

Themes.

The two previous sections, *Profiles* and *Profile analyses*, provided a representation of experience that was rooted in the context of each individual. With the purpose of generating a more universal understanding of lesbian women's experience of childhood sexual abuse, I deemed it necessary to investigate commonalities across the data set, as well as within. Cross-case examination facilitated me in developing themes that were representative of that experience, albeit embedded in the contextual richness of each individual. (See Chapter 5 for variations of experience, and Table 5 for biographic information about the participants).

A *theme* is a phrase or sentence that captures an essence of a phenomenon that one is attempting to understand (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). The sequence of categorizing "up" was critical to the inductive process: (a) Each interview was scanned for insights and ideas that were important in the individual's experience; (b) Insights from one interview sensitized me to analogous information as it occurred in other accounts; (c) As ideas repeatedly occurred in multiple contexts, I then considered the idea as a category; (d) Those categories that could be explained, described, or made sense across the data set, as well as in individual accounts, I ultimately instantiated as a theme.

This section was organized and presented in such a manner as to make the interpretive method as transparent as possible to the reader, and with due consideration of the volume of material that was generated. To this end, I adapted a documentation table developed by Anfara et al. (2002, p. 32), to show the interpretative process as four iterative strategies, in a series of three tables. It is important to note, that although these iterations were displayed in separate tables, they were, in fact, often performed concomitantly. The tables were arranged in the following order:

1. Table 2, *First iteration*—a sample of initial categories and corresponding transcripts and paragraph numbers; Appendix E documents all initial categories.
2. Table 3, *Second iteration*—comparison within and across categories.
3. Table 4, *An overview of the interpretive process*—illustrating the relatedness of the four iterations; it includes the *Third iteration*—synthesis of categories to themes; and *Fourth iteration*—the way the themes relate to the research questions.

Because of formatting constraints, it was not possible to document all the initial categories in Table 2, which contains only a sample of categories and their corresponding transcripts and paragraph numbers. However, complete documentation for initial categories is in Appendix E. After a review and discussion of the tables, detailed descriptions of the six themes that emerged from the analysis follows.

Repetitive readings of the transcripts required a meditative focus on the data, combined with an awareness of the bio/psycho/social contexts of each individual. Appendix E is a record of the initial process of interpretation that enabled me to mark and label the interview transcripts with categories. During the readings, a word or phrase that aptly described a sentence, phrase, or passage, was tentatively assigned, until a category emerged. The designation of these categories provided me with a manageable way to describe the complex nature of experiences that were gleaned from hundreds of pages of interview transcriptions. Table 2 (below) is an example of some of the categories that emerged. The left column of the table contains categories of underlying patterns; they were sorted alphabetically, solely for the purpose of facilitating the management of the data. The column on the right shows the participant's first initial, followed by

Table 2

First Iteration: Sample of Initial Categories (See Appendix E for all categories)

Categories	Participant and Interview Paragraph Number from Appendix D
Being/coming out	O[5]; S[3,4,53,8]; M[2,6,7,15,63]; K[1,8,13,16,17,21,60,64]; T[21,43]; La[1,29,31,32,57]; P[5,6,8,14,22,21,19,62]; Le[1,16,17]; H[6,12,13,51,58,59]; J[9,10,11,12,14,21,22,49]
Family support/rejection	O[5,21]; S[17, 19,3,4,11,12,31]; M[7,8,17,46,39]; K[8,11,48]; T[32]; La[6,12,20,29]; P[7,20,22,62,65]; Le[5,21,29,33,38]; H[11,12,13,17,24,25,47,48,57]; J[12,14,15,38,41,44]
Feeling different	O[21]; S[33,58]; M[2,11,24,42,45]; K[55,56]; T[19]; La[6]; P[19,22]; Le[20,22,26]; J[21]; H[13,47] H[13,47]
Hiding/closeting	O[16,26]; S[6,8,11,21]; M[12,15,28]; K[13,16,17,28]; T[1,3,5,6,13,14,18,24,28,32,33,43]; P[13,25,42]; Le[20]; La[6,22,27,31,36,37,38,39,46,49,50,52]; J[8,10,20,22]; H[9,10,11,24,25,28,46,54]
Internalized homophobia	O[16,3,4,16]; S[6]; M[1,2]; K[4,5,19,62,66]; T[3,5,6,7,9,10, 13,17,21,45]; La[1,4,24,25,26,27,32,33,34,37,38,39,57, 61,70]; P[6,7,19,21,22,62,65]; Le[49]; H[7,13,46,47,54,55,58,59];
Sexual identity	S[54,56,51]; M[2,6,7,15,62]; K[1,61,62,65]; T[1,5,43]; La[4,57,58,60]; P[5,8,15,17,22,62,65]; Le[1,17,54]; H[6,7,9,46,51,58]; J[6,10,11,12,15,17,20,22]
Therapist/therapy	O[4,14]; S[18]; M[2,15,19,27,29,51]; K[12]; T[41]; La[12,52,41]; P[10,13,27,30,37,39,42,63]; Le[12,13,36]; J[12,25,30,35,51]; H[24,25,26,35,39,45,54,56,60,63]

Note. O = Olivia; S = Sheree; M = Marina; K = Kitt; T = Tess; La = Laura; P = Phia; Le = Leonie; H = Harriet; J = Jasmine.

the paragraph number(s) of the interview transcript (Appendix D), which corresponds to the category. The first letter of the participant's name identifies each transcript, with the exceptions of Laura (La), and Leonie (Le), where the first 2 letters of their name were used.

The interpretive process illustrated in Table 2 (above), represents the first steps toward discovering idiographic generalizations across transcripts, which began to emerge from the stories told by particular individuals in the context of their own experiences. The second iteration consolidated the interpretation further, where meaning and insights were integrated into three main categories: (a) individual, (b) family and community, and (c) societal. These three categories provided an ecological structure in which to sort the phenomena, highlight the issues, and address the research questions that this study posed. Prior to the presentation of the next interpretative step, documented in Table 3, it was necessary to define the three categories used in the table, as well as to provide the rationale for using this particular framework.

Inspired by Garbarino and Abramowitz (1992), I used an ecological framework because individuals develop interactively with their immediate social environments, and they, in turn, interact, and are informed by larger social contexts. This particular framework was also congruent with the assumptions of the study (see page 12). In asking and answering questions about identity development, one should look within, beyond, and across individual lives in an attempt to capture the essence, or variation of experience.

1. Individual

Part of the process of human development is forming an identity; for example, knowing who you are, and where you fit into the family, community, and the larger society. It is a continual progression of integrating disparate aspects of the self into a cohesive and distinct whole. Perceptions of the self are projected, and expressed through our emotions, attitudes and thoughts, and behaviors.

2. Family and community

During the formative years of childhood, and sometimes into adulthood, we perceive ourselves within the family context, that is, through the eyes of our parents and siblings. An individual's perception of self is also informed by less immediate relationships such as relatives, peers, teachers, baby-sitters, health professionals, church members, and work cohorts.

3. Societal

Although it is less apparent, the wider social and cultural world has a profound effect on the developing individual. In a sense, discovering the essence of an experience also includes knowing how the lives of individuals are interrelated with such things as laws, social attitudes, and institutions.

Table 3 (p. 323) documents the second iterative process. Categories from the first iteration (see Appendix E) were reclassified under (a) Individual, (b) Family and community, and (c) Societal. Each of these classifications was subdivided further and assigned an alphanumerical identifier:

1. Individual—1A. emotions, 1B. attitudes and thoughts, and 1C. behaviors.
2. Family and community—2A. family, 2B. school, 2C. workplace, 2D. ethnicity, 2E. religion, 2F. friends.
3. Societal—3A. public policy, 3B. attitudes towards LGB and CSA and, 3C. mental health system.

Table 3
Second Iteration: Comparison Within and Across Categories

Category Integration	Categories from the first iteration (See Appendix E)
<u>Individual</u>	
1A. Emotions	Abandonment; anxiety; depression; confusion; ambivalence; emptiness; anger; feeling targeted; shame; guilt, discomfort/comfort; control; dissociation; emotion regulation; feeling different; unheard/ignored; grief; helpless; hope/hopeless; safe; lost; regulation/dysregulation; power; pride; vulnerability
1B. Attitudes/thoughts	Ambiguity/ambivalence; attempts to make sense; LGB; men; women; coming out; career; children; loss of childhood; partners; pride; religion/spirituality; rescuer/protector; responsibility; self-worth/self-esteem; sexual identity; sexuality; fiscal impact; trust/mistrust; militancy; wishing it were different
1C. Behaviors	Coming out; anorexia; acting out; B&D; creating boundaries; career; control; dependence-independence; drug & alcohol use; dismissing; hiding/closeting; hypervigilance; internalizing homophobia; isolating; parasuicidal acts; passivity; partners; pride; rationalizing; responsibility; rigidity; sexuality; fiscal impact; stress management; violence; obsessing/compulsivity
<u>Family & Community</u>	
2A. Family	Rejection; acceptance; dynamics/descriptors; boundaries; CSA; discomfort/comfort; control; emotional abuse; intergenerational connections; interpersonal relationships; partners; perpetrator; physical abuse; power; control; rescuer/protector; safety; sexual identity; fiscal impact; suicide/mental illness; violence; homophobia; violence
2B. School	Being targeted; homophobia; harassment; academic history; coming out; discomfort/comfort; community attitudes; feeling targeted; emotional abuse; feeling different; frustration; teacher; violence
2C. Workplace	Harassment; homophobia; coming out; discomfort/comfort; feeling targeted; emotional abuse; feeling different; interpersonal relationships; safety; sexual identity; violence
2D. Ethnicity	Intolerance; attitudes; CSA; coming out; discomfort/comfort; community attitudes; ethnicity; sexual identity; violence
2E. Religion	Attitudes; acceptance; intolerance; CSA; coming out; homophobia
2F. Friends	Peer relationships; boundaries; CSA; interpersonal relationships; discomfort/comfort; attitudes; feeling different; partners; perpetrator; physical abuse; safety; sexual identity; hiding/closeting; homophobia;
<u>Societal</u>	
3A. Public Policy	Discrimination; CSA; homophobia; targeting; gay rights; sexual identity
3B. Attitudes re: LGB and CSA	Harassment; homophobia; acceptance/intolerance; gay community; safety; sexual identity; violence; men/women; rejection
3C. Mental Health System	CSA; LGB; control; depression; drug therapy; frustration; hospitalizations; parasuicidal acts, sexual identity; therapists/mental health professionals; therapy; denial

Note. CSA = childhood sexual abuse; LGB = lesbian, gay, bisexual; B&D = bondage and domination.

Table 4 (below) shows the outcome of the third iterative process, where I compared within and across categories, and which resulted in the emergence of six themes that relate to the individual, family and community, and society. The table documented the connectedness between (a) categories and themes, (b) themes and the research questions, and (c) illuminated the overall picture of how the interpretive process developed in this study. The table is read from the bottom up, as the arrows indicate. The iterative process of comparison at all levels among the transcripts enabled me to move back and forth between individuals and the text as a whole. This process of reinterpretation and reflection also allowed me to follow themes across the cases; units of meaning were integrated and reintegrated, and the same general themes emerged across all the accounts. The themes that emerged from the iterative, interpretive process were

1. I live with ambivalence.
2. I am always at risk.
3. I am different, but I want to fit in.
4. I exist in two worlds.
5. I need affirmation for who I am, and what I have experienced.
6. It should have been easier to come out.

The goal of this study was to identify and describe lesbian women's perspectives about the ways they experienced childhood sexual abuse, coming out as lesbian women, and their perceptions of how particular experiences of coming out, and CSA might interrelate. Accordingly, each theme resonated with the participant's experience of coming out, and being sexually abused as a child. Exemplars from the transcripts that elucidated an individual's experience, with regard to the theme, follow each thematic description.

Table 4

Four Iterations: An Overview of the Interpretive Process (to be read from the bottom up)

Mapping the Interpretive Process			
RQ#1: How are experiences of CSA perceived by selected lesbian women?	RQ#2: How are coming out experiences perceived by lesbians who survived CSA?	RQ#3: Do lesbian women perceive any relationship between their experiences of coming out and CSA?	
↑ (Fourth iteration: Application to Research Questions) ↑			
↑ (Third iteration: Final synthesis of categories to themes) ↑			
I live with ambivalence. (1-A,B,C; 2-A,B,C,D,E,F; 3-A,B,C)	I am different, but I want to fit in. (1-A,B,C; 2-A,B,C,D,E,F; 3-A,B,C)	I need affirmation for who I am, and what I have experienced. (1-A,B,C; 2-A,B,C,D,E,F; 3-A,B,C)	
I exist in two worlds. (1-A,B,C; 2-A,B,C,D,E,F; 3-A,B,C)	It should have been easier to come out. (1-A,B,C; 2-A,B,C,D,E,F; 3-A,B,C)		
I am always at risk. (1-A,B,C; 2-A,B,C,D,E,F; 3-A,B,C)			
↑ (Second iteration: Comparison within and across categories) ↑			
<u>Individual</u>	<u>Family and Community</u>		<u>Societal</u>
1A. Individual emotions	2A. Family	2B. School	3A. Public Policy
1B. Individual attitudes	2C. Workplace	2D. Ethnicity	3B. Attitudes about gays
1C. Individual behaviors	2E. Religion	2F. Friends	3C. Mental Health System
↑ (First iteration: Initial categories) ↑			
(See Appendix E and Table 3)			
↑ Transcripts	↑	↑ Researcher Notes	↑
	↑	Field Notes	↑
	↑	Literature	↑

Note. CSA = childhood sexual abuse.

Description of the themes.

1. I live with ambivalence.

The term *ambivalence* is defined as vacillation in belief, behavior, and affect, which is directed toward an individual, experience, or an object (Bolen & Lamb, 2004). Bolen and Lamb suggested that many theories conceptualize ambivalence as ego-dystonic, and “thus potentially psychologically distressing” (p. 197). According to Linehan (1993), the inability to synthesize the notions of a dilemma might lead to heightened emotional stress, and in some cases dysfunctional behaviors such as dissociation, emotional dysregulation, and parasuicidal behaviors. In a variety of contexts, the women who participated in this study articulated ambivalent feelings, thoughts, and attitudes regarding their childhood sexual abuse, sexual identity, coming out, perpetrator, and interpersonal relationships.

O[9] *One of the things I think that disappoints me most is to know somebody and not know them.*

S[54] *I mean there was a point when I thought I was straight, when I was a teenager. Then I was sure I was a lesbian for those years, when I got married I was bi – I fell in love with a woman and, oh my God, I’m really a lesbian. Then what am I doing topping men, you know? What is that about? And that, I can’t fit that in.*

J[51] *Me ... wanting to seduce, being the aggressor on some level and then feeling like I’m getting abused during sex ... it’s two extremes; that I am the whore, or I am the nun.*

Le[58] [The subject of CSA] ... *comes up a lot and its just hard to know in terms of ... your other relationships ... when it’s something coming up from your past, or whether because of your past you are particularly ... right on about something ... I mean its just very hard to know because in the end you just are who you are.*

S[11] [The abuse] *It wasn’t that much, but it was, it was really profound.*

La[60] *I really feel that if I wasn’t abused I probably would have been with a guy, forever. But because I was, I think that changed my view on it and made me open to the possibility of being with another woman. That opened it up. Now it’s like, I want to be with another woman. It’s not the abuse, but I want to be with another woman.*

K[26] *And I mean I was never physically hurt or anything like that. And, you know, it was sort of repulsive, but it wasn’t that bad. So I just thought it was something I had to do, sort as a favor.*

H[25] *I’m really not sure if I’m making this up. I mean, I actually said, I don’t know if I’m making this up, but it seems real. And I don’t want to say something that’s not true, even though I’ve made allegations in the past.*

M[19] *I didn’t trust anybody, but I trusted that I could trust her, and she would be able to help me get to some place better cause she said she could. I didn’t believe it, but I believed she believed it.*

S[58] *There’s a part of me feels very good about that [B&D] and there’s another part of me that wonders ... is there something wrong with me that I can do that.*

2. I am always at risk.

The experience of CSA puts at risk the acquisition of a sense that the world is a reasonably secure and benevolent environment. It puts at risk trust in others, particularly those people who are so vital to our well-being, and on whom we so critically depend. It puts at risk a child’s emerging sense of self as an individual who has some control over her life. Additionally,

it puts at risk a child's developing self-esteem, as well as her emerging sexual identity (Mullen, Martin, Anderson, Romans, & Herbison, 1994). Across all cases, the participants not only associated this continual state of vulnerability with their CSA experience, but also connected those thoughts and feelings to their experience of coming and being out.

O[2] *Even though she was younger, she was like my protector because she would fight back. And I wouldn't fight back.*

Le[22] *I think I experienced a lot of harassment being a lesbian ... And I really think it had something to do with being a lesbian. It's not something you can pinpoint, and like prove. But I think the fact that I'm a lesbian made them want to target me and I just feel that happens all the time.*

Le[29] *Um, they're [father and brother] still inappropriate, so it's a matter of safety.*

O[29] *Well now I don't let a man get that close to me. There's always that thing about getting close.*

H[38] *I've had extremely stressful times when I've like taken knives out and ... brandished them like oh look what I'm going to do.*

M[5] *I mean I heard homophobic slurs at least 25 or 30 times a day. And you know, I got called dyke, lezzy, more than once, cause I wouldn't date. ... And the teachers would always say, "Well if only you would just apply yourself." I was like you know if I felt physically safe, maybe I could do that.*

K[55] *Between the people picking on me, and me not thinking I was very smart, school was pretty much of a struggle.*

La[34] *Everyone knows [about my lesbianism]. But it's not something I can go around and you know, brag about or get involved with.*

3. I am different, but I want to fit in.

According to Bohan (1996), there is a profound and pervasive impact on individuals who are members of a stigmatized group, such as lesbians. Internalizing the cultural condemnation of homophilia creates complications for individuals attempting to manage the stigma. The experience of CSA also brings shame and stigma, and has a powerful impact on the developing sense of self. As the child comes to realize that others her age have not had the same sexual experiences, she feels marked, and freakish (Courtois, 1988). The participants often expressed or alluded to feeling different; they also expressed a desire to be perceived as *normal*, and accepted for what they are.

M[12] *I was not attracted to boys. I felt there was something horribly, disgustingly wrong with me. And I had to hide it, and, you know, between the two of those [abuse and being gay], it wasn't such a great combination.*

O[21] *I'm the brownest. The Masons don't like brown people. ... My sister resembles them more. It's like this self-loathing. It's like you always wanted to be something that you're not.*

H[47] *I think she [mother] just wanted somebody, some girl, some daughter, to have the big white wedding, and the husband and the babies and the whole nine yards. ... They don't realize that I could have a big white wedding.*

K[57] *I lived my life with my best friends. I was always was involved in creative ways ... by going along, or ... facilitating. It satisfied my need to be nice, help people; then maybe people would ... like me because I was dying for someone to like me.*

La[3] *I never felt normal after it [sex abuse] had happened. I always felt like I was different. ... It felt like it changed everything.*

M[2] *Granted, I've never even touched a boy, but you know, "I'm straight." I just wanted to be normal, whatever that means.*

T[17] *The lesbians though in the church were sort of ... I want to say were pariahs almost. ... I think my father made some comment that she was a lesbian ... and it was just something to stay away from ... to be careful around her because I wasn't clear about ... how that would impact me.*

S[4] *I did have a son when I was 25. And I gave temporary custody to his father while I went to school and took advantage of a scholarship. And when I tried to get him back, I couldn't because I was a lesbian. So I lost my son, custody of him, which was very painful. And at that time, in the eighties you just couldn't get your kids back, the way you can now.*

K[3] *I became totally out, at work and everywhere, and so it gets me, but every once in a while there's that little glitch. I got a new job and you got to do it all over again, and there's always that little possibility that somebody's going to come and give you grief about it. Rosie's uncle is giving me a motor scooter. ... if [we] were married ... the taxes would be waved. But because we weren't married ... we're not legally recognized. ... There's things like that you get discriminated against.*

J[34] *I started taking drugs, Quaaludes, Tuinol, angel dust, everything, the whole gamut except for heroine. ... I got in with the wrong crowd, I guess the crowd was like my family and I started going to clubs. I was so desperately looking for love and a boyfriend, per se that I went to these clubs and started taking Quaaludes.*

4. I exist in two worlds.

An individual with a bifurcated worldview lives cognitively and affectively in two distinctive domains. Each of those spaces is a conflicting image of the other, for example, good parent-bad parent, sweet girl-nasty girl and, good-evil. The affective states that accompany these images are also held separately, making it difficult to modulate emotions (Masterson, 1988). The inability to integrate "the selves" often leads to feelings of confusion, frustration, and depression. The women who participated in this study spoke openly about their two worlds, especially with regard to coming out, and a majority displayed dissociative symptoms characteristic of individuals who suffered childhood sexual abuse. They manifested as amnesia, perceptual distortions, out-of-body experiences, and anxiety symptoms, such as panic attacks, and flashbacks. It is also likely that for some of the participants, alcohol and drugs were used to induce dissociative states.

P[8] *Until recently I've always had the feeling that it was happening to somebody right next to me. ...but I never quite felt integrated. Like it only recently feels like it's happening to me. Like I could let it in. You know before it felt like it's happening to this person right next to me over here.*

M[28] *I had this horrible secret though, and I had to go on with my life, and my life depended on it, as far as I knew. So I just went through school completely numb, completely dissociated.*

O[26] *When I was a child I used to sit in my closet. We had an armoire, and I would go and sit in there, and turn off the light. I would sit there in the dark, and the clothes and the objects in the closet...I would talk to them.*

J[51] *Thinking and being whether I'm in reality or fantasy in my life, am I fantasizing still about that white knight in shining armor coming, whether it be a man or a woman, but is that a fantasy for me still, am I still 3 years old?*

Le[20] *I don't feel like I can come out there. ...And I'm an outsider in their environment. I really wish I could come out there, but I can't. I don't feel like I can.*

O[8] *It's like having two lives. It's true it's just like having two lives. When I live away from her, I'm more comfortable in coming out. When I live with her, I'm just not sexual.*

S[22] *Sometimes I feel like I'm almost like two people. Well, it's like there's one part of me that is very warm, and kind, and compassionate, and caring. And there is another part of me that feels like an actor behind a façade, and I feel like really I have no feelings, and really bottom line, I don't care.*

K[4] *I didn't come out to my peers or my co-workers or anybody [for] 11 years I mean we were very closeted. I mean the only people that knew, were some other gay people and most of them didn't live in our State. ... We had no gay friends; we did no gay stuff.*

La[27] *I did a lot of stuff to hide it. I used to walk around the school with my boyfriend, hand in hand. We used to stand at the locker and kiss, come over in the morning and ride the bus together. We were inseparable. Turns out we were just best friends. There was nothing there, and we were always together hand in hand.*

La[38] *And the most we did was hold hands for the entire road trip. But they see that. That's about the only thing they ever see. Anything else is behind closed doors, or shades drawn, or keeping real quiet.*

5. I need affirmation for who I am, and what I have experienced.

The literature supports the notion that survivors of childhood sexual abuse dread receiving negative reactions, such as rejection and blame, as a result of disclosing sexual abuse (Ullman, 2003). The motivation for nondisclosure of one's lesbian identity is also fear of negative reactions, such as disapproval, violence, economic sanctions, and loss of prestige (Harry, 1993). With regard to both CSA and same-sex attractions, the participants often faced the dilemma of whether or not to disclose. They might gain social support by disclosing, but be forced to tolerate negative responses. Conversely, nondisclosure might avoid negative reactions, but they forgo possible social or therapeutic support by doing so. Across all cases, the participants expressed the desire to be believed, affirmed and taken seriously by their parents, friends, therapists, and the society at large.

M[15] *I noticed every male psychiatrist I've always had has said, "What's your sexual orientation?" I've always said, "How is that relevant to my treatment?" Just on principle, I will not answer the question.*

O[5] *Then I came back home and brother Michael just told me go along with it, just don't make waves.*

T[52] *I think that with women, with lesbians especially, there's such a disappearing of ... experience and validity.*

La[6] *And my parents didn't accept what happened. Till this day they really don't believe that anything happened because it took me so long to tell them about what had happened. It's like the unforbidden thing, we don't talk about it at home, we don't mention it, no one in the family knows about it, except for my parents. So no one talks about it.*

Le[29] *The things I say to my mom, people would think wow, and in some ways I hold back a lot, to protect myself from her denial and judging.*

T[24] *So now my reality, my emotional spaces, my emotional states weren't validated, so I'm still going through that whole thing of disappearing.*

Le[33] *It makes me feel that I'm exaggerating it and what happened really wasn't abusive, and I mean 'cause that's what my mom would tell me.*

H[24] *I went through the mental health system for 10 years, and I have brought it up [sexual abuse]. And it's the sort of thing that they don't, it's almost like they don't want to talk about, or they don't want to believe you. I was told so many times, "Well just cause you're saying this you ... doesn't necessarily mean this happened in the past."*

K[12] *She [my mother] talked to her therapist. And her therapist talked to me. I was in a happy, healthy relationship. So he went back and told her that there is nothing wrong with me, that you need an attitude change basically. So I think that meant a lot to her coming from a professional.*

H[25] *The counselors are all like, "You don't have to talk about it, you don't ... you don't have to talk about it if you don't feel comfortable. You don't have to talk about it.*

M[28] *And the school, the teachers were not perceptive or sympathetic to [self injury] in the least. I mean, they thought I was lazy, or absent-minded, or stupid or something. And you know, when a child had issues, the way to deal with them was to yell at ... her. So I just got yelled at a lot.*

M[29] *My therapist ... wanted to be supportive but didn't know how in the beginning. ... "How could you forget this?" Or ... "Are you sure he raped you at knife point?" I mean you don't want to believe it, and if you're not trained in this area, you don't get it.*

S[11] *I got very depressed, very depressed. Had a really hard time, and I finally told my sister, and my sister got very angry with me. ... And she said, you're just crazy. You're making this up." ... My mother called me hysterical and called me every name in the book. ... "Your father would never, ever do that. You have a sick, twisted mind." ... And about a year later, I tried to kill myself. ... I just got so depressed, I cut myself off from my family because I felt like not only did they not believe me, but they were supporting him.*

6. It should have been easier to come out.

Research indicated that there is considerable variation in the fluidity, timing, and context of women's same-sex experiences and coming out (Diamond & Savin-Williams, 2000).

However, the general perception of the women who participated in this study was that their particular experience of coming out was atypical and difficult. The theme of coming out also had relevance with regard to the closeting of their childhood abuse experiences. A number of participants had limited, or no, discussions about their abuse with family members, friends, and even therapists.

K[32] *Sometimes I would think since I'm participating in this, [but] then on the other hand you realize that I can never say I ever enjoyed any of it, but I guess I was at the age*

where I was old enough to think that there was something different, because if I was in the right development, maybe I would be enjoying it. ... so I'm thinking maybe that does mean I'm tracked this other way, there was this back and forth thing.

O[16] *You know, I'm gay, but I don't tell it. I don't go sleep with men! But I don't tell it. ... It's so hard. Like I don't know what they would think, you know. ... and people knew me from not gay, or whatever, you know. And it was always assumed especially that I would get married to somebody, and have a child.*

P[62] *But I remember that night, that feeling being with her. And I don't know why, for me it didn't just happen you know like progressively. Why then didn't I go look for another woman? I didn't. I went and looked for men. Maybe it was because it was too risky or too, you know I never really thought of that before, that I would be like that. I remember that night thinking ... I can't become gay ... I can't be gay because, I can't let my family know that after being, after coming out of the hospital, they already think I'm crazy. They already hate me and it would be too hard. I remember thinking that.*

Le[49] *When I first came out, I struggled for a lot of years and I thought am I just gay because I was abused by men, you know and I just struggled with that for a long time and I feel like that's sort of something I struggled around. I struggled with that and I kind of wanted to be queer but I thought, is this just because I was abused by men?*

La[57] *In the beginning, I was denying it all over the place. I was thinking this is not what a person should be. It's wrong for another woman to kiss another woman or for a guy to kiss another guy. It thought that was very wrong. That's the way I grew up. It's the way mom and dad taught you. And that's the way the church said to be. So I really believed it was wrong. But I kept having these feelings and these problems. I know for the longest time I didn't even tell Joan [her therapist] that I had these problems.*

T[45] *I hadn't introduced this woman, a 5-year relationship, my immediate family knew who she was to me, but not the extended family outside of that, or like the friends at the family function. Looking back on that now, it's just like what is that? ... I was sort of not shaking the boat.*

M[63] *I would have been out very much sooner, probably 14 or 15, because I understood I was attracted to women. And I understood there were other women in the world like that. So it was a matter of not being able to trust what my body was telling me. Of course, it's a common theme.*

H[48] *So my mom she's made all kinds of comments. She's been all over the map with it. "It's not normal," she's said that, "It's not normal," um "Gay people aren't normal."*

S[11] *I didn't tell anybody about it [the abuse], because I think I just couldn't believe it. You know, I kept trying to figure out ... I remember saying to myself for years, "Oh, he was just trying to see if I was clean." "Dads do that, you know."*

Summary of themes.

Identifying and describing categories and themes that emerged across all interview transcriptions, was an iterative process. This section attempted to bring to light commonalities of the experience, and comprised interpretations representing multiple accounts of the same experience. Three tables were presented that endeavored to document the development of the analysis, as well as to illuminate the combined influence of forces that shaped the emotions, thoughts, and actions of each participant with regard to her CSA and coming out experience.

Summary of Chapter 4

This chapter identified and described all empirical materials used in the analytic process. They included interview transcriptions, my notes, literature, participants' poetry, profiles, profile analyses, and emerging themes. I pursued metaphors of body language, modes of speech, and personal environments, as well as metaphors embedded in textual contents; this activity sometimes helped me to find new meaning and deeper understanding of a woman's individual experience. Data analysis was presented in the forms of profiles, analysis of the profiles, and themes that emerged from analysis within and across cases. In this chapter, my goal was to develop interpretations of the empirical materials that not only pointed out the uniqueness of each participant, but also demonstrated the commonalities of the experience of being a lesbian woman who was sexually abused as a child.