

Lesbi Honest: Barriers to Identifying and Actualizing Sexuality as a “Later in Life Lesbian”

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## **ABSTRACT**

The growth of Queer Sociology has produced a body of research focused on LGBTQ identity formation, while less has been discovered about subsets of this community, including later-life lesbians who were previously partnered in long-term heterosexual relationships with cisgender men. Several theories, including the Cass Theory of Sexual Orientation Identity Formation and Fassinger’s Theory, provide a model which LGBTQ people may progress through as they develop their sexual orientation identity. These models provide insight towards the development of a lesbian identification later in life. Through sixteen in-depth interviews with lesbians in the United States who did not identify as lesbian until after age thirty-five, I examine the social barriers that impact these women’s identity formation processes, and examine how sexual orientation identity development theories help us understand this process. My findings reveal that heteronormativity, compulsory heterosexuality, lack of representation, gendered expectations, and the pursuit of success all acted as societal barriers that delayed these women in their sexual orientation identity development. Thus, we see that Cass’ recognition of the importance of the sociocultural environment is vital. However, the theory’s commitment to linearity is still questionable, and her theory may not provide enough flexibility for the fluidity of sexual orientation. Alternatively, Fassinger’s theory provides more space for sexual orientation to exist as a process of continuous development.

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## **GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT**

The field of Sociology expanded to research LGBTQ experiences and identities in the 1980's and 90's, forming the study of Queer Sociology. Since this formation, smaller subsets of the community have yet to be explored. This includes women who came to a lesbian identification later in life (after the age of thirty-five) who were previously partnered in long-term heterosexual relationships with cisgender men. These women are known as later life lesbians. Within the field of Queer Sociology, several theories have been developed to provide a process which LGBTQ people may progress through as they develop their sexual orientation identity. This includes the Cass Theory of Sexual Orientation Identity Formation and Fassinger's Theory. These models can be used to provide insight into the sexual orientation identity development of later life lesbians. Through sixteen interviews with later life lesbians, I examine the social factors that impact these women's sexual identity formation processes, and examine how sexual orientation identity development theories help us understand this process. My findings reveal that the societal expectation of heterosexuality, lack of queer representation, gendered expectations, and the pursuit of success all acted as societal barriers that delayed these women in their sexual orientation identity development. Based on these social factors, we see that Cass' recognition of the importance of the social and cultural environment is vital. However, Cass also commits to a linear development of sexual orientation identity, which remains questionable. Additionally, her theory may not provide enough flexibility for the fluidity of sexual orientation. Alternatively, Fassinger's theory provides more space for sexual orientation to exist as a process of continuous development.

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## Introduction

While LGBTQIA+<sup>1</sup> studies exploring queer history started to appear in the 1970s, and queer theory emerged in the 1990s, the LGBTQ community is often still viewed as having outsider status, separate from mainstream society. This unfamiliarity leads to distrust, animosity, and, in some cases, even hatred towards the LGBTQ community. Smaller subsets of the LGBTQ community remain relatively unexplored. This study examines lesbian identity formation in the United States among those who formed lesbian sexual identities later in life (aged forty plus) after previously identifying as heterosexual. Theoretical approaches attempting to explain sexual orientation identity development include stage theories—of which Cass’s Identity Model is the most popular—and Fassinger’s theory; however, none have been applied specifically to a “later in life” population. In the study that follows, I will test these theories’ explanatory power to create a starting point for understanding later in life sexual orientation identity development. Social factors (e.g. religion, upbringing, location) that impact the actuation of sexual orientation will also be considered.

Using data from sixteen semi-structured face-to-face interviews, this research explores the following research questions: **What barriers impact the formation of sexual identity, leading to the discovery of a lesbian identity later in life? And, how might various sexual orientation identity development theories help us understand this process?**

My study draws from sixteen in-depth interviews with later in life lesbians, and shows the ways that social factors such as compulsory heterosexuality, heteronormativity, and common expectations of women resulted in a lack of LGBTQ representation for this population, which led

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<sup>1</sup> The term LGBTQIA+ refers to people whose gender and/or sexual orientation differ from societal norms that include heterosexuality and cisgenderism. This may be shortened to LGBTQ or queer when referring to the community of people, but not when referencing an individual person, unless that person has identified themselves as queer.

to a later identification of their lesbian identity. These findings contribute to current research by expanding the literature on LGBTQ identities in the United States. This research also contributes to queer theory and history by giving voice to the experiences of later in life lesbians, whose stories rarely receive adequate attention from researchers. More broadly, the findings may help to normalize lesbian experiences in our society and provide further understanding of the LGBTQ community for those outside of it.

## **Literature Review**

### **The Beginning of Queer Studies and Using the Term “Queer”**

It is important to understand where queer studies began, why the term queer is used, and the important research that has come from this topic. First, the 1970s was a time of emerging stories and experiences from the LGBTQ community. Much of the literature produced was about the lives and histories of LGBTQ people, often showing that LGBTQ people and practices (potentially covert and unidentified as queer) appeared throughout history—which prompted a move towards acceptance for this community. In the 1990s, a deeper analysis of LGBTQ lives began to emerge, examining more than just history.

A few key authors contributed ideas to the emergence of queer theory. Gayle Rubin's essay *Thinking Sex* (1984) explores the hierarchies of sexual identity and behavior, and the way that certain sexual behaviors are considered more valuable and thus oppress other sexualities. More specifically, sexual behaviors related to love, marriage, and reproduction were seen as legitimate and valued, whereas “deviant” behaviors, such as homosexuality and sex for pleasure, were questioned and ostracized. Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) focused on gender and the way that the sex binary enforces the norm of heterosexuality. Butler also explores gender performance and the way that gender is assigned according to social practices, such as what we



wear. She explains that one is not born a man or woman, but one learns to act as such because gender and the division of gender is created through performance (Butler 1988, 1990). This concept can be further reflected on sexuality and the ways that it may be learned due to societal influence. In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1998) discussed the problem with “the closet,” and questioned the heterosexual/homosexual divide. Further, she questioned modern culture’s binaries of masculine/feminine, natural/artificial, same/different, majority/minority, and so forth (Sedgwick 1998).

Teresa de Lauretis (1987) examined gender hierarchies and coined the term “queer theory” in *Technology of Gender*. In doing so, she identified the phrase “lesbian and gay” as problematic, for it was simply a substitute term for “gay” or “homosexual” in which male is the representative and invisibility is maintained for lesbians and other identities within the LGBTQ population. Instead, de Lauretis turned to the term “queer,” which was beginning to be reclaimed. This was a deliberate move away from white, gay studies and towards creating a space for all LGBTQ voices (de Lauretis 1987, 1991). In the early 1990s, the use of the term queer was also popularized as members of the organization “AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power” came together and formed “Queer Nation,” which still exists today with the mission to “eliminate homophobia and increase LGBT visibility” (Queer Nation NY History: <https://queernationny.org/history>, January 15, 2023) Their rally cry “We’re here! We’re Queer! Get used to it!” became popular during demonstrations and further normalized the use of the word queer (Ibid).

It is important to recognize that “queer” was once a slur used against people in the LGBTQ community, and some people still do not like the term. However, with definitions like de Lauretis’ and emerging actions to reclaim the word, some see queer as an umbrella term to

more succinctly refer to those in the LGBTQ community, even though not every LGBTQ person necessarily identifies as queer. For these reasons, this study refers to the queer community as a way to envelop all identities, but does not identify any single person as queer unless they self-identify as such. The term “homosexual” may also be used at times, but this is in reference to the formation of certain theories during a time when homosexual was the most valid term, unlike today.

Other central ideas emerging from the exploration of queer theory include the terms “heteronormativity” and “compulsory heterosexuality.” While Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner did not coin the term heteronormativity, they explore it and define it cogently in their article *Sex in Public* (1998). In the article, they seek to explore the impact on personal identity and public life if heterosexuality were no longer considered the norm. They define heteronormativity as “the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent—that is, organized as a sexuality—but also privileged” (1998:548). More succinctly, heteronormativity is a societal view that puts heterosexuality as the default and most privileged sexual identification. This works as a form of power and control that pressures all people to conform to this rigid identification.

The term heteronormativity was drawn from the work of Adrienne Rich, who coined compulsory heterosexuality; but an understanding of heteronormativity can be used to understand compulsory heterosexuality, as again, heterosexuality is assumed to be the default. In her article *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*, Rich stated that “however we choose to identify ourselves, however we find ourselves labeled, [heterosexuality] flickers across and distorts our lives” (1980:34). Rich also argues that women are especially disadvantaged by this, as heterosexuality and patriarchy are the privileged norm (Rich 1980). Thus,

heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality severely impacts queer individuals as they form their identity. Drawing from Rich's critique of forced heterosexuality, and in consideration of the legalization of same-sex marriage, Ruthann Robson discussed the institution of marriage, and proposed that marriage is imposed or coerced by the nation state. Robson called this compulsory matrimony (2009).

Because of heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality, a queer identity is often seen as a negative, and society has a derogatory disposition towards queer people. When this derogatory disposition is internalized by a person it is known as internalized homophobia. This was first coined by A. K. Malyon in 1982. Malyon stated "...the internalization of homophobic partiality renders homosexual desire unacceptable before the process of attribution begins. As a result, the maturation of erotic and intimate capacities is confounded by a socialized disposition which makes them ego alien and militates against their integration" (Malyon 1982:60). In simpler terms, the homophobic attitudes of society are internalized, even by queer people themselves, before one even identifies as queer, which then impacts one's queer identity formation.

These researchers show the way that homosexuality has been ostracized and othered, while other sexual acts were valued (Rubin 1984); the sex binary, gender and gendered expectations are instilled and reinforce heterosexuality as the norm (Butler 1990); and the problem with binaries created by modern culture (Sedgwick 1998). We also see how the term queer was brought to light by those such as de Laetis (1987, 1991) and the organization Queer Nation (Queer Nation NY History: <https://queernationny.org/history>, January 15, 2023). Lastly, the terms heteronormativity (Berlant and Warner 1998) and compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 1980) work to describe how society inscribes heterosexual expectations upon people's bodies

and minds, while internalized homophobia (Malyon 1982) describes the internalization of derogatory social attitudes towards homosexuality.

### **Lesbian Identity and Later in Life Lesbians**

To explore the identity formation of lesbians who come to identify as queer later in life, one must first explore what sexual orientation identity is. This definition may be considered difficult to clarify as attraction, behavior, and desire may or may not align in one person. A person may be attracted to one's same sex, but not act upon that attraction; thus, their behavior would not align with their attraction or desire. Additionally, this definition may potentially change as we learn more about sexual identification. However, for the purpose of this research, sexual orientation identity is defined as "the enduring sense of oneself as a sexual being which fits a culturally created category and accounts for one's sexual fantasies, attractions, and behaviors" (Savin-Williams 1995:166). This definition works to account for attraction and behavior, as well as the way that society influences perceptions of sexuality.

It is also necessary to establish the term "later in life lesbian" in order to examine the way one forms their sexual orientation identity. It is important to note that "later life" does not refer to age, but instead the development of a lesbian identity at an age that is later than the average. Andy Dunlap (2016) identified the average age at which his research participants achieved important milestones in the coming-out process. He interviewed 1,131 lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals aged 18-85. Dunlap found that in his sample the average age of achieving coming-out milestones decreased over time. For example, the female cohort born before 1951 (aged 60 plus at the time of the study) told their family of their sexual orientation identity at the age of 36.1 on average. Comparatively, the female cohort born between 1963-1969 (ages 42-49 at the time of the study) told their family of their sexual orientation identity at the age of 25.7, on

average. Another milestone marker, concluding that one is not heterosexual, happened on average at age 27.9 and 21.2 for these two cohorts (Dunlap 2016). Using the milestone markers noted by Dunlap as a guide, women who begin to recognize their sexual orientation identity and identify as a lesbian at age forty or older would be coming to this identity later in life.

Molly Stullman conducted one of the only studies to examine women who arrived at identity milestones related to sexuality later in life: she called them later-life lesbians (1984). She interviewed women between the ages of forty-three to fifty who became lesbian-identified at the age of thirty-five or older, and who had identified as such for at least five years.

Stullman's study used Levinson's Theory of Psychosocial Development (Levinson 1974) which presents six stages of life (Table 1). Stullman conducted in-depth interviews with eight women who met the previously identified conditions of age, prior stable and long-term heterosexual commitment or marriage, motherhood, and no previous homosexual identification. Stullman analyzed her interview data through a combination of coding and case analysis to determine how the women interviewed fit each stage of Levinson's Theory. Within Levinson's theory, ages forty to forty-five represent a stage of reevaluating previous commitments, making dramatic changes if necessary, giving expression to previously ignored talents or aspirations, and feeling more of a sense of urgency about life and its meaning. While forty is not commonly referred to as "later life," it suits the context of self-identifying one's sexual orientation identity later in adulthood. It is also late enough in life to have established a heterosexual relationship, and potentially to have had children. These factors specifically will contribute to revealing how these women developed their lesbian identity formation in ways that differ from younger women who identified as lesbian.

Table 1: Levinson's Theory of Psychosocial Development	
Early adult transition (17-22)	Leaving home, leaving family; making first choices about career and education
Entering the adult world (22-28)	Committing to an occupation, defining goals, finding intimate relationships
Age 30 transition (28-33)	Reevaluating those choices and perhaps making modifications or changing one's attitude toward love and work
Settling down (33 to 40)	Reinvesting in work and family commitments; becoming involved in the community
Midlife transition (40-45)	Reevaluating previous commitments; making dramatic changes if necessary; giving expression to previously ignored talents or aspirations; feeling more of a sense of urgency about life and its meaning
Entering middle adulthood (45-50)	Committing to new choices made and placing one's energies into these commitments

## Stage Theories and Cass's Identity Model

With a queer identity running counter to society's heteronormative ideas, it becomes a task to construct theories as to how queer sexual orientation identity is developed. A common branch of such theories is stage theories. Stage theories generally propose various steps or stages from awareness of same-sex attraction until acceptance and integration of a queer identity. One of the most widely cited stage theories, and one that established much of the framework for continuous research, is that of Vivienne Cass (1979). When working as a clinical psychologist and counseling a patient who hated being attracted to other women, Dr. Cass became inspired to explore the process of gay and lesbian identity formation. She saw each stage of her theory as a place where one could foreclose, or stop the process of identity formation from going any further. However, one may not be conscious of this stop, resulting in feeling stuck. By developing this theory, Cass could assist people in moving forward in the identity formation process. Therefore, Cass's goal was simple: to help people understand their same-sex attraction.

While Cass developed this theory in Australia, she notes the way it has been adopted by researchers and therapists across the world (Cass 2015). In comparison to the US, Australia has had a relatively similar timeline in moving towards an acceptance of LGBTQ people. For example, Australia also saw increasing visibility for queer people in the 1970s, and legalized gay marriage for the entire country in December of 2017, while the US legalized gay marriage in June 2015 (Poushter and Kent 2020). Cass's theory remains a fundamental theory of queer identity development because it continues to form the basis of other theories and research studies. For example, it is regularly used in the healthcare field both in counseling and in health care training, and it is continuously adopted in developing countries as Western ideas about sexuality spread (Cass 2015).

The Cass Theory of Homosexual Identity Formation, later renamed the Cass Theory of Sexual Orientation Identity Formation, was published in 1979, tested by Cass in 1984, and revised by Cass in 1996. This theory identifies six stages that a queer person could fall into during their journey to queer identification. These stages – represented in Table 2 – can be understood as markers in the ongoing formation of identity. Cass’s theory recognizes the importance of the sociocultural environment and the way that it influences sexual behavior and the formation of sexual identities. She describes the process of identity formation as a continuous “being and becoming.” The various social interactions that people experience throughout their life form a complex web of relationships, which ultimately helps one construct their sense of “self.” As people learn about “others,” they relate that experience to the “self.” Thus, interactions with society can greatly influence why and for how long one occupies a particular view of themselves along the stages towards the full self-acceptance of being a lesbian (Cass 2015). Understanding this aspect of the theory and the interaction with society may assist in understanding the way that later in life lesbians develop their identity and how it may align or break away from Cass’s theory. This would help lead to a better understanding of how social forces influence an individual’s ability to actuate their sexuality.



Table 2: Cass's Stage Theories	
Identity Confusion	Unexamined awareness of potential homosexual feelings that can lead to conflict
Identity Comparison	Beginning to consider the possibility of being homosexual, along with the challenges this may bring
Identity Tolerance	A separation from heterosexual culture and a move towards homosexual culture, although this may remain hidden
Identity Acceptance	Increasing relationship with and acceptance into homosexual culture
Identity Pride	Rejects the unacceptance of heterosexual culture, involves coming out and developing pride for being gay
Identity Synthesis	Private and public life has come together with support

In testing her model, these six stages are described using sixteen dimensions, such as commitment, disclosure, and personal satisfaction. Each dimension is experienced differently depending on the participant's stage. In order to explore how well individuals fit into these six categories, Cass had respondents self-identify their location among the six stages, and then compared each response to a questionnaire of 210 items that examined her respondents' position in life based on the sixteen dimensions previously outlined. Using this process, respondents were expected to answer questions in the way that most corresponded with the stage of life they chose. For example, when asked "How much do you feel you fit into homosexual groups," respondents could choose "Not at all," "A little," "Some," "A fair amount," or "totally." This question gauges the dimension of "Group Identification." How a respondent answers indicates which stage they are in, and whether or not the stage they initially picked is most fitting to them.

Cass received 178 responses: 109 males and 69 females. Of the 178, 166 were able to identify themselves as fitting distinctly into one of Cass's identified categories. However, twelve stated that they felt they belonged in multiple categories. The author expected that the results of the questionnaire would most greatly match the self-identified stage the respondent had chosen. For stages one, five, and six, Cass found significant results that her hypothesis was supported, stages two and four were almost significant, while stage three was not significant (Cass 1984). In her study, Cass recognized that her proposed model is linear, and that not all identity development will be linear. However, she also notes that linearity is often determined by coming-out events, such as disclosing your sexuality to family or entering a same-sex relationship; whereas her stages are noted by cognitive processes and emotional changes that result from the translation of cultural knowledge about sexuality into self-knowledge about the self as a lesbian (or gay man). Cass states "The cognition, 'I am gay', for example, will follow 'I

may be gay', but these will not occur in the reverse order." Cass goes on to say that this is a cognitive process, not a series of life events (Cass 2015).

In 1996, Cass published some revisions to her model, starting with the name change from "homosexual identity" to "sexual orientation identity." She also noted that her model, along with similar models of sexual orientation identity development, came from an essentialist frame of view, meaning that the identity formation process is a process of universal truths or facts found in the psychology of all people, regardless of cultural or social background. This essentialist view was critiqued by some, so Cass noted in this revision that a social constructionist view was also considered, as the social context that the model was formed under was not ignored. Cass also created an addition to her original six stages, describing a "pre-stage" which individuals may fall into. In the "pre-stage" individuals would see themselves as heterosexual, or should be heterosexual, and understand that heterosexuality is preferred and privileged in society, while homosexuality is stigmatized. Lastly, in this revision, Cass noted that differences in individuals do occur based on their intersecting identities, sociocultural background, the conflict management and communication styles, and their needs (Cass 1996).

Considering the origins of this theory in the 1970s and changing views on sexualities, we must question its applicability today. Since the 70s, Cass has periodically written about her theory, most recently in 2015 with the release of *A Quick Guide to the Cass Theory of Lesbian & Gay Identity Formation*. In this overview, Cass highlights why the theory is still of importance today. While she recognizes that there have been improvements in the acceptance of queer individuals, she notes that there is no universal experience, and that individuals may still cope with feelings that are difficult to manage and understand. Cass states "...at this time the *experiencing* of lesbian or gay identity is still a psychological reality for individuals who become

engaged in the process of identity formation. As long as this is the case, I see the theory as being useful in understanding such experiences” (Cass 2015:126).

### **Critiques of Stage Models and Cass’s Theory**

Due to Cass’s Theory being the most widely known and accepted, it is often one of the key points of critique among stage models. Paula Rust stated that “although models are developed to describe psychological and social phenomena, when they are used in efforts to predict or facilitate the processes they describe, they become prescriptive” (2003:239) This leaves out several scenarios, and implies that there is a “normal” (and thus abnormal) identity development process. One may not reach the end stage, implying that they have not fully developed their sexual orientation identity. One may have several sexual identities across a lifespan. Further, as noted by many queer people, “coming out” is a constant process, where one is often identifying themselves as part of the queer community, and yet they may choose not to come out in a particular scenario due to economic or personal well-being; thus interrupting the notion of the end goal that one has fully integrated their sexual orientation identity into their life (Rust 2003). These factors lead many to question the linearity and absoluteness of stage theories. One solution to these critiques can be found in adopting a constructionist viewpoint. An essentialist view, as found in Cass’s theory, does not adequately account for the role of social constructs in shaping sexuality. While Cass tried to address this in her 1996 revision, many critics still see her theory as essentialist. Exchanging an essentialist viewpoint for a constructionist viewpoint accounts for the possibility of a person having multiple sexualities across a lifespan, and further explains that changes in a person’s identity are often in response to one’s changing social world (Rust 2003).

Cass's theory also did not consider the intersectionality of identities, including gender, race, ethnicity, religion, and other identities. In fact, women were often overlooked in the formation and study of stage theories. This is problematic as women may experience the sexual orientation identity development process much differently than men. While Cass did test her theory on men and women, other researchers still argued that women have a more unique sexual orientation identity formation process. Gonsiorek concluded that men appear to have a sexual orientation identity development that is much more abrupt, while women appear to have a process that is more ambiguous and fluid (Gonsiorek 1995). Degges-White, Rice, and Myers applied Cass's theory to twelve lesbian women and concluded that the theory generally held true; however, the linearity of the theory was once again questioned, as the women interviewed did not progress linearly through the stages (2000).

### **Fassinger's Theory**

Due to critiques of previous stage theories, especially Cass's, psychologist Ruth Fassinger and counselor Susan McCarn developed their own, more flexible theory. More specifically, Fassinger and McCarn wanted to create a theory oriented towards lesbian women, which eventually became known as Fassinger's Theory (1996, 1998). This theory was also influenced by race/ethnic identity development models and gender identity development models, making it more inclusive; however, it did not account for class, religious upbringing, or cultural context—all of which influence identity formation.

Fassinger's Theory is unique in that it attempts to distinguish between personal development of same-sex sexual orientation and redefinition of group membership and group meaning. Thus, McCarn and Fassinger developed a theory consisting of two separate processes: individual sexual identity development and group membership identity development, each with

four phases. However, they do state that it is unlikely that one would reach the final phase of individual development without beginning to address group membership. Tables 3 and 4 outline these processes. The usage of phases as opposed to stages is meant to provide flexibility and show that development is continuous and circular. Fassinger and McCarn state “every new relationship raises new issues about individual sexuality, and every new context requires renewed awareness of group oppression” (McCarn and Fassinger 1996:522). This helps explain another key distinction of their theory, in that disclosure of sexual orientation, or lack thereof, is not seen as evidence of developmental advancement due to oppression faced by queer individuals (McCarn and Fassinger 1996).

While this theory was originally created to address the gap in research around lesbian women, Fassinger later tested the theory, finding evidence that the model could describe the experiences of lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals (Fassinger 1998).

Table 3: Fassinger's Theory (Individual Sexual Identity Development)	
Awareness	Identifying oneself as different from other people, and different from one's predicted self
Exploration	Investigating one's feelings of same-sex attraction towards the same-sex, potentially one person in particular (may not include sexual exploration)
Deepening/Commitment	Internalizing one's sense of self as a queer person, and committing to one's self-fulfillment as a sexual being
Internalization/Synthesis	Incorporating one's queer identity into their overall identity (unlikely to reach this stage without beginning to address group membership as well)

Table 4: Fassinger's Theory (Group Membership Identity Development)	
Awareness	Recognizing that there is a queer community, and that heterosexuality is not the norm
Exploration	Pursuing knowledge about the queer community, and one's possible belonging to this group
Deepening/Commitment	Committing to and becoming aware of the value of shared community, but also the oppression faced by the community
Internalization/Synthesis	Identifying as part of the community, understanding the meaning of the group, and internalizing the meaning into one's own concept of self



## **Expectations of Women and the American Dream**

As Adrienne Rich (1980) noted, the impacts of heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality fall more heavily on women due to patriarchal privilege in our society. While heteronormativity impacts one's sexual orientation identity formation, expectations for women in American society may also influence later in life lesbian's identity formation. Often, women are expected to be more emotional, gentle, understanding, and devoted to those close to them. As for societal roles, women are often expected to be caregivers, who tend to the duties of the home and children, and provide emotional support; while physically, women should be graceful, pretty, and soft. In contrast, men are seen as practical, independent, self confident, leaders and heads of households, and physically stronger (Kite, Deaux, and Haines 2008; Kang et al. 2017). Indeed, both men and women are found to adapt their self-views, behavior, and overall life choices to what is societally appropriate for their gender (Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin 1999). Additionally, women who behave inline with gendered expectations are interpreted more positively than women who do not (Eagly and Mladinic 1994). Challenging the expected norm is especially difficult for women, as standing out or being defiant is against their prescribed gender norm, creating a cycle that traps women (Faniko et al. 2016). Based on these expectations, women could follow the desires of their family of origin and the gendered expectations outlined by society, which may not include diverging from heterosexual norms, and pursue a path of heterosexual marriage and family building.

Now one might assume that such stereotypes are improving, or changing somewhat. However, this may not be true. In 2014, Elizabeth L. Haines, Kay Deaux, and Nicole Lofaro recreated a 1985 study by Kay Deaux and Laurie Lewis, in which participants were asked to rate

the likelihood that various characteristics would apply to a male or female. The 1985 results were compared to the 2014 results to see how gender stereotypes had changed, if at all, during this time span. The authors found that there was virtually no difference across time periods towards men's expected gender roles, men and women's occupations, and men and women's physical characteristics. The one exception was an increase in stereotyping on the female gender role (Haines, Deaux, and Lofaro 2016). In a similar study comparing public opinion polls from 1946 to 2018, researchers found that women were assumed more competent over time, but that qualities of personality still stereotype women as more communal (compassionate, warm, expressive) and men as having stronger agency (ambitious, assertive, competitive) (Eagly et al. 2020).

Not only do gender stereotypes influence our lives, but they begin to pervade our thoughts early. Lin Bian, Sarah-Jane Leslie, and Andrei Cimpian (2017) found that stereotypes expecting men to be smarter begin to develop as early as age six. At this age, young girls were more likely to identify young boys as "really, really smart" and would themselves avoid games and challenges designed for the "really, really smart" (1). This early attitude shapes both interests and career goals (Bian, Leslie, and Cimpian 2017). While this research does not go into the effect on sexual orientation identity, it does make clear the early impact that gender stereotypes have on girls. Knowing that compulsory heterosexuality is a norm expected by society, combined with the evidence that norms and stereotypes are adopted early, we see that gendered expectations are inscribed upon one's body and mind, and at an early age. It's possible that the expectation to conform to heterosexuality is inscribed before girls even reach an age where they explore physical and romantic attraction.

Lastly, women and men both often subscribe to the typical “American Dream,” but what exactly does that mean? Jennifer Hoschild and Nathan Scovronick describe the American Dream best when they state:

It encourages each person who lives in the United States to pursue success, and it creates the framework within which everyone can do it. It holds each person responsible for achieving his or her own dreams, while generating shared values and behaviors needed to persuade Americans that they have a real chance to achieve them. It holds out a vision of both individual success and the collective good of all (Hoschild and Scovronick 2003:26).

Thus we see that the American Dream poses its own set of expectations, values, and behaviors upon people. Going along with the American Dream is the belief in meritocracy, and that one will be successful, and hopefully happy, if they demonstrate that they possess desired skills and are willing to work hard. Reynolds and Xian (2014) found that Americans' beliefs in hard work, education, and ambition are important for getting ahead in society, and that this belief has not decreased over time (130), and young, upper-class whites are more likely to believe in meritocracy (126). Thus, it's possible a young person could pursue hard work and/or an education in order to be successful and happy, leaving less capacity to consider their sexual orientation.

While it remains unanswered in current research how heteronormativity, gender stereotypes, and the American Dream all come together to shape the lived experiences and identity formation of later in life lesbians specifically, the current research does show the pressure that women are under from a young age to work hard, conform and fulfill a certain role in order to be seen as successful.

## **Key Points from the Literature**

As one can see, the existing literature related to this topic of later in life lesbians is brief. The only analysis of later-life lesbians was conducted by Stullman (1984) and took a philosophical and psychological approach. However, her article does help illustrate the age at which someone would be considered a later in life lesbian. With this knowledge, the parameters for the current study were set. The formation of queer theory helps establish a basis of queer knowledge and understanding of sexual orientation identity. Cass's and Fassinger's theories provide perspectives for understanding how sexual orientation identity development may progress for later life lesbians. Lastly, societal expectations of women, including gender stereotypes and the American Dream, may help explain why women who later come to identify as lesbians maintain a commitment to a heteronormative path at earlier points in their lives.

## **The Research Questions**

Much of the exploration around later life lesbians has been philosophical and psychological. While several theories attempt to explain sexual orientation identity development, it is also important to understand the sociological factors that impact the way people identify and present themselves. While a woman may suspect or know she is a lesbian and may even engage in same-sex sexual behaviors, she may still embody a heterosexual identity either in full, or in specific places or situations. Delaying one's identification as queer may be related to factors such as family, location, religion, and more. This study specifically explores this idea among later-life lesbians. Exploring later-life lesbians will assist in understanding how, even as queer sexuality becomes more mainstream, socialization continues to impact and even delay the way that people identify. Therefore this study asks **What barriers impact the formation of sexual identity, leading to the discovery of a lesbian identity later in life? And,**

**how might various sexual orientation identity development theories help us understand this process?**

### **Methods**

This study draws on sixteen semi-structured interviews with women aged forty and up, who did not identify as queer before the age of thirty-five, have now been queer identified for at least five years, previously had a committed relationship with a cisgender man for at least a year, and lived in the US. These parameters were chosen based on previous definitions of later in life lesbians (Stullman 1984) with one exception: the requirement that the respondent be a mother. Since the experience of motherhood was out of scope for the present study, child-free women were also included as participants.

### **Data Collection**

Participants (see Table 5) were recruited through Facebook groups such as Later in Life Lesbians Support and Forum, Late Bloomer Lesbians+ Support Group, and Mid - Later In Life Lesbian Lounge. Niche groups oriented towards common interests or shared personal traits are prevalent on Facebook as a way to discuss, debate, or gain perspective from similar people, making them a great space to look for participants matching certain demographic categories. After beginning to recruit participants via these Facebook groups, the creator of one Facebook group offered to send out an email newsletter oriented towards later in life lesbians to recruit participants.

Zoom interviews were conducted in early 2022. Interview length ranged from 47 minutes to 115 minutes, and lasted an average of 77 minutes. The interview protocol included questions about growing up, values and beliefs instilled in respondents, current and previous relationships, dating patterns, and people, places, and events that validated or invalidated their

identity (see Appendix for the full interview guide). All interviews were conducted by the researcher, who intentionally set aside time to introduce herself in an attempt to establish rapport and create a more comfortable environment in which participants could share their experiences.

### **Data Analysis**

Each interview produced a rough draft transcript from Zoom, which was then edited for clarity by the researcher. Following IRB guidelines, these transcripts were kept on a separate Google account dedicated to this research, and password protected with a unique and intricate password. These transcriptions were then coded inductively using focused coding.

Major themes were identified before coding began based on memory of the interviews and ideas from the literature. Codes were defined using the language used by later in life lesbians from the Facebook groups where participants were drawn from, and from previous research. It was important that the community being researched was considered during coding. For example, the term “catalyst” is commonly used in the later in life Facebook groups to refer to a same-sex crush or attraction, often one that occurred for the first time, that led a person to question their sexual orientation and explore the possibility of same-sex attraction.

During a first review of the transcripts, themes were color-coded and identified in each interview transcript. Additional codes were adopted after the first review of the transcripts by identifying recurring themes that were previously unidentified. These themes were then color-coded in a second review of the transcripts. A final review was done to ensure no themes or occurrence of codes had been missed, and prominent quotes were highlighted to track clear statements about each theme from the participants. This made for a total of three reviews for each transcript.

A spreadsheet was also used with a row for each participant and a column for each code, so occurrences of themes could be easily seen both as a whole and as described individually by each participant. Each code was then analyzed for frequency of occurrence, which helped to discern the most important themes. Definitions of each code can be seen in Appendix B.

During this research, some limitations existed. While more participants would have been ideal in order to gather a more diverse sample, interviewing and transcribing was a time intensive process. Participation was also limited by those willing and able to be interviewed. This may mean that this sample consists of more open and out women, those who feel safe enough to be on a social media group dedicated to this population, and those who feel safe and confident enough sharing their story with a researcher. Another limitation lies in the interview guide, as some themes, such as the importance of a “catalyst,” became apparent after completing the interview process. It may have been more illuminating if questions could have been included in the interview script that specifically targeted those themes, rather than having them come up coincidentally in relation to other questions. However, this is common in interview-based research, and this research will exist to provide an idea of common themes for future research on this population. A final limitation is that the sample is rather homogenous. This research can not speak to the unique experiences of later in life lesbians who are women of color, who did not receive a higher education, or who were not assigned female at birth.

## Participants

Table 5: Participant Data							
Participant	Age	Gender	Sexuality	Race/Ethnicity	Education Level	Marital Status	State
Alice	43	Cisgender Woman	Queer/Lesbian	White	Associate	Married	Minnesota
Betty	49	Cisgender Woman	Bisexual/Lesbian Leaning	White	Masters/ Professional	Married	Oklahoma
Claire	57	Cisgender Woman	Lesbian	White	Masters/ Professional	Married	Tennessee
Denise	53	Demi-girl	Lesbian	White	Bachelor	Divorced/ Separated	New York
Eleanor	73	Cisgender Woman	Lesbian	White	Bachelor	Married	Pennsylvania
Frances	41	Non- Binary	Queer/Lesbian/ Gay	White, Jewish	Bachelor	Divorced and Partnered	New York and New Jersey
Grace	58	Cisgender Woman	Lesbian	White	Masters/ Professional	Married	West Virginia



Hazel	47	Cisgender Woman	Bisexual	White	Masters/ Professional	Married	New York
Irene	64	Cisgender Woman	Lesbian	White	Bachelor	Married	Pennsylvania
Jennifer	61	Cisgender Woman	Lesbian	White	Masters/ Professional	Divorced/ Separated	Montana
Kelsey	49	Cisgender Woman	Pansexual	White	Masters/ Professional	Single	Oregon
Linda	60	Cisgender Woman	Lesbian	White, Middle Eastern	Masters/ Professional	Engaged	New York
Martha	60	Cisgender Woman	Queer/Lesbian/ Gay	White	Bachelor	Widowed	North Carolina
Nina	46	Cisgender Woman	Lesbian/Sapphic	White	Masters/ Professional	Single	Arizona
Olive	53	Cisgender Woman	Lesbian	White	Associate	Married	Kansas
Penny	46	Cisgender Woman	Queer/Lesbian Leaning	White	Bachelor	Divorced/ Separated	Colorado

Table 5 includes participant data. The sixteen participants ranged in age from 43 to 73, most identified racially as White, and all had earned higher education degrees (again, speaking to the limitation that they may have a safer social standing to be able to share their experiences). Most participants identified as cisgender women, although one identified as demi-girl (partially, but not fully, a woman) and one as non-binary (although both stated they were comfortable being referenced as part of a group of women). Most identified as lesbian or queer, two as bisexual, and one as pansexual. Thus, participants may be referred to as lesbian or lesbian-adjacent<sup>2</sup>. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym.

### **Participant Narratives**

**Alice** is 43 and lives in Minnesota. She was married to her high school sweetheart for almost twenty years, and had three children with him. Alice had a somewhat tumultuous childhood, which she thinks contributed to her later in life identification as a lesbian. She remembers being “boy crazy” as a child and brushing off attraction to women as a young adult. At the age of 37, she reconnected with a woman from high school who later became her wife. She describes the transformative experience of connecting with her wife as “a catalyst.”

**Betty** is 49 and lives in Oklahoma. She grew up in a religious setting where heterosexual relationships were the only ones demonstrated to her. She was married to her ex-husband for over ten years. They had two children together. After their separation, he acknowledged that he was gay. She later met and married her current husband, although they no longer consider themselves together or cohabit; however, they did not end their relationship due to her sexuality.

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<sup>2</sup> In this research, lesbian-adjacent refers to participants who identified themselves as queer, bisexual, or pansexual, but still felt like their identities and experiences lined up with this research, and were comfortable being referenced in a group of lesbians. This definition was determined by the researcher.

In her 40s, her attraction to women became increasingly evident as she had dreams about women and felt “time stop” upon meeting a certain woman. She now identifies as bisexual/lesbian leaning, and her most recent relationship was with a woman.

**Claire** is 57 and lives with her wife in Tennessee. Her parents were together her entire life, but their relationship was chaotic. They raised her with conservative values drawn from their Catholic beliefs. More of her experiences are described in “Lack of Representation” and “The Ideology of Success and Expectations of Women” below. Claire believes that if she had more exposure to queer people as a young adult, she may have come to her own queer identification earlier. Claire and her husband had four kids who were the center of their lives. While Claire explains that she had a great friendship with her ex-husband, she fell unbelievably romantically in love with her wife, with whom she has had a wonderful relationship for six years. Drawing from her own life experiences, Claire is now a life coach for later life lesbians.

**Denise** is 53 and lives in New York. She has three children with her ex-husband. She described a natural attraction to other girls at a young age, however, she was discouraged from acting on this attraction before she even recognized what it was. As a young adult, she kissed a woman and casually dated a few, but she ultimately repressed her feelings as she knew she was expected to marry a man. She described her battle with suicidal thoughts, until she ultimately married her ex-husband, both to combat the attraction she was feeling towards another woman, and to “pick up the script” expected of her. Having a background in theater, she often described life in theater metaphors. At the time of the interview she was in a relationship with a woman that she described as complicated.

**Eleanor** is 73 and lives in Pennsylvania with her wife, Irene, who was another participant in this research. They became friends and then fell in love after meeting in one of the Facebook

groups oriented towards later in life lesbians. Eleanor and her husband had two children and were married for 47 years before he passed. At 66, Eleanor confessed to her therapist a feeling of same-sex attraction towards a woman she had met. She thought that would be the end of the discussion, but her therapist, much like Vivienne Cass, said “No, Eleanor, this is a process.”

**Frances** is 41 and splits her time between New York and New Jersey. She was raised by her grandparents, and explained that her grandfather was very misogynistic and taught her that her grandmother’s care work and labor in the home was not respectable. Instead, he instilled in her the “Ideology of Success,” as discussed later, and encouraged her to become successful and powerful. Looking back, she said she never felt normal, but could not pinpoint why. However, she knew that a lesbian identity could not fit into the image of success she had learned. She married her ex-husband, not for love, but for the vision of success she saw they were capable of together. They went on to have four kids together, and lived as an Orthodox Jewish family.

At 36, as her children relied on her less, she began to reflect on her own identity and desires, and fully realized her same-sex attraction. Now she has been with her girlfriend for over three years, and co-parents her children with her ex-husband.

**Grace** is 58 and lives in West Virginia with her wife. Grace had previous marriages with two men, and has no children. After leaving her second marriage, she discovered feelings of attraction for a friend who already identified as a lesbian. They dated, and while they did not work out, she realized she wanted to continue dating only women. She later met her wife on a dating website, and they’ve been together for four years.

**Hazel** is 47 and lives in New York with her husband of 23 years and two kids. She is still navigating the complexity of recognizing her same-sex attraction while in a relationship with a man. She currently identifies as bisexual. Hazel discusses the tumultuous feelings of loss and

grief that many participants went through, even when they knew they were moving towards their best self, due to the loss of the life they had previously known.

**Irene** is 64, lives in Pennsylvania, and is married to Eleanor. Irene has a daughter whom she adopted with her ex-husband. They were together 20+ years before they got divorced. She experienced a “catalyst” moment, as discussed later, and discovered an inner peace upon recognizing her same-sex attraction and identity as a lesbian.

**Jennifer** is 61 and lives in Montana. She was married for 17 years to a person she describes as “a really good man.” At the age of 56, Jennifer met a woman, which will later be defined as a “catalyst.” When she met this woman and fell in love, she realized her feelings for her husband would never compare. Thus, she pursued a divorce, began to process her newfound identity as a lesbian, and began dating. However, she worries about being fully out at work, as she does contract work in conservative areas with mostly men, and worries she would not be hired if her sexual orientation were known.

**Kelsey** is 49 and lives in Oregon. She has one son from a previous relationship. She began identifying as bisexual in her late thirties, and now identifies as pansexual. She’s happy that she no longer feels the need to dress and present in a way that is traditionally attractive to men, and live in a place that feels safe for her as a queer person. She also feels that she may be on the asexual (experiencing little or no sexual attraction) spectrum.

**Linda** is 60 and lives in New York with her fiancé. Linda and her ex-husband had two children together before their divorce when she was 47. Only after her fiftieth birthday did she begin to find herself attracted to women. She now feels more confident in herself, both in being an older woman and being a lesbian. She intentionally surrounds herself only with people who are supportive of her entire identity.

**Martha** is 60 and recently moved from Oregon to North Carolina. She grew up in a family with five children, and her brother identified as gay. Out of all the women I spoke with, Martha had the largest amount of exposure to the queer community growing up, but still explained that she didn't feel she belonged in the community. She had three significant relationships with men, one of whom she had a child with. At times she considered her level of attraction to women, and thought she would date women after her second significant relationship ended; however, she soon met the man from her third significant relationship and fell for him. Only after his passing did Martha truly consider her same-sex attraction. Now Martha is enjoying the dating scene in her new town.

**Nina** is 46 and lives in Arizona with her daughter. She had two previous significant relationships with men. Around the age of forty, she suffered from a traumatic brain injury (TBI). This, paired with getting older, changed who she was and her outlook on life. She described herself as being more to the point, having no filter, and believing what she believes without caring what others think. She is unsure if the TBI altered the makeup of her brain, or just inspired her to live her most authentic life. Regardless, she felt the incident drove her towards her exploration of the same-sex attraction she was beginning to feel.

**Olive** is 53 and lives in Kansas with her wife. She had two previous marriages with men, and has two children. In her late forties, she began to question if she was where she wanted to be in life, and felt like something was wrong with her. She met the woman who later became her wife, bonded over a mutual interest, and developed strong romantic feelings for her. For a tumultuous few years, she recognized the contrast between her feelings for this woman, and the lack of feelings for her husband at the time, and yet, she continued to try to get through the life she had built with a man. Finally, the stress of the situation developed into physical symptoms,

and she wound up in the hospital. At this time, she realized that life was too short not to live for herself.

**Penny** is 46 and is roommates with her ex-husband as they co-parent their two children. She grew up with only heterosexual relationships around her. She often described her marriage as an attempt to feel “settled.” After being pregnant and nursing children, and having more time to herself as her children grew older, she began to reflect on her own self and happiness, and began to consider the possibility of her own same-sex attraction. Becoming involved in a fan group of a show which teased a relationship between same-sex characters also opened her eyes to the possibility of same-sex attraction for herself. After being with a woman, she knew for sure she was queer. When she understood her sexual orientation, she began separating from her husband. Due to the cost of living and shared children, they continue to share a home, but live on different floors and consider themselves separated.

### **Findings and Results**

In total, eleven themes were explored, while seven were found to be significant enough to analyze for this publication. Four themes were not discussed because they were outside the scope of research. For more information on all themes identified, see Table 6 in Appendix B. Three themes—“lack of representation,” “ideology of success,” and “expectations of women”—are barriers that hindered identification as a lesbian, and came from the societal influence participants faced. Lack of representation was the most frequently occurring theme, as every single participant discussed the heteronormativity displayed to them growing up, and the lack of queer representation they saw. The ideology of success is a term pulled from Frances, which describes the expectation that many participants felt to be successful, and the way that being a lesbian did not fit into the participant’s understanding of success. Expectations of women

highlights the societal pressure women face to behave a certain way, and the way that this expectation impacted the experiences of this population specifically.

One theme, “a catalyst,” speaks to the midlife transition phase in which people reevaluate previous commitments and aspirations, as identified by Levinson (1974). A catalyst is defined as the existence of particular women, events, or time periods that propelled participants to explore the possibility and potential reality of their same-sex attraction. Again, getting through this stage acted as a temporary barrier for some participants.

The remaining three themes speak to the after-effects of coming to identify as a lesbian later in life. This includes the way that many participants saw an “increase in personal confidence,” and a “decrease in feminine expression.” Lastly, the “importance of pride and public pride demonstrations” shows how these events are meaningful and reaffirm their identities for participants to feel and see the representation that they did not get to see growing up.

Together, these seven themes tell a story which highlights the barriers that impact the formation of sexual orientation identity, leading to the discovery of a lesbian identification later in life. Throughout these sections, the themes are discussed as they relate to various theories about queer sexual orientation identity development. More broadly, this research will expand the existing research on the later life lesbian community and provide insight towards future research.

## **Societal Barriers**

### **Lack of Representation**

When reflecting on their childhood, most participants explained that heterosexual relationships were not just the norm, but the only type of relationships they saw growing up. If they recall seeing couples who were not heterosexual, it was often gay male couples. With the



growth of the AIDS epidemic beginning in the 1980s, many participants recall hearing negativity towards gay men, making any interaction they had with differing sexualities a negative one.

When participants did see or hear of lesbian existence, it was often stereotyped to only masculine-presenting or “butch” lesbians, which did not fit the identity or presentation of most participants. Claire stated, “There was no representation whatsoever. The only representation was gay men and that was it.” Olive explained, “I didn't know that I was a lesbian. I didn't really have any role model that would've led me to even think that was a possibility.” These factors led many participants to reflect that they were not avoiding the possibility of being a lesbian, or trying to ignore things they were feeling, but that they had no opportunity to recognize different sexualities that existed, and what those sexualities could look like, and thus apply that identity as possibly being their own.

Of the sixteen participants, only three had and understood their feelings of same-sex attraction at a young age, and chose not to pursue that attraction due to societal pressure or establishment of a heterosexual relationship. The other thirteen participants either had no same-sex attraction, or did not recognize that same-sex attraction until they were looking back on it at a later age. Jennifer explained “I really didn't know. I knew that emotionally I preferred women. I didn't know that I could also prefer women sexually. I never thought that was an option.”

Similarly, Martha stated

Then when I was with a woman, it was like, ‘Oh.’ I felt comfortable in my own skin for the first time, but I didn't know something was wrong before that, you know what I mean? So I was 54 when I actually came out, but I had thought about it before that. When I was jealous of the lesbians that I would see at church and stuff, but I never had a specific crush or like had one person.

The jealousy that Martha felt aligns with Cass's stage of "Identity Confusion" in which one faces unexamined awareness of potential homosexual feelings that can lead to conflict. These statements also show the way that socialization, from family and overall social heteronormativity, heavily impacts sexual orientation identity development beginning at a young age. Combined with other factors, many participants were left feeling like there was only one path to follow, and that path required heterosexuality.

As discussed previously, Berlant and Warner described in *Sex in Public* (1998) the way that heteronormativity works as a form of power and control that pressures people to conform to the societal expectation of a heterosexual identification. The pressure to conform is evident in these findings as the women discussed having had no representation of alternatives to heterosexuality, and thus conformed to the expectation of heterosexuality. Additionally, Adrienne Rich stated that "[heterosexuality] flickers across and distorts our lives" (1980:34). The word "distorts" appropriately captures the impact that heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality has had upon the lives of these women. The fact that many participants often heard gay men spoken of in a derogatory manner could have contributed to building internalized homophobia. Lastly, looking at Fassinger's theory, these women would have to go through the group phase of "Awareness" in which one recognizes that there is a queer community and that heterosexuality is not the norm or only option in order to pursue their own queer identification.

### **The Ideology of Success and Expectations of Women**

At the beginning of each interview, participants were asked to reflect on their childhood and the beliefs instilled upon them. There was no clear pattern of similar family structures between participants. For example, five participants had parents who were divorced, who later dated and/or remarried. Nine had parents married for the entirety of the participants' lives.

Seven participants reflected on positive childhoods, describing a happy upbringing. Seven participants faced varying traumas in their childhood, including witnessing or experiencing abuse, having an alcoholic parent, or witnessing family members with severe mental health issues. The participants interpreted these negative experiences as encouraging them to seek a more “normal” life through building their own heterosexual relationship and family.

Despite varying families of origin, many participants were driven by a desire to be “successful.” Frances explained that her family instilled what she called an “Ideology of Success.” As previously mentioned, she was raised by her grandparents, and her grandfather often devalued her grandmother’s life and roles in the home. Because her grandfather did not respect her grandmother’s labor, he encouraged a different life for Frances. She explained how she was taught what success means, and how she felt that the image of success instilled in her did not include a lesbian identification. Frances stated:

The ideology of success is really what was instilled in me. My grandfather wanted me to be a successful, powerful, sexy woman who has lots of money, drives a nice car, you know, has a nice place. Coming out as....I just couldn't. I never saw that as a lesbian. So I was one way or another trying to not feel feelings or consider them something that will hinder me from achieving this goal of success.

While she was raised Jewish, she was not raised Orthodox, thus, this ideology may have contributed to Frances’ decision to pursue Orthodox Judaism as an adult. Orthodox Judaism provided rigid standards for Frances to follow, which did not question her role or worth as a woman, however, over time, those rigid standards contributed further to her lack of understanding of her own identity. She stated

Like the longer I was there, the more backed into the corner the real me was. It was like there was a dissonance between who I was inside and how everyone was perceiving me and telling me in their own way how I should behave and what I should think and all of that. Initially it was a relief because now I got all this other stuff to distract me, but over time I just couldn't ignore it anymore.

This is another example of how socialization, in this instance, religious socialization, served as a conduit for heteronormativity.

Penny also felt pressured to pursue success. She stated “I really feel like I was soaked in that kind of heteronormativity....and this is a way to be successful, right, is to be partnered with a man.” In all, seven participants described the importance of success that was instilled in them, which either made them feel like they had to be partnered with a man, or distracted them from the potential for same-sex attraction. For example, Denise explained “So [we] married. We were friends for three years before we ever went out. And then it was a time when I had to....I had to pick up the script.” As previously mentioned, we see Denise describing life as a “script” she must follow. For her, this was a heteronormative script that necessitated being married to a man. Both Penny and Denise felt the pressure of heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality, and even the idea of compulsory matrimony, which influenced the lives they pursued, and their images of success.

Twelve of the participants described how societal expectations for women influenced the role they felt they had to play in life. For the participants, expectations for women included how to dress, act, behave sexually, and whom to be committed to – a man and children. Claire explained, “I got messages about being a woman, which means that I'm always second...my role was to take care of the man and take care of any children we had...I just wanted to be a quote,

unquote, ‘good girl’...so American family values were first and foremost.” Claire had also previously dated an African American man, which brought shame and ostracization from her family. She feared that dating women would bring forth the same behavior from her family. She also noted “American family values” and how, for a woman, this meant marrying a man and caring for children. This shows the role that families have in inscribing heteronormative expectations and the expectation of marriage upon a person. Alice had a similar outlook. She stated “I needed to get married and buy a house, have children, do all the things possible...I was whatever my husband did, whatever my husband liked, whatever he believed.” Here we see Alice followed societal expectations for women and pursued marriage, having children and caring for them and a home, and shaped the expectations for her life based on her husband, even merging her identity with his. Penny related her experiences to the movie *Encanto*, saying “Obviously, it's not about queer people, but about family roles, right? And, about like the role you take on in your family and then you keep playing even though it hurts you, you know?” In the movie *Encanto*, the main character faces serious inner turmoil as she tries to live up to her family and her town’s expectations, but feels that she fails, and yet continues to push herself towards those expectations at her own expense. The movie also teaches a lesson about the importance of communication, as the family deals both with secrets they’ve kept, and their own turmoil from high expectations. Penny went through a similar scenario with her own family, as she had to come to recognize that the family and societal expectations laid out for her were damaging to her, and she had to ultimately learn to communicate her needs with her family, despite it going against the family’s expectations for her. These examples from Claire, Alice, and Penny show the way that heteronormativity is inscribed upon the body and mind, showing women that heterosexual marriage and reproduction is the only viable path. Again, this served

as both a guide as to what to do in life, and a distraction from the potential for same-sex attraction. Frances captures this idea, saying “I think I saw myself through the eyes of society.”

Grace also recognized the societal influence, saying

I just felt like, oh my god, am I the only person this has ever happened to? I spent a lot of time thinking back about did I miss something? Should I have been on the lesbian boat from the get-go? What did I miss like, for example, if there... if there hadn't been so much societal pressure? But once I was going in this direction, I wasn't about to try to fit myself back in the box that I came out of.

Grace's desire to not fit herself back in the “box” aligns with Fassinger's individual phase of “Deepening/Commitment” as she commits to her own self-fulfillment as a sexual being.

While some participants were more aware of the societal impact than others, I would argue that most women in the United States are pressured to follow a certain life script. This is seen in Ridgeway and Smith-Lovins (1999) research in which both men and women adapt their life choices to fit what is considered socially acceptable for their gender, and Eagly and Mladinic' (1994) research that shows women who do so are perceived more positively. Furthermore, challenging gendered norms is ever harder for women (Faniko et al. 2016).

Interviewees' interpretations of societal expectations for women appeared to be one of the first steps in preventing participants' knowledge of the existence or possibility of other sexualities. Later, after feeling like they had fulfilled this life script, participants had time to reflect on their own selves, and their own desires and needs. Claire again speaks on this topic, saying

I check the all-American list of what a woman should have. I mean, I was married, solid marriage, pillar of my community, four beautiful children, you know, career. I had

everything and I just wasn't happy. Like I just couldn't figure out what was wrong with me.

As she later learned, nothing was wrong with her: she was just a lesbian. These quotes exemplify Adrienne Rich's (1980) idea that the impacts of heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality fall more heavily on women, and the further concept of compulsory marriage, and contributes to the idea that compulsory heterosexuality is inscribed upon the mind and body at a young age, in the same way that gendered expectations were found to be inscribed early (Bian, Leslie, and Cimpian 2017). This shows that the impact of heteronormativity combined with lack of representation of other identities is frankly damaging to the development of people, especially women. Claire's feeling that her marriage was "solid" and that she was a "pillar of [her] community" may have even influenced her further to feel that she had built the ideal life and should be happy in that life and maintain it. However, Claire's newfound career as a life coach to later life lesbians implies that she has reached Cass's final stage of "Identity Synthesis" and Fassinger's individual phase of "Internalization/Synthesis" where the private and public life has come together and one has incorporated their queer identity into their overall identity.

As for theories of sexual orientation identity development, Cass also intended to recognize the importance of the sociocultural environment and the way in which it impacts sexual orientation identity development. She noted how the interactions that one has with others helps them in shaping their view of the self. This was seen time and time again in this sample, as women reflected on what their family taught them, what society taught them, and how this influenced their decisions in life, including pursuing heterosexual relationships. Cass's later addition of the "pre-stage," in which a person understands that heterosexuality is preferred and privileged in society, while homosexuality is stigmatized, was clearly reflected in the stories

participants shared, as these women were impacted by compulsory heterosexuality and the awareness that homosexuality would not be easily accepted. These quotes also exemplify the way that the American Dream and the goal of success pervade one's actions and drive them towards a certain lifestyle. In Hoschild and Scovronick's (2003) definition of the American Dream, each person is responsible for achieving their own dreams, and thus their own happiness. With the concept of the American Dream being a shared concept in society, it leaves women feeling responsible for their own happiness, and potentially blaming themselves if they are not happy with the life they built. Among this population, heterosexuality and committed relationships were even part of their vision of success, therefore, it was often difficult to pinpoint sexuality as the reason that the participant was not happy with their life. These women thought they had already fulfilled what was needed to be happy.

## **Midlife Transition**

### **A Catalyst**

When participants discussed their first realization that their sexuality may differ from their previous identification as heterosexual, many described an event or person that acted as a catalyst. Facebook's later in life lesbian community seemed to have a common understanding of a "catalyst" as the woman you first felt attracted to, and/or first had a sexual or romantic relationship with. For example, in one popular group with over a thousand members and daily new posts, the term catalyst was used in discussion 36 times, and inspired posts such as "Open Letter To My Catalyst." Three participants used the term "catalyst" in the same sense as it was understood in the Facebook groups. While not every participant used this definition or used that exact word to describe such experiences, 15 participants described people or events that meet this study's definition of the theme. Nine participants reported a specific woman who caused



them to question their sexuality. Six more had an event or time period that served as a catalyst. Three of these six mentioned the election of Donald Trump as a turning point that encouraged them to search for a better understanding of their sexuality, and two mentioned their children's decreasing needs as they grew up as providing them more free time to explore their inner selves. Penny explained "My younger son weaned and I was done with kids and I maybe had more time on my hands. And I started thinking, I think I have an attraction to women there." Linda described the person who acted as her catalyst, stating:

I was friends with this person, like we'd go for walks and stuff, and the more that I got to know her it was like even if she was gay, she wouldn't have been a good partner for me but she was, you probably know this word, she was my catalyst. The catalyst for me to say, "something needs to change," because I was almost obsessed with the fantasy of being with her for, like a month, I wanna say.

Alice described the woman who later became her wife, explaining

She messaged me and said 'Just so you know, I'm sure you know I'm queer, but I had a big crush on you in high school.' And that's the first moment I was like \*laughs\* oh no, just now what have I gotten myself into? And the more her and I chatted, it was like this light came on. It was like this is how I'm supposed to feel. This is what it feels like in, like, a real relationship. Like feeling real attraction and real connection and sexual energy with somebody, and it was just like what have I been doing for the last twenty years? Like it was a huge huge lightbulb moment.

These catalyst moments align with Fassinger's individual "Exploration" phase where a person investigates their feelings of same-sex attraction, potentially with one person in particular, but not necessarily sexually. The catalyst moment also fits Levinson's (1974) idea that people

go through a midlife transition around the age of 40-45, in which they reevaluate previous commitments, make dramatic changes if necessary, give expression to previously ignored talents or aspirations, and feel more of a sense of urgency about life and its meaning. This theory was previously used in Stullman's (1984) research on later life lesbians. Looking at a catalyst as a person, event, or time period that encouraged participants to rethink their heterosexual identification, these participants experienced their catalyst moments at an average age of 47. Like Levinson predicted, participants did feel more of a sense of urgency about life (for example, Olive's explanation of questioning her life in her mid 40's), reevaluate previous commitments (heterosexual relationships), and make dramatic changes (beginning to identify as lesbian or lesbian-adjacent). Linda said

Having sex, authenticated something in me and validated something in me that I didn't even realize was missing until I had it. I felt like I found the other half of my soul and I didn't even know it was missing. But that's how I felt. But it wasn't that she was the other half of my soul, it was this sexuality that was the other half of my soul.

Similarly, Nina described her first experience with a woman, saying "Probably the most natural thing I've ever felt in my entire life beforehand." The fulfillment (other half of my soul) and naturalness that these women express speaks to Fassinger's individual phase of "Deepening/Commitment" and committing to one's self-fulfillment as a sexual being.

Another phenomenon occurring after the catalyst moment was the participants' struggles with uncertainty, confusion, and even grief. Despite coming closer to understanding themselves, participants had to deal with the fallout of their previous relationships. Those still in heterosexual relationships had to consider the process of leaving that relationship, and potentially going through a divorce. If they had children, it weighed heavily upon them what their decision

might do to their children. Participants even had to grieve the life that they expected to live, and had put effort into building. Hazel explained

It's so emotionally exhausting because I tell everybody that they should be loving their true authentic self. And I'm like, I don't know what that is for me. I don't know who that is. I don't know if my true authentic self is just staying and doing what I always envisioned my life would look like or is it like breaking everything apart and destroying everything?

Hazel was in the earliest part of her sexual orientation development, as she knew she was queer, and she identified as bisexual, however, she was still determining how her newfound identity aligned with her current relationship with her husband, and her role as a mother.

Jennifer stated:

So at first when I first made my discovery about me, I was not ready to come out publicly.... I was dealing with severe grief around the loss of my marriage, the loss of my life as it was going to be. I mean, I was not planning to be in my late fifties and single again.

Betty also described her feelings after her first sexual encounter with a woman, while she was still with her ex-husband. She said

I was driving home and I just kept crying. I was like, I don't know what this means. Like what does my life need to look like now?....I don't want to uproot everybody or change everybody at this late stage. My son had two years of high school left. And I don't want to hurt [my husband] or anybody.

These quotes capture a sense of what many of the participants went through at this stage of their life. Many had to decipher if they should leave what they were accustomed to, or break

away and pursue something else. Again, the research of Faniko et al. (2016) is evident here as these women struggle to to defy their prescribed gender norms. These women felt as if they were betraying their family of origin who socialized them to behave a certain way, and the family they created through marriage and childbirth, to whom they felt they owed their continuous commitment. They may have also been battling internalized homophobia. Ultimately, they struggled to prioritize themselves during this point in their sexual orientation identity development. These feelings of sadness, grief, betrayal, and confusion continue to bring to light the extent of the damage caused by heteronormativity, compulsory heterosexuality, and internalized homophobia. This also aligns with Cass's stage of "Identity Comparison" as a person has to consider the challenges that their queer identification brings. This also aligns with Fassinger's individual phase of "Awareness" where a person identifies themselves as different from their predicted self.

Despite this common catalyst moment, it's still not evident that the sexual orientation identity development process is as linear as Cass explained in her theory. Under Cass's theory, participants would move from thoughts of "I may be gay" to "I am gay," but not in the opposite order. This did appear mostly true, but there were time periods when participants questioned their sexuality, and struggled to break free from the societal expectation of heteronormativity and the commitment to their family, often feeling like they could not break the mold or deviate from the script expected of them, causing participants to waver in deciding if they may or may not be gay. For example, Irene explained how her experiences with her catalyst were somewhat back and forth in terms of both women's sexual orientation identifications. She stated "I can remember having conversations with her for months after that, saying, we aren't really lesbian. We aren't... like complete denial." Irene went on to explain her own personal struggle with her

identification, as she worried about several factors, and wavered in her potential identification as a lesbian. She said “How would I live my life, how would I get treated, how would my daughter get treated? It was hard.” However, Irene did eventually make peace with her identification as a lesbian, and did not revert her identification back to heterosexual. This again speaks to Cass’s “Identity Comparison” phase and considering the challenges that come with being queer, even considering the impact that a queer identity would have on their children, and again, causing these women to question breaking their commitment to their family. Still, this shows that the process towards sexual orientation identity development may not be easily identified as linear as people battle with societal forces, their own interpretation of societal forces, and the potential consequences of deviating from what is expected. If women who behave in line with gendered expectations are viewed more positively (Eagly and Mladinic 1994), then women who behave outside of those norms face retribution for breaking those norms.

A similar hesitation to break gendered norms and heterosexual commitment is seen in some of the women’s sexual orientation identities. While participants were not specifically asked if they identified as bisexual or pansexual before coming to identify as lesbian, some did mention changing their orientation identity a few times as they progressed in their sexual orientation identity development, and it is a topic of discussion seen in the Facebook groups oriented towards this population. Further, two participants do identify as bisexual and one as pansexual. Some people, such as Kelsey, simply prefer a sexual orientation identity that is more fluid, while Hazel is still married to her husband and identifies as bisexual, but is still figuring out her sexual orientation identity fully. Other participants, whether at the time of interview or in their past, felt a hesitation towards fully identifying as lesbian, because of their previous relationships with men. Penny explained “at first I was like, I just assumed well I’m bi[sexual]

because I've always been with men, so it must just be that I'm bi[sexual].” This again brings to question a firm linearity to sexual orientation identity development, as participants struggled with the juxtaposition between their previous relationships with men and their current attraction to women. This also shows the impact of compulsory heterosexuality, and the difficulty in breaking away from gendered expectations.

When considering Fassinger’s theory and its application to this population, Fassinger’s use of phases as opposed to stages appears more fitting. Fassinger chose phases as a way to recognize the continuous and circular development of one's sexual orientation identity. As noted, it was often not an easy journey for participants to come to the decision of “I am gay.” Providing flexibility for the difficult process of understanding a new sexual orientation identity is apt. Fassinger’s theory also avoids the critique that Cass’s theory is too prescriptive and does not allow room for varying scenarios, thus implying that one is “abnormal” and has failed to fully develop their sexual orientation identity. Fassinger recognized that sexual orientation disclosure, or lack thereof, is not seen as evidence of developmental advancement due to oppression faced by queer individuals. This is seen when Linda says “Once you come out, you’re coming out for the rest of your life. Every time you say your fiancé is a woman, you're coming out to somebody.” Again, heteronormativity, compulsory heterosexuality, and internalized homophobia are seen, and in this scenario, creating a cycle of anxiety that may never fully be resolved.

### **After-Effects**

#### **Increased Confidence, Decreased Femininity**

Participants were also asked to reflect on their presentation of self before and after coming to their identity as a lesbian or lesbian-adjacent. While most participants still identified

their presentation as feminine, nine reported a decrease in what are often considered feminine traits. For example, many participants noted avoiding heels, dresses, and makeup following their identification as lesbian or lesbian-adjacent. Some participants discussed the idea that they were previously dressing for the male gaze, and no longer felt the need to do so upon realizing their identity as a lesbian. Kelsey explained “I stopped dyeing my hair, wearing makeup and I was so free from that, because it feels free to not have to present in this way that was traditionally attractive to guys.” This appears to be an act against gendered expectations, and a move towards accepting their own identity. This aligns with Cass’s “Identity Tolerance” stage and the separation from heterosexual culture. This could also be seen as dropping or rejecting the “performance” of gender, as described by Butler (1990). Inversely, two participants mentioned dressing more femininely after coming to their identity as a lesbian, as they were acting out against or avoiding the male gaze before. Irene stated

What has been interesting on my journey is that I dressed probably more androgynously before I came out, because I was terrified that men would look at me. I couldn't stand to have male attention. So in looking back, I don't think I always realized it at the time, but over the whole journey, I think because once I didn't worry about that anymore and that wasn't an issue, I felt like I could dress in a more feminine way and just because it felt comfortable to me.

This still speaks to moving towards their own identity, as well as Butler’s “performance” of gender, as these two participants, even if it was innate, recognized what actions garnered positive attention from men. Eight participants recognized choices such as dyeing their hair, cutting it shorter, wearing different clothing (specifically flannels), or adding more piercings or tattoos as more indicative of a queer identity. This lines up with Cass’s description of the “Identity

Tolerance” stage in which one makes a separation from heterosexual culture and a move towards homosexual culture, and the “Identity Acceptance” stage where one feels an increasing relationship with and acceptance into homosexual culture. It also aligns with Fassinger’s individual phase of “Deepening/Commitment” where a person internalizes their sense of self as a queer person, and Fassinger’s individual phase of “Internalization/Synthesis” where someone incorporates their queer identity into their overall identity. Five participants specifically noted an increase in self-confidence and a more sure sense of themselves after realizing their identity as a lesbian. Alice explained “I have a huge shift in confidence, in the way that I carry myself.” This may again relate back to social factors and influence, as Linda explains “I feel more confident now. And some of that is age, not just coming out, and a lot of it is the change in what's socially acceptable.” Linda went on to describe how she came out the week that gay marriage was legalized by the Supreme Court, and how the visibility and acceptance of queer identities contributed to her confidence. Linda’s recognition of social influence and the impact it had on her ability to come out, and her confidence in her personal identity speaks to the strong effect of compulsory heterosexuality, and how compulsory heterosexuality could be reduced through increased queer visibility (as discussed further later).

Along with increased confidence in relation to their overall presentation of self, participants showed a strong sense of self-confidence in their identity as a lesbian or lesbian-adjacent. When asked about people or places who made them feel like they needed to hide their sexuality, most respondents had few specific locations or people where they did not present as lesbian. Linda stated “So I'm kinda surrounded by friends and clients who are very open-minded about this kind of thing and that makes me just sort of more confident.” Two participants did not discuss their identity as a lesbian in their work lives, because they felt they did not always work



with accepting people and it could potentially jeopardize their careers. One of these participants worked in a male-dominated field, which likely influenced her feeling like she could not come out in that space, while the second identified as bisexual and was still married to her husband, so she may not have felt as valid in her queer identification. While two other participants were worried about the impact at work, they ultimately chose to come out there. For example, Jennifer explained

I'm self-employed and I do expert witness work for attorneys. And some of the attorneys are quite conservative. And they're men. And so I'm not out professionally. I mean, I'm not trying to hide myself, but at the same time...I am self-employed and I rely on referrals. And if there are people that won't use me because I'm gay, that's a big deal.

Nine participants mentioned getting a feel for a space before committing to actions such as holding their partner's hand or discussing their sexuality, but usually felt comfortable in most spaces. Alice explains this scenario with her wife, describing a time they were on vacation. She said

When I came out, my wrong assumption was that in this time, it is safe and okay to be gay everywhere and that everybody would be cool with it and it's fine and I don't have to worry about anything. And I was very naive and just thinking, this is going to be so fun. Like everybody is going to think this is so cool and so progressive and whatever. And now, obviously not the case, but the first time that came up was when I was with my wife. We went to Mexico and we were at like an all-inclusive resort and I reached for her hand and she was like 'Please don't hold my hand right now.' And I was like 'What?' And she's been out since she was like, I don't know, 15 or 16, like very young. And I was so offended. I was like 'What are you embarrassed?' And she's like, 'No, I just don't

know if this place is safe.' Like she needed to feel it out and kinda like gauge the room. And I was just like 'What? Everybody's fine.' And she's like 'we're not in our own country, I need to make sure that I feel safe first before I'm holding your hand.' And it took me a while to realize that that wasn't a personal attack against me. I realized, it isn't always safe like it doesn't always feel okay.

Alice mentioned in this quote that her partner came out in her teens. Looking at the lack of queer representation that participants faced in their childhoods, it would obviously have been a different environment that Alice's partner came out in, as opposed to the environment Alice came out in. Thus, Alice's partner had a different perspective on reading spaces and gauging their safety as queer people. In this case, socialization was different for Alice and her partner based on age and the time period in which they came out. This scenario speaks to McCarn and Fassinger's explanation of as to why their theory is meant to be continuous, as they say "every new context requires renewed awareness of group oppression" (1996:522).

While participants may have had family members or friends who did not agree with their sexuality upon learning about it, most participants said that if someone did not support their sexuality then there was no space for that negativity in the participant's life and they no longer interacted with that person. Penny stated "I do feel like other people, if they're not going to be supportive, yeah fuck 'em. So if someone wants to pray for me, they can do it, whatever. If they never want to talk to me again, fine. If they want to talk to me, and harangue me, I get to hang up [the phone]." This aligns with Cass's "Identity Pride" stage where a person rejects the unacceptance of heterosexual culture. It also aligns with Fassinger's individual phase of "Deepening/Commitment " as someone commits to their own fulfillment as a queer person.

This ability to live for themselves appears somewhat unique to this population, likely assisted by the fact that many participants no longer had living parents or grandparents to manage relationships with, which eliminated some of the commitment they felt towards their family of origin, and participants usually had well-established lives of their own (although this could serve as another commitment to break). This was clear when Penny stated further “One of the things that's powerful about getting older as a woman is saying like ‘fuck this, fuck that, fuck you, I’m not playing by those rules anymore,’ you know.” Research shows that young LGBTQ adults still do extensive work to maintain relationships with family members, despite conflict and often at their own expense (Bosley-Smith and Reczek 2022; Reczek and Bosley-Smith 2021). While initial conversations about their sexuality may have been strained with friends or family, these relationships were often not reported to be continuously damaging to the individual due to the death of a negative person, a person’s changed opinion, or a removal of a person from future interactions. Grace explains:

I don't have a lot of angst and I think it has to do with my immediate peer group, my group of friends here at this stage in my life, they are so loving and supportive. I have no worries. I have no... it's not like I have to decide between do I keep this person and not be myself or do I tell them and I potentially lose them? I have avoided all of that. My parents are dead.

Similarly, Nina said “A few years ago, I lost like three of my grandparents all in the same year, in their nineties or whatever. So it wasn't like super unexpected, but it was almost like a relief. Like I don't need to share with them. They don't need to know. That will never happen.” Because many of the participants struggled with breaking the commitment they felt towards their

family of origin who socialized them to internalize heteronormativity and homophobia, they became free from that commitment as their family members grew older and passed away.

While previous findings illuminated the negative impacts of compulsory sexuality, heteronormativity, and internalized homophobia, it's uplifting to see that this sample was still able to move towards feelings of confidence in their sexual orientation, and in themselves as a whole. The participants' adoption of differing levels of femininity and various styles of dress that they consider queer shows an ability to move past the societal expectations of women, and begin to repair the damage done by compulsory heterosexuality, heteronormativity, and internalized homophobia. However, these women still put significant effort and energy into considering their safety in certain areas, including the work space, and they may feel they are continuously coming out (as previously described by Linda). Unsurprisingly, it's not possible to entirely escape the negative impact of heteronormativity, compulsory heterosexuality, and internalized homophobia.

The confidence seen among this sample also brings back the common critique of Cass's theory being prescriptive, leaving out the possibility of varying scenarios, and thus asserting that there is a normal and abnormal process towards sexual orientation identity development. This leaves less room for the fluidity of sexual orientation, as seen among this population. Further, if a person were to not reach the final stage of Cass's theory, they would be considered "foreclosed," or stuck, thus implying that they have not fully developed their sexual orientation identity. As critics of Cass's theory note, and participants - such as Linda - discussed, "coming out" is a constant process, where one is often identifying themselves as part of the queer community, and yet they may choose not to come out in a particular scenario if they have analyzed the situation as unsafe due to economic or personal well-being. This was seen among

the later in life population, such as when four participants worried about coming out at work, or chose not to come out at work due to fear of retaliation and economic harm, or when participants examined a new space and chose not to display affection there. This may also be due to internalized homophobia, and the fear or rejection or discrimination based on societal views. However, these women were confident in their lesbian (or lesbian-adjacent) identity, and shouldn't be accused of not fully developing their sexual orientation identity simply because they chose to remain closeted in some scenarios. Again, Fassinger's use of phases instead of stages may be more appropriate.

### **The Importance of Pride and Public Pride Demonstrations**

The importance of representation was further illuminated in the way that participants discussed pride events and representation of queer people in society. When asked about events that fostered personal acceptance of their identity, nine participants mentioned pride events such as parades as being spaces where they felt most affirmed, comfortable, and safest in their identity. Hannah stated "I never felt so happy too, like when we walked in our first Pride parade, it was so exciting," while Irene said "And just going to my first pride event... You don't have to explain things. You can say a word or two and everyone in that room gets it. And you don't have to explain yourself or justify yourself. Just be." This aligns with Cass's stages of "Identity Acceptance" where one feels an increasing relationship with and acceptance into homosexual culture and "Identity Pride" in which a person rejects the non-acceptance of heterosexual culture, and develops pride for being gay. This also aligns with Fassinger's group phase of "Internalization/Synthesis" where someone identifies as part of the community, understands the meaning of the group, and internalizes the meaning into their own concept of self.

Towards the end of the interview, participants were asked to reflect on global events that had been significant to their coming out journey. Often global events will cause a person to reflect on how their identity is impacted by that event. Again the election came up, as many mentioned the 2016 presidential race and ultimate election of Donald Trump as impacting their coming out process. Claire explained

So I was in the process of deciding whether to come out all during the year that Donald Trump was going to be elected president. He was running against Hillary Clinton. I remember myself saying ‘Well, if Donald Trump gets elected president, this is going to be a very hostile environment to come out as a queer person. So I won't do it, and you know, maybe if Hillary wins, I'll do it. I mean, shit like that. And he got elected president and I'm like, “fuck this shit, I'm comin out,” like “fuck this.” I was so angry that he was president and so disappointed in my country.

In this quote, we see Claire grapple with Fassinger's group phase of “Deepening/Commitment” where one commits to the value of shared community, but also recognizes the oppression that comes with their identity in that group.

Participants were also asked to recall the Supreme Court decision in 2015 which legalized gay marriage across the United States. While most participants were not identifying as lesbian or lesbian-adjacent at the time of the decision, all participants remembered the day and reflected positively. Penny said, “I was at that point out in a limited way as bi, and so it felt like something that wouldn't necessarily affect me, but I was so glad for everybody else and I was so glad for younger people to see. And I was just so thrilled, so happy.” Many participants stated that at the time of the decision they felt gay marriage was an obvious right, with many saying it should not have taken as long as it did to become legal, and many saying they did not understand

why others would waste time fighting against this right. Grace stated “Thank God they finally did something right. Yes. And it always seemed really unfair to me, especially when you consider the legal issues.” Alice said, “I remember when they did pass that thinking fucking finally. Like, who cares? Why should anybody else care?” With neither Grace nor Alice having come to their own queer identity at the time, their responses align with Fassinger’s group phase of “Awareness,” in which a person recognizes that there is a queer community and heterosexuality is not the norm.

With the Supreme Court decision being such a large historical moment, it was one of the biggest representations of LGBTQ identities up to that point. This event highlighted queer existence in a more positive light than many had seen before. Claire explains this well in her reflection on the day the Supreme Court legalized gay marriage, saying

I was very excited and very happy. I think it had some influence on me too. Probably subconsciously because I came out in 2016 and it was 2015. I was very happy for the queer community. I was always a really good ally. But I do think it might have had something to do with me. Like, I think maybe I realized that I could get married again and stuff like that if I came out. I think it was all very subconscious though. Like a lot of us in the later in life community with our own internalized homophobia. And like we were really good allies. I was always a great ally. It was just that the only person who can’t be gay was me.

Again and again we see the negative impacts of compulsory heterosexuality, heteronormativity, and internalized homophobia. The importance of pride events and representation among this population shows that we could potentially be repairing some of the impact that these phenomena have had on society, and this population. Several participants

discussed the world that their children and grandchildren have been able to grow up in, and the way that sexuality is more open and less confusing for them. Eleanor explained, "It's hard to believe that my grandchildren all know that difference. They're ten years of age and they have an understanding of the different sexualities where I didn't have that." As queer representation continues, we may see the impacts of heteronormativity, compulsory heterosexuality, and internalized homophobia decrease. This may also lead to a decrease in the amount of women who come to identify as later life lesbians. This speaks to Cass's explanation as to why theories like this are still important, as heteronormativity, compulsory heterosexuality, internalized homophobia and their impacts continue to exist as roadblocks that impact self-actualization for queer people. It's also possible that Fassinger's phases would have to be edited, as a person would no longer need to go through the "Awareness" phases.

Speaking to the importance of theories such as Cass's and Fassinger's, and research such as this, Alice stated

I saw your post and I was just like that's me. I was like somebody actually wants to talk about like me, like what happened. I think that I often feel really alone....I kept thinking like, I'm the only person that couldn't figure it out....So when I saw your posts for this, I was like, holy crap, there's other people. There's more people like me and it's like I'm not alone, even if I don't know any of these other people, like somebody is interested in this topic, and like wants to do some work around it. And I just was so excited.

While the importance of queer representation has been discussed, Alice's quote shows the importance of representing a multitude of queer experiences. With Alice having married a woman who came out in her teens, Alice still had to seek out connections with other women who came to their lesbian identification later in life like she did. Luckily, Alice was able to find that



community on Facebook in a group oriented towards later in life lesbians. Seeking out connection with other later in life lesbians may impact the “Identity Acceptance,” “Identity Pride,” and “Identity Synthesis” stages of Cass’s Theory, and Fassinger’s individual and group phases of “Exploration,” Deepening/Commitment,” and “Internalization/Synthesis.” Looking at Alice’s quote, and the overall sense of community seen in the Facebook groups, it’s conceivable that a woman could internalize her own identity as a lesbian, and her identity as part of the LGBTQ community more easily if she saw not just queer representation, but representation of her own queer identity and experience. Thus, not only is queer representation important, but also representation of unique and intersecting queer identities.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

As seen in the existing literature, later life lesbians have been a population relatively unexplored by researchers, and little was known about why women would come to a lesbian identification later in life. As a whole, society’s unfamiliarity with the LGBTQ community has led to distrust, animosity, and in extreme cases, hatred. The goal of this research was to better understand this subset of the queer community, give voice to their experiences, identify the barriers that impacted the formation of sexual identity among this population, and explore various sexual orientation identity development theories that help us understand this process. From interviewing sixteen women and analyzing those interview transcripts, a story emerges that explains the experiences of later life lesbians.

First, societal barriers disguised, delayed, and distracted these women from their identity as lesbians (or lesbian-adjacent). The heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality that is prevalent in society contributed to the lack of representation throughout these women’s lives, and inscribed the expectation of heterosexuality upon them, while internalized homophobia inscribed

derogatory values towards queer people upon them. Gendered expectations and the idea of success further pushed this population to pursue a role in life which included heterosexuality. As seen in the literature review, the expectations of women imposed by society have a strong impact on every woman, and compulsory heterosexuality invades our culture, however, for these women, these factors prevented the possibility of an alternative sexual orientation identity, and at times, overshadowed their same-sex attraction. Upon reaching an older age, reflecting on their life, and usually experiencing a catalyst, these women became open to a journey of self-exploration that led to the discovery of a lesbian or lesbian-adjacent identity; however, they continued to overcome barriers, such as navigating family relationships and identifying safe spaces to be openly lesbian. For these participants, it was truly an act of bravery, courage, and sacrifice to commit to a new identity while rejecting previous commitments that had been instilled upon them for a lifetime. Discovering their true identity often led to increased confidence and a stronger sense of themselves, as well as shunning the expectations of femininity shaped by society. Upon discovering their sexual orientation, the importance of representation continued to be prevalent, as events like Pride created a sense of belonging for these women.

While heteronormativity, compulsory heterosexuality, and internalized homophobia are significant aspects of queer theory that have impacted this population, it's also important to emphasize the strong impact of gendered expectations and socialization. While heterosexuality is a compulsory regime, it can also be argued that marriage and relationships are compulsory as well, and the expectation to enter into a committed partnership is inscribed upon the mind at an early age. Working in a similar fashion as heteronormativity, the compulsion to be partnered (in

a heterosexual relationship) served as a means to limit the imagination and life options of this population.

In short, we see that heteronormativity, compulsory heterosexuality, internalized homophobia, lack of representation, gendered expectations, and the pursuit of success all acted as societal barriers that delayed these women in their identity as lesbians (or lesbian-adjacent). While no theory of sexual orientation identity development can be perfectly applied, aspects of several theories help to understand experiences common to this population. Cass's theory is vital in its recognition of the importance of the sociocultural environment and the way in which it impacts sexual orientation identity development. However, the commitment to linearity in her theory is still questionable. Further, her theory may not leave enough space for sexual orientation fluidity, and may imply that queer people have not entirely accepted their identity if they are not fully out in every scenario. Instead, Fassinger's use of phases instead of stages may be more fitting, in order to recognize the continuous and circular development of one's sexual orientation identity.

Looking forward after the completion of this research, there are several opportunities for additional research. First, researching the same population, with a larger sample, and focusing on the themes highlighted in this research could further illuminate the true percentage of women who have struggled with each theme identified. Many of the themes found were discovered by chance, and not because a specific question was asked about that idea. Sharpening the focus of the interview script and centering questions around themes that arose in the post-interview transcript reviews could show the true magnitude of the barriers found here. Additionally, a larger and more diverse sample including women of different races, women with different levels of education, and transgender women, could provide insight as to how intersecting identities

affect this community's experiences. Cass's and Fassinger's Models were similarly critiqued for not considering the way that identities intersect. Further, these theories could be examined using this population by pursuing quantitative research as opposed to qualitative, similar to the way Cass (1984) and Fassinger (1998) tested their own theories. This could provide more generalizable data to investigate which theory may best describe the experiences of later in life lesbians. Lastly, it would be enlightening to pursue research on later in life gay men to see if a later identification as gay happens as frequently among men. Adrienne Rich noted that compulsory heterosexuality had a stronger impact on women (1980), and a cursory glance at Facebook reveals no groups oriented towards men coming to a gay identification later in life, whereas these groups were numerous for women.

The intent of this research was always to shine light on the stories and lived experiences of a subset of the LGBTQ population that has received little attention in previous research. While this research can not fully fill the gap in the research, as there is so little research on this population, and thus so much that can still be explored, it does serve as a starting point towards understanding this population while bringing forth insights from queer theory, sexual orientation identity theory, and gender socialization theory. This research has contributed to sharing the voices and stories of communities of later in life lesbians. Hopefully, these findings will help to normalize various lesbian experiences in our society, and provide further understanding of the LGBTQ community for those outside of it.

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## Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. Can you start by telling me a bit about yourself? Please include your name and age.
  1. Where did you grow up? Who did you live with? What kinds of romantic relationships were demonstrated to you growing up?
  2. When was your first ever romantic relationship?
2. What was your sexual socialization like? What sexual scripts did your family teach you? In what ways did your parents teach you to be a sexual person? Some of the ways in which they expected you to behave sexually?
3. What types of ideologies were instilled upon you that contributed to your ability to feel like you could be yourself, or be a lesbian?
4. Do you remember when you first considered your own sexuality? Or the first time you realized it may be outside the norm? What was that like?
5. Can you tell me about your previous heterosexual relationships? Potentially highlighting those that felt the most important to you and why?
6. Do you feel that you presented as straight. If yes, can you give me some examples of how you did so? If not, what makes you say no?
7. Can you tell me about your current or most recent lesbian relationship?
8. What patterns of dating do you see in your history? Looking back, how do you interpret that now? Is that different from how you interpreted it at the time?
  1. (Prompt) Did you alternate between dating men and women at any time? Were there any factors that encouraged you to date men again?
9. Can you identify specific events that made you want to/have to be who you are?
10. What do you need to do to feel like your true self, in regards to your sexuality? Do you or did you feel any sense of urgency to be yourself?
11. Did anyone you know try to change your mind? Or offer you an alternative? Reminders in your life that straightness is the norm?
12. Can you recall a stage of thinking “I’ve got to let people know who I am?” Can you tell me about that?
  1. (Prompt) Do you feel that your presentation of self changed? Do you feel this alternated depending on the space you were in and people you were around?

13. Are there spaces where you feel it's okay to be openly gay? Why or why not? What factors prevent you from being openly gay?
14. Are there spaces where you feel you still have to be in the closet? How does being in the closet, even if it's only to a small extent, influence your identity as a lesbian?
15. Do you remember hearing about the Supreme Court deciding in favor of marriage equality? How did that make you feel? Or have any events in your lifetime made you feel more accepted? Less accepted? Global events or personal events? Did any event encourage you to be more out, or any events that made you want to hide?
16. How did children, whether having them or wanting them, impact how your identity developed, if at all?
17. Is there anything else you want to discuss? Any topics we did not get at that you would like to talk about?
18. Do you have any questions for me?

## Appendix B: Code Book

Table 6: Code Book	
Codes Used in Research	Definition
Lack of Representation	Participant noted a lack of queer representation growing up, especially lesbian representation.
Success	Participant pursued a successful life, which may include a career and/or family.
Expectations of Women	Participant mentioned societal expectations surrounding women's behavior, appearance, and life.
Catalyst	Participant mentioned a woman one first felt attraction to, and potentially first had a sexual or romantic relationship, or an event or time period that caused one to question their sexual orientation and begin considering a new one.
Increased Confidence	Participant stated that their confidence had improved since coming to their lesbian or lesbian-adjacent identity.
Decreased Femininity	A decrease in things typically associated with femininity, such as wearing makeup, heels, dresses, etc.
Importance of Pride/Representation	Participant discussed the importance of Pride events and representation of the queer community, as it made them feel supported, seen, and safe.
Unused Codes	Definition
Fluidity (did not occur as often as expected)	Participant alternated between pursuing men and women.
Influence of Children (outside scope of research/not all participants had children)	Children influenced participant to actuate their sexual orientation identity.
Living for Themselves (Too similar and not discernible from "Increased Confidence")	Participant expressed confidence in their lesbian identification, and did not allow space

	in their lives for people who did not support that identification.
Religious Ideology Instilled (did not occur as often as expected)	Participant mentioned religion as the primary ideology that influenced their heteronormative upbringing.