Negotiating the tension between investigating experiences with intense personal meaning and casting wider nets has been a continuing challenge.” It is my belief that this negotiation must, in part, be shared with my audience, which is why I offer the following.
REFLECTION WITHIN A FEMINIST FRAMEWORK

Allow me to share my own struggle with how I experienced and fit into the data that does not belong to me, but rather that to which I feel I belong. What I feel is so often lost, if not openly struggled with, in feminist research is the me, the self, the I - the personal stake that we have in our own directions of inquiry. We, as researchers, are so entrenched in our plight to disseminate valid information that we neglect to consider that our own perceptions are indeed indicative of how others might perceive whatever medium we are studying. Catering to our roles as scientists, we ignore the obvious, which is that we too have domain assumptions from which we interpret the world. While the goal of impartiality is a noble one, it is not necessarily guaranteed. It becomes even more difficult to separate one’s self from qualitative inquiry when research enters into the sacred ground of ones’ own psyche. Since many of us as researchers gravitate to issues that in some way touch our lives, it is important to recognize that our voices are just as important as those that we study. It is for this reason that I could not share the “findings” of my work without revealing what I have “found” about myself.

Quite naively, I took on this project without considering the toll it would take on my own understanding of my lesbian identity and my position within the lesbian community. Having been in a seven-year relationship with a transgendered woman, I confused my comfort in lifestyle for being indicative of a strong sense of self and community inclusion. This, I have discovered through my LC research, is simply not the case. Pouring through 30 years worth of the most personal of testimonials has
made me realize that being affirmed as a lesbian woman is a lifelong process, regardless of how secure we feel. One does not wake up one day and say, "I'm OK with myself, everything is perfect, and no one can tell me otherwise." Rather, a lesbian woman is lucky if she can find in herself that comfort that is strong enough to withstand only the worst of oppressions; it takes daily reminders to maintain such a content place on a more micro/personal level within this turbulent and heterosexually dominant culture that so many of us take for granted. As a lesbian I have assumed that, because I am comfortable with the heterosexual world that I have been socialized to consider the norm, I am a secure lesbian. As I have learned from many LC women, this simply means that I have effectively learned to situate myself in a world that is not yet comfortable with me.

This withstanding comfort, when all is said and done, is what LC has come to mean to myself as a lesbian sociologist and, subsequently, what has widely contributed to the findings of this research. It has shaped what I consider to be a contribution to the sociological understanding of community development and perseverance. The differences of opinion, long-lived debates and, on occasion, the full-fledged fights that conspire through LC are not suggestive of a community in turmoil. Rather, the political, social, economic, physical, and emotional differences that are so brightly illuminated by the words found in LC are evidence that the LC community is indeed a solid one, grounded by a desire to understand the lesbian experience through a wide range of interpretations.
Throughout the analysis of my data, as I read and coded hundreds of letters and articles submitted by LC readers, I cried, laughed, empathized, and feared the emotions that were so clearly presented and most times reiterated by a trail of responses from others. I found myself relieved when someone else’s “coming out” experience mirrored my own; I found myself nauseated when I was forced to endure someone’s struggle with abuse as they healed through sharing it with others; I felt my heart torn when women described losing life partners that they had shared decades with; and I felt empowered when women pleaded with others to take pride in their inherent worth as lesbians and as female beings. I found that my emotions were struck on such a deep level that I often felt I could not describe them to others with the passion that they warranted.

After much reflection, I am convinced that LC would not have endured more than thirty years as a donation-only publication if other women did not feel the same way each time the new issue came in the mail. This being said, in the feminist tradition, I offer here the voices of the LC women. While in my findings I share some of my own speculation as to what LC means to sociological and feminist research, it is also my goal to simply let the voices of the LC women tell their own stories, as in and of themselves they offer tremendous insight into lesbian identity and community.
DEFINITIONS

Before sharing the intricate experiences of LC readers, a few definitions must be provided for a clearer understanding of the discussion that follows. Even so, I must respect the feelings of many LC readers by noting that the following labels may in fact perpetuate the stereotypes of which many lesbians wish to rid themselves. As one LC reader put it (Volume 10, 1987), “The more that homosexuals and lesbians refer to us with these names and titles the more the world will continue to do so.” Nevertheless, many of the submissions found in LC contain these words, and it is important to present their generic meanings. Please understand that the following definitions are meant to create an easier understanding of this research for those embarking on unfamiliar territory and are not meant to be rigid definitions applicable to all lesbians that demonstrate the characteristics mentioned.

Assimilationists Also known as “participationists,” these lesbians desire full acceptance into the patriarchal norm including, but not limited to, the military and the tradition of marriage.

Butch A lesbian who prefers masculine forms of self-expression, including traditionally masculine clothing and mannerisms.

Femme A lesbian who prefers feminine forms of self-expression, including traditionally feminine clothing and mannerisms.

Lesbian A female homosexual, one who is sexually and emotionally attracted to members of the same sex.

Lesbian Separatism A radical feminist ideology that encourages emotional, social, physical, financial, political and psychological separation from any and all patriarchal institutions.

Transsexual An individual who has had or intends on having sexual reassignment surgery. Transsexual individuals can be male converting to female (MTF) or female converting to male (FTM), and may identify as heterosexual, bisexual, lesbian, or gay.
**Transgender** An individual whose gender presentation and/or identity challenges traditional gender norms. Examples include, transvestites, drag kings, drag queens, and cross dressers.

A comprehensive understanding of how these terms are commonly used in the academic literature allows for a clearer focus on what is truly unique about the findings of this research, which is how lesbians in the LC community negotiate their own meanings of these words. The following conversation considers these words as they are applied to both separate and unite the women of LC.
FINDINGS

Here, there are two discussions of separation. The first, is the issue of lesbian separatism, or how the women of LC negotiate their difference from “outsiders” (i.e., non-lesbians). The second is what I call intra-separatism, or how the women of LC negotiate their differences from each other. Issues of intra-separatism are considered in two separate discussions: gender expression and in/out; both issues this research considers to be specific to communities of sexual minority. Another section, community building, considers what LC is doing as an entity to build a sense of community among its readers. This section also offers a few comments on issues of traditional difference, or those differences that are not unique to the lesbian community, such as a variation in opinions regarding politics and religion.

LESBIAN SEPARATISM

The issue of lesbian separatism, also referred to as feminist-lesbian-separatism, is raised immediately by LC readers, in response to the policies of a Lesbian Resource Center. In fact, separatist concerns make their debut in Volume I of LC. The center, which opened in the same city as LC is published, prohibited any men from entering the facility at all and required center approval for heterosexual or bisexual women to enter the premises. This policy was created only after several lesbians became upset about non-lesbian women using the center. Despite the new policy, a letter written by a representative for the center did respond to the disgruntled lesbians by denouncing separatist ideas, stating that their new policy, “…respects the right of any woman to decide for herself if she belongs there.” This letter, which was
published in LC, seemed to be a catalyst for a debate about the general concept of feminist-lesbian-separatism, how and if it fits into lesbian politics, and whether or not it is feasible as a way of life and political action.

In the same issue as the center’s response, a New Jersey woman praised LC for being a lesbian-only space, to which LC responded with, “Editors’ Note: We are not all separatists.” A woman from Milwaukee, apparently having recognized the varied opinions of LC’s staff, wrote, “I was glad to read that your group’s politics vary from Separatism to integration.” Hence, the conversation begins. As scholars and activists began to debate separatism in the feminist literature of the 1970’s, so did the women of LC. What makes the debate in LC unique and especially important to understanding the larger separatist movement, is that the conversations in LC surpass the ideological purpose of separatism to challenge the practicality and application of separatism as a workable part of lesbian life.

Despite LC staffs’ frequent persistence that, as a publication, it did not support any particular political stance, such as separatism, many readers mistook its “by and for lesbians” status as being indicative of such. A Nashville reader submitted the following statement in the same volume as the initial separatist discussions:

I fully agree lesbians should totally withdraw from straight ‘feminist’ movement. However, it is necessary for all lesbians to become strong radical feminists. Feminism should be different for lesbians than what it is for straight women. It is essential to develop our own politics.

This letter serves as a prime example of how some LC readers felt the need to distinguish themselves from heterosexual feminists, yet felt compelled to adhere to the basic principles of radical feminism in general. The problematic illustrated here is
that separatism was essentially an anti-feminist movement grounded in feminist principles, namely that of female empowerment – only here, sex with other women (or at the least, lack of sex with men) was seen as pivotal to this empowerment.

Many submissions demonstrate the difficulty that non-separatists have had with their own lesbian identity in light of the movement. A basic premise of the lesbian separatist movement is that being a lesbian is not necessarily inherent, but rather a political choice. This proves to be confusing for non-separatists because it forces them to wonder if they are, in fact, “lesbians” at all since non-separatists do not see lesbianism as a political choice, but a biological characteristic. Several times throughout my analysis (and I am sure in other volumes), women wrote in asking to be taken off of the LC mailing list because they felt the separatist rhetoric posted by others was invalidating. Conversely, many separatists asked to be taken off the mailing list because they felt the publication was too non-political and, therefore, invalidating. “Out” lesbians debated the meaning of their identities at great length during the early separatist movement; so much so that their constant disagreement threatened any remaining safe spaces in which other lesbians could come “out.” By Volume 5 (1980), many LC women were consciously recognizing the strain that separatism put on those women not yet “out”:

Coming out to me does not mean the reductionism of my values and philosophy or the restriction of whom I view as allies or friends. I see it as enriching my life, a way to know myself better in order to deepen my humanitarianism and commitment to all progressive struggles. I firmly believe that if the lesbian movement continues with its separatist politics and intolerance of people in general it will fail to be counted among these struggles...Apparently many lesbians have separated themselves too long already, becoming intolerant of any
'outsiders' to the extent that they are even undermining and vicious with women just coming out.

Still there were those LC submissions that attempt to bridge the gap between separatists and assimilationists, asking others to recognize their unique lesbian identity while still working with the heterosexual feminist movement. An eloquently written essay submitted in 1974 by a woman named Regi attempts to illustrate this point:

The despised status of 'Lesbian' is inextricably linked to misogyny, and the maintenance of Lesbian-hating is crucial to those who would keep women in their place. As long as Lesbianism is feared and devalued, no woman is free to be strong, to love herself, and to love her sisters. Thus, non-Lesbian Feminists must come to realize the importance of Lesbianism and must struggle with us for its legal and social acceptance.

She closes by saying that “Feminist’ is not a word to be taken lightly, it implies commitment, study and struggle, much as ‘Lesbian requires strength, awareness, and courage. The combination is powerful and, in struggle for complete liberation, is inevitable.”

The onset of lesbian separatism, while on one hand suggested the formation of a new community, on the other threatened to divide whatever sense of “community” lesbians did have with heterosexual feminists and other lesbians. This division likely manifested because the practice of separatism required a total change in every aspect of one’s life. Conversely, it was potentially the foundation for “community” in both interpretations of the word; it fit the paradigm of common locale in the sense that practicing separatists often cohabitated with other women (e.g., the Furies), and the paradigm of intimacy because practicing lesbian separatism required structuring one’s
life around women completely - the ultimate expression of total intimacy. Contrary to popular belief, LC suggests that separatism was not just a wave of lesbian feminism, but rather a persistent faction of lesbian thought that was ultimately silenced in the larger arena by a global shift towards “celebrating” diversity.

Several years later, in Volume 5, the debate gets only more heated. Having been published from 1980 to 1982, Volume 5 was published after the point in history when many scholars, such as Steven Siedman (1993), claim that the separatist movement had essentially died. By this time, the language in LC had actually taken an overall turn towards anger and disgust for the “other,” by both separatists and on occasion, assimilationists. A New Jersey reader submitted an article entitled “Silencing Separatists” (1980) in which she wrote,

The energy that goes into ERA, abortion, faggot and male-left politics, takes away energy that could go towards lesbians. The other-directed energy tries to submerge lesbian identity back into the great American melting pot – it is part of the same motion that has mcdonaldized this country, that ignores color, class, ethnic differences between us. Lesbians are not the same as straights; there is nothing good to be gained by identifying with our enemies, ‘turning the other cheek’, blending in, mellowing out.

Readers like Elana, who submitted this piece, clearly felt that separatism was very much alive or needed to be. She and many others expressed their opinions that the separatist political stance was still thriving, and that separatists were being ignored by a larger audience because too many lesbians were disillusioned by the ease at which the larger public accepted a “celebrate diversity” approach to equality.

Elana’s anger is mirrored in a 1987 entry in which a woman complains, “Let’s be honest – there’s not a man out there worth ten cents anyway.” Albeit a simpler
way of denouncing patriarchy, it demonstrates how strands of separatism can be noted in lesbian speech long after the movement was thought to have dissipated. It was perhaps the lack of familiar jargon that pushed academia away from tracking the lesbian separatist movement. This, however, should not overshadow the fact that within the LC forum, submissions still suggested an understanding and involvement in the movement as recently as 2003. In response to an anti-separatist letter printed in an earlier volume, Lyndon (Volume 25, 2003) replies,

> While I do not consider myself a lesbian separatist, I do have an understanding and appreciation for those who are... Many of these women have worked diligently for the last thirty years or so to secure your right to walk down the street holding the hand of your lover without getting your ass kicked. These women have marched, rallied, and protested for the rights of women and lesbians everywhere... Before you accuse separatists of being 'prejudiced and ignorant', you should educate yourself on what these women have done to improve our lives and our world.

Although it is apparent that separatist thought still exists in lesbian discourse, it is also clear that a distinct shift occurs. As predicted by assimilationists, time proved fruitful for lesbians, in that lesbianism is slowly becoming more acceptable in mainstream society. With this shift, however, is the loss of the “other.” As heterosexuals become more of an asset than a burden to lesbian advancement, the definition of “other” has become muddy. Going back to the example of the Jewish community, the “other” is quite clearly the “non-Jew.” Many members of the LC community, the assimilationists, wished to erase the other, preferring that their sexual orientation not be their connection to a community of people (although submitting to LC may suggest otherwise – yet another contradiction). Separatism was an alternative
to being a community based on integrating with the “other”; without the other to abhor, separatism was without purpose. This is not to say that the women of LC ceased to focus on the “other,” rather the “other” was eventually identified within the lesbian community. It is in this negotiation of the new “other” that we see the development of intra-separatism. Separatists and non-separatists continued to debate their personal opinions on the matter in LC over the course of many years, forging a community of intimacy through their disagreement.

**INTRA-SEPARATISM**

The broader lesbian-separatist debate that peppers LC’s history served to overshadowed an issue of equal importance, which I have named “intra-separatism.” Although its origins are noted in early issues, “intra-separatism” gains significant speed once lesbian separatism loses its appeal. Specifically, “intra-separatism” refers to the division that assimilation caused between different types of lesbians. Just as the women’s movement became more complicated and disaggregated as it became clear that women had more needs than just overcoming sexism, the lesbian movement was confused by the introduction of diversity as well. As more and more lesbians joined the effort to fight oppression, or even just came “out,” it became clear that lesbians themselves were a diverse group with varied identifications including butch, femme, transgendered, vegetarian, lesbian of color, religiously identified, monogamous or non-monogamous, and so on. Along with these new identifications came new issues of diversity and, in turn, new separatist ideologies. Contemporary
separatist debates in LC move away from focusing on heterosexism to a focus on the "others" within the lesbian community.

The pages of LC demonstrate not an eradication of the lesbian-separatist movement, but a change in its form. As assimilation became a more popular political choice, lesbians began to separate from themselves, as opposed to separating from heterosexuals. Interestingly, those lesbians that became the "other" due to intra-separatism were those lesbians that blatantly defied heterosexual norms. As they became more visible, gender-bending lesbians became the new "other" at the brunt of a new separatist debate. The separation that begins to occur in the 80's is expressed through LC in general terms that grow in intensity as years pass by. A woman calling herself Em writes in Volume 15 (1992), "I finally realized that, because I was isolated from other lesbians, I had created an imaginary world where lesbians treated each other better than people in the straight world do." Her feelings are no doubt a reaction to what Bev describes in Volume 5 (1982):

As soon as we learn the patriarchy's standards we start applying them to each other, so that even in the lesbian community the most popular lesbians are the most privileged, white, thin, prime age, educated, from money and 'pretty'. We've got to stop doing this to each other.

Unfortunately, in the very same submission, Bev harshly criticizes those lesbians who wear their hair in "fag tag" style or, as it is known now, a mullet. As clear as it is that many writers wish to denounce separatism within the lesbian community, it is also clear that they struggle with exactly how to do that without threatening their own personal identities.
Just as in any community, the women of LC frequently debate contradictions that arise based on expressions of individualism that are both exclusive to and separate from their lesbian identity. Lesbian-exclusive contradictions include butch/femme and transgender/transsexual/women-born women, which are addressed in terms of the general concern of gender expression, and in the closet/out of the closet issues, which have been dedicated to their own section. Contradictions that are not exclusive to the lesbian community, such as monogamy/non-monogamous, religious/ secular, and political discord, will be discussed in a third section reserved for traditional differences.

The division between each of these identifications is what defines the intra-separatism seen here and in other communities. Aside from those contradictions that are distinctly lesbian (e.g., in/out), many are contradictions seen in all communities forged through social or political action. What is important to recognize here is that, despite these contradictions, the LC community has grown immensely over the years. In this sense, it can be seen how the radical communities of difference that many theorists have talked about actually happen and even thrive. Although the lesbian-specific contradictions outlined above are discussed as separate from the traditional issues addressed below, note that the language the women use in regard to each is quite similar and, at times, the issues intersect.

**Gender Expression**

An interesting gender revolution occurs in the lesbian community, beginning with the butch vs. femme dichotomy that can be traced back to the 1930’s (Nestle,
and transforming into a focus on transgendered and/or transsexual vs. what women in LC dub to be “women-born-women.” Because lesbians have become more visible over the course of time and, in turn, more women self-identify with the label lesbian, what constitutes such becomes a heated debate both in and outside of LC. This “what is a lesbian” discourse surpasses a focus on sexual behavior to focus on what the appropriate gender expression of a lesbian should be. In a fashion strikingly similar to the lesbian separatist divisions seen in early issues of LC, the focus of contemporary submissions becomes who is deserving of the label “lesbian,” based on the variance in gender identification that develops with a sexually revolutionized society.

As early as Volume 1, LC begins to trace the phenomenon whereby butches renounce femmes for buying into heterosexual norms and femmes reject butches for being in denial of their inherent femaleness. It traces the phenomenon by which butches and femmes, who find themselves attracted to one another, share their fears of facing a lesbian community that may ostracize them for falling into heterosexual norms. One presumably femme reader (Volume 1, 1974) from New York argued that, “To be a lesbian you must be a woman,” chastising butches for trying to “…out-macho real men.” This line of thinking clearly illuminates how even lesbians rely deeply on socially constructed gender norms to validate their appearance. In their opposition to and discomfort with these roles, many lesbians denounce them both in their own behavior and by criticizing and ostracizing others.
Unfortunately, gender expression bashing is far from uncommon in LC and was not completely limited to a specific time frame. The dated statement above was not a reflection of conservative times, as the sentiment was echoed time and time again. In Volume 5 (1982), a woman from Canada states, “There is nothing to be gained by looking like a reject from a garbage dump. If I wanted a man, I would get one, but I don’t. I want my woman to be a woman not a pseudo man.” A woman from Tennessee adds, “I love a woman and do not want her acting and dressing like a man. It disturbs me that gay women think that one has to be macho or manly to be gay.”

Fifteen years later, in Volume 20 (1997), LC women are still sharing their feelings about butch/femme expression, although by this time it seems that femmes are the ones feeling left out. Rosa, a woman from California says, “since I’m femme-looking (with long hair and lipstick) I’ve felt plenty of disapproval in the fourteen years I’ve been out. We all need to be more open and accepting rather than just disliking others based on prejudice.” While some women were expressing their feelings of alienation from others based on their butch or femme identification, others were engaging in a dialogue about how to express their lesbian identity without looking butch or femme. Ironically, many of these submissions refer to “the lesbian uniform” which, as the women describe it, seems to have been “butch” in nature, i.e., baggy and/or men’s clothing, short hair, and no makeup. Virginia wrote in 2003 (Volume 25), “I am a lesbian, and therefore had to subscribe to the lesbian dress code
and the behavior code! I thought I was supposed to be butch.” Perhaps those who identified as butch spoke up so often that others assumed they were the majority.

Readers frequently express their feelings of alienation in regards to their appearance, such as one woman from S. Pasadena, Florida (Volume 10, 1987).

I don’t ‘look like a lesbian’, so other lesbians don’t recognize me. I’m not particularly athletic, I wear my hair longish, and my body shape is far from ‘androgynous’. I don’t look my best in unisex, sporty or farmers’ clothes. It bothers me that the lesbian ‘uniform’ is so rigidly defined.

She continues by asking other readers if they can suggest any way to reveal her lesbian identity while simultaneously expressing her individuality. Letters such as this one reveal one of the most complicated aspects of living with a sexual minority status. Being a lesbian is not always outwardly obvious, which makes connecting with others difficult and even embarrassing.

Not surprisingly, dozens of women responded to the letter from Pasadena. Women from all over the country shared their own concerns about not “looking” lesbian, and even shared tips for “dropping hints.” One woman suggested sporting long fingernails, except on the index and middle finger of your right hand; lesbians would recognize this as being sexually aware of a partner’s needs, and the wearer would still be able to hide her sexuality from heterosexuals by claiming that being right handed, she has a difficult time keeping those particular fingernails long. Still other respondents suggested wearing lambda pendants or a female symbol on a necklace.
As frequently as butch lesbians are put down for acting too “manly,” both transgendered and transsexual women are also criticized by LC readers for confusing the lesbian cause and denying their god-given gift of womanhood. The criticism thrown at transgendered individuals in more recent volumes of LC have a tone eerily similar to that of the letters focused on butch-femme separatism and are strangely reminiscent of the “man-bashing” of early issues. At a subconscious level, it appears that trans-women are seen as a threat because they challenge not only the norms of the lesbian community, but the norms of the larger society that some lesbians have found comfort in. Trans-hate as it plays out in LC seems to be a form of separatism for assimilationists or those that have found acceptance from the heterosexual community. Because assimilationists often reflect a level of sexual normalcy through feminine gender roles and/or their acceptance of heterosexual institutions like marriage, they submit anti-trans letters to LC at the greatest frequency.

Some of the LC submissions about the transgendered community are openly hostile, and it is either as a result of this or because of their own political beliefs that the editorial staff of LC decided to make their first exclusionary policy (aside from the obvious of lesbian vs. non-lesbian). By 2004 (which was not captured by my data), the submission guidelines for LC make the implicit statement that, “LC is a forum for lesbians (which to us means women-born-women who identify as lesbians)” (Volume 26, 2004). The use of the term “women-born-women” excludes transsexual women who identify as lesbians, and Volume 25 offers many clues as to why this would be accepted by the LC audience.
There is Daryl who shares her feelings about the progressively greater acceptance of transsexuals. She writes, “I recently attended a women’s music festival and, try as I might, I just can’t help but get my buttons pushed when I see transsexual women in lesbian space.” Specifically, she is talking about the Michigan Womyn’s Festival, to which thousands of lesbians from around the world pilgrimage each year. The festival faces scrutiny (and even protest) each year because of its womyn-born-womyn policies, and every year the policy is revisited in the pages of LC. Despite protest, the festival manages to draw more women each year, in part due to the anti-trans policy because, as Wendy from Wisconsin assures, “We will continue to go to the Festival every year we can as long as Lisa...keeps inviting us women-born-women.”

Although Daryl felt sadness at transsexual women in her space, she came to the ultimate conclusion that transsexuals should be accepted as part of a changing society. She was met with frustration as one woman responded that,

Having been raised with male privilege few, if any, transsexuals get over the habit of assuming that privilege. Surgery and hormone therapy do not remove a lifetime of cultural expectations to act with assertion, aggression and control...As a lesbian feminist I wish to have a space somewhere in the world where I don’t have to face and deal with male attitudes.

This sentiment mirrors the feelings that lesbian-separatists had toward the gay male liberation movement. While lesbian separatists could identify with the sexual oppression felt by gay males, they were hesitant to join forces with gay men because of their inherent privilege within the patriarchal system.
It is because of the consistency with which the LC women negotiate maleness in their space that I argue separatism did not die with academic interest in the early eighties. The women of LC make it clear that separatist attitudes have not dissipated in all lesbian forums but has changed form and essentially morphed into something larger. As the lesbian community has become more openly diverse, new divisions have been fabricated between feminine lesbians, women-born-women, those who either identify with masculine expressions of gender, and those biological males who identify with feminine forms of expression and lesbian sexuality.

Whether butches complain about femmes, women-born-women complain about transsexual women, or vice-versa, there is clearly a negotiation of individual gender expression occurring in LC. What is unique about the conversations of gender that are occurring in LC is that they are not one-sided, and people on either sides of these debates claim to identify with, appreciate, and make reference to LC as our community, despite the diversity of their opinions.

_In the Closet/Out of the Closet_

To be or not to be (out, that is) and how to be seems to be the question on LC readers’ minds. Actually, for a few it seems not to even be a question- in or out, the women are adamant about the choices they have made. Not surprisingly, early issues make it clear that for many women being out was just not an option. An LC posting for a gay caucus, to be held at the 1975 annual meeting of the American Institute of Biological Sciences, expressly stated that, “It would be organized in such a manner that you would not have to be ‘out’ with your straight colleagues in order to attend.”
In another instance (also in Volume 1) a woman wrote in, “I am very interested in receiving the newsletter Lesbian Connection, however I am in a position which demands a lot of ‘brown bagging’ and plain sealed wrappers.” She and every other recipient of the newsletter was obliged as still to this day LC arrives in a plain brown envelope without any reference to lesbianism on the return address.

Despite the fact that the staff members of LC are very much “out,” they are respectful of others’ choices to stay in the closet, perhaps understanding that LC also serves as a forum in which women can openly (and anonymously) discuss the pain of living in the closet. Many of the women who submit to LC talk about being closeted in their “real” lives, suggesting that LC is their only tie, so to speak, to the lesbian community. Perhaps this is why LC is quite often referred to as a community in and of itself. Understandably, many of the women express that they are members of the LC community without making any mention of their attachment to the wider “lesbian community.”

A theme that persists through all thirty years of LC is one of pain and anguish with the lesbian identity. As a reader from Maryland shares, “I keep asking myself, ‘Why me?’ Don’t I have enough problems without this too? I am very frightened. It still scares me to look at another woman and desire her” (Volume 1, 1975). Yet another provides insight as to why many women share such intimate fears on the pages of LC, as she notes, “I have spent my life in a BITTER closet and would like to talk to others who understand” (Volume 1, 1975). For many women, LC supplements
localized community by providing a degree of intimacy that is not specific to geographic proximity, but specific to shared experiences.

One quagmire that lesbians face is that it is not necessarily easy to identify others who share the same experiences. Even if one does have the ability to seek out other lesbians (e.g., social groups, resource centers), bringing yourself to do so, as the women of LC express, can be embarrassing and even terrifying. As the discussion on separatism suggests, this is not only due to intolerance by heterosexuals, but by other lesbians as well. As separatism became a less popular choice among lesbians, women who identified with lesbianism for political reasons found themselves being shunned for not having struggled with their identities. One woman admits in her submission that,

I’m still to timid to talk to many other women about this, but is there still stigma attached to ‘political’ come-outs? That we are not real lesbians? I’ve gotten the feeling from fringe feminists and older lesbians that if you didn’t grow up as a tomboy and fall in love with your high school classmates you ain’t no fer-real dyke...When asked now about how I came out, I have gotten into adding a fictitious struggle with lesbianism from way back in talking to some women. It helps to show your scars, even fake ones.

What this letter demonstrates is that many women sympathize with the struggle of others to such a degree that they are ashamed if they didn’t endure an equitable amount of emotional suffering. What we see here is one symptom of greater acceptance in the larger society. As younger lesbians begin to face less abuse for their decisions to “come out” they feel somewhat guilty for their social comfort, possibly adding to their own coming out stories in order to feel a greater sense of belonging in their community. Even when their stories are false, they serve to create a sense of
unity through struggle which is a notable characteristic of many marginalized communities.

The coming out process of lesbians has a lot to do with how lesbian women identify with their communities. Because there is not a coming out process for individuals of the sexual majority, this is a unique facet of what constitutes lesbian identity, hence affecting the structure of lesbian communities. LC demonstrates that lesbian communities are unique in that they are capable of embracing those that do openly identify with those communities, as well those who are not yet ready to. LC thrives as a community on this basis in that, for many of LC’s readers, receiving a brown-bagged newsletter is as far as their courage will take them towards joining a community that they feel safe and comfortable in. In this sense, LC provides for some readers what most communities could not.

COMMUNITY BUILDING

The fact that LC is constantly referred to by its readers as their community is not the only reason that it should be considered such. Throughout the thirty years analyzed for this project, it is clear that creating an ideal community identity was an intentional goal of LC’s founders. This intention is plainly demonstrated by two different aspects of the publication: first, by the development of the contact dyke directory and, second, by the democratic manner in which decisions are made in regards to how the newsletter should be presented. The contact dyke directory serves to make positive connections between lesbians, and LC’s democratic practices
provide a sense of ownership to its readers, both of which are integral to why LC fits into the paradigm of community.

The contact dyke directory is perhaps the largest available directory of lesbians ever, providing the names, phone numbers, home addresses, and email addresses of lesbians around the world who are willing to be contacted by other lesbians traveling or moving to their location. The directory, printed in its entirety every volume, clearly states that contact dykes are not potential lovers, therapists, or pen-pals, but simply safe individuals to contact when lesbians find themselves in new territory. What started in Volume One as a list of 15 women across the United States grew into a list of 1,511 contacts in Volume 25. By 2003, lesbian individuals and couples from 30\(^1\) different countries and even a few RV “women on the road” are listed in the directory.

The directory is groundbreaking in that LC has managed to unite people on a localized level, fulfilling one of the sociological determinations of community. Women who use the list when they move to a new place are able to access nearby lesbians with whom they can build additional localized communities. This not only assists them on an individual level, but it essentially strengthens a global bond among lesbians as well. Volume 10 offers a string of testimonials about the list that lends insight into how much it means to the women of LC. As one woman notes,

Your contact dyke list saved me when I moved here. I didn’t know a soul at first, but within a week of getting in touch with the women on

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\(^1\) Argentina, Australia, Austria, Brazil, Canada, Costa Rica, England/UK, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Netherlands, New Zealand, Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Puerto Rico, Scotland, Singapore, South Africa, Spain, Switzerland, United States, Wales, West Indies.
your list I have been invited to a solstice party and met some women with whom I have now forged the bonds of a lifetime of friendship.

Yet another writes, “As a contact dyke for many years, I’ve had nothing but positive experiences. In two days I’m leaving to visit women in Scotland who visited me last summer, thru LC! So… I can’t express how much I appreciate your energy and commitment.”

The same woman offers her thoughts on LC’s democratic policies, another characteristic that lends itself to the community identity of its readers, and subsequently to the intimacy paradigm of the sociological definition of community. “I really enjoy how you share your process,” she writes, “and reading your magazine keeps up my hope that we do, in fact, have an (inter)national lesbian culture, despite signs to the contrary.” LC’s “process” is actually a two-pronged democratic approach, one that deals with opinion and controversial issues, and the other that deals with presentation of the newsletter.

The sharing of opinion and discussion of controversial issues in LC is democratic in the sense that the letters and editorials submitted vary from conservative to liberal and religious to secular and appear to be presented in a minimally edited manner. On occasion, LC staff will “divert” certain topics after they appear to be exhausted. One example would be an ongoing discussion about intimate partner relations after incest that evolved after a reader wrote in about her own experience with incest and asked others whether or not intimacy was possible during recovery. Literally dozens of women mailed in responses (which were printed), offering advice, suggesting support groups and books, and offering condolences.
After several issues had been saturated in the topic, the editors warned readers that, "This is the third (and most likely the last) time that we'll deal with the subjects covered in the following responses – at least for a while." Nonetheless, it appears that the majority of letters submitted by readers are printed, except in scenarios when there are simply too many for the publication to afford printing costs. Although it was not mentioned in my data set, it is also likely that as LC's subscription base grows, so does the amount of letters it receives, which may require additional editing.

Not only are a diversity of opinions accounted for within LC, it is clear that LC readers represent a diverse segment of the overall population. Women of many races, ethnicities, religions, political identifications, and socioeconomic backgrounds have offered their experiences through letters and editorials. Even incarcerated women receive and write into LC, which is likely because it is free to those who cannot afford to donate money. In this sense, the LC community experiences a number of the traditional differences seen in other communities. The unique characteristic about how these women negotiate such differences is that the discussion of such seems to be part of a process of understanding and expression, as opposed to a process of segregation.

Distinct from the anger displayed in letters regarding heterosexual or gender-based separatism, the language that the women of LC use in regards to traditional differences is one of empathy and the desire to educate others. While many women express the need to align with people of similar racial-ethnic heritage, political stance,
religious beliefs, and the like, their letters also suggest a desire to spark the interest of others who do not share the same experiences. As one woman writes,

    Black lesbians are going to have problems that are separate from White lesbians. At times this will simply be a cultural gap. But whatever the reason, there are things we need to talk about and do separately. Where are you? This is a call for help. It is also a call for unity (Volume 1, 1975).

While this submission illustrates a feeling of isolation from lesbians of different races, it does not suggest the same anger with which LC women attack those lesbians that threaten gender norms. Rather than denounce others because they cannot understand her situation, this reader recognizes the need to discuss the differences between herself and others. It is this type of communication and peer education between individuals with traditional differences that are pivotal to the development of an ideal community.

A sense of ownership of LC is also provided to readers in that all changes in its presentation are dealt with in a democratic manner. For example, the editors put out a call for artwork when LC decided to create a logo (Volume 25). Eighty women independently submitted logos to be considered, and 1,400 women mailed in voter ballots indicating their favorite. Not only have readers determined the aesthetic nature of LC, reader discussion has lead to changes in other aspects of LC as well, including contact dyke policies, guidelines for community inclusion (e.g., "women-born-women") and even arbitrary decisions like how many staples will hold the newsletter shut.
In other words, LC has allowed lesbians an opportunity to shape their own media, a prospect that is rarely afforded in today's society. There is a distinct vision enforced by both LC and its readers. As quoted in Volume One (1975):

Loving each other wholly is that vision. How every woman deals with lesbianism daily is political. How we reflect that in our media will be a measure of our strength. How we solidify our common strength as lesbians in order to take control of the image making factories in this country is one of the next important steps we have to take.

This research has found that LC and, more importantly, its readers, did in fact take that step and deserve to be considered a primary example of positive lesbian action on both the political and social levels.
DISCUSSION

Recognizing difference, which requires an environment friendly to self expression and active listening, is the only way to discover what change needs to occur and who has the foremost ability and responsibility to do so. What makes LC an effective community is in fact the characteristic that many sociologists would initially say renders it not a community. Because LC members are given a chance to express entire thoughts without the interruptions of a face-to-face conversation, others are essentially forced to process the “others” experience before responding to it. This process of uninterrupted exchange is a primary starting point for the development of ideal communities that thrive regardless of stark individualism and oppositional beliefs.

Consider the community of sociologists. While yes, we do have heated (and often unresolved) debates in department hallways, at conferences, and in the classroom, there is an element to our community that has allowed us to thrive by way of our disagreement. The fact that academics generate, share and receive knowledge from text is key to our cohesion as a community of researchers and, more importantly, as activists. I am not suggesting that we agree on everything because it is in print – surely, we do not. But because we process our science widely by reading and privilege others’ ideas before responding to them, we are able to make (for the most part) positive decisions for our advancement as a scientific community. We are a community drawn together by a desire to learn, generate, and disseminate valid
information, despite our obvious differences, expressions of individualism, and diverse agendas.

There is, of course, a precursor to the success of our science and the success of LC, which is a desire to listen. The women of LC have made the choice to listen actively despite frequent frustration with the perceptions of others, and even some (in both cases) have made the choice to discontinue their involvement in this form of interaction (e.g., “Will you please remove my name from your mailing list? I cannot condone your separatist philosophy and no longer wish to receive your bulletins” Volume 1, 1975). This proves to be the biggest dilemma of these findings and suggestions for building positive communities. The answer – and I admit that it is broadly conceived and highly difficult to achieve as rapidly as desired – lies in inspiration and reinforcement. The desire to involve oneself in others lives in such a selfless way must be inspired – a job that is, and must continue to be, that of revolutionaries like the founders of LC, a group that will inevitably become tired if not replaced by young leaders. Sparking interest and involvement, however, is not enough and must be constantly reinforced by those who already appreciate, respect, promote, and are attempting to understand diversity. Reinforcement is not only provided by those who agree with us, but by those who disagree with us for if oppression or opposition is hidden by a generic sense of unity or agreement, then our ability to situate and change our own position in society would be threatened.

Ultimately, there is no Point B (the ideal community) short of a global recognition of such and to suggest so would be to ignore the changing needs of
individuals. Social change is not one action, but a series of actions that must reflect the changing nature of humanity and, in this case, lesbianism. The solution to one problem often leads to a series of other problems as problematic is defined in the eye of the beholder, so to speak. Yes, these findings have revealed a problematic, but only if one chooses to see it that way. My hope is that many will see the positive in the problematic; it is what makes us human, it is what makes us diverse, it is what makes social change possible.

The readers of LC are a diverse group in every sense of the meaning. They differ in opinion on every topic that has ever been raised over the years, from separatism, to health, to sex, to love, to gender expression, to politics, and even to how many staples will be used to hold together its pages. LC is the epitome of democratic conversation, fair development of policy, and unrestricted flow of information. This characteristic of democratic desire and practice is the glue that has held the LC community together for so many years. The women that choose to join the LC community persistently express one need in common – the need to be heard and, most importantly, respected, regardless of contradictions in personal convictions. As one woman declared in 1997,

I think LC is about the only place where you can hear heated debates from all sides of different issues... I love the passion and the fierce independence of LC dykes. Thank you for bringing us – all of us, with all of our differing opinions – together six times a year.

LC has, in the abstract sense, accomplished what is desirable in the larger culture. It is a micro-representation of what many sociologists interested in activism strive for when they challenge traditional ways of living and thinking. It is important to
consider small, successful communities such as LC when applying sociology in the proactive sense because, as said best by Margaret Mead, those of us who aspire for change should, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

It is my job as a social activist to open the eyes of those who may not have been so aware of the amazing contributions the LC women have made to the development and evolution of their own community. I could not have done this if LC had not first inspired me on a personal level, as a lesbian woman, hence encouraging me to further my understanding of what I saw and share it with my fellow sociologists. Moreover, it is my responsibility to illustrate for sociologists and practitioners alike what the world could look like if the LC concept of community and human ethic was applied on a larger scale. I can only hope that I have begun to make such a contribution to the improvement of my field and of the world community.
LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In addition to the obvious limitation of my own identity as a lesbian, this research is limited by its scope. The aforementioned findings are exclusive to those women that made the decision to actively involve themselves in LC's community by submitting letters and articles. While the pages of LC may reveal some broad issues relevant to the wider lesbian community, there are millions of lesbians who choose not to participate in such a forum and, therefore, it cannot be assumed that their feelings and needs are being expressed by others. The greatest need of women that are not submitting things to LC may be that they do not know such a forum exists in which to participate. The fact that LC's subscription base is incredibly larger than the number of submissions it receives further indicates that many more women are reading LC than writing for it. Perhaps reading LC fulfills a need in some women that writing a letter or an article cannot compensate for, which is one reason why LC readers (as opposed to writers) should be a future focus of research.

I cannot honestly purport that this research is unfettered by personal involvement in my data. If I could, I truly believe that what LC has to offer to the sociological understanding of community would not be of such importance. LC fully captures the concept of how the personal is political; it is an ultimate depiction of a grass roots community forming from a need to express this relationship freely to an interested audience. This research has intended and succeeded in recognizing those voices that have made their way into the Lesbian Connection. Whether or not LC submissions represent the millions of lesbians living around the world, they do
represent the women who wrote the thousands of letters and articles that have been
published. In the spirit of feminist research, this project recognizes the importance of
listening to individual women and providing a forum for the consideration of what
those individual women have to say about their world, their thoughts, and their
experiences.
CONCLUSION

Ultimately, these findings are beneficial to both social psychologists seeking to understand how lesbian identity is expressed through a community of women, and to sociologists interested in the dynamics of alternative groups. Additionally, this research provides queer theory with applications for better understanding the creation of non-local lesbian groups. This work also provides activists with new objectives to consider when advocating for services for the lesbian community or attempting to promote positive social change at the grass-roots level. Despite what my research offers to the understanding of lesbian identity and community, this study was merely the beginning of a dialogue that must continue through the scientific community. As Wilton (1995: 26) notes, “Lesbian studies is a complex, amorphous and shifting entity. In the process of developing a distinct academic infrastructure, it must also remain accessible to and supportive of the grassroots lesbian community.”

Understanding communities, including those that break traditional boundaries, is imperative to creating a vision of the next ideal. As mentioned before, the ideal is an ever-changing concept and should be treated as such. This having been said, future research needs to take many directions. Non-traditional communities, not just those of the lesbian persuasion, should be visited frequently, whether through ethnography, participant observation, discourse analysis, or by quantitative measures. It is through the study of these varied communities that sociologists can begin to understand how they resemble and differ from one another and, eventually, how they can interconnect (despite their differences) to make radical changes in society.
This research provides both queer and heterosexual sociologists with both a historical reference of the lesbian movement and a framework for understanding and assessing lesbian identities as they shift with changes in society. Future research in the sociological arena should consider additional lesbian communities and how they differ from and resemble the community formed by the women of LC. By doing so we can begin to understand what motivates lesbians to make grassroots connections and how the techniques that they use to do so may help or hinder other marginalized groups in making desirable progress.

Social psychologists will note that this study presents many of the ways in which lesbians express their individualism while maintaining member status of a diverse community. However, this is only a starting point and it is necessary to continue to question how individual lesbians interact in other groups and communities on both the micro and macro levels. Lesbians offer unique opportunities to researchers seeking to understand identity because not only are they telling to how individuals cope with oppression, they also represent a myriad of demographic characteristics that must be included in social research.

Finally, this work serves its most important purpose for activists that desire improvement in the quality of life for lesbians as well as a more inclusive global community. Throughout this analysis it has become clear that lesbians deserve and need to be provided resources for dealing with a multitude of issues, including sexual abuse, domestic violence, internalized homophobia, and legal equity. By continuing to consider lesbian voices as the most important in regards to the needs and
advancement of lesbian women, social change can take a holistic approach that compliments the grass roots movement that is already occurring. It is necessary to emphasize the steps that lesbians are already taking towards improving their lives, as opposed to ignoring them to further our own agendas.

In closing I wish to make it clear that I have not uncovered things that the women of LC do not already know about themselves. In fact, it has become clear to me that it is the scientific community that must take the initiative to learn what the women of LC have been trying to say for thirty years. Doing so will be just as beneficial to us as we should be to them. This study provides a starting point for theorists, scientists, and activists to take the first step towards bettering themselves and others by first understanding and then sharing what they can uncover about lesbian identity, oppression and community, which can only improve our chances for doing the same for other groups as well. What should be learned from this study has already been said best by an LC reader, which is that,

We must explore the interconnections between different oppressions, and we must also address each individually; each oppression has its own unique characteristics and each cuts across different allegiances and group identifications...To maintain that all our energy be devoted to only one of these oppressions is divisive and strategically unsound. Such a single issue position forces us to deny essential parts of our identities and experiences. It also inhibits the forming of coalitions among women of various ethnic, religious, racial and class background – coalitions which are vital to the fight for freedom and justice (Volume 5, 1982).
APPENDIX

Date: March 1, 2004

To: Zoann Snyder, Principal Investigator
    Emily Lenning, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Mary Lagerwey, Ph.D., Chair

Re: HSIRB Project Number: 04-02-22

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project entitled “The Lesbian Connection: Identity and Culture in a Lesbian Community” has been approved under the exempt category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. 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 application.

Please note that you may only conduct this research exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project. You must also seek reapproval if the project extends beyond the termination date noted below. In addition if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

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

Approval Termination: March 1, 2005
BIBLIOGRAPHY


