

Family Experiences of Single Sexual Minority Women from the Baby Boom

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ABSTRACT

Most individuals spend more than half their lives as single due to divorce, widowhood, and remaining single (Simpson, 2016). Singlehood, in general, has meant not being in a heterosexual relationship. Historically, lesbian women have been considered single because their relationships were not legally recognized. Single women and lesbian women have had more choices to live outside heterosexual marriage, financially and with social acceptability, in the later portion of the 20th century and in the early 21st century than previously. Single sexual minority women of the baby boom came of age during this time and are beginning to plan for and enter into old age. This study used qualitative methods to study how single sexual minority women of the baby boom cohort defined family and planned for their later years. Women from the baby boom cohort who are currently single and identify as a sexual minority were connected to their family of origin and extended families in their youth, focused on romantic relationships during adulthood, and currently identify their family as biological and chosen family. The women had formal and informal plans for their future as they continue to age. Limitations, future directions, and implications are also discussed.

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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

Within the United States, most individuals spend more than half their lives as single. Singlehood, in general, has meant not being in a heterosexual relationship. Historically, lesbian women have been considered single because their relationships were not legally recognized. Single and sexual minority women are recently more able financially and with social acceptability, to live outside heterosexual marriage. Single sexual minority women of the baby boom came of age during this time and are beginning to plan for and enter into old age. This study used interviews to research how single sexual minority women of the baby boom cohort defined family and planned for their later years. Women from the baby boom cohort who are currently single and identify as a sexual minority were connected to their immediate family and extended families in their youth, focused on romantic relationships during adulthood, and currently identify their closest circle as biological and chosen family. The women had formal and informal plans for their future as they continue to age with a desire to remain independent for as long as possible. Discussions around sexuality in relation to singlehood also emerged during the interviews.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Singlehood has had a recent celebration and acknowledgement, particularly within writings for non-academic audiences and single women. For example, during the week of Valentine's Day 2016, *The Washington Post* printed a series on singlehood (e.g., Coontz, 2016). Additionally, books released in the last few years about single women go beyond the discourse of "how to get a man" (see Bolick, 2015; Traister, 2016). Previously, the discourse surrounding singlehood focused on what was wrong with women for not being married, but this focus is problematic in that it perpetuates the assumptions associated with compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980) and heteronormativity (Oswald, Blume, & Marks, 2005).

Historically, lesbian women have been considered single because their relationships were not recognized legally and often were not recognized by their families either (Franzen, 1996). Thus, for single lesbian women, social singlehood, when someone was not in a romantic relationship, was prominent prior to the 21st century and before there was a greater push across the United States for same-sex marriage. Currently, as same-sex marriage has become legal within the United States, there are two discourses—those that refer to legal singlehood and those that refer to social singlehood (Morris, Sinclair, & DePaulo, 2007; Sassler, 2010; Slonim, Gur-Yaish, & Katz, 2015). Additionally, by the later portion of the 20th century, lesbian women were able to live outside heterosexual marriage and on their own terms if they were able to be financially independent (Faderman, 1991). This option became more feasible as women were more able to find work in the paid labor force, move outside their family of origin's home, and relocate to distant locations, predominantly cities, giving them freedom from constant family surveillance.

My focus is on legally and socially single lesbian women of the baby boom cohort, born between 1946 and 1964 (Colby & Ortman, 2014; Lin & Brown, 2012). That is, they are not legally tied to a partner nor are they in a long-term romantic relationship without legal standing (i.e., committed but not married, domestic partnership, or civil union; Morris et al., 2007). Sexual minority is an umbrella term, used primarily within academic social sciences rather than by individuals as a label, to capture sexual orientation identities of multiple labels when people are not exclusively heterosexual. Many sexual minority women may identify as lesbian or bisexual or queer. Some scholars prefer to use “queer” as the umbrella term or LGBT+ (van Eeden-Moorefield, 2018), however those terms and identity labels may be more preferred among younger individuals (Russell, Clarke, & Clary, 2009) and while this research was open to women who identified as women, no trans individuals participated. Thus, I use the terms lesbian and sexual minority for women who are sexually and/or romantically attracted to women, though individuals may use a variety of labels to identify themselves (Diamond, 2008).

Single sexual minority women of the baby boom cohort came of age during a time when it became more socially acceptable for women to be overtly single and non-heterosexual. Currently, as members of the baby boom cohort, they are beginning to enter into old age (Lin & Brown, 2012). They are subject to singleism, which DePaulo (2006) defined as the stereotyping and stigmatizing of individuals who are single through divorce, widowhood, and lifelong singlehood. For these women, singleism, at the very least, intersects with ageism, sexism, and homophobia, if not other biases as well. Other social identities that are positioned as invisible or oppressed may lead to further differentiation and disadvantage, including racial, ethnic, and physical distinctions. These considerations lead to two research questions that I examined in this

study: a) How do sexual minority women who are unmarried and uncoupled define family? b) How do women who have been historically marginalized plan for their later years?

Single women and lesbian women historically have occupied a space on the outskirts of society in terms of the prevalent expectations of heterosexuality and being partnered, which until recently assumed heterosexual marriage. Further, lesbians have hidden their identity and have had their voices silenced (Faderman, 1991; Stanley & Wise, 1990). Single lesbian women are, therefore, marginalized within heterosexual and coupled society. Additionally, women have often been defined in terms of their dependency on a man, such as socially, economically, and physically (Stanley & Wise, 1990). Research has focused primarily on marriage and family patterns, particularly the normative ideals of finding a partner, having children, and having grandchildren (Allen, 1989). This focus has led to a limited body of work on how individuals approach marriage and family relationships in various ways (Budgeon, 2016; Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007; Fitzpatrick, Sharp, & Reifman, 2009). Research on women's lives beyond the focus on ideals of marriage and family can include how individuals experience sexual and romantic identity and their romantic and sexual partnering over time outside of marriage (Manley, Diamond, & van Anders, 2015), especially when focusing on those who are and have remained single for long periods of their lives (Budgeon, 2016; Byrne & Carr, 2005; McCann & Allen, 2018; Sharp & Ganong, 2011).

In the last 20 years, within the United States, there has been a shift in the celebration and acceptance of singlehood across sexual orientation identities as well as a major shift in terms of increasing acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community. One aspect of this shift is same-sex marriage, which became legal in all 50 states with the Supreme Court ruling in *Obergefell v. Hodges* on June 26, 2016. This ruling occurred almost exactly 47 years after the Stonewall Inn Riots, which

is often considered the beginning of the gay liberation movement (D'Emilio & Freedman, 2012; Faderman, 1991). These changes bring legal and social recognition of same-sex couples and families. As Gartrell, Bos, Peyser, Deck, and Rodas (2011) argued, society is moving from a lack of institutional understanding and support of relationships outside traditional heterosexual marriage to providing legal recognition of a variety of partnerships.

Tasker (2013) argued that it is important to look at gay and lesbian individuals and families not in comparison to what is considered acceptable and normal (i.e., heterosexual two-parent families), but rather to study these families as to what makes them unique, special, and resilient. In many ways, research on members of sexual minorities needs to focus outside heteronormativity. Scholars call for the examination of families and relationships outside the biological kinship connections and embrace the diverse ways families are constituted (Berkowitz, 2009; Goldberg & Gartrell, 2014; Oswald, Kuvalanka, Blume, & Berkowitz, 2009).

As members of the baby boom, older adults in the United States are a more diverse and heterogeneous population compared to previous cohorts (Fredriksen-Goldsen, Hoy-Ellis, Muraco, Goldsen, & Kim, 2015; Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2011; Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2013; Orel & Fruhauf, 2015; Services and Advocacy for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Elders [SAGE], 2014). One in three members of the baby boom birth cohort are estimated to be unmarried (Lin & Brown, 2012) and projected that there will be 3 million adults in the United States who are over 65 and identify as a member of a sexual minority group by the year 2030 (Allen & Roberto, 2016; Williams & Fredriksen-Goldsen, 2014). Many of these diverse groups need unique supports, as they have remained underserved and historically disadvantaged (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2011; Orel, 2014; Orel & Fruhauf, 2015; SAGE, 2014).

In addition to sexual minority older adults being an oft-invisible subset of the aging population (Rowan & Giunta, 2014; Sullivan, 2014), gerontological research has historically ignored their specific needs and concerns due to ignorance, heterosexism, and purposeful marginalization (Brown & Grossman, 2014; Orel & Fruhauf, 2015; Sullivan, 2014). Another issue is the challenge of securing adults from sexual minority groups as research participants, as many do not trust researchers to have their best interest in mind (Averett et al., 2014; Sullivan, 2014). The existing research tends to focus on the discussion of health disparities (e.g., Fredriksen-Goldsen, Kim, Barkan, Muraco, & Hoy-Ellis, 2013), housing challenges (e.g., Sullivan, 2014) and social care networks through families of choice (e.g., Muraco & Fredriksen-Goldsen, 2011) including friend-centered support networks (e.g., Brennan-Ing, Seidel, Larson, & Karpiak, 2014).

Theoretical Framework

Life course and critical feminist perspectives guided this study. These perspectives are particularly relevant with the focus on single women of the baby boom cohort, due to the off-time nature of singlehood and sexuality transitions (Allen, 1989; Band-Winterstein & Manchik-Rimon, 2014; Sharp & Ganong, 2011). Combining a life course perspective with a feminist perspective supported a focus on the life history of individuals as influenced by socio-historical context, particularly for aging sexual minority women (Adriansen, 2012; Bengtson & Allen, 1993; Allen & Roberto, 2016; Townsend, 2012).

Life Course Perspective

A life course perspective highlights the historical and social context that underscore an individual's and family's life (Elder, 1998; Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003; Elder & Giele, 2009). Life course is an interdisciplinary approach to individual and family development that

acknowledges the sensitivity to various dimensions of time, including individual, family, and historical time (Allen, 1989; Bengtson & Allen, 1993; Elder, 1998). A life course perspective takes note of transitions and turning points in individual and family life, which can include entering or exiting a relationship and disclosing one's sexual orientation identity or relational identity (Allen & Henderson, 2017; Elder, 1998). The concept of agency is also important within a life course perspective, in which an individual has the ability to make choices, though those choices are constrained within the historical and societal institutions in which they live (Allen & Henderson, 2017; Elder, 1998).

Another key concept within a life course perspective that influences this project is that of cohorts. Cohorts consist of individuals with general characteristics based on experiencing similar contexts as they moved through life during certain historical time frames; their shared experiences are also influenced by economics, politics, religion, and other socio-cultural players (Allen & Henderson, 2017; Elder, 1998; Elder et al., 2003; Elder & Giele, 2009). In contrast to cohorts, generations include the linked lives of families and the succession of births in the family life cycle (Elder et al., 2003). Elder et al. (2003) noted that locating people into cohorts by birth year, provides a more precise historical placement than the broader concept of generations, by linking age and historical time and the historical changes that have implications for people of different ages.

A life course perspective is particularly important in studying the lives of sexual minorities, especially, with the focus on human development occurring in unique sociopolitical settings that have resulted in distinctions across cohorts (Hammack & Cohler, 2011). Each successive generation that comes of age and are attracted to the same sex have encountered unique historical events and social change that has influenced their lives, and defined the

meaning of identity and desire (Cohler, 2005; Hammack & Cohler, 2011). Historical events and social change can include shifts in defining and understanding same-sex attraction, the activism of the mid-20th century, the emergence of the gay liberation movement, and the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s (Hammack & Cohler, 2011). Within the last decade, the social change events included policy shifts towards same-sex marriage inclusion, the repeal of Don't Ask Don't Tell, and executive orders protecting LGBTQ+ individuals and families from the federal government and some states. As Connidis and Walker (2009) wrote, a "life course perspective demands attention to aging and incorporates agency in the view that we construct our biographies through the decisions that we make and the paths that we take" (p. 153). Through involvement with education, family, work, and other institutions, individual lives follow different paths (Bengtson & Allen, 1993; Connidis & Walker, 2009).

Critical Feminist Perspective

As Stanley and Wise (1990) have argued, women have often been defined in terms of social, economic, physical, and other dependency on a man. Feminist principles emphasize that women are capable and valuable; recognize that most knowledge has an androcentric bias; and add an understanding that social locations intersect to produce differential life experiences, such that there is not a universal standpoint for women (Walker, Allen, & Connidis, 2005). With this, research can be about privileging the experiences of women rather than presuming objective, value-free knowledge (Adams, 2009; Allen, 1994), as well as acknowledging and finding value in women's experiences, values, and activities. Societal beliefs, norms, and opportunities define women's real and perceived options (Baber & Allen, 1992).

Feminism, as a theoretical perspective and a social movement, has had fluid periods where ideas and progress build upon each other, typically called waves. Each wave does not

have firm start or end dates but are fluid in when and how society and personal lives change. Each wave continues to build upon the previous period's contributions and critiques (Allen, 2016; Phillips & Cree, 2014). The waves of feminism can be equated with cohorts of individuals, influencing the historical and social context in which they live (Allen, 2016; Eichorn, 2015; Phillips & Cree, 2014). The first wave directly stemmed from the abolition movement, though focused on White middle-class women and their push for equal rights with men, particularly around property and voting rights (Allen, 2016; Phillips & Cree, 2014). The second wave emerged with movements for social change including the civil rights movements, gay liberation, women's liberation, and protesting the Vietnam War during the late 1950s to the 1970s. This period was also influenced by writings, such as Betty Friedan's (1963) *The Feminine Mystique*, though this still spoke primarily to White middle-class women's experiences (Coontz, 2005).

The third wave, during the 1980s to early 21st century (Phillips & Cree, 2014) challenged the universal definition of woman, bringing in the voices of many women and discussing multiply marginalized identities as intersectionality (De Reus, Few, & Blume, 2005). This period also had a wide use of zines, which are self-published, grassroots magazines (Eichorn, 2015; Phillips & Cree, 2014). The third wave was also characterized by the instrumental influence of work by Black feminist scholars Audre Lorde (1984), bell hooks (1984), and Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) (see Few-Demo, 2014) on feminism and intersectionality.

The current feminist era is the fourth wave, with a renewed interest and focus on feminism, acknowledging that there is a long way to go in areas including sexual assault, poverty, work, economic advancement, and reproductive freedom (Allen, 2016) while also pushing towards body positivity, sex positivity, and gender equality (beyond the dichotomy) for trans individuals (Baumgardner, 2011; Munro, n.d.). This period is also influenced by the digital

age, including blogs, social media, websites focusing on feminism (e.g., feministing.com, everydayfeminism.com; Baumgardner, 2011; Munro, n.d.; Phillips & Cree, 2014; Solomon, 2009) and hashtag movements (e.g., #heforshe, #blacklivesmatter, #staywoke, #sayhername, #MeToo, #TimesUp).

Within family studies, critical feminist perspectives have challenged the assumptions that reflect the status quo by questioning traditional power dynamics and the previously assumed knowledge about how families should look and behave (Allen, 2000, 2016; Few-Demo, 2014). Feminist family studies have emphasized the need to study families beyond the Standard North American Family (SNAF; Smith, 1993) of a heterosexual, legally married couple sharing a household with the male as the primary breadwinner (see also Allen, Lloyd, & Few, 2009). Feminist family scholars have also emphasized the necessity of incorporating intersectional perspectives including how age, class, race, sexual orientation, and other hierarchical structures influence families (Allen, 2016; Connidis & Walker, 2009; Few-Demo, 2014). Additionally, a critical feminist perspective on aging allows for analysis of the extent to which political and social factors interact to shape the experience of aging, in particular with regards to gender, race and origins, and social class (Freixas, Luque, & Reina, 2012; Ray, 1999).

Reflexive Statement—My Herstory

In relation to the reflexive nature of feminist research, I present my positionality to this study. Through my lived experience, I am both an insider and an outsider to the group with whom I have conducted research. I am a single, White, cisgender, queer, woman who comes from an academic heterosexual middle-class family of origin. However, my extended family and our historic roots in Appalachia are primarily working class, particularly with an agricultural

focus, such as farm hands. Within my extended family, each generation has had a “spinster” aunt.

My queer identity was not an important aspect of my self while growing up, but I came to my own realization and understanding while at a women’s college and more so during graduate school. I always had role models and peers who were out and visible to me, including queer and lesbian women who were part of the baby boom cohort. Though I did not understand it at the time, I gravitated towards these women, often developing strong friendships with them.

While at the 2016 LGBT Research Symposium at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, I had a conversation with a colleague about our experience with aging relatives that made me realize the connection between my interest in aging and my lived experience. As the offspring of those born at the beginning of the baby boom, there is a subsequent cohort, (commonly known as Generation X, roughly those born between 1965 and 1981) between my parents and my brother and me. Thus, I grew up with extended family who were older than the families of my peers, and I was more likely to encounter the health declines and deaths of aging family members. Until graduate school, I had been to more funerals than I had weddings. From age 8 to 21, my family of origin served as caretakers, both close-by and at a distance, of aging biological and chosen family members, which I often refer to as my village, referencing the proverb “it takes a village to raise a child”. Each of these individuals was single due to widowhood or divorce; all were all heterosexual, and two were childless.

As a member of what is popularly known as the millennial generation (roughly those born between 1982 and 1994; Ng, Lyons, & Schweitzer, 2012), I have come of age at the start of the fourth wave feminist movement (Phillips & Cree, 2014). However, when asked what brought me to feminism or when I first realized my positions were feminist, I do not recall a singular

moment of realization, which is not surprising as I was raised in a second-wave feminist household. I was always fascinated by feminist history, which showed in my academic work from a project on Sojourner Truth and her “Ain’t I A Woman” speech in the 6th grade, to competing at the local and state level in the 8th grade with a project on the Seneca Falls Convention and the beginning of first wave feminism. My village supported this in always being willing to discuss feminism and women’s education with me. I found an institution of higher education that supported and continued to challenge my ideas about feminism in a historically women’s college, which was founded in 1842, shortly before the start of first wave feminism.

During my undergraduate years at Hollins University, Beyoncé released the song, “Single Ladies”. At the same time, a member of Hollins’ Board of Trustees, Dr. Cynthia Hale ‘75, a Black ever-single founder and pastor of a mega-church in Georgia, began writing and publishing about choosing singlehood. Reading her work started my path to thinking about singlehood beyond the deficit definition often portrayed both in the media and academic literature. During the summer after the landmark decision of *Obergefell v. Hodges*, I was reading Bolick’s (2015) book, *Spinster: Making a Life of One’s Own*, which made me start to think about the relationship of singlehood and sexual minorities. What particularly sparked my interest were the assumptions that singles are lonely sexual minorities, and sexual minorities are lonely singles. These assumptions do not leave much room for resilience and single sexual minority women to have the positive aspects of their lives heard and understood. My intention in undertaking this study of singlehood was to learn more about how sexual minority women understand the relational aspects of their lives as they age and how that has been influenced by the sociohistorical time period, their sexuality, their age, their gender, and other critical areas of experience.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of legally and socially single lesbian women of the baby boom cohort draws from multidisciplinary sources. Thus, reviewing literature on the historical context of single women, lesbian women, and sexual minority older women requires an interdisciplinary search. To conduct this review, I searched journals and academic search engines across disciplines, including those focusing on family studies, gerontology, LGBTQ, sexuality, and women's studies (see Appendix A: Journals Consulted for Literature Review for a full list of journals). In this chapter, I present a review of relevant literature to contextualize my study. I begin with research on singlehood, including the history of women's singlehood. I then move the focus to lesbian women, including the historical context of sexual minority women being visible and "out", as well as the women's and gay liberation movements. The final section of the literature review focuses on the family and social support contexts of sexual minority older adults.

Singlehood

History of Women's Singlehood

For much of history, societal expectations required individuals to marry someone of a different sex. The marriage expectation was particularly salient for women. After marriage, women were expected to bear and rear children. Women who did not marry (and did not enter religious organizations such as a convent) have often been looked upon with the least respect in society and within scientific literature (Baber & Allen, 1992; Band-Winterstein & Manchik-Rimon, 2014; Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007). This negative view of unmarried women, especially when older, ignores the sense of personal freedom many experience by being able to work outside the home, travel, earn their own money, and the like (Allen, 1994).

Women's opportunity to choose singlehood or to enter a long-term same-sex relationship meant choosing not to be dependent on men or have their central well-being not include male approval (Allen, 1994; Budgeon, 2016; Fahs, 2010; Sharp & Ganong, 2007). At the same time, many individuals within the United States, including researchers, still consider marriage a necessity to have the full human experience (Byrne & Carr, 2005; Cherlin, 2009; DePaulo & Morris, 2005; Fowlkes, 1994; Sandfield & Percy, 2003). Marriage is a way to have intimacy and security for oneself and one's family, including children (Cobb, 2012). However, being able to support oneself and leave the family home allowed women in the 19th and early 20th centuries to delay or avoid heterosexual marriage (Coontz, 2005). Even so, adult life in the United States continues to be organized around marriage. For example, by providing tax breaks and legal advantages to the married, the government emphasizes that families formed through marriage are the primary way in which individuals should live (Budgeon, 2016; Cherlin, 2009; DePaulo & Morris, 2005).

The 1960s brought a time of change for women who were single. Largely as a consequence of the civil rights movement and the women's movement, educational and employment opportunities for women expanded (Coontz, 1992, 2005; Fowlkes, 1994). This period had more individuals who chose to live in and create a singlehood culture in urban areas, including developing clubs and bars focused on single adults with disposable income (Weigel, 2016). Along with singles bars and clubs, young adults who were living in cities, away from the watchful eye of their families, and with enough income to spend money outside of necessities, allowed a new culture of consumerism to emerge. This consumerist culture included guidebooks for the unattached, dating services, and new styles of living with youth-oriented apartment buildings (D'Emilio & Freedman, 2012; Weigel, 2016). However, money was a prerequisite for

a successful single life for women, earned through hard work rather than a male admirer, thus measuring a woman's worth by what she did rather than to whom she belonged (Coontz, 1992, 2005; Franzen, 1996; Sharp & Ganong, 2011). D'Emilio and Freedman (2012) explained,

In the Progressive era, the working girl raised the specter of social disorder and gender upheaval. In the postwar period, the single working woman was not only an accepted but also a necessary feature of economic life. The expansion of the retail and service sector of the labor force, the so-called pink-collar economy, drew women into the job market, married as well as single. Moreover, economic prosperity rested squarely upon an ethic of consumption, as business needed buyers for an endless array of consumer items. (p. 305)

During this time period, new ideas about freedom emerged, including physical and sexual freedom, and not seeing marriage as a virtue (Coontz, 1992). With the hippie and free-love influence, and the separation of sex, marriage, and childrearing, some individuals abandoned the nuclear family, and raised children in communal settings. Communal settings allowed for common, loose extended families to emerge (Coontz, 1992; D'Emilio & Freedman, 2012).

Current Perspectives on Singlehood

With the demographic shift of more individuals remaining single, re-entering singlehood after divorce or being widowed, and spending more than half of adult life as single (Coontz, 2016; Lin & Brown, 2012; Simpson, 2016), a renewed interest in singlehood studies has emerged (Budgeon, 2008). Most of the literature on singlehood focuses on young adults (Band-Winterstein & Manchik-Rimon, 2014; Mahay & Lewin, 2007) and heterosexual individuals (e.g., Fitzpatrick et al., 2009; Mahay & Lewin, 2007; Sandfield & Percy, 2003). For a long time being single meant not being in a heterosexual marriage (Fowlkes, 1994; Franzen, 1996). Now, in the

21st century, being single means not being in a heterosexual or same-sex marriage (legally single) as well as not being in a long-term relationship, cohabitating or living-apart-together (socially single; Morris et al., 2007; Sassler, 2010; Slonim, Gur-Yaish, & Katz, 2015). The general literature on adulthood and the specific literature on single older adults are characterized by two areas: (a) ever-single adults and (b) comparing the well-being of singles (never-married, divorced, and widowed) to married adults.

Ever-single. Ever-single adults, particularly women, are considered by many to be a marginalized group and are categorized in stereotypical and pejorative ways for defying social norms (Allen, 1994; Byrne & Carr, 2005; Moore & Radtke, 2015; Slonim, Gur-Yaish, & Katz, 2015; Sharp & Ganong, 2011). Singles, particularly older single adults, are also presumed to be lonely (Band-Winterstein & Manchik-Rimon, 2014). In a qualitative study, Sandfield and Percy (2003) found that single White, able-bodied, heterosexual women aged 20-48 from the United Kingdom constructed the status of being unmarried as a temporary and preparatory stage for marriage. However, this construction was influenced by the age of the participants and the age of the women who were single. Young women who are not married were constructed as not married yet, but older women were constructed as unusual or deviant and needed to account for their single status to themselves and others. Additionally, singlehood was seen as a threat to social connections. The younger women referred to older single women in negative and derogatory ways, by constructing them as lonely, passive, and “ending up” as spinsters (Sandfield & Percy, 2003).

Ever-single's desire to marry. Some ever-single individuals do want to find a partner and marry, while calculating the cost and benefits of marriage (Sassler, 2010). Mahay and Lewin (2007) studied age differences in the desire to marry among singles aged 18-69. They found that

single men and women aged 55-69 had less desire to marry than younger single men and women. Though having a spouse at older ages may be important for health, physical functioning, and financial well-being, it is also complicated to marry at older ages in terms of merging finances, careers, children, and lifestyles (Mahay & Lewin, 2007). Additionally, those older singles who had children from previous relationships had a reduced desire to marry (Mahay & Lewin, 2007). In a separate study focusing on those who do want to partner, Fitzpatrick et al. (2009) used secondary data analysis of the American Association for Retired Persons (AARP) survey with a sample of 3501 predominantly White, heterosexual individuals aged 40-69 on their willingness to date heterogeneous partners. They found that individuals in their 60s were less willing to date racially different partners than younger adults. Never-married singles were more willing to date heterogeneous partners than divorced or widowed individuals, potentially due to a wider social network or willingness to challenge convention (Fitzpatrick et al., 2009).

Singlehood identity. Some ever-singles have a sense of pride and identity building around their singlehood. Using in-depth life history interviews, Simpson (2016) studied 37 White heterosexual women in Great Britain, who were aged 36-83. The women noted that even with more single women, there were still many negative stereotypes of singles, including being gay, frigid, or too independent. Ever-single women were expected to explain why and how they were single, with those who stated an involuntary single status feeling less social stigma. However, those who saw singlehood as a resource viewed themselves as pioneers rather than someone who failed to enter into a long-term romantic relationship, thus representing a positive aspect of identity. Within the construction of a positive self-identity as a single person, many of the women emphasized sustaining relationships with friends and family members, similar to the findings of Allen's (1989) study of White, working class older never-married women. Simpson

(2016) argued that the importance of friendship in affirming one's positive sense of self-identity and self-worth may be especially significant for single women who are stigmatized as lonely and isolated.

Focusing on young and mid-life adults, Sharp and Ganong (2007), Budgeon (2008), and Moore and Radtke (2015), studied the "production of singleness" (Budgeon, p. 311) within the culture of couplehood. While Sharp and Ganong's (2007) study was conducted in the United States, Budgeon's (2008) was conducted in Great Britain, and Moore and Radtke's (2015) was conducted in Western Canada, with all studies using a predominantly White sample. Though the majority of participants were heterosexual, Budgeon (2008) included some gay men and lesbian women (29%). These studies found that though the participants were outside the couplehood norm by being single, the participants resisted any sort of deficit identity for being single and constructed their lives as secure and enjoyed living independently (Budgeon, 2008; Moore & Radtke, 2015; Sharp & Ganong, 2007). They negotiated space where being single was considered normal (Budgeon, 2008; Moore & Radtke, 2015) rather than being stigmatized for missing the marital transition (Sharp & Ganong, 2007). Additionally, participants noted why and how they remained single, including not meeting anyone they wanted to marry or choosing career, school, or location over partnering (Sharp & Ganong, 2007).

Focusing on older adults, Band-Winterstein and Manchik-Rimon (2014) conducted a qualitative study of single and childless retired men and women aged 60-87, from Israel. They found four major themes: (a) why they stayed single; (b) solitude as a part of the everyday routine; (c) taking care of themselves in old age; and (d) the self behind prejudices and stereotypes. Many of the participants indicated that while they were alone in the sense of being single, they did not feel lonely, in large part because of their broader family and friend networks.

They also took responsibility for the changes that old age brought, including making home adaptations as needed and the need for economic security. The participants also discussed how there was a broader social expectation of marriage and coupledness, and by being single and childless, there was some stigma related to that and many felt the need to justify their lives (Band-Winterstein & Manchik-Rimon, 2014).

Sexual-minority singles. The literature that focuses on socially single sexual minorities consists of three articles—two on single gay men (see Hostetler, 2009, 2012) and one on lesbian women (Laner, 1996). Laner (1996) analyzed age-related content of personal ads for companions placed by heterosexual and lesbian women with the expectation that lesbian women would desire younger partners more than heterosexual women. She found that younger women were more likely to place personal ads than older women. Contrary to her expectations, lesbian women were not seeking to find younger partners more than heterosexual women. These findings led Laner to argue that lesbians do not experience an acceleration of aging as early as heterosexual women because the age of their partner is not as important, and lesbian women have the advantage of ongoing contact with the LGBTQ community for friendship whether they are in a relationship or not.

Hostetler (2009, 2012) focused on mid-life and older gay men's experiences and understanding of their singlehood in relation to their sexuality. In a study of 94 gay men from a large Midwestern city in the United States who were aged 35 or older, Hostetler found that the men were not satisfied with their single status. Being single was not a salient identity for the men, and they did not indicate that they were single by choice. Hostetler argued that even within LGBTQ+ communities, there was a similar normative expectation of couplehood as in the broader heteronormative culture. Thus, for individuals to claim that they are single by choice is

to risk disbelief and the loss of support. The assumptions that all adults desire a long-term committed relationship, and those who do not have that desire or do not achieve a long-term relationship are pathological, leads individuals to not see singlehood as a positive status (Hostetler, 2012).

Comparing singles and marrieds. Two of the major concerns about single women that appear in the literature are their well-being, especially the ability to care for themselves as they age (DePaulo & Morris, 2005) and their loneliness (Dykstra & de Jong Gierveld, 2004). The assumption made about singles is that they are without a family. Yet, as Allen (1989) found, White, working-class single older women were fully integrated into their families of origin and larger kin networks. Additionally, whereas many women are single in old age due to being ever-single, divorced, and widowed, those who have been single for a long period of time may be better able to handle some of the perceived challenges of singlehood such as financial security and having a social network (Dykstra & de Jong Gierveld, 2004). Dykstra and de Jong Gierveld (2004) studied 3737 Dutch older adults who were married or currently un-married, and found that for older women, although marriage was not central to emotional well-being, social embeddedness or network, such as close friendships, colleagues, neighbors, and relatives was important. Women were able to find protection from emotional loneliness through close ties other than a spouse.

Looking specifically at the baby boom cohort, Lin and Brown (2012) used U. S. Census data from 1980, 1990, and 2000 to document trends, provide a national portrait, and attend to the heterogeneity of individuals' identities and experiences within the socio-historical context. In 2009, 37% of women aged 45-63 were unmarried. Lin and Brown found that unmarried older adults from the baby boom cohort faced greater economic, health, and social vulnerabilities

compared to married baby boomers, although the vulnerabilities were less pronounced for divorced individuals. Widowed women were the most disadvantaged among the groups as they were more likely to report having a disability, having a decline in economic resources, and having less education, partially because those who were widowed typically had been considered single for less time than those who were divorced or ever-single (Lin & Brown, 2012).

Sexual Minority Women

History of Women-Loving-Women Since the 19th Century

Veil of sexual innocence and romantic friendships. In the 19th century, the term “lesbian” had yet to be used to describe women who were attracted to or loved women. Often women who loved women had romantic friendships, which were considered a normal part of female development and preparation for heterosexual marriage (Faderman, 1991; Coontz, 1992, 2005; Vicinus, 1989, 2004). Overall, women’s autonomous sexuality and understanding of women as being sexual was denied or ignored, particularly among the upper economic class (Brehony, 1993; Faderman, 1991; Rothblum & Brehony, 1993). Women who were able to support themselves or who had family wealth were not forced to give up their romantic friendships for marriage (Faderman, 1991; Rothblum & Brehony, 1993; Vicinus, 2004).

For some in the late 19th century and early 20th century, as it was considered unfeasible for women to be sexual with other women, their relationships were considered asexual and have been referred to as Boston Marriages, after Henry James’ 1886 book, *The Bostonians* (Brehony, 1993; Faderman, 1991, 1993; Rothblum & Brehony, 1993). These women chose to live with other women who had similar life goals and career paths, such as remaining single and pursuing employment that allowed them to be financially independent (Rothblum & Brehony, 1993; Smith-Rosenberg, 1989; Vicinus, 2004). In the early 20th century, the rejection of close same-sex

friendships and extended family ties reflected the growing primacy of the heterosexual couple (Coontz, 2005). Additionally, with the rise of the scientific study of sexology, German sexologists such as Havelock Ellis and Richard von Krafft-Ebing defined and labeled same-sex attractions (Vicinus, 2004). Thus, women were no longer able to hide behind a “veil of sexual innocence” (Faderman, 1991, p. 4), leading to the end of romantic friendships as acceptable relationships for women (Fowlkes, 1994; Franzen, 1996).

Moving towards independence. At the end of the 19th century and into the early 20th century, living openly as someone who loved other women also meant living independently of male protection or financial support (Faderman, 1991, 1993; Franzen, 1996; Smith-Rosenberg, 1989; Vicinus, 2004). This independence was more feasible as women were able to secure employment outside the home, move outside their family of origin’s home, and relocate to more urban areas, allowing them to be economically self-sufficient and free from constant family surveillance (Coontz, 1992, 2005; D’Emilio & Freedman, 2012; Faderman, 1991; Franzen, 1996). Between the 1880s and the First World War, working-class women left the home to work in factories, offices, and retail establishments. During this same period middle-class and wealthy, predominantly White women, entered college and pursued professional careers (Coontz, 2005; D’Emilio & Freedman, 2012; Franzen, 1996). These societal changes helped to develop a lesbian subculture. The lesbian subculture included public places for women to meet other women who had similar interests, allowed women to have less pressure to procreate, an openness about sexuality, and independence and self-sufficiency (Faderman, 1991).

The pendulum continued to swing for many decades within the 20th and early 21st centuries in relation to how permissive or restricted life was for lesbian women. In the 1920s, lesbian bars were often the hub of lesbian subculture, which were mostly frequented by working

class women (D'Emilio & Freedman, 2012; Faderman, 1991). By the 1930s, with the Great Depression, it was difficult for women to not be in a heterosexual marriage due to the downturn in the economy and the challenge of being financially independent (Coontz, 2005; Vicinus, 2004). With World War II, women again were able to move into large cities for work, thereby allowing them to meet other lesbians and giving them a sense of independence. Following the war, women were expected to move back to heterosexual domestic life, but modern innovations and circumstances led to an awakening consciousness and the beginning of a new wave of social justice for women in general and lesbians in particular (D'Emilio & Freedman, 2012; Faderman, 1991). A lesbian subculture flourished, despite the persecution of the lesbian and gay community throughout the McCarthy Era of the 1950s, known as the Lavender Scare (Faderman, 1991).

Women's and gay liberation. The 1960s ushered in an intensity of social justice movements, including peace and anti-war movements, civil rights, and a reawakening of feminism. Lesbian women refused to be secretive about their lives as well (Faderman, 1991). During this period, social-political groups flourished, and there was some movement away from the lesbian bar culture (Faderman, 1991; Rothblum, 2010). The 1960s was also the period of lesbian-feminists, where some women (primarily White and college educated) “converted” to lesbianism as part of a change in consciousness that women should not go home to men; rather, they should devote their time and energy to other women—socially, politically, and sexually (Faderman, 1991). Lesbian-feminists revised the essentialist argument, saying that all women had the capacity for same-sex attraction and behaviors (Rich, 1980), which is continued in the current literature on sexual fluidity (e.g., Diamond, 2008). The various social movements were not always accepting of people within the movement leadership or organizations who held

multiple identities or acknowledged multiple oppressions, such as lesbians within the National Organization of Women or lesbians of color in the lesbian-feminist movement (Faderman, 1991).

With the revival of feminism in the late 1960s, some lesbians took up the cause of women's emancipation. Lesbians had been moving in the public world of work to support themselves and had encountered the challenges of women in the workforce (Fowlkes, 1994; Franzen, 1996). They did not have husbands to provide them legitimacy in a hetero-coupled society (Coontz, 2005; Fowlkes, 1994; Vicinus, 2004) and did not want to be part of the "single-girl who chased men" ideology (Fowlkes, 1994; Franzen, 1996). Lesbians confronted the limited options available to women, which touched upon the political matter of oppression, domination, and power (Smith-Rosenberg, 1989). Lesbianism, and lesbian-feminists, put women first, in direct confrontation to society's view of male supremacy (D'Emilio & Freedman, 2012; Fowlkes, 1994). Additionally, through women's and gay liberation, heterosexual marriage was challenged as undeserving of a favored status in law and custom (D'Emilio & Freedman, 2012; Faderman, 1991; Franzen, 1996).

By the late 1980s within the lesbian community, there was more acceptance of diversity with the recognition and understanding of multiple identities for all lesbians. These identities included racial diversity and sub-identities, such as gender expression, in how one is portrayed (Faderman, 1991; Rothblum, 2010). Where lesbians had once been invisible minorities, lesbian women pushed for more visibility in order to gain one's rights and greater acceptance, as well as to appreciate their uniqueness and strength (Vicinus, 2004). Within the 1980s and the greater recognition of multiple identities, there was more acknowledgement of lesbians of color such as Gloria Anzaldua and Audre Lorde, who, in an interview, defined being a lesbian as,

strongly woman-identified women where love between is open and possible, beyond physical in every way. There are lesbians, God knows...if you came up through lesbian circles in the forties and fifties in New York...who were not feminist and would not call themselves feminists. But the true feminist deals out of a lesbian consciousness whether or not she ever sleeps with women. I can't really define it in sexual terms alone although our sexuality is so energizing why not enjoy it too? But that comes back to the whole issue of what the erotic is. There are so many ways of describing 'lesbian.' Part of the lesbian consciousness is an absolute recognition of the erotic within our lives and, taking that a step further, dealing with the erotic not only in sexual terms. (Hammond & Lorde, 1980, p. 21)

During this time of the 1980s, the New Right emerged in political and religious spheres, which brought some pressure on the community, but there was also a "gayby boom" (Dunne, 2000; Orel & Fruhauf, 2006), using medical technology to have biological children, especially among lesbian couples (Faderman, 1991).

Moving towards greater acceptance. Women and the LGBTQ+ community have pushed the boundaries of normativity throughout history, such as women who chose to be single and work outside the home pre-World War II (Smith-Rosenberg, 1989), and women creating an entire subculture with the Gay Bar scene (Davis & Kennedy, 1989). Pushing the boundaries also included challenging gender through butch-femme representation, such as wearing pants when it was socially unacceptable (and to some extent illegal), which occurred both within the predominantly White lesbian bars and in the Black community of Harlem (Crawley, 2001; Davis & Kennedy, 1989; Faderman, 1991; Weber, 1996). In the 21st century, after many decades of

debate and struggle, the sexual minority community has sought and partially won the ability to assimilate through legal marriage along with some greater acceptance for non-heterosexual identities (Hammack & Cohler, 2011). The legal opportunity to marry was largely fought for acceptance and safety, including the safety of family laws to have legal rights to one's children and property. However, this has also led to assimilating into the dominant heteronormative culture (Rich, 1980), resulting in homonormativity which is the expectation of having a same-sex long-term partnership with children as well as being White, middle or upper class, able-bodied, further marginalizing those who do not fit this paradigm (Allen & Mendez, 2018; Brown, 2012; Bryant, 2008). Having discussed the socio-historical view of women-loving-women, during which women of the baby boom came of age, I will next turn to a discussion of family and social support for older sexual minority women.

Family and Social Support for Sexual Minority Older Women

Families are considered foundational for human development, providing lifelong sources of economic, educational, social, and emotional support. Families have traditionally been defined by a legal or biological tie, such as marriage, biological parenthood, or adoption (Allen & Roberto, 2016; Demo, Allen, & Fine, 2000; Heaphy, 2009; Scherrer & Fedor, 2015). Positive family relationships are considered important for one's overall health and happiness, which may be particularly true for older adults who sometimes rely on family members for care or find these relationships particularly meaningful (Scherrer & Fedor, 2015). If sexual minority individuals were rejected by their family of origin, they historically have turned to friends and the broader LGBTQ+ community, converting them to kin-like relationships (family of choice; Allen & Roberto, 2016; Heaphy, 2009; Weston, 1991). Sexual minority individuals had to be creative in

their family ties, given the legal and social constraints until the 21st Century in the United States (Allen & Roberto, 2016; Brennan-Ing et al., 2014; Gabrielson, 2011; Heaphy, 2009).

With the history of being hidden and marginalized by society and biological families, scholars include an assumption within the academic literature that sexual minority older individuals are not in contact with their families of origin, that they do not have children, and that they are single, isolated, lonely, and depressed (Gabrielson, 2011; Kimmel, Rose, Orel, & Greene, 2006; Wilkens, 2015). Further, the research on sexual minority older adults and their families is limited (as of this writing, a total of 51 articles published from 2000 to 2018). Overall, there was an influx of research on elder sexual minority adults after 2000 (Barker, Herdt, & DeVries, 2006; Kimmel, Rose, & David, 2006), but this new literature is primarily focused on gay men or on both gay men and women rather than solely on lesbian women (Averett, Yoon, & Jenkins, 2012; Barker et al., 2006; Gabrielson, 2011). However, within the broader sexual minority literature, there has been an influx of work on same-sex parenting and same-sex relationships (Biblarz & Savci, 2010). As societal acceptance has shifted, many of the findings and discussions about midlife and older sexual minorities may shift, including acknowledging that many older gay and lesbian individuals may have had children while in a heterosexual relationship or during the gayby boom of the 1980s (Averett et al., 2012; Fruhauf, Orel, & Jenkins, 2009; Orel & Fruhauf, 2006) rather than claiming sexual minority older adults are childless (e.g., Gabrielson, 2011).

Social support. de Vries (2015) argued that having social support from friends and family is important in mitigating the impact of stigmatization. Such social support could be particularly important for sexual minority older adults as they age (Brennan-Ing et al., 2014). Studies of sexual minority midlife and older adults have reported that sexual minority individuals

have a fear about aging, accessing resources, and medical care primarily due to previous discrimination. Further, these individuals indicated a greater likelihood that they would use LGBTQ+ friendly services (Gabrielson, 2011; Gardner, de Vries, & Mockus, 2014; Goldberg, Sickler, & Dibble, 2005; Sullivan, 2014). Sexual minority older adults have smaller support networks compared to their heterosexual peers (27% compared to 40%; SAGE, 2014) because they are less likely to have married, and they have fewer children (Brown & Grossman, 2014; Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2011). Having a same-sex partner has been found to be associated with better self-reported health and fewer depressive symptoms compared to single sexual minority older adults, even when controlling for race, education, gender, age, income, sexuality, and relationship duration (Williams & Fredriksen-Goldsen, 2014).

Fredriksen-Goldsen et al. (2011) also noted that among a sample of sexual minority older adults (aged 50 and over), 90% had at least moderate levels of social support. For example, many attended spiritual or religious services or activities (38%). They found that many of those in the LGBTQ+ community care for one another. In particular the sexual minority older adults relied heavily on partners and/or friends, especially those of similar age to provide assistance and help as they age together. Partners and friends who provide assistance can include those within the LGBTQ+ community; further, involvement with the community aids in maintaining the strength of one's social network and support (Orel, 2014).

Relationships. Past research has found that sexual minority older adults are less likely to have partnered or married compared to their heterosexual peers, resulting in less social support (Gabrielson, 2011). Sexual minority older adults are more likely to be childless than their heterosexual peers (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2011). However, in a study of 456 lesbian women over the age of 50 from across the United States, Averett et al. (2012) found that about 60% were

currently in a long-term relationship and 25% were single and not dating. The rest of the women indicated they were widowed, casually dating, or celibate,

Using a national sample, Brown and Grossman (2014) found that the men and women who indicated they were in a same-sex sexual relationship, were younger (see also Heaphy, 2009), less likely to have children, or had fewer children than their heterosexual counterparts. However, those in a same-sex sexual relationship had higher levels of education, were more likely to be working, and had fewer sources of social support and/or potential informal caregivers in their networks compared to their heterosexual peers. Sexual minority and heterosexual older adults did not have a difference in mental health in this sample (Brown & Grossman, 2014).

Sexual minority older adults were more likely to live alone compared to heterosexual peers, but the numbers differ based on location and study. The SAGE (2014) study found that 34% of sexual minority older adults lived alone and Sullivan (2014) found that 65% of sexual minority older adults in Los Angeles lived alone, without a roommate, children or partner, compared to the national rate of 21% of heterosexual peers (SAGE, 2014). They also reported a smaller support networks over time (40% compared to 27%; SAGE, 2014). Fredriksen-Goldsen et al. (2011) note in their executive summary report to the Institute for Multigenerational Health that older gay and bisexual men are at particular risk of living alone (see also Grossman, D'Augelli, & Hershberger, 2000).

Further, in a British mixed-method study merging relationships and social support, Heaphy (2009) examined how gay men and lesbian women over age 50 structured and negotiated their relational lives and the factors that limited the negotiations. They acknowledged the historical aspect of chosen families, which, as noted previously, are self-made resources with

the underpinning ethics of mutuality and reciprocity comprised of partners, children, ex-partners, friends, and members from the family of origin. These chosen kin can provide emotional and practical support in day-to-day life (Heaphy; Weston, 1991). Heaphy found, however, that most of the participants (60%) were in a coupled relationship, rather than that they were single, and preferred to be in a romantic relationship for support when it came to illness or later life. The participants were often critical of the couple-oriented culture as it assumed heterosexual ideals, though saw their same-sex relationships as operating in mutuality and reciprocity of egalitarian ideals. Additionally, a majority (63%) of the participants were still closely connected with their families of origin and were out to them. The participants also indicated that with economic resources, they have more access to relational supports, which can also include social and cultural resources such as joining clubs, affinity groups, and other networks (see also Wilkens, 2015).

From the sociocultural history for sexual minorities, much of the scholarship still presumes that sexual minority older adults are single, childless, lonely, and isolated (e.g. Gabrielson, 2011), yet some of the data contradicts that assumption (e.g. Averett et al., 2011). Living as a single sexual minority woman may require some level of independence and self-sufficiency, building on strengths within their lives rather than what is not in their life. Several socio-historical moments have occurred with the baby boom cohort compared to previous eras: the emergence of women who are financially independent and not heterosexually married and more acceptance of being out as a sexual minority. These women are also currently preparing to enter old age. With these historically invisible women, the aim of this study was to learn how they define family and how they are preparing for old age. The next chapter discusses how I conducted the research on single sexual minority women of the baby boom cohort.

CHAPTER 3: METHOD

The current study is a qualitative inquiry into the personal and family lives of single sexual minority women of the baby boom birth cohort. This study is grounded in a critical social constructivist paradigm (Daly, 2007), acknowledging that reality is constructed and can be understood in multiple ways (Morrow, 2005) and holding sight of feminist theory and life course theory as my guiding frameworks. Qualitative research within a critical paradigm allows participants who have historically been marginalized, invisible, and oppressed, to tell their stories and give meaning to their experiences (Band-Winterstein & Manchik-Rimon, 2014) by addressing history, context, and power (Daly, 2007).

The current study utilized constructivist grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2014) and the qualitative methods of semi-structured interviews, a life history calendar, and memoing. Constructivist grounded theory is a useful methodology in combination with a feminist framework, as feminist research embraces women's subjective knowledge of their lived experience and expands the understanding of how women actually live (Baber & Allen, 1992). Constructivism includes being aware that reality is invented through selecting, ordering, and organizing information, where knowledge and truth are created rather than discovered or revealed (Baber & Allen, 1992). Constructivist grounded theory allows researchers to be aware of the subjectivity of research, knowledge, and truth (Creswell, 2014). Grounded theory also allows the work to remain grounded in the words and voices of those who have the lived experience (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell, 2014). In this chapter, I discuss the participant inclusion criteria, recruitment strategies, data collection procedures, and data analysis process I utilized in detail.

Participants and Recruitment

Sample Inclusion

Participants for this study were single sexual minority women who are part of the baby boom. “Single women” was defined as legally and socially single (unmarried and not in a committed romantic relationship) for at least five years. The women could have been in a long-term relationship, including heterosexual marriage, in the past and could have children or be childfree. For sexual minority women, the focus was on women who were sexually and/or romantically attracted to women, while being inclusive of many different sexual and romantic identities. The baby boom generally includes those born between 1946 and 1964, although the dates are somewhat fluid and some identify as a Baby Boomer outside those years (Lin & Brown, 2012).

Additionally, the sample was not limited by other defining characteristics such as class, race, or educational level, nor limited by how the women spent their adulthood (e.g., previously heterosexually married, having higher education, moving out of childhood SES, having children. Lived experiences are not standard for women (Simpson, 2016) or how individuals arrived at certain identities (Diamond, 2008). Thus, limiting the inclusion criteria further for recruitment of participants would have unnecessarily excluded certain women.

Recruitment Process

Previous researchers have found success in accessing older lesbian women through activist organizations and online communities along with snowball sampling (Averett et al., 2012; McCormack, 2014; Westwood, 2013). I initially began recruitment in late October to mid-November 2016. I did additional rounds of recruitment in January 2017, September 2017, and

finally mid-October 2017. Thus, recruitment was open for a year, although some postings were open longer.

Some organizations and communities I reached out to included those of sexual minority older adults (e.g., local affiliates associated with SAGE, singlehood communities, and list-servs of individuals with common interests). I contacted 60 organizations, eight list-servs, and eight people individually using language approved by the Institutional Review Board (see Appendix B). Individuals who received list-serv announcements were able to introduce me to other people who had access to organizations or list-servs or posted the call for participants. Recruitment was across the United States. A total of 24 people, including gatekeepers to organizations, responded with willingness to assist in recruiting participants for the project. The 24 people were willing to contact potential participants individually, send out notifications in their organization's newsletter, or post on a research website for their organization maintained for members and active participants of the organization.

Participants were directed to contact me to establish whether they were eligible to participate (see Appendix C). Participants were considered eligible to participate by confirming their age, their gender identity, their sexual orientation identity, that they were currently single, and the date of their last long-term, committed relationship. Women who contacted me were also asked what state they currently lived in to decide which interview option to provide (in-person, phone, or video chat). A total of 17 women contacted me about participating in the study. One woman was born before the United States entered World War II, so would not be considered part of the Baby Boom birth cohort. Three women were not romantically nor sexually attracted to other women. Thus, 13 women were interviewed for this study.

Sample

Thirteen cisgender women participated in this study. They were aged 53-72 ($M = 62.8$) at the time of their interviews (See Table 1 for participant characteristics). Nine identified as lesbian, three as bisexual, and one woman identified as queer. Twelve of the women were White and one woman identified as mixed-race noting her Sephardic Eastern European Jewish and Western European White heritage. They had been single between 6 and 17 years. The women hailed from the East Coast (including three in Appalachia), the West Coast, and one woman was from the Rocky Mountain region of the United States. They were currently residing in rural areas ($n=1$), town or small city ($n=6$), and major metropolitan areas ($n=6$).

Two women had some college, but not a bachelor's degree; three had a bachelor's degree; two had a bachelor's degree plus an additional certificate; and six had graduate degrees, particularly a master's degree. Three women were still working full-time, and they were the youngest who participated. Two women had retired early due to disabilities. Five women were retired from all work. Three additional women retired from their long-term career, but created a non-profit, their own business, or decided to work part-time jobs that sounded interesting to them. Many had been in human service careers, particularly teaching, nursing, physician's assistant, public health, and counseling. The other work histories were with the local government, non-profit organizations, and for-profit industries, such as the electric or telephone company. Their annual income varied from the \$20,000-49,999 range to the \$100,000-119,000 range.

Table 1

Participant Characteristics

Age (range)	62.8 (53-72)
Sexual Identity	
Lesbian	9
Bisexual	3
Queer	1
Race/Ethnicity	
White	12
Mixed Background*	1
Level of Education	
Some College	2
College	3
Post-Baccalaureate Education	8
Employment Status	
Retired	7
Part-time	3
Full-time	3
Income Range	
Didn't Answer	4
\$20,000-49,999	5
\$50,000-79,999	3
\$80,000-99,999	0
\$100,000-119,999	1

*The participant's phrasing

Data Collection Process

Women who were interested in participating contacted me via e-mail. They also had the option to call, but all women contacted me through e-mail. At that time they received the initial eligibility questions. Once those questions were answered, we scheduled the time to speak for the interview (see Appendix C). They were given the option of doing the interview in person (for those who were in Virginia or surrounding states), on the telephone, or through video-chat (e.g.

Skype, Google Hangout, Facetime). They were also sent the Informed Consent form (Appendix D).

The interviews were scheduled according to the participant's preference. One woman did the interview in person, two via Skype, one via the voice option of Google Hangout, and nine were conducted on the phone. The interviews lasted between 57 minutes and 105 minutes ($M = 75.6$ minutes). The use of multiple interviewing formats allowed participants from varied geographical regions throughout the United States to participate and choose the way that was most comfortable to them. Having multiple interviewing formats can be especially important for sexual minority older adults as they have historically been marginalized, and the phone or video chatting allows for more anonymity and in settings that are comfortable to them (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Seitz, 2016; Trier-Bieniek, 2012).

Interviews were semi-structured (Appendix E). The main questions were predominantly presented in chronological order from the women's past, their present, and their anticipated future. When asked about their family in childhood, some of the women told their life narrative in chronological order without additional prompting. The interview guide consisted of 11 questions, and additional probes or follow-up questions were asked to gather clarification or to elicit deeper explanation of lived experiences. During the interview I filled out the life history calendar with key dates in the women's lives, such as births, marriages, divorces, and deaths (Appendix F). I also wrote detailed notes about what the women were saying. The life history calendar was an aid in capturing participants' life stories through a visual notation of life events.

As soon as the interview ended, except for the in-person interview, I wrote observational memos (Charmaz, 2014) about the interview (Appendix I), the participant, and how the women's lived experiences were similar to or different from previous interviews. I also wrote about my

thoughts and feelings related to the interview. I wrote the observations for the one in-person interview once I was in a location alone. I transcribed four interviews fully and half of two additional interviews; a professional transcriptionist completed the remaining transcripts. I verified all of the transcripts by listening to the interview recordings and comparing the transcripts to my interview notes.

Within 12 hours of the interview, I sent the life history calendar (Appendix F) and additional demographic questions (Appendix G), along with a follow-up note to the participant (Appendix H). I also sent an electronic gift card for either Amazon or Macy's (the women had the opportunity to choose) for \$25 for participating. I initially began only using Amazon, but when one woman said she did not use Amazon, we settled on Macy's, which other women also chose. The demographic questions included information such as open-ended questions about race and ethnicity and closed-ended questions about the size of the area in which they live, education level, employment status, and income. To help guide the development of the demographic questions, I used U.S. Census categories (Jones, 2014). The life history calendar and additional demographic questions were sent to the women to ensure that I understood what they told me during the interview. Two women did not follow-up with the life history calendar corrections or demographic information, even after reminders (e.g., one woman moved shortly after our interview). A few women chose not to answer certain demographic questions, particularly about income.

Sample Size and Saturation

Sampling was selective, as I sought to hear the voices of women who were currently single, identified as sexual minorities, and were part of the baby boom. Sampling was also selective in my desire to remain open to various lived experiences related to class, multiple races

and ethnicities, and people who identify as women even when female was not their sex assigned at birth. While recruitment efforts continued and calls for participants remained with organizations (including posted on their websites) for nine months after the 13th interview, no additional potential participants came forward (Gilgun, 2005).

The 13 interviews were in-depth with complex and detailed information shared by the participants about how they viewed their lives and relationships, and how their life course experiences fit within the world, especially in light of the 2016 political climate and U.S. election that took place at the time of data collection. By the 13th interview, informational redundancy had occurred. Informational redundancy, defined as the repetition of experiences and ideas, is a type of informational saturation (Morrow, 2005; Roy et al., 2015). Saturation also involves developing properties of a category, where I was seeing similar instances repeatedly to the point that nothing remained to be added. This saturation sufficiently allowed me to understand the nature and patterns of the women's experiences (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell, 2014; Daly, 2007; Gilgun, 2005).

Data Analysis Process

The data analysis was guided by constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) with the framing theories of life course and feminism. Grounded theory analysis gives central focus to the views of the study participants, while keeping note of the participants' descriptions of their own experiences (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell, 2014). Grounded theory focuses on questions about current experiences, but also experiences and life changes over time (Creswell, Hanson, Plano-Clark, & Morales, 2007). Grounded theory includes constant comparison of data with emerging ideas and categories (Creswell, 2014). Constant comparison involves continuously comparing the data with the

emerging codes while writing memos about the codes and definitions at each level of analysis, comparing contexts and statements between interviews (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell, 2014).

In general, grounded theory methodology is characterized by systematic steps to analyze the data (Creswell, 2014). Constructivist grounded theory, as articulated by Charmaz (2014), allows more flexibility in the use of the stages of data coding and analysis, given the focus on learning about the experiences embedded within situations, relationships, and hierarchies of power. Further, as Braun and Clarke (2006) explain, data analysis can be flexible than regimented. Thus, I utilized a systematic, though flexible approach to data coding and analysis.

Prior to open coding, I read through my interview notes and memos four times, read through the transcripts three times, and listened to the interviews again twice to continuously familiarize myself with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Reading the data multiple times also allowed me to be open to emerging codes rather than force them into pre-conceived or developed concepts (Charmaz, 2014; LaRossa, 2005). My dissertation chair also read all of the transcripts and provided notes, questions, and thoughts with each one.

Following these multiple interview reviews, I conducted open coding of my data. Open, or line-by-line coding is the first step in the analysis process where initial categories are noted (Creswell et al., 2007). I coded using MAXQDA, a computer analysis software that allowed for the data to be in one location, color identify emerging codes, and organize phrases that illustrate the codes. I coded using *in-vivo* codes (e.g., “mixed background”), setting/context codes (e.g., “typical suburban environment”) for events and process (e.g., life transitions, parents’ divorce, deaths), feelings, concepts (e.g., lesbian history in the bars), activity codes (e.g. golfing, bowling, painting), and relationship codes (e.g., core friends and family; Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). My initial round of open coding resulted in 1868 coded segments. I wrote analytic memos, notes of

potential themes, and reflective memos of my own experiences and areas I was not paying close attention to during open coding (see Appendix I).

Next, I conducted focused coding, in which I used the open coded categories and paid attention to the relationship and various dimensions between the codes to merge into categories (Charmaz, 2014; Gilgun, 2005; LaRossa, 2005). I sorted codes into potential categories, gathering all the potentially relevant codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For example, I took the codes of “close to siblings” and “close friends” to bring them together into a higher order code of “closest circle”. This step allowed me to begin to see the overarching story of the data (Creswell et al., 2007; LaRossa, 2005). At each step of the coding process, I reviewed drafts of the coding scheme with my dissertation chair, who continually questioned and challenged the logic and evidence of the emerging storyline.

In the final phase of selective coding, I continued to refine the categories and fit them with the ultimate storyline (Braun & Clarke, 2006; LaRossa, 2005). Deciding the overarching story involved going back to open and focused coding over time to decide which codes and categories could fit together (Gilgun, 2005), continuing to refine the specifics (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For example, I began with a linear scheme that involved how long the women were single, whether they had been heterosexually married in the past, and their sexual identities in each stage of their life, to a more integrated framework linking how singlehood, sexuality, and relationship history worked together in the women’s lives.

Trustworthiness

Below I will discuss paths I took towards trustworthiness of the research, within the framework of integrity of clear communication of findings, integrity of data, and reflexivity (Williams & Morrow, 2009). Trustworthiness reflects the constructivist nature of this project

(Creswell & Miller, 2000; Williams & Morrow, 2009). Within the constructivist nature of the qualitative research, where there is no singular Truth, and establishing trustworthiness ensures the credibility of the work (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell, 2014; Williams & Morrow, 2009).

Trustworthiness of a project occurs throughout the research, from the recruitment point, working with participants, through data analysis, and the presentation of the final project (Creswell, 2014).

Clear Communication of Findings

A path towards building trust in my research is having a clear communication of findings. Being clear about the findings and how I reached them enables researchers to transfer the work to other populations or replicate the findings, including being clear and easily understood by the reader (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002). In Chapter 4, there are direct quotes and description illustrating the context. I have also provided some additional context when discussing the sample. The direct quotes within Chapter 4 also illustrate the categories or themes of the findings and reveal participants' own voices (Williams & Morrow, 2009).

Integrity of Data

Within the path of integrity of data (Williams & Morrow, 2009) establishing trustworthiness includes peer review or debriefing (sometimes referred to as triangulation; Morrow, 2005; Daly, 2007) and providing the details of decisions made (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The life history calendars were another way of receiving reviews of early interpretations of the women's lived experiences. The calendars were sent to the women after each interview to ensure that I heard their "big life events" and for them to add or change the timeline as they told it to me. This was a form of member checking.

Peer review involves another researcher who is familiar with the phenomenon under study and who provides support, plays devil's advocate, challenges the researchers' assumptions, pushes the researchers to the next steps methodologically, and asks difficult questions about the interpretations being presented by the primary researcher (Creswell & Miller, 2000). I worked with my dissertation chair closely, who provided support, challenged my assumptions, and pushed for greater understanding of the data. She was able to take note of areas that were less clear to me, in part related to our different lived experiences and social locations.

Integrity of data can include an audit trail (Creswell & Miller, 2000), or a clear documentation of all research decisions and activities. The audit trail can include journaling, memoing, and keeping a research log of all activities to help record data analysis procedures (Creswell & Miller, 2000). I maintained a log of whom I contacted for recruitment purposes, the language used in communication with gatekeepers and potential participants (Appendix B), and hand-written thoughts were kept within the research notebook (Appendix I). For example, when doing the final round of recruitment for this study, I wrote,

Digging through all the different diversity and LGBT centers [around the U.S.], very few have anything for seniors, especially senior women. They are focused on youth, on trans, and on HIV+ men. The few that do have senior groups focus on men, or at least that is who comes and is in the pictures. A few groups for parents who are LG and some PFLAG groups.

Reflexivity and Subjectivity

The subjective nature of qualitative research includes what the participants say, while also acknowledging the researcher's biases and expectations as they interpret participant's words (Creswell, 2014; Williams & Morrow, 2009). As a researcher using constructivist grounded

theory, I am fully embedded within the project, including my positionality. To assist in noting my biases and expectations through reflexivity, I wrote my “herstory statement” prior to beginning the recruitment for this study. I continued to examine my subjectivity and biases throughout the data coding and analysis process (Creswell & Miller, 2009; Appendix I). I kept a research notebook and documents with the interview notes, memos, additional thoughts, early ways of framing the results, and information about the participants, such as demographics.

Acknowledging one’s biases and beliefs can occur with participants, helping to build the collaborative aspect of research and minimize inequality participants may feel (Creswell & Miller, 2000). This project is not an experiment where participants needed to have limited knowledge of the study; instead, participants knew what I was researching, including my own understanding of where the research has been lacking. In my quiet and shy nature, this was easier as the interviews progressed.

Acknowledging where I came from, what the project was about, and my connection to the subject were discussed with many of the women during our conversations. Some women asked at the beginning, some at the end, and sometimes my connection to the subject came up during the interview. A few of the women asked how old I was, anticipating the average age of undergraduate students, or because I looked young on the video-conference. Some of the women asked how I identified and I responded that I identified as queer. Another way I was able to make connections with the women was by having conversations about all-women’s spaces. One woman went to an all-women’s college on the East Coast (not Hollins), another was introduced to the lesbian community in her town through a lecture at the local women’s college. Others were discussing trans conversations within all-women’s spaces that they were a part of, which is a large discussion within historically women’s colleges.

Many of the women were appreciative that someone was interested in their lived experiences. For example, Kwincy said,

I wonder, I don't think there have been many studies done on older lesbian women. Have there? We are really the invisible population. Older women are an invisible population to begin with. . . .I applaud you. So, when I heard about this, I thought, yes. You know, we're not dead yet [chuckles]. So people need to...My era has been extremely interesting! I mean, it's been dynamic, because you are like the worm that comes out of the hole. Now people are getting married. And now it's who does what with whom and nobody cares, but they all still care. But the big lie is that yes we do care. So yeah, thank you. Thank you for having the courage to do this kind of work. This takes strength and courage. Good for you!

One unanticipated challenge that I faced while doing the study were the traumas experienced by many of the women that were not only outside my own lived experience but that of my extended family as well. The first time one of my participants discussed her childhood abuse, I froze, not knowing whether to probe, or what to do with that information. I did not want to upset her or cause harm by asking too many questions. I also remember thinking that I did not want to take the historical ideas that lesbian women were abused and that is what "made them" gay or that single women were "damaged." As I completed more interviews, and it was becoming clear that abuse was emerging as a theme, I was able to ask some follow-up questions related to the women's statements about their troubled home or their traumas. As I worked through this issue and discussed my reservations with my dissertation chair, returning to the data over and over again, I could see that overall, the women discussed their abuse as a matter of fact.

That is, they presented their experiences of childhood abuse as just another part of their life story. They revealed that they had already dealt with it and now, in narrating this part of their experience to me, they had incorporated their stories of abuse into their perception of the life they had lived. Some women explained in more detail and most mentioned it as part of their experience and moved on in the timeline of their life. Although I share more of my reflections about the interviews in Appendix I, I desired to acknowledge the learning experience of having the women entrust me with their stories.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

In this chapter, I present my findings in four sections. The first section, *Where I Came From*, are the women's descriptions of their childhood and adolescent years. The second section, *How I Made A Living*, focuses on their work and career histories. The *How I Lived and Loved* section is the women's intimate life of their relational and sexuality history, including building a family. The final section, *My Life Today*, focuses on the women's community, their closest circle, and their anticipations about the future.

Where I Came From

In this section of *Where I Came From*, I describe the developmental roots and emerging contexts for the women's lives. The women's roots include their immediate and extended families, their home lives, and their religious upbringing. Some of their home lives were difficult. The women often had major events in their lives that impacted them as they were growing up, and for some, are still influential.

Table 2

Where I Came From

	Year Born	Siblings	Abuse Narrative	Extended Family	Non-Normative Events	Places Lived in Childhood/ Adolescence
Amelia	1944	2	No	Connected	None	VA, NC
Beverly	1962	2	Yes	Connected	Parents divorced	GA
Crystal	1953	3	No	Disconnected	None	CT, HI, VA, CA
Dee	1954	3	Yes	Connected	Parents divorced	NY
Elizabeth	1952	4	No	Connected	None	CA, AZ, HI, D.C.
Francesca	1947	4	Yes	Disconnected	KKK violence towards family friend	CT, NY, AR
Gayle	1963	2	Yes	Disconnected	Mother died when Gayle was 11	Canada, Japan, OH, CT, MI, IL
Harri	1949	3	Yes	Connected	None	MA, NJ
Immunity	1960	3	No	Connected	Both parents died while she was in elementary school	MA, Philippines, TX, VA
Jay-Bird	1950	1	Yes	Connected	Father's affair and parents divorce	WA
Kwincy	1948	8	Yes	Disconnected	Two siblings died young; father's affairs	NY
Lindsay	1962	4	Yes	Connected	Equestrian accident, coma and injury during teenage years	NY
Mary	1947	2	No	Connected	Brother died when he was 6	UT

Traditional Family

At the start of every interview I asked women to discuss their time growing up. The women began their stories describing their childhood families as “nuclear”, “intact”, or “normal.” To illustrate, Gayle said, “I was raised in a nuclear family. I had a mom and dad and two brothers.” Elizabeth began her story with, “Well, I have four siblings and my mother and father, and we were an intact family. And my father was in the Navy, so we moved around a lot.”

The women had between one and eight brothers and sisters with an average of three siblings (See Table 2). Birth order was frequently noted when discussing their siblings. For example, Dee said, “I was second born. I was the middle child for most of my childhood....We go by what numbers we are. I’m number two, no pun intended.”

All of the women’s parents were part of their childhoods. While Kwincy described her parents as “wonderful, hardworking parents” most of the women did not describe their parents beyond the type of jobs their parents held. Those that did describe their parents noted that their father was a “difficult man.” Jay-Bird compared her father to Donald Trump saying, “he was a very difficult man and he wasn’t just difficult for women, although he was...he actually resembled Donald Trump in a lot of ways, very narcissistic, very misogynistic.” Their fathers had a variety of work histories, from working in a wallboard plant or in business, as a bricklayer, a photographer, or an electrical engineer. In addition, three fathers were in the military.

The women sometimes provided more detailed and nicer comments about their mothers, including Jay-Bird who said, “My mother I loved to the end. I mean, my mother was, she wasn’t a saint but she was very positive, kind person, so my relationship with her, we were close.” Most of the women’s mothers worked, with only Harri’s and Crystal’s mothers specifically being stay-at-home mothers, though Harri noted that once the kids got older, “my mother started doing all sorts of volunteer stuff and became outgoing and friendly, and happy, did a lot of good in the community.” Some of their mothers’ work included being a real estate agent, a medical assistant, or a teacher.

Rough home life. Many of the women discussed having a rough home life growing up, as in saying, it was “a violent and troubled home” (Francesca) or “it was an abusive home...I didn’t want to be home” (Dee). The rough home life included a parent’s alcoholism and abuse.

Kwincy and Lindsay both had explicit parental alcoholism in their lives as they were growing up. In addition, about half of the women were physically, emotionally, and/or sexually abused while growing up. Beverly connected corporal punishment as abuse. Kwincy experienced emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, saying “if it [abuse] was there, I got it. Although I know a lot of people got a lot worse than I did. Trust me, I got my share.”

Most of the women discussed the abuse as matter-of-fact, not providing many details, as though they had told the story before. They mentioned abuse in their home, sometimes qualifying it as physical or emotional, but not always. For example, some women mentioned abuse as just one of many other statements within the timeline of their childhood lives, as if they had time to own their stories and come to terms with the events of their lives. Jay-Bird’s telling of her sexual abuse was very vivid:

After I had this boyfriend, I realized that some of what was going on between me and my dad was inappropriate. I mean, I think I always realized it. He [dad] French kissed me, from the time I was, I don’t know how old I was, until I kind of...I don’t know what you, how much you know about abuse, but, you know, you know it’s wrong. I mean I’ve read...I haven’t read very much theoretical stuff on it but where I was at is I knew it was wrong. I knew it felt uncomfortable but it’s all a matter of power right? And he had the power and he was not a man to be trifled with. He wasn’t physically abusive except for the emotional abuse but his temper was not something you wanted to get on the wrong side of. So after [my boyfriend] and I started getting together, and that was pretty early on in college. I met him in September I think. Then the next time my dad tried that stuff, I pushed him away. And he always did it when other people weren’t in the room so nobody

else in the family knew and I pushed him away and we didn't say anything about it and he didn't try it any more but at that point I had, you know, I wasn't daddy's little girl anymore, and it was important to him for me to be his little girl, his object. So then our relationship started to go downhill...so my relationship with my dad deteriorated and it never really recovered.

In another example, Gayle discussed her difficult home life with her father and the resulting connection with her brothers saying,

My dad was kind of a jerk, so that relationship was never really good. And my brothers...they're brothers, I mean, I don't know. We got along okay. As adults, I kind of see us as people who were in the same prison camp together. Once you finally get out, you really don't want to spend a lot of time with the people you were in prison camp with, because it reminds you of how bad it was. We got along. We survived.

She later went on to say that she felt that if she could hold on until high school graduation, she could "get the hell out of there."

Religion. Religion was also discussed as part of childhood and adolescence by most of the women. Most of these women acknowledged a childhood connection to a branch of Christianity, including Catholic, Southern Baptist, United Church of Christ, and Mormon. The exceptions included Francesca who spoke about her family's "mixed background" of Judaism and Protestant Christianity, and Harri who was raised in an atheist household due to her father's views on religion.

The women who were raised Catholic, including those who attended parochial school, had more vivid experiences in their religious upbringing to share than women who were raised in

other faiths. Kwincy was particularly vocal about her family's time with the Catholic Church, saying,

We were raised Catholic. So, that is significant in my life...My father never went, my mother went on Sunday if we had a nickel. And I can remember she would take the ashtray and pull the doily out from underneath and would put it on my head, stick a bobby pin in it, put a nickel in my hand, give my brother and little sister a nickel. And if she had a quarter we could go to the church.

Extended Family

Connected to extended family. Most of the women were at least occasionally connected to their extended family during their childhood. Even when moving around geographically, Elizabeth's extended family stayed close emotionally. She said that,

We would travel cross country and we would go to Oregon and see my mom's parents and stay with them for one or two weeks, or they would come and visit us....My dad's family was from Ohio, so when we lived on the East Coast...a lot of Thanksgivings we would drive to Ohio and spend Thanksgiving with my dad's mom and his brother. So, we were in touch, but no, we never really lived in the same vicinity to have a tight knit, you know, "go down the street and have your grandmother take care of you" type of situation.

Five of the women lived with extended family for some period of time. Immunity spent most of her adolescent years living with her aunt, uncle, and cousins along with her siblings after her parents passed away. Others lived with grandparents for some period of time due to their grandparents' aging or as their parents were working towards buying or building their own home. For example, Amelia and her brother and parents lived with her maternal grandparents for

the first few years of her life. Harri lived with or nearby both her paternal and maternal grandmothers:

My father's mother lived with us for about a year...while my father built her a little cabin. She always lived next door....She was great....My nana [maternal grandmother] bought a house in the town that we were living in, down the street. So she was always down the street.

Disconnected from extended family. Four of the women noted that they were disconnected from their extended families, with the assumption that other people did have connections to grandparents or extended family, sometimes living with or close to those relatives. Most of the time this disconnection was due to distance and moving around for a parent's job, such as the U.S. Navy. Crystal noted that when they lived in Hawaii, "we didn't have family around." Gayle said that she was not connected to her extended family growing up adding that, "one of the consequences of my mom marrying my dad was that she ended up leaving her family. And so, we didn't see a lot of our extended family growing up." Francesca and Crystal noted that the disconnection from grandparents was also related to their grandparent as an immigrant, not being able to speak much English. The disconnection for some of the women was also related to grandparents already deceased when the women were young children.

Big Events

Moving. Six of the 13 women stayed in a single town and state while growing up (see Table 2). These women claimed that where they grew up was "normal" or had "limited excitement", describing the location as "a typical suburban environment" (Beverly), "rural" (Mary), or "in the city limits...in a White, working-class neighborhood" (Jay-Bird). Jay-Bird noted that she "lived in the same house all my growing up years."

The rest of the women had multiple moves during their childhood and adolescence. For women such as Amelia and Harri, the moves were more local and were related to their parents building a house for the family. Five women had cross-country or international moves while growing up related to their father's job. Crystal, whose father was in the Navy, discussed the moving and how that influenced her as an adult.

So, I was born in Connecticut.... We lived in Connecticut for seven years and then we moved to Hawaii for six. So, I had an experience in Hawaii from about age 7 to 13 that was, I think, really helped shape me in terms of being around different people and exploring the islands and that different type of experience. Then we moved to Virginia, Northern Virginia and that's where I went to high school for three years. And then my Dad was transferred to San Diego in my senior year of high school. And that was really hard. So, after my senior year of high school I went back to NOVA where my friends were.

Similarly, Francesca was greatly influenced by her cross-country move from New England to Arkansas, spending a large part of the interview discussing these experiences and comparing the diversity and acceptance of diversity in her life in New England, especially as a woman of Jewish heritage, to the area of Arkansas "controlled by the fundamentalists." She described her experiences with racism, oppression, and social justice movements during her adolescence as profoundly influential on her understanding of difference, diversity, and activism.

When I moved to Arkansas, I was 13. We experienced—it was during the civil rights violence, it was 1960—activities from the Klan. My father was very dark because he was Sephardic. He was gorgeous. He promoted an African American man to be head of maintenance. Not because he was liberal and wanted to prove a

point, but because it was the best person for the job! The man was picked up and a White woman's picture was put in his billfold, he was beaten up. We got death threats and that was my introduction to what was going on. It's more than just going to a place to demonstrate. I don't want to be disdainful of others, but when you are immersed and live in a place, it just washes through you. And not that it can't in other circumstances. But, it was very profound to me....I was introduced to gospel music. African American people mentored me. I'd always had diverse friends...And my father got a lawyer out of the good old boy circle to get him out of jail and everything and for us too. Because of the death threats and the gasoline bombs.

Family of origin deaths. Four of the women experienced parents' or siblings' deaths during childhood, which were often interpreted as changing their family dynamics. When she was 11, Gayle lost her mother to cancer while Immunity lost both parents by the age of 11. Immunity's father passed away while they were living in Texas, and her mother moved them to Arlington, Virginia, "which is where he is buried. She just wanted to be near his gravesite and be closer to other family [and] military friends. So then, we were in Virginia for about three years and my Mom died there." Immunity and her siblings then moved in with her maternal aunt and uncle and cousins.

Kwincy had two siblings die while they were still infants. Mary lost a brother when he was 6-years-old, which had far reaching consequences for her family dynamics. She said, My mother had a lot of emotional problems about the fact that he died, and she decided to go to work full-time. Before that, she had never worked outside of the home...[we] were pretty much home alone in the summer. It did affect us. I also

decided, in my mind, that I had to be my father's son, so I took on being Dad's boy.

Parental divorce. Three of the women's parents divorced as they were leaving high school, between 1968 and 1980. Beverly explained that "my parents got divorced when I was a teenager. My Dad moved to Florida. My Mom had a successful career and she stayed there in Georgia. My brother, sister, and I all went off to college." Jay-Bird's parents' divorce was related to her father's extramarital affair.

He moved to the Netherlands because he had an affair that led to a divorce....My brother and I...we could figure out that things were funky between our parents. I mean they had never been fantastic and they came together. We had a family meeting, first time in our lives ever having a family meeting, last time in our lives, where they told us that he was going to keep his mistress. He was going to bring her from the Netherlands Antilles, where he met her, and she was going to be his mistress and he was going to spend a couple nights a week with her and the rest of the time with us, and that lasted for two weeks, that idea.

Leaving home and independence. Even when in a romantic relationship, the women told stories of moving outside their family of origin and the desire for independence. The women had various paths towards independence during late adolescence, though most of them noted a desire to leave home or be their own person. Four of the women followed the path of attending college and living away from home while in college, such as living in the dorms, until they completed their degree. Jay-Bird began college across the country, but returned home after her parents' divorce, and Lindsay lived at home during college, moving away only after she had completed her degree. Beverly noted her desire to be her own person outside of her experience in

college, and defined her independence as rebelliousness, saying, “the pattern throughout my life was to rebel against authority.”

One woman did not discuss her transition between living at home and adulthood, and six women spoke of leaving home as “early.” Crystal, Gayle, Mary, and Dee specifically noted leaving home as soon as they graduated from high school. Elizabeth ran away from home at 16, though she did end up returning long enough to finish high school before moving around to multiple states while working and attending school. Kwincy’s path of independence was through marriage after getting pregnant, explaining,

I had been dating this guy for about nine months and I made a conscious decision to have a sexual relationship. And when I did, the very first time I had sex, I got pregnant. I had a son, who is 50 now. We ended up getting married. So, I have him and I also had a daughter...In fact, it was suggested that I quit school [when I was a teenager] because I wasn’t going to become anybody or anything anyway. I may as well get married and have kids. There was no future offered to me whatsoever, other than being a mother. That was the only thing offered to me. So, yeah, I got married.

Health challenges. Six women discussed a mental or physical health challenge. The women who experienced a health challenge had this occur during childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood, with lasting ramifications, carrying the health challenges with them into late adulthood. Lindsay’s health challenges began in late adolescence when she fell off one of her family’s horses, hitting her head. After a week-long coma, she was able to go home since she could walk, talk, and knew who she was. However, there were long-lasting effects to this injury. The injury affected her emotions, leaving her in a depression to the point of suicidality, drinking

heavily, and with an eating disorder. When she spoke with me for the interview, she had been sober for 30 years and been working on her eating disorder, including several residential treatment admittances.

After a ruptured cyst on one of her ovaries when she was in her early 20s, Amelia had both ovaries removed by a “doctor, who was either incompetent or a misogynist.” She noted this affected her entire life, including her relationships, as she could not have children, yet wanted children. Kwincy first became ill in her late 20s, which resulted in an ileostomy (removing large intestine and part of the small intestine and appendix) and leaves someone with a colostomy bag. She is still living with this now. Yet, she acknowledged that when she was first told of the surgery, she desired to die from being so ill and not being able to see how anyone could find her attractive with the medical device attached to her body. Kwincy also noted that she was an alcoholic during her early adulthood,

Nobody knew I was an alcoholic. I was a very high functioning alcoholic.

Everything was clean and spotless. And now I think I have been in recovery long enough that I was just trying to prove to myself that I wasn't an alcoholic. The cleaner I could be and the more productive I could be, the more I convinced myself there was nothing wrong. I kept doing it, kept doing it.

Two of the women solely had mental health challenges that they disclosed without physical health challenges. After struggling for many years with depression and anxiety, Dee retired early, when she was 49. She noted that there is a stigma related to her anxiety and depression, saying that people “don't understand that. I keep trying to explain to them that you can't just shut it off, that if I could, I'd still be working and making a lot more money than I'm making now.”

How I Made A Living

All of the women have worked throughout their lives, and overall, the women were well educated. For those who left home and lived on campus or near the institution for their bachelor's degrees, that was a chance to be independent from their families. For example, Beverly and Jay-Bird went to college across the country from their parents for at least a year of college. Even with the challenges following her horse accident, Lindsay went on after high school for her associate's degree, bachelor's degree, and a master's degree, saying "academically I was doing okay" though she did not leave home initially. In a pattern different from the rest of the women, Mary did not earn her first bachelor's degree until she retired from her full-time job at age 63 when she earned a degree in gerontology.

Many had been in human service careers, government work, non-profit agencies, or for-profit industries. After high school Mary moved to the largest city in her home state of Utah and went right to work "at the phone company" where she spent her career. While some of the women, such as Dee and Jay-Bird, stayed in one career until their retirement, others had career changes. Some career changes were in similar areas. For example, Amelia and Lindsay did a mix of teaching and social work with children during their careers, and Elizabeth went from being a respiratory therapist to a physician's assistant. Kwincy, Francesca, Mary, and Crystal had larger career changes during their lives. Mary and Crystal retired from positions they held throughout adulthood, but have found non-profit and for-profit work since.

Kwincy left her "financially well off" position in a for-profit industry to be an entrepreneur and do "public speaking workshops and seminars for women in college", and Francesca went from visual arts to community health. Francesca spoke of the financial resources she was able to have by focusing on public and community health rather than making a living in

the visual arts. For Francesca, Crystal, and Kwincy, their career shifts during adulthood allowed them to find a profession that gave them purpose, and Mary enjoyed the work she found as something new for her to experience. Francesca said that she worked “with people who make the world a better place” and liked making a contribution.

The women overall found fulfillment or enjoyment in their work, even when working their “tail off” (Jay-Bird). Beverly, for example, worked for a non-profit that focused on animals, which was one of her loves in life. The exception was Amelia, who had a negative experience working in her local schools system. She said,

I started out as a teacher in the ‘60s. Of course, I wasn’t at all aware of who I was then....From the time I came out in my late 30s and working in the school system, it was pretty mandatory that I stay closeted in this part of the state....In about 1998, somewhere in there, I decided I was going to leave. At that point I was an elementary counselor, and I decided I was going to leave the school system all together and go to culinary school. And I made these plans and thought that I was on my way to making this change, and so I came out to some pretty key people in the school system, and then realized, “whoa, these plans are not working out. You’re not going to be going to culinary school after all.” So, you’re here and you got a job, and then I got this letter from the school system saying, “You have been reassigned” and it was so, so blatantly because I had come out as a lesbian. And they did not want me interacting with people who mattered, like professors’ children or doctors’ children or lawyers’ children. They decided the best place to put me was working with low-income poor families because they don’t matter. So, instead of being brave enough to leave, I thought, “What if I try to go to

another county?...The recommendation will include the fact that I am a lesbian and they won't hire me." So, I just sucked it up and stayed here and worked that job for 10 years and hated every single minute of it. Absolutely hated it. And so, that that was a pretty dark period in my life, because if you hate your job. I should speak for myself: hating my job, I didn't feel inclined to pursue any kind of a relationship with anybody because I wasn't happy with myself and I wasn't happy with my life, and what did I have to offer somebody else?

How I Lived and Loved

In this section, the focus is on the women's relationship history, the ending of relationships, building of families, and their sexuality, primarily during early and middle adulthood. All 13 women had some history with romantic relationships during their lives (See Table 3). When asked about the important people in their lives during early and middle adulthood, the women consistently talked about their dating and long-term romantic relationship history and how children and their sexuality fit within those relationships.

Table 3

Patterns of Sexual Identity and Relationship History

Relationship Pattern	Current Age	Age of Claiming Sexuality Minority Identity	Length of Current Singlehood in years	Length of Longest Relationship in years
Lesbian Relationships Only				
Short-Term				
Dee	62	18	13	4
Immunity	56	23	10	5
Lindsay	54	24	11	2.5
Long-Term				
Crystal	63	30	8	20
Elizabeth	64	30	11	25
Harri	67	25	8	22
Heterosexual Marriage and Divorce, then Lesbian Relationship(s)				
Short-Term				
Amelia	72	38	8	5 ²
Beverly	54	15	8	20 ²
Gayle	53	50	6	14 ²
Jay-Bird	66	61	7	20 ²
Kwincy	68	23	7	5 ²
Long-Term				
Francesca	69	43	6	20 ¹
Mary	69	43	17	23 ²

¹ Lesbian relationship longest; ² Heterosexual marriage longest

Relationship History

The women had four patterns of relationship history. Some of the women described more casual dating experiences than long-term or significant partnerships. Others had long-term significant same-sex partnerships throughout their lives. Most of the women were heterosexually married for a period of time, but ultimately divorced. Since then, these formerly married women

either had a long-term, significant relationship, or only dated and had short-term lesbian relationships following their marriages.

Short-term lesbian relationships. Three of the women never married during their life, nor did they have a long-term significant partnership. All three of these women claimed a sexual minority identity before they were in their mid-20s. Dee spoke of how her career goals were a challenge in her relationship. While Dee was pursuing her nursing degree her girlfriend was “upset that I wasn’t paying more attention to her. And I just told her that if she could wait for me to get through this that things could work out. But she ended up getting involved with somebody else.” They broke up after that and Dee said, “I haven’t been very successful in relationships.”

Similarly, Immunity spoke on her perspective on romantic relationships while she was in college. While her longest relationships were with women, at the time she was in a heterosexual relationship, saying,

I took an interest in dating and trying to explore that. And I think that, early on, there was this pressure to kind of settle down, if you will. And I just, I would not have that. That was not in my cards and I let that be known. Relationship stuff was not meant to do anything other than to just have fun and have somebody to be with, but not to go steady and be involved. My friends were, well not monogamous, but I mean were on a track towards marriage. Marriage just never really entertained me....he [early college boyfriend] was just pressuring me to be in this mode of, you’re going to graduate and we’re going to get married. And I’m like, no that’s not me! I gotta see the world, I want to travel, I want to have a career. I don’t want to just go back [home] and just have babies. You’re talking to the wrong woman! That’s not me.

Regarding their experiences as lifelong single sexual minority women, with the exception of Immunity whose relationship included one year of living together, the women in this pattern characterized their relationships as brief and more like dating than committed partnerships. Lindsay said, “in the past over 10 years I’ve dated, had casual dates with women...just nothing has worked out.”

Long-term lesbian relationships. An additional three women also did not marry heterosexually. These women, however, had relationships with same-sex partners for 20 years or more. Harri had two significant relationships, one lasting 22 years and the second lasting 10 years. Harri said that when she was younger “it was all about who I was dating and my partners.” Crystal, Elizabeth, and Harri all claimed their sexual minority identity by age 30.

Harri and Crystal both had the experience of their ex-partners having an affair, which caused the relationship to dissolve. Harri’s ex-partner of 22 years had an affair with and married her best friend. Crystal was partnered with Nancy for 20 years. Crystal said of their relationship and how they built their life together,

I met this woman [Nancy] in New York. She ended up moving here and we had a 20 year relationship and we had a child together. She was nine years younger than I am, so she got pregnant. We were together seven years and went through artificial insemination process and had a son in 1996. And that changed our relationship because I was, I’m more the mother and she was more the friend. I don’t know if that was an age thing or just the way our personalities were. I think more the personalities. I thought that the relationship would last forever. I really believed that with all my heart. And on our 20th anniversary, she broke up with

me for somebody else. And I was devastated....I think I was so surprised, so shocked. Like, “wait, what?”

In contrast to the way that Crystal and Harri’s relationships ended, Elizabeth was with her partner for close to 25 years before her partner passed away. Elizabeth discussed how they built a life together, saying,

Through a friend, I met a woman...and she kind of pursued me very heavily, and we ended up being together for close to 25 years. But I kind of had one serious relationship that lasted 25 years, and during that time we moved to California...bought a house...and we lived there and worked there....They [my parents] were very supportive. They always included my partner. I can remember going to, I don’t remember if it was Christmas or Thanksgiving at my parent’s house one year, and my Mom had made sweatshirts for everybody with the family tree and they had included Sarah in the family tree, so I thought that was very cool. And they would invite her when we would do [family trips]. So, she was very included. It did not alienate us.

Short-term lesbian relationships after heterosexual divorce. Five women had short-term lesbian relationships or only dated women after their heterosexual marriage. Their marriages lasted between five and 20 years. Amelia in particular noted the pressure to get married and have children, saying, “I was finishing college and it was 1967, and what you’re supposed to do is get married, and so I did.”

Ultimately, Amelia married and divorced twice, before she came out as a lesbian. When she was 44, she had a relationship with a woman, Arizona, for approximately three years over two periods of time (two years the first time and then up to a year a second time). Sadly, their

relationship ended when Arizona passed away from cancer. Kwincy had 11 relationships for up to four years each following her heterosexual divorce, later discussing how she was “a real womanizer. A real skirt chaser” being “sexually active with everybody I could get my hands on. I was like a kid in a candy shop when I was first out....I went through a lot of relationships.” Additionally, Beverly, Gayle, and Jay-Bird have dated women since their heterosexual marriages ended.

Long-term lesbian relationship after heterosexual divorce. Francesca and Mary both had long-term significant lesbian relationships after their heterosexual marriages ended in divorce. Francesca, was married to two men for 10 years each before her lesbian partnership, which lasted for 20 years. Mary had been married for 23 years when she left her husband for her partner, Bethany. Mary and Bethany were together for 10 years following Mary’s divorce from her husband. Mary and Bethany had been very good friends when they were younger and worked together then did not see each other for 18 years before reconnecting.

And then I ran into her, and it was such a good feeling to see each other again.

We decided to go on a trip. We were both still married....On the trip, I realized I am in love with this woman....So that’s when I came out. And then, we were together....It was really rough for her because her family didn’t accept it. She had not had an open, loving relationship with her family and they didn’t accept her.

My family was very accepting, so it was much easier for me.

Ultimately, however, Mary and Bethany broke up, and Mary’s reflection on this revealed how family acceptance impacted their relationship. Over time, she was accepting of the change.

Bethany was also raised very Mormon. While I moved away from the church, she didn’t, so it really bothered her. She felt very guilty about our relationship.

So when we finally broke up, it was because she wanted to be able to go back to the temple of Mormon, because that was part of what she believed you needed for salvation. It was religion, basically, why we broke up....I have grown into liking to be single. [I like] the lifestyle that I have as a single person.

Regarding their experiences the two women in this pattern had a single long-term lesbian relationship following heterosexual divorce(s). Their lesbian relationships broke up after at least 10 years, with Francesca's lasting 20 years.

Pathways to Parenthood

Having children, or not having children, was also part of the women's experiences, and typically addressed when asked about relations during early and middle adulthood. The seven women who did not have children generally noted that at some point during the interview. Amelia wished for children, but due to her ovarian removal earlier in her life was not able to have children. Elizabeth and her partner decided not to have children, saying "neither one of us really wanted to have a child, so we opted not to have children." Similarly, Lindsay initially desired to have children. She explained,

I took a 12-week class so I could be an adoptive parent....I always wanted to have children and thought of all the different ways that you could without just going out and having sex with a man....I did have two foster children at two different times. One was five and one was 14. I had one for six months and one for six weeks. That was when I decided not to have children. I always knew it was difficult to have children but you really have to try it and go out and see.

The other six women had children through adoption, their partner giving birth, or having biological children. Generally, children were brought up in connection to their relationship

history, but none of the women placed a major emphasis on their lives as parents. The women had an average of two children. Harri's and Crystal's sons were both given birth to by the women they were partnered with at the time of their children's birth, which was during the 1990s and the gayby boom (Dunne, 2000; Orel & Fruhauf, 2006). In addition, Harri adopted two daughters with her first lesbian partner who had given birth to their son. Francesca, Kwincy, and Mary had biological children while they were in a heterosexual marriage, and Jay-Bird adopted her two children with her husband.

In addition to these various pathways to parenthood, Francesca and Kwincy both had children pass away during their lives, thus experiencing the non-normative life event of having a child die. Francesca was in her 60s when she lost her son, and Kwincy was in her early 40s when her daughter died. Francesca mentioned her son's death briefly, stating, "I lost my son. I had a son and a daughter, I have a daughter." Kwincy, however, gave more details and how it impacted her life, saying, "I have him [my son] and I also had a daughter, who would be 48 if she was alive." She went on to say, "my daughter, she committed suicide at 25 [in 1994]. She'd become an alcoholic. My son is not an alcoholic. But my daughter had." Kwincy discussed how she dealt with the situation of her daughter's illness and death, putting it in context with her own issues with alcoholism and the importance of the recovery community. Kwincy said that she had been sober for four years when her daughter died and that the recovery group of Alcoholics Anonymous was supportive of her during that time. Her daughter's death was the catalyst for her career shift into developing her public speaking business, which she viewed as an opportunity to help and give back to others.

Claiming their Sexual Identity

Many of the women were well versed in discussions of sexuality existing on a continuum, often citing Kinsey's scale (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948) specifically. All of the women also claimed an identity label for their sexuality, with nine who identified as lesbian, three as bisexual, and one as queer. Dee and Beverly were unique in originally being aware of and claiming their bisexual identity during their teens. Beverly said, "I came out as bisexual in my teens to my friends. And really became aware of it as my identity. And just sort of set me on a course in life."

Five of the women realized their same-sex attractions in their 20s after leaving their family home, such as Lindsay who began noticing attractions to the women nurses while in treatment for her eating disorder and medical challenges following her horseback riding accident. Lindsay told the story, "at the treatment center is where I started having fantasies about the female nurses there....It was the first time I was living away from home and thought I can have these thoughts now, but that's when they started." Similarly, Elizabeth began noticing her attractions while on a sailing trip with her brothers. While in Hawaii she met lesbians when she began thinking about her identity, then "sailed for nine months with my brothers in a small sailboat from Florida through the Panama Canal and Costa Rica. During this time, I was contemplating coming out. Talked with some women I met along the way." She was 30 when she came out.

In contrast, Amelia, Francesca, Gayle, and Jay-Bird only became aware of or claimed their same-sex attractions after they were divorced from their husbands. Gayle said,

So, I've always had inklings of crushes towards women. I've never entertained them because it was never something I could do. I kind of followed the traditional path. And so, [sigh] after I left my husband, about a year later, I noticed another

inkling with a female co-worker and this time for the first time in my life, I said, you know what, I'm open right now. I'm single. I'm just going to see where this goes. So I followed it. And it ended up in heartbreak [chuckles]. After her, there was another one. And then five years later, so from 2009 to 2014, February 2014, I was sitting on my bed crying because this woman I had been chatting with was getting back with her ex. And I was sitting there crying and it all of a sudden occurred to me that I had only been attracted to women for the last five years. And it was like this ah-hah moment. I just thought, Oh my God, Gayle, you know, you've got to change your dating profile. And so I did. And because I had just turned 50, I had this urgency. Like, oh my God. I've got to do this and I've got to do it now. And also, once I finally shifted my mindset, it was like, the more time I spent with lesbians the more I wanted to spend with them. And the more attracted I became. And it was like fast forwarding, like hyperspace. From zero to 60. So, I felt this sense of urgency and I probably was really rushing through things. And I made a lot of mistakes. I felt like a teenager! Like I'm 14. It's exhilarating and it's painful and it's awkward. It's all that stuff.

Alternatively, Kwincy and Mary both came to claim their same-sex attractions while heterosexually married. Kwincy had an awakening moment after a neighbor kissed her. Kwincy said, "She [the neighbor] kissed me one night!....She kissed me and I'm like 'whoah.' It was like someone had stuck my whole body and wired it with electricity from head to toe. It was one little tiny kiss." She said that we went home and wondered what to do, but that she felt like questions she had had during her life finally came together. This was part of the catalyst for her to tell her

husband to leave. As discussed above, Mary realized she was in love with a friend, decided to leave her husband, and was with her partner for 10 years following the divorce.

Kwincy and Mary also shared how they discussed their sexuality with their children.

Kwincy said,

I came out to my family, my friends, and everybody in 1972. Even sat my children down, they were three and five. And I said, “kids, Daddy’s not here anymore....I need to let you know that Mommy won’t be bringing home another daddy for you guys. Not going to happen. I just wanted to let you know that the three of us will do this together.” And then when I had partnered with someone, I sat my children down and I talked to them about that.

Eight of the women, no matter when they began to claim their same-sex attraction, discussed feminism, women’s rights movement, or being introduced to their local lesbian community as aspects of claiming their identity. Crystal said, “In 1970 was when I became involved in the women’s movement and started identifying as a feminist. And that reshaped my life.” Amelia noted that she met this “strong, strong feminist, empowered” woman about the time she started having intimate dreams about women, and the feminist woman introduced her to the local lesbian community. Kwincy and Elizabeth both discussed the lesbian bars (Davis & Kennedy, 1989; Faderman, 1991) as important to them as they were beginning to claim their lesbian identity. Kwincy also noted how the same bars that saved lives also took lives with alcoholism, saying,

I think that the gay bars saved my life at the time. ‘Cause I don’t know if I could have tolerated being a lesbian in a small town. I just think it introduced me. It allowed me to be with my people. And that was the only place you could go that

many years ago [in the 1970s]. There weren't even parties. If there were, I didn't know since I was just coming out....The gay population is the highest population of drugs and alcohol. You know. It's the bars that save our lives, it's the bars that take our lives. It's pretty strange.

My Life Today

Singlehood and Sexual Identity: Pathways and Satisfaction

Pathways to singlehood. All of the women were currently single, though they came to their singlehood through different paths. The women had been single for an average of nine years (range of six to 17 years). As discussed above, three women did not have long-term significant relationships and have been single for at least a decade. The 10 women who were either heterosexually married or in long-term same-sex partnerships have been single since their relationship dissolved or in two cases since their lesbian partner passed away. The women who have been single for a long period of time noted their experience with the transition and how they have grown into being independent in their singlehood. Elizabeth, who has been single for 11 years since her lesbian partner passed away, said that living without her partner "was a learning process. A learning and growing process" after being partnered for 25 years. Beverly, who identified as bisexual, and has been single for eight years since her last relationship ended, said,

I think I have grown to not only accept being single but to actually prefer it....I was [initially] very uncertain. Looking back, I felt really shaky after the separation. And it had been so long since I had lived alone, I was maybe a little paranoid or something. I didn't want to go places by myself and didn't want to travel by myself....So, when we separated, at first, I felt very vulnerable. I felt

incapable. I wasn't sure I could deal with everything by myself....Dealing with the car or the power tools. I owned a house and had to take care of it. I figured out all that stuff. And I adapted to it all. Now, I'm at a place where I feel much more confident. I am confident I can deal with whatever comes along pretty much.

Francesca, a lesbian who had twice been heterosexually married and divorced, and in long term lesbian partnerships, acknowledged that she was still trying to find herself in relation to singlehood, saying,

I'm trying to come to terms with it....But I don't want that [dating] the focus of my life! The focus of my life is becoming who I want to spend the rest of my life with. So that is where I am right now. I'm trying to define this phase of my life and rediscover myself, if you will. And it's not easy, you know. I can sometimes see why people would rather move right into another relationship. It does have its lonely moments, but so does living in a relationship with an emotionally unavailable person.

Nine of the women lived alone and four women lived with someone else at least part of the year. That is, Crystal's college-aged son lived with her during school breaks. Mary had a granddaughter living with her because her home was close to the university, and Jay-Bird's son is living with her while he is in college. Gayle was living with friends when she spoke with me, after recently moving from a different city. She was not sure where she would live after leaving her friend's home, as she was anticipating moving to Canada, where she was also a citizen, in light of the 2016 U.S. Presidential election.

Satisfaction with singlehood. Eleven of the women liked or were comfortable with their singlehood, acknowledging that they were happy, satisfied, and had a rich life without a romantic

partner. Harri noted that it was “freeing” to be happy single, and Jay-Bird discussed the liberation of not being married, even wearing a liberty coin ring for a few years. Like Beverly and Francesca discussed above, there were challenges and transitions to reach the place where they were happy being single. Similarly, Crystal said that after recovering from the trauma of her partner leaving her, she is now settled and happy with her life.

When she [ex-partner] first left, I was, I think I lost a whole year. I was just kind of in shock. And then, they [ex and ex’s new partner] moved next door. So it wasn’t like there was that huge split where I didn’t see her. I see her every day. I think it took longer for me to heal. She would do anything for me and always has so, it wasn’t that part. It was that betrayal. But now it’s been eight years, and I really love my life. I mean, I even like things really organized....I like where I live. I love my community. I have very close friends. And I travel a lot. And when you travel as one it is more doable to go different places, than paying for two. So, in many ways, I think my life is exactly the way I want it right now.

Alternatively, only two of the women disliked their singlehood. Both Amelia, who identified as lesbian, and Gayle, who identified as queer, felt that they were missing out on an aspect of life or had a difficult time with singlehood. Gayle noted that singlehood “sucks”, stating,

I hate it. It’s been a real struggle. Especially coming out later in life. And having a lot of regret and a lot of grief about missed opportunities when I was younger....I’ve had a really hard time since [the divorce]. I’ve been struggling, professionally, housing-wise, and dating was really tough.

Openness to dating. Five women were actively interested in dating at the present time. Although they identified as single, they said they were interested in finding a romantic partner or companion. Some were asking friends to set them up, or they were using online dating websites or services. For example, Elizabeth was on a “senior dating site”, and Jay-Bird had discovered a dating site solely focused on lesbian women having positive relationships.

The other eight women were not foreclosing on a romantic relationship, but they were also not actively in the process of seeking dates or a relationship. These women said that they were open to a relationship, though would not go out seeking one. Dee said, “I’m not really hunting. I’m just living my life, and if paths cross, then that’s the way it’s going to happen. I don’t feel empty because I don’t have a relationship.” Similarly, Crystal said,

I’m not going to go on cupid.com or whatever. I’m just not that kind of person.

I’m not going to try to look for a relationship because I feel like I need to be in one, because I don’t. If I met someone and there was a spark both ways, I would be open to that.

Community Connections

The women were very active in their communities through groups, organizations, and activities. Their activities included book clubs, groups to both play and listen to music, art organizations, language learning groups, Happiness Club, motorcycle club, recovery group, and religious affiliations. The women also spent their time producing art, traveling, engaging in exercise or outdoor activities (e.g., golf, camping, hiking, kayaking, gardening, yoga, dancing, bowling), and having dinner with friends. The activities and the groups were formed in person or online. Six women cited the website, Meet-Up, as the location where they found groups of like-minded people to participate in activities. A few of the women, such as Beverly and Gayle,

created Meet-Up groups on the website to find a group of lesbian women or vegan individuals in their communities. Beverly and Gayle, in particular, noted that they had community solely online as well, including a singlehood community and a late in life lesbian group.

All of the women were active in at least one lesbian-only or LGBT group, which is not surprising as many of the women were recruited through LGBT organizations. Some of the lesbian groups were social or support groups, and some LGBT groups had focused activities or membership. For example, Jay-Bird, who is part of a lesbian choir, discussed how her activities have been developed since she retired from teaching, saying,

I thought about joining the choir a couple years before I retired but I realized I wouldn't have the energy for it. I couldn't come home from work, grab food, go to choir practice and get up and work the next day and have a decent amount of energy because I come home from work and have something to eat and do some more work....Then there was almost always overtime on the weekends and I just didn't have the energy to socialize. So what being retired has done is not only do I have time during the day but I have energy in the evening....So my social life has blossomed in terms of those kinds of connections.

Most of the women spoke about their activism and spending their time as volunteers for the community. Gayle was active in racial justice, particularly her local chapter of Standing Up for Racial Justice. Crystal and Mary were activists for women's and LGBT rights. Immunity takes her cats to visit nursing homes, which reflects her love of pets and her desire to volunteer. Harri has been volunteering with a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) related to education in Uganda over the years. Elizabeth noted that she was still "trying to find out what I want to do in retirement. So, now checking out different volunteer activities."

While a few women, such as Elizabeth and Jay-Bird, were growing their activities, others were trying to refocus their energies on only certain groups and activities. Mary said that “this week right here, I don’t have one night at home. I don’t have time to really fill a lot in. I’m pretty busy.” Similarly, Francesca spoke of the activities and groups she is a part of, saying, “I’m going to continue those kinds of endeavors, because they are so nourishing. So, what else I get involved with, I’m not sure. And I’m not quite sure yet where I’m going to edit. But I know I’m going to.”

Closest Circle

When the women were asked who they considered part of their family or who was in their closest circle, everyone named a few individuals that they were close to, that they had been connected to for a while, anticipated would be in their lives for a long time, and that they could rely on. Their families included siblings, members of the next generation, friends who were like family, and people who had legally been family in the past.

Eleven of the women included at least one of their siblings in their closest circle, even when they lived at a distance. One woman, Dee, still had her mother alive and considered her part of her family and closest circle along with her younger sister. Elizabeth is particularly close to her brothers, saying, “I was close to my older brothers in my youth, and as an adult, we’re all pretty close still...Actually, I traveled with my older brother and his wife for three, four weeks last spring.” Mary, however, has lost her siblings, though was connected to her sister before her death. Gayle was the only participant who has lost her connection to her siblings, stating that she does not speak with her brothers.

Ten of the women were close to individuals of the next generations, including younger neighbors, nieces, nephews, children, and grandchildren. Of the six women who had children, all

except one discussed their children as part of their closest circle now. Harri, Kwincy, and Mary had grandchildren. Mary had her granddaughter living with her at the time. Harri had made a cross-country move to be closer to her grandchild as well. Amelia and Dee both had nieces that they were particularly close to. Dee said of her relationship with her nieces,

One niece is my oldest sister's daughter, and we're close. We don't physically get to see each other as much, but we're very close. If I had a daughter, it would be...she thinks she's my daughter....Then my other niece...I did get to see her more often. It isn't like a mother/daughter relationship that I have with her. It's more like she's my niece.

The women would often cite close friends as part of their family. Generally, they noted "a couple close friends" (Francesca) or "four core group of friends" (Crystal), and Mary had a close friend group of eight. These close friends had predominantly been with the women through long periods of time, including life transitions such as partnerships dissolving and divorce. Amelia and Crystal both had a group of four friends who they had been close with for decades. Gayle had a best friend from college that she was still very close to, even though they lived in different states. Similarly, Jay-Bird was close to a woman she first met when working towards her teaching certificate. She said, "Maggie and I became fast friends because we were the two older women [in the program]....And Maggie has been a good friend ever since....I could call on Maggie in the middle of the night [if I needed support]."

Several of the women were deeply connected to ex-partners, ex-husbands, and ex-sisters-in-law. Five of the women were close to exes and still considered them part of their family (Allen, Blieszner, & Roberto, 2011). Crystal's ex-partner lived next door to her, and they were connected through their son, celebrating milestones with him, but also having dinner together at

least once a month. Crystal also said that she would turn to her ex-partner for assistance around the house if needed. Harri was also connected to her ex-partner, in part because of their son and grandchild. She said, “We are both major supports for each other. We feel like we are basically sisters at this point. I will do anything for her, she will do anything for me.” Jay-Bird and Mary were also connected to ex-husbands through their children and grandchildren, and Mary traveled with her ex-husband in recent years. Gayle, who did not have children, said that she still “hangs out” with her ex-husband and that “he and I are still soulmates, we’re just platonic soulmates” even celebrating Thanksgiving together.

Anticipating the Future

Women’s ideas about their future were connected to pre-planning and anticipating the possibilities of aging-related issues, such as how to deal with a short illness or knee replacement. Their ideas for the future spanned the topics of housing and support.

Housing. All of the women had the desire to stay in a space that was just theirs, such as a single family home, and a few who had not moved in many years desired to stay in their current home. Amelia, Kwincy, and Harri were in the process of moving to locations that were conducive to physical changes, such as an accessible apartment. Amelia was in the process of moving to a community of smaller single family homes for retirees. She said,

I’m moving into a condo association. I will have my own house...free standing house.....And the difference is this [current] neighborhood is to a large extent younger families, and the neighborhood I’m moving into is mostly retirees. And I’m actually...looking forward to, I think, being with people closer to my own age. And I think people who live in this neighborhood I’m moving to, love it. I keep hearing, “once you move here, you won’t want to leave.”...So, I’m keeping my

fingers crossed that it will be a positive move. And I think it will. I mean, people have already reached out to some extent and welcomed me and said, “looking forward to you getting here.” I hope.

Five of the women said that they were open to the idea of assisted living if the need arose in the future. Lindsay, however, was not sure what her future would hold, which I discuss below.

Seven of the women discussed an interest in communal living or a group home. Jay-Bird discussed multigenerational housing in cove housing or a tiny house community, which are popular in the city in which she lives. Crystal, who has a core group of four friends, said,

Maybe in our 70s, we may even find a group home!...It’s sort of what we are talking about. In terms of, like, ideally wouldn’t it be a nice kind of thing. But we’re not actually moving towards it....So, it’s sort of like “wouldn’t it be great if.” People might want a lesbian aging home! I always thought that would be fun!

Support. A few of the women had plans in place for formal, instrumental support. Specifically, three of the women had long-term care insurance, and one woman was contemplating purchasing insurance prior to the need arising. Immunity discussed her decision to set herself up financially with long-term care insurance, saying,

That was a decision I made based on the fact that I was realizing that if I am single that I want to be able to...I don’t want to have to have nieces and nephews do what they need to do. I would be able to...I like that whole aging in place mentality and using funds appropriately in the way I want them to be used, where I want them.

The women had an idea of what organizations or opportunities in their community could offer services as well and they were willing to hire people to assist with large projects around

their home. For example, Elizabeth mentioned using Angie's List, the home services website and directory. Jay-Bird has used her activity of learning a new language, Spanish, to hire local day laborers to assist her around the house. She also discussed a local network of volunteers set up to assist people, especially as they age.

Those who had informal support plans for the future had an overall sense of who in their closest circle and community would step forward for physical and instrumental or emotional support. Four of the women discussed how their neighbors will help them and have helped them for projects such as moving furniture. Related to illness, Francesca had a surgery within the last few years and knew that she could count on her locally residing cousin to assist her emotionally and physically in illness, saying, "she took care of me the first week I was out of the hospital. I could call on her." Lindsay, however, was not as sure about her future, saying,

As far as being ill, I worry about that...what's going to happen to me. I don't have any children to take me in. I don't have any parents. I don't know what I would do. If it was simpler than that and a temporary illness I would ask my close friends. If I needed to, I would go through the email [LGBT group list-serv] again, if I needed someone to come and stay with me for a couple of days or to transport me.

Final reflections. The women who spoke with me lived full lives, with ups and downs within them. At the time of our interviews, most of them were happy in their lives, even wondering what the next adventure would be. Two of the women specifically left me with their advice on aging, wanting to share their wisdom that they had gained. Kwincy said, "live in the moment. If there's a future past the moment then fantastic. Take it as it comes." Harri told me,

When you are a little kid and looking at old ladies who are 65, you say they probably just bake cookies all the time. Who knew. Do not worry about getting older. It's huge fun. Except for your body, there's the body, but huge fun. You don't know that you're not in high school so it's good.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Expanding on the previous research on single women and sexual minority older adults, in this study I explored the relationships of single older sexual minority women throughout their lives. In the findings, I discussed the early experiences the women had that impacted them and often carried with them into adulthood and later life, how they made a living, how they lived and loved, how they view their lives currently, and what they anticipate in the future. In the following chapter I discuss the findings in the context of the previous literature and the guiding research questions. I also discuss the limitations, future research, and implications built from this research.

Discussion of Findings

Western society, particularly within the United States has the expectation that adults will be in romantic relationships and marry (Budgeon, 2008; Cherlin, 2009; Coontz, 2016). Individuals internalize the expectation of love and marriage. Yet, life does not always work out that way for a variety of reasons. Women who live outside the heteronormative or homonormative (Allen & Mendez, 2018) culture have been left out of the same-sex marriage movement in the discussion of “love is love” which focuses on whether someone is in a heterosexual or same-sex relationship, love is the same. Single women, particularly sexual minority women, may or may not have intergenerational relationships to lean on to care for them in old age. However, the single women in this study are living fulfilling lives and many have plans for old age. I now turn to a discussion of the findings in relation to the two research questions that guided this study: (a) How do sexual minority women who are unmarried and uncoupled define family; and (b) How do women who have been historically marginalized anticipate their later years?

How Single Sexual Minority Women Define Family

The first research question of how unmarried and uncoupled women who identify as a sexual minority, define family was framed by critical feminist and life course theoretical perspectives. In their youth, the women acknowledged the normative nature of their nuclear families. Their parents worked and raised them, and all of the women had siblings. Some of them were connected to their extended families through visits such as at holidays or living with them. Their early lives were not all easy, though. Within their home lives, some of the women had experienced physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. Abuse narratives and families with alcoholism were not uncommon among individuals in the baby boom cohort, stemming from ramifications of World War II, such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and patriarchal power (Coontz, 2016). Many of the women noted early independence and rebelliousness with the desire to leave their childhood home as soon as possible. For the women with a rough home life, the desire to leave was related to the abuses they were experiencing.

During early and middle adulthood, the women cited romantic relationships as most important to them. They included their partners as key members of their family. The women revealed relationship histories along four paths. That is, six of the women did not marry heterosexually; they had lesbian relationships for either short or long-term periods of time. The other seven women were first involved in at least one heterosexual marriage before they entered into either short or long-term lesbian relationships. Entering and exiting relationships and the transition to parenthood were important turning points in their individual and family lives (Allen & Henderson, 2017; Elder, 1998).

In addition to their partnership histories, half of the women had children, but through a variety of means: adoption, a partner having a biological child, or having biological children of

their own. The women who were becoming parents on their own or in same-sex relationships were building their families during the “gayby boom” of the 1990s (Dunne, 2000; Orel & Fruhauf, 2006). Of the women who did not have children only one wanted children and was not able to have children due to medical challenges when she was younger. The other women chose not to be a parent. The women were not childfree because of their sexuality but rather they made the choice. Elizabeth and Lindsay who specifically spoke about coming to the decision to remain childfree noted that they felt fulfilled in their lives without children and the challenges that come from having children.

Now in later life all of the women have connections within their community and persons they consider as their closest circle and family. Important parts of their community were LGBT groups, specifically lesbian groups for socializing and activities. The women were also involved in their communities through activities such as arts and sports, as well as volunteering and activism. As sexual minority women and single women they had helped develop spaces and communities during their lives, including as activists, and were continuing to do so. Their closest circle included a core group of friends, siblings, children and grandchildren, and exes. Similar to Dykstra and de Jong Gierveld’s (2004) findings of Dutch older adults, older women with close friends, neighbors, and relatives were important in their lives and the women had close ties outside of a partner or spouse.

Research around sexual minorities frequently describes individuals as being rejected by their family of origin and historically turning to friends and the broader LGBTQ+ community, converting them to kin-like relationships (family of choice; Allen & Roberto, 2016; Heaphy, 2009; Weston, 1991). Many scholars also presume that sexual minority older adults are not in contact with their families of origin and that they do not have children (e.g., Fredriksen-Goldsen,

Hoy-Ellis, Muraco, Goldsen, & Kim, 2015; Gabrielson, 2011; Muraco & Fredriksen-Goldsen, 2014; Wilkens, 2015). However, I found that sexual minority women of the baby boom cohort have family of consisting of friends and individuals from the LGBTQ+ community, in addition to members of their family of origin, their children and grandchildren, and individuals who had been legally part of their family in the past (Allen et al., 2011). The women in this study have continued to add people that they consider family rather than remove individuals, or will return to important people in their lives as they age, thus securing the support of chosen, biological, and legal kin.

Anticipating Later Years

A life course perspective framed the second research question of how women who had been historically marginalized anticipated their later years. Overall, the women in this study were well-educated and had long careers. Only three of the women said that they were unsure about their financial future, including two of the younger women in the sample who were still working full-time. Thus, the women were not dependent on men or partners for their financial stability (Stanley & Wise, 1990). The women who were comfortable with their financial stability noted their pension from their careers and owning their own home as important to feeling comfortable with their finances. Three women also had made the decision to purchase long-term care insurance so they could continue to feel financially stable even when needing additional assistance. One woman even said that she was not sure about getting in to a relationship with someone who did not also have the same financial stability.

Along with financial independence, the women expressed a strong desire to live independently for as long as possible. This was especially true for the women who owned their own homes. They knew the types of updates they would need to make within their homes to be

able to stay when their health declines. The women were also predominantly open to group living with key friends or communal living, which would be a way for them to maintain some independence while also having others around to assist them or to spend time with. One woman was in the process of making that move to community housing when I interviewed her.

Through past experience or in the course of our conversation, the women also revealed that they had a concept of who they could turn to for informal physical and emotional support as they got older. Neighbors and others in their community were identified as able to assist with some home tasks, and the women often had asked for this assistance recently when we spoke. Close friends were also important, especially for emotional support. Many of the women noted that it was their friends that helped them through some of their life's difficult moments and anticipated those friends would be supports for them in the future as well. Only five women discussed a sibling or children as someone they anticipated would assist them in the future, which is often who people assume they will turn to for care when they get older (Gabrielson, 2011; Silverstein & Giarrusso, 2010). Often when one is unmarried or uncoupled, they turn to siblings and children for informal caregiving and support (Umberson, Pudrovskaya, & Reczek, 2010). For some, the physical distance between them and siblings or children influenced their anticipation for support, especially physical support.

Women who did not have children said that they did not want to burden their nieces or nephews with caring for them, unless the nieces or nephews chose to on their own. Among childless older adults, they are more likely to be helped by nonrelatives and organizations (Albertini & Mencarini, 2014). The finding that single sexual minority older women rely more on friends and local support systems rather than siblings or children confirms some of the stereotypes that have been made around LGBT older adults receiving care (Barker et al., 2006;

Brennan-Ing et al., 2014; Muraco & Fredriksen-Goldsen, 2014); in particular, that lesbian women from the baby boom cohort are able to conceptualize, develop, and sustain social support in alternative, yet often informal ways (Barker et al., 2006; Brown & Grossman, 2014; Heaphy, 2009).

The majority of the work on sexual minority older adults comes from Social Work and has a health focus to the research. Much of that work is cross-sectional and quantitative (e.g. Averett et al., 2012; Fredriksen-Goldsen, et al., 2013; Williams & Fredriksen-Goldsen, 2014). In that literature, the stereotype that older sexual minority adults are single, lonely, depressed, and childless is perpetuated to help make the case for the necessity of the research conducted. The research often lumps all sexual minority individuals over a certain age (e.g., 45) together asking questions about current abuse, health, care-receiving, life satisfaction, and includes a likert-scale of social support (e.g. Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2011; Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2013). My research shows the importance of acknowledging the cohort in which someone lived as the socio-historical time influenced the acceptance they had, the medical technology for having children, and other experiences that would influence current views of life between a sexual minority adult who is currently 70 compared to currently 90.

Longitudinal and life history research is also important to understand the lived experiences of sexual minority adults. For example, in my research half the women had a rough home life growing up, medical challenges beginning when they were younger, or had family members die young, which influence their lives today. Cross-sectional research asking about current health and current abuse does not acknowledge previous life events and the impact on the responses about health and life satisfaction in the current moment. Qualitative research asking

about life history and using a critical feminist and life course perspective acknowledges the context.

Sexuality and Singlehood

In addition to addressing the two research questions, a third area of focus emerged during the data collection and analysis: How do women experience the intersection of singlehood and sexuality? A critical feminist perspective is helpful to understand the women's identities related to singlehood and sexuality. The women who participated in this study claimed a sexual minority identity from as early as their teenage years and up into their 60s. Most of the women identified as lesbian. The three women who identified as bisexual all claimed their identity before their mid-20s. They were also three of the younger individuals who participated. The youngest woman identified as queer and had only claimed her sexual identity three years prior to the interview, while being single for at least six years. The labels that the women have chosen to identify their sexuality may in part be influenced by their lived experiences as well as by their cohort, with those who are the youngest members of the baby boom cohort claiming more fluid and non-monosexual labels (Diamond, 2008; Russell et al., 2009).

The identity labels chosen was a point of tension among gatekeepers as well as the women themselves. The women who were previously married to men at times discussed how they came to their sexual identity label, evoking Kinsey (Kinsey et al., 1948) to discuss the sexuality spectrum. Most of these women chose lesbian because they had mostly dated or were interested in dating women and did not feel the need to acknowledge past relationships with men. The three women who identified as bisexual did acknowledge that they had been with men and that there was still some attraction to men. One gatekeeper noted that she would not share the research with her community because I identify as queer and since bisexual women were

included in the study. Her community felt that lesbian women are too silenced to include bisexual women as well. Alternatively, Beverly noted that she could not share her bisexual experiences with her lesbian friends because they would find it threatening and would not appreciate it. So, there is some within group tension as to who is part of sexual minority groups. The within group tensions may stem from the baby boom cohort's period of lesbian feminism and all-women's spaces (Faderman, 1991) where women who have a connection to men or possible connection to men could threaten those spaces.

The four women who identified as bisexual or queer all had short-term relationships with women rather than long-term same-sex relationships. While there was within group silencing of bisexuality, I also acknowledge that by choosing the phrase "lesbian relationships" as the describer for same-sex relationships, it may silence bisexual and queer women's identities in relation to their relationship history as well. Dee noted that she was open to dating men, though she was not actively looking to date anyone, the other three women were open to dating predominantly women. However, at least Beverly acknowledged the fear within the LGBTQ community for women to date women who were bisexual since they may leave to go back to boyfriends or husbands. At the same time, the women who participated in the study were all single women who also had a sexual minority identity, pushing the boundaries to the idea that one has to be in a same-sex relationship to be part of the LGBTQ+ community. One's sexual identity is not solely about who they are sleeping with.

Throughout the women's lives there was an element of independence and agency. Except for Kwincy and Mary, who had attractions to women as a catalyst for divorcing their husbands, the women were independent in some way when they were first attracted to women and claimed a sexual minority identity. They were in college, living on their own, or already divorced from

their husband when first acknowledging their same-sex attractions. Being independent in relation to their sexuality is similar to what was seen in previous cohorts of women who were able to be financially stable on their own and living in locations away from their family (Faderman, 1991).

Most of the women discussed claiming or realizing their sexual minority identity along with an introduction to feminism, the women's rights movement, or being introduced to lesbian women in their local community. Kwincy, Elizabeth, and Lindsay all had early introductions to gay or lesbian bars (Davis & Kennedy, 1989; Faderman, 1991) and noted how those were important to them at the time. The women of the baby boom cohort were coming of age primarily during "second wave" feminism and the Civil Rights era, which marked major sociohistorical influences on their lives (Allen, 2016; Eichorn, 2015; Phillips & Cree, 2014).

The women intentionally or unintentionally challenged patriarchal norms through their independence from men currently and throughout their lives (Budgeon, 2016; hooks, 2002; Faderman, 1991; Stanley & Wise, 1990). As bell hooks notes in her 2002 book *Communion: The Female Search For Love*, women no longer see aging as a negative and can think about love in later life in new ways and building their own path. Women can choose their own adventure and definitions around love with radical feminism challenging the obsession with heterosexual romantic love (hooks, 2002). The single sexual minority women in this study were finding ways to be fully self-actualized as independent women who have built community and families outside of heteronormative ideals (Budgeon, 2008; hooks, 2002).

All of the women were currently single and had been for an average of nine years. Two women became single when their partner passed away while 11 women became single after long or short-term partnerships and marriages broke up. Possibly related to the length of time the women had been single, most were comfortable or liked being single and were not actively

looking for a new partner. Stein (1981) posed four types of singles related to whether being single was voluntary or involuntary and whether being single was temporary or stable. The women within this study who were actively looking to date were involuntary temporary singles while the women who were open to dating were voluntary stable singles, though they may not have been voluntarily single when first becoming single after relationship dissolution. However, a key distinction is that with Stein's types of singlehood, the focus is on getting married. None of the women noted a desire to get married with a new partner, but did desire a romantic relationship and companionship with a partner. The language regarding marriage is important in relation to sexual minority individuals who have not had the legal right to marry until the last decade, but also for the baby boom cohort who form partnerships outside of marriage rather than remarry (Brown & Shinohara, 2013; Mahay & Lewin, 2007). Similar to older heterosexual women, many of the women in this study were more interested in companionship and someone to have fun with and do activities with than to marry (Watson & Stelle, 2011). Additionally, Stein's label of "temporary" singlehood relays the idea that being single is short-term. However, the women in this study who desired to date and find a relationship and were actively seeking a relationship had been single for at least six years though they did not see their singlehood status as permanent, marking a stable singlehood according to Stein (1981).

As Allen (1994) noted in her reflections on the study on older single women, the women in this study had a sense of pride about their independence and ability to find happiness in being single (Allen, 1994). While many of the women had been partnered during their lifetime, they did not feel that being partnered currently was necessary for a fulfilling life, contradicting the scholarly and lay narrative of marriage as a necessity (Byrne & Carr, 2005; Cherlin, 2009; Sandfield & Percy, 2003). The women overall had a positive self-identity as single while

emphasizing sustaining relationships with chosen family and biological family members (Allen, 1989; Simpson, 2016). This finding is different than what Hostetler (2009, 2012) found with gay men over the age of 35, who were not satisfied with their singlehood.

In a study of single lesbian women, which focused on personal ads for companions, Laner (1996) argued that lesbian women have the advantage of continued contact with the LGBQ community for friendship even when they were not in a relationship. With support and social organizations for LGBTQ+ individuals that most of the women were involved with on some level or had close lesbian friends, on the surface, I found support in this study for Laner's argument. However, some of the women in this study also noted that while they are involved in the LGBTQ+ community in their locality, women often will couple up and then disappear from the community. They noted that the pressure to be in a couple was strong. This type of intensive pressure to be coupled among the LGBTQ+ community is similar to the findings of Hostetler (2012) for gay men. The intersection of gender and sexual orientation in relation to pressures for coupledness, friendships, and community bear further investigation.

Limitations

Previous research has had challenges with recruiting older sexual minority adults (Sullivan, 2014), as I did. The previous research that has been done has used specific organizations (e.g., Averett et al., 2012; de Vries et al., 2009; Gardner et al., 2014; Grossman et al., 2000; Orel & Fruhauf, 2006) in specific geographical regions and large metropolitan areas where social services are more easily accessible (e.g., Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, Seattle; Cohler, 2005; Richard & Brown, 2006; Scherrer & Fedor, 2015). I specifically did not recruit with a singular organization or specific geographical region. However, the most successful way I found to recruit participants was through LGBTQ+ organizations that had

senior specific groups. What I learned was many LGBT organizations did not have senior groups. Rather, most of these LGBTQ+ organizations focused on youth, same-sex parents, and trans individuals. Thus, my participation was limited to organizations that had senior groups and the systems in place to bring attention to the study.

Like much research on LGBTQ+ older adults, this study consisted of predominantly White and well-educated women. While there were some women from rural or smaller localities, most were from large metropolitan areas. Most of the women also resided in states that have been more progressive in laws for LGBTQ+ individuals, including having same-sex marriage at least three years prior to the Obergefell v. Hodges ruling by the Supreme Court of the United States. The sample was also located mainly on the East and West coasts of the United States. Thus, the voices of women from large areas of the U.S., including extremely rural areas of the Midwest, Rocky Mountains, and the Plains, were not included.

My own social locations may have contributed to the limitation of participants. I was 25 to 41 years younger than the women I sought to interview. I also identify as queer, which was a point of contention with one gatekeeper, who wanted all research to focus on lesbian women done by lesbian women. I am also a White woman. These social locations and identities potentially limited the ability to engage in snowball sampling or to go through personal networks to reach more diverse participants (Averett et al., 2012; Charmaz, 2014; Daly, 2007; McCormack, 2014; Westwood, 2013). I was not embedded in the social networks, social groups, or geographical locations to reach additional participants (Lavender-Stott, Grafsky, Nguyen, Wacker, & Steelman, 2018).

Another limitation included how I presented singlehood while recruiting participants. I decided upon the criterion that the women needed to be single for at least five years in order to

indicate the stability of their singlehood. However, women who may have been dating or in relationships for a few months during the last five years might not have felt that they could participate. Women who are still seeking a new romantic relationship and a long-term partner may not claim singlehood as an identity or as part of their relationship history. Averett et al. (2012) found that 25% of lesbian women over age 50 in a sample from across the United States said that they were single and not dating, but 15% were single but casually dating or identified as widowed or celibate. Thus, having a broader view on what singlehood entailed may have included more sexual minority women's voices.

Future Research

Research that focuses on LGBTQ+ older adults is needed and should continue. The research on LGBTQ+ older adults is outside the predominant focus within LGBTQ+ scholarship of same-sex parents with children and sexual minority youth (van Eeden-Moorefield, 2018). It is important to look at strengths of individuals and families in what makes them unique (Tasker, 2013). Future research should continue to acknowledge the challenges that sexual minority individuals have faced throughout their lives and how best to support them in their later years, such as with future housing needs and plans.

In addition to supports, I aim to continue this research with the limitations of the current study in mind. I will use the connections I have made within this project as well as future connections in the rural plains of the Midwest. I will also recruit more specifically for women who are sexual minorities and older without putting stipulations on their romantic relationship history. This will allow for voices that may have not felt that they were part of the study to be heard.

Future research can include how this cohort of baby boomers experienced family acceptance and disclosure. The women in the current study had verbally disclosed their sexual identity to their family of origin, particularly when in a long-term lesbian relationship or they acknowledged that their parents knew without them having to say anything. The women predominantly were accepted by siblings or had found ways to have common ground to maintain a connection with their siblings. Focusing on this aspect of sexual minority older adults' lived experiences, can in turn, assist in developing an understanding and guidance for sexual minority youth as they disclose to their family of origin and build on the understanding of youth deciding to disclose to their immediate and extended family (e.g., Grafsky, Hickey, Nguyen, & Wall, 2018).

The women in the study have had lives that included challenges and heartbreak. Yet, the women have a community and people they consider family. Similar to above, we can learn from those who have had a lifetime of experiences in making and keeping connections with friends, community, and family beyond a family of procreation. Having a greater understanding of these connections can assist in helping people facing loneliness, no matter their social location.

Implications

The current study adds to the discussion of older sexual minority adults, and their strengths, needs, and desires. For example, one issue is what women wish to have in future housing situations when they are uncoupled and may or may not have children. Understanding the desire for independence can assist social workers, family members, and even housing developers in working with older lesbian women.

There is a continued push for schools to be safe for sexual minority youth, and research has shown that youth do better when there is a Gay Straight Alliance or a similar organization in

the school (Poteat, Sinclair, DiGiovanni, Koenig, & Russell, 2013; Russell, Muraco, Subramaniam, & Laub, 2009; Toomey & Russell, 2011; Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, & Russell, 2011). The importance of organizations for youth is in part to counteract isolation and provide them with a supportive place they spend large portions of their week. I see the need for community among youth as corollary to the situation for older adults. Older sexual minority adults are strengthened by having access to social and support groups such as SAGE or other LGBTQ+ groups. However, there are very few groups that focus on older sexual minority adults, especially for women. More social groups in person and online will be beneficial for individuals to feel connected, seen, and heard, and thus providing needed support (Brennan-Ing et al., 2014; SAGE, 2014). This will be especially important with the estimation that three million adults in the United States will be over 65 and identify as a sexual minority by 2030 (Allen & Roberto, 2016; Williams & Fredriksen-Goldsen, 2014).

Conclusion

The women in this study, all of whom identified as a sexual minority, have had lives that included tragedies and traumas. Yet, they are resilient and found ways to choose their own path. They were highly invested in creating worthwhile lives for themselves, having owned and faced the challenges they experienced. In part, they demonstrated the ability to have realistic expectations about what one's life is going to be, including being single with or without children and using the resources they have to find their way to strength. They have intellectual resources, such as through education, life experience, and curiosity, often as lifelong doers and learners. The women have relational resources through friends as family, biological kin, and legal kin and creating community where they are. They also have developed financial resources through work and savings. Ultimately, these women came to live in the moment, making some plans, but not

worrying about it too much since they have learned that it could all change, choosing to live their life to the fullest.

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Appendix A: Journals Consulted for Literature Review

Family and Relationship Journals

Family and Community History
Family Process
Family Relations
History of the Family
Journal of Comparative Family Studies
Journal of Family Issues
Journal of Family Theory and Review
Journal of GLBT Family Studies
Journal of Marriage and Family
Journal of Social and Personal Relationships

Gerontology Journals

Journal of Aging Studies
Journal of Gerontological Social Work
Journal of Gerontology Series A: Biological Sciences & Medical Sciences
Journal of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences & Social Sciences
The Gerontologist

LGBT Journals

International Journal of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies
InterAlia: A Journal of Queer Studies
Journal of Bisexuality
Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health
Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services
Journal of Homosexuality
Journal of Lesbian Studies
Journal of LGBT Issues in Counseling
Journal of LGBT Youth
LGBT Health
QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking

Sexuality Journals

Journal of Sex Research
Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies
Journal of the History of Sexuality
Sexualities
Sexuality, Gender, and Policy Journal
Sexuality Research and Social Policy
Sex Roles

Women's Studies and Feminist Journals

Feminism & Psychology
Feminist Studies

Gender and Society
Journal of International Women's Studies
Journal of Women's History
Psychology of Women Quarterly
Signs
Women's Studies: An inter-disciplinary journal
Women's Studies Quarterly

Appendix B: Recruitment Message

Recruitment message script to list-servs, organizations, and groups:

Dear [insert name]/Hello,

My name is Erin Lavender-Stott and I am a doctoral candidate in the department of Human Development at Virginia Tech. I am working on a research project to understand the lived experiences of single sexual minority women aged 52-70 and their future plans. I am currently looking for women who are not in a romantic relationship and have not been in a committed relationship for the last five years, who identify as a sexual minority (LGBQ+) and were born between 1946 and 1964 for a qualitative study.

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Virginia Tech has granted approval to conduct this research (#16-890). The study includes a 60-90 minute audio-recorded interview to take place in-person, on the phone, or via Skype/Google Hangout, etc. as appropriate. There are questions about your family and friends across your life, singlehood, and communities. Following the interview, any demographic information that was not gathered during the interview may be asked for. All information will be kept confidential and any data collected will be used only for the purposes of this study. Each person who participates in the interview will receive a \$25 gift card. The study is being supervised by my advisor, Dr. Katherine Allen.

I would appreciate it if you are willing to share this message and information with those who you may think will be interested. If you are unable to share this information, feel that this research does not pertain to those in your organization, please disregard this message.

If you are interested in participating, you may contact me at erinsls@vt.edu. For questions or further information, you may contact me via e-mail or at 540-230-7301.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Erin S. Lavender-Stott, M.A.
Doctoral Candidate, Human Development (Family Studies)
Virginia Tech
erinsls@vt.edu

Appendix C: Eligibility and Scheduling Script

[When an individual e-mails at erinsls@vt.edu, they will receive the following message]

Dear XXXX,

Thank you for getting in touch about the Family Experiences of Single Sexual Minority Women from the Baby Boom Generation project! The purpose of this project is to learn more about lived experiences and future plans of single sexual minority (LGBQ+) women who are of the baby boom generation. The following questions are to determine your eligibility to participate. If you are eligible, this information will be included in the research study. If you are ineligible or choose not to participate, this information will be destroyed. By responding to this message and answering the following questions you are consenting to answer the eligibility aspect of this study only and may remove yourself from the study at any point.

Participation is voluntary and all information associated with this study will remain strictly confidential. This project has been approved by Virginia Tech's Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (16-890).

How old are you?

What state do you live in?

What is your gender identity?

What is your sexual orientation identity?

Are you currently in a long-term committed romantic relationship?

If no, when was the last time you were in a committed romantic relationship?

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Erin S. Lavender-Stott, M.A.

Doctoral Candidate, Human Development (Family Studies)

Virginia Tech

erinsls@vt.edu

[If the potential participant responds to above message]

Dear XXXX,

[If not eligible] Thank you for taking the time to answer the questions in my earlier e-mail.

Unfortunately, you do not qualify for participation in this study. However, if we choose to expand the eligibility criteria, may we re-contact you?

[If eligible and local] Thank you for taking the time to answer the questions in my earlier e-mail. You do qualify for participation in the study. Our next step is the interview, which will take 60-90 minutes. Depending on your preference, we can meet in-person for the interview, or conduct the interview via phone or Skype/Google Hangout or another video chat technology. Following the interview, I will send some additional questions for you to review that primarily address demographics. For participating in the interview, you will receive a \$25 gift card.

Additionally, I am attaching the consent form for you to review before we conduct the interview. We will discuss this more when we talk for the interview. Participation is voluntary and all information associated with this study will remain strictly confidential. You may withdraw from participating in this study at any time without penalty.

Please let me know some times you are available and your preferred method for the interview.

[If eligible and not local] Thank you for taking the time to answer the questions in my earlier e-mail. You do qualify for participation in the study. Our next step is the interview, which will take 60-90 minutes. Depending on your preference, we can conduct the interview via phone or Skype/Google Hangout or another video chat technology. Following the interview, I will send some additional questions for you to review that primarily address demographics. For participating in the interview, you will receive a \$25 gift card.

Additionally, I am attaching the consent form for you to review before we conduct the interview. We will discuss this more when we talk for the interview. Participation is voluntary and all information associated with this study will remain strictly confidential. You may withdraw from participating in this study at any time without penalty.

Please let me know some times you are available and your preferred method for the interview.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Erin S. Lavender-Stott, M.A.
Doctoral Candidate, Human Development (Family Studies)
Virginia Tech
erinsls@vt.edu

IV. Benefits

Your participation in this project may help you feel better about your lived experiences by talking about their lived experiences. You may also benefit from feeling as though you are helping to make a difference for others by assisting in this research. No promise or guarantee of benefits has been made to encourage you to participate.

V. Extent of Anonymity and Confidentiality

Every effort will be made to keep your study-related information confidential. Identifying information will be removed from the transcript of the interview and the only connection between the interview and the follow-up questions will be a Study ID.

At no time will the researchers release identifiable results of the study to anyone other than individuals working on the project without your written consent unless you indicate an immediate threat to harm yourself or someone specific, or there is physical or sexual abuse of a minor. Additionally, your records may be reviewed by the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (IRB) for auditing purposes. The IRB is responsible for the oversight of the protection of human subjects involved in research.

VI. Compensation

Participants will be compensated with a \$25 gift card. The gift card will be provided after the interview, whether it is completed or not.

VII. Freedom to Withdraw

It is important for you to know that you are free to withdraw from this study at any time without penalty. You are free not to answer any questions that you choose or respond to what is being asked of you without penalty.

Please note that there may be circumstances under which the investigator may determine that a subject should not continue as a subject.

Should you withdraw or otherwise discontinue participation, you will be compensated for the portion of the project completed in accordance with the Compensation section of this document.

VIII. Questions or Concerns

Should you have any questions about this study, you may contact one of the research investigators whose contact information is included at the beginning of this document.

Should you have any questions or concerns about the study's conduct or your rights as a research subject, or need to report a research-related injury or event, you may contact the VT IRB Chair, Dr. David M. Moore at moored@vt.edu or (540) 231-4991.

IX. Participant's Consent

I have read the Consent Form and conditions of this project. I have had all my questions answered. I hereby acknowledge the above and give my voluntary consent:

_____ Date _____
Participant signature

Participant printed name

Appendix E: Interview Protocol

Thank you for meeting with me today. I believe your input will be invaluable to this research. We'll be talking for about 60 to 90 minutes and I will keep everything you say confidential. I recognize that your time is valuable, and I also recognize that your experiences are very important to our work.

Do you have any questions about the informed consent form?

I'd like to remind you that you can ask me to stop audio recording your answers at any time.

[If on the phone/Skype/Google Hangout] Before the interview officially begins, I'd like to confirm that you are in a room where you are alone and will not be disturbed for the next hour or so and that you feel comfortable to speak with me. In order to ensure your privacy, I need to confirm this fact with you.

While we are talking today, I will be filling out what I call a Life History Calendar. It includes important events in your life including births, deaths, career changes, entering relationships, exiting relationships and any other events that have been important to you. If you are willing, once we have finished talking today, I will send the Life History Calendar to you to correct or change.

	1945-1950	1951-1960	1961-1970	1971-1980	1981-1990	1991-2000	2001-2010	2011-2017
Births								
Deaths								
Entering Relationships (including marriage, first same-sex relationship)								
Exiting Relationships (including divorce)								
Other important dates and events to you								

[Past] First, I will be asking some questions about your past and time growing up.

1. Please tell me a little bit about your family when you were a child? Who did you consider a part of your family?
 - a. How did these relationships change as you grew up?
2. In early and mid-adulthood (from roughly age 18 to 50), what relationships were most important to you during this time?
 - a. In what ways have they been important?
 - b. In what ways, if any, have these relationships changed over time?

[Present] I am now shifting gears to discuss current times.

3. How do you experience singlehood today, compared to when you first became single?
 - a. What are your living arrangements?
4. How do you identify your sexual orientation?
 - a. Please tell me about your experiences as a [LGBQ] woman in your life up to this point.
5. Who would you say is in your closest circle now?
 - a. In what ways, if any, have you felt supported by people in your closest circle?
 - b. In what ways, if any, have you felt unsupported?
6. Who would you say is in your family now, including friends, siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles, children?
 - a. What, if anything, has ever stopped you from feeling connected to your family?
7. What communities are you a part of, including religious groups, community groups, hobby groups, etc.?
 - a. How do you spend your free time?
 - b. What, if anything, has helped you feel connected to those communities/support networks?
 - c. What, if anything, has stopped you from feeling connected to these communities/support networks?
 - d. [If part of religious groups] What is your religious or spiritual affiliation?
 - e. [If part of religious groups] How important are your spiritual and/or religious beliefs to you? (Not at all important, very unimportant, somewhat unimportant, somewhat important, very important, extremely important)
8. In what ways do you think your ideas or beliefs about relationships and community have changed as you have gotten older?

[Future] Finally, I am shifting to some questions about how you foresee the future.

9. Are there any circumstances that might lead you to dating or seeking a romantic relationship?
 - a. If you desire a romantic relationship, how would you go about meeting someone or seeking a relationship?
10. What circles of people and/or communities do you foresee being a part of in the future, including family, friends, religious groups, community groups, etc.?
 - a. How do you anticipate your current relationships with these people and/or groups to change in the future?
11. If you ever need help or assistance because of illness or limitations, is there anyone you could count on?
 - a. What sort of plans do you have in place for illness or aging?

- b. Have your plans for illness or aging been influenced by your sexual orientation identity?
- c. How are you planning for caring relationships (both caregiving and care-receiving)?

That is all of the questions that I have for you. I would like to thank you again for participating in this study and telling me about your life. Again, all information you provided is confidential and you will not be identified in writings from this work. Would you mind if I contact you again for anything that needs clarifying, including the Life History Calendar, and to answer a few short demographic questions? Also, I would like to offer you a copy of the final report, if you would like to read it.

Appendix G: Demographic Questions

Demographic Questions:

1. How do you describe the area where you live?
 - a. Rural (under 10,000 people)
 - b. Town or suburb (10,000-50,000 people)
 - c. Small city (50,000-100,000 people)
 - d. Large city (100,000-500,000 people)
 - e. Major metropolitan area (more than 500,000 people)

2. What is your highest education level?
 - a. Some high school
 - b. High school graduate
 - c. Some college
 - d. Associate's degree
 - e. Bachelor's degree
 - f. Graduate degree (master's or doctoral degrees)

3. Are you currently employed?
 - a. Full-time
 - b. Part-time
 - c. Retired
 - d. Unemployed

4. What is your income level before taxes?
 - a. Less than \$20,000 per year
 - b. \$20,000-\$49,999
 - c. \$50,000-\$79,999
 - d. \$80,000-\$99,999
 - e. \$100,000-\$119,999
 - f. \$120,000+

5. What is your race, ethnicity, or origin? (e.g., White, Black, African-American, Middle-Eastern/North African, Pacific Islander, Asian)

Appendix H: Follow-Up Notes with Participants**Gift Card Note:**

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me this week. Your input is invaluable to this research. I hope you enjoy this Amazon gift card as a token of my appreciation for your time.

Follow-up note:

Thank you again for speaking with me this week! As we discussed, I have sent you the electronic gift card from Amazon. Please let me know if that does not get to your e-mail for some reason.

Also, I am attaching the Life History Calendar and the last few demographic questions. I started to fill it out based on our conversation on Tuesday to give you an idea of what I am looking for. Please feel free to add, remove, or move anything on the Life History Calendar and the demographics.

Thank you,
Erin

After Sending life history calendar back:

Thank you for sending the document back with the clarifications in the timeline and responding to the demographic questions. As we discussed, I will be back in touch when the project is complete to share the results.

Thank you again for your time in speaking to me this week.

Thanks,
Erin

Appendix I: Selected Memos

November 1, 2016 (pre-interviews)

- Singles by choice and those by circumstance
 - Women single as they pursue passions that take them far in their careers and hobbies, that often means they are single
- If singlehood was not a marginalized status or group, why are there tax differences; it is different but marriage is not necessarily better for all
- Why are there groups for people to discuss the limits and challenges they face in society?
- Why people still pray for children to find partners and people worry there is something wrong with them when they are not partnered/married
- Are single people doing more of the volunteer work and more connected to their communities?
- Matrimania devalues relationships outside marriage
- Would rather work than date
- One person in the singlehood FB group who is out said it was easier for others to accept her lesbian identity than her single identity

November 12, 2016—Amelia memo

- A lot of people in and out because of the move. Leaving the area after so many years was clearly difficult. Really close to next door neighbor, S, but felt she couldn't bend her life to a neighbor and their family.
- The election added emotion to an already tough time and conversation
- She noted being lonely [which I have to hear and accept], but more so since retiring since she wasn't around people at work any more. But also because the lesbian community is not as vibrant in the town/region any more. People, instead, are coupling up and staying home rather than going out as groups, even when coupled.
- Does not have a plan for illness and aging
- Chose to move to a vibrant community with a lot going on. Though will have to rebuild relationships in new city. The neighborhood has single-family homes, but is a condo association, so has maintenance staff to help out. Can also call on other connected with when stayed there a few months last year before the decision to move.

November 20, 2016—Dee Memo

- Much more intense
- She has the intersection of illness/disability as well that influences as much if not more than sexual orientation or singlehood
- Complicated life history
- Has friends and community but doesn't seem to do tons with them
- Not energetic
- Yearning for what once was/what thought life would be like
- Abuse and then anxiety/depression challenges have influenced life completely

January 3, 2017—Kwincy Memo

- Name after her owl writing muse figurine

- Skype interview, wanted to use her real name
- Not sure what to do with all this abuse in people's stories
- She was all about transparency
- Big note on the gay bar scene and the number of LGBT alcoholics, but not many in recovery
 - Not sure entirely how to be social with lesbians without alcohol
- Other than SAGE, community is primarily straight
- A lot of suicide in her family
- An interesting research question she posed on butch/femme and sexual desires, but so many are not thinking like that anymore
- They like sharing their life's philosophies with younger people and I like hearing them, why I always liked talking with people older than me
- Need to acknowledge John in Diss. As cat wrangler, allowing me to do the phone/video interviews

October 16, 2017

- I have imposter syndrome with my research. Everything else I do I feel complete confidence, even when it's challenging and I wonder what I could do differently. Teaching and service do not make me freeze in the work I am trying to do the way research does right now. Feeling that I could be making mistakes. That there is a better, "right" way to do it.
- My shy, introvert ways makes interviews difficult. I decided to do it anyways to learn and to try to be stronger at it. I am afraid of offending people. It also makes recruiting hard for fear of bothering people or offending them.
 - Also what makes transcribing own interviews hard. Hearing yourself be awkward on the phone.
- Wanting what is best for the community.
- The identity politics have influenced who will work with me. Who is part of the community and who is not. Who can do this work and who can't.
 - Bisexuality and lesbian discussions
- Qualitative research is important, yet more time consuming and difficult to navigate. Especially since confidentiality is important and speaking to people may make it murky. Potentially why people do not want to participate. It is too personal, too visible.
 - Yet, quantitative or survey research puts the researchers opinions and ideas at the forefront rather than the individuals of the community/population. Using their words and understanding rather than mine.

December 2017 and January 2018 Memos (reading transcripts and finishing last transcript)

- Is it possible that the connection between LGB people being abused as kids isn't what "made them gay" but more specifically that children who are not necessarily conforming are more likely to be abused?
- All have their ideas of what relationships could/would look like now
 - Many in versions of living apart together situations
 - Have lines of what they don't want/only want (vegan, cats or no cats, etc.)
 - Most want someone to travel with

- Getting married because what supposed to do, so did
- Happiness of singlehood connected to whether retired or not; how connected to a community or group
- Being open or closeted at work
- Volunteering and activism
- Meet-up groups
- Actively dating (online, set-ups) or passive (if it comes along, sure)
- LGB groups; interest groups
 - Merge of LGB interest groups
- Working at relationships
- Put up roadblocks for starting a relationship
 - Say they do or have specific requirements for the people willing to date
 - Financially
- Connection to exes
- Lesbian/queer history
- When young family was parents & siblings; current time connected to some siblings but not all
- Relationships as successful → "haven't been successful in relationships"
- Nervous to be in a rels. Now, putting up the roadblocks
- Learning to do things on own after long relationship
- Gender roles
- Being supported/unsupported b/c of personalities and regular life events, not sexuality
- Pets
- Loneliness
- Family's religiousness related to current connectedness
- Alcoholism and drug use
 - Self and family
- Sections
 - Past family structure, current family structure, future family structure
 - Plans for the future
 - Singlehood
 - Sexuality
 - Community
- Family understanding: past, present
- Singlehood and Significant Others: dating/relationship roadblocks aka active vs. passive relationship seeking; loneliness; activism; volunteering; personality connection and retirement; hobbies; meet-ups; community connections with local, LGBT, and/or singlehood groups, some women's groups;

February 18, 2018 Reflective Memo

Starting with Dee, Katherine asked how I handled it when women disclosed their abuse or difficult life experiences? She pushed that I wasn't being vulnerable, that I was not open to vulnerability. While I understand that is true about myself, I struggled to understand what that had to do with my research. Looking back on the interviews, particularly with Dee's story, I know that it caught me off guard. I was not prepared for her story. When abuse initially came up,

I did not know how to ask probe questions. In a lot of ways, I froze. I did not want to push them in directions they were not comfortable going. I also did not want to fall into the historical trap of blaming sexuality on abusive pasts or parental relationships. Over the interviews, the follow-up questions were a bit easier to gain clarification, yet, for abuse in particular, I let the women tell as much or as little as they wanted to.

In trying to grapple with vulnerability and research, I was thinking about why I chose the population that I did. Acknowledging that a minor piece was about me-search, but above and beyond that it was to hear the voices and lived experiences of these women who predominantly have been lumped together and pathologized. What is the missing narrative? By doing this research it is about being vulnerable: recruiting, working with gatekeepers, being respectful, sharing about who I am/my work/my identities to build rapport requires some elements of being vulnerable. Yet, who has the privileged position? Each of us possessed something of value to the other, thus it was mutually beneficial.

While processing Katherine's comments about vulnerability, I went looking for literature to help. I ended up re-finding Brene Brown's work. In her social work research (using Grounded Theory) on shame and resiliency, she also worked on vulnerability. She discusses how research is storytelling and within that qualitative research includes vulnerability, as it can be non-linear and profound, which can affect us. Yet, we need to lean into the discomfort of the work and connection is why we are here. By allowing for the vulnerability we help lay the code out of messy life for others; acknowledge the beauty of life; and demonstrate the willingness to put ourselves (as researchers and participants) out there.

February 19, 2018 Reflective Memo

I continuously am trying to process and bracket my own lived experience with that of the women in my study and Katherine's experiences that reflect the women's. As a single queer woman about to move out of the "nest" there is so much for me to learn from these women. Yet, I also acknowledge that my lived experience and that of my family of origin does not reflect these women's.

My experience is that after retirement siblings become much closer. When Brice [mother's brother] retired, largely due to medical challenges, he would call every night at dinner. He would be on speakerphone during dinner every night. We were four hours away and still the primary caregivers throughout his four-year illness. He was definitely an alcoholic (not the cause of his medical problems, but didn't help) and emotionally unavailable, though not abusive. He just struggled to connect to the family, though had a lot of strong friendships. And he didn't know what to do with children. But that connection was always there.

Dad's brothers are very connected to us now. Cell-phones have made a difference with that too. They will call while waiting for grandchildren in the after-school pick-up line. Or just to chat. We hear from them at least twice a week. Retirement helped. Also kids being grown and the grandchildren not being babies anymore allowed for more time to connect with each other. Each medical challenge one of the brothers goes through is a reminder too.

As I said above, my family history does include alcoholism. However, none of our history includes abuse. Not just my own growing-up but my parents either. When asking at dinner one night, they each could come up with a single memory of a spanking or negative statement from a parent or grandparent, but that was it. Nothing consistent or systemic. Though alcohol was discussed. They made two comments of how much the men returning from World War 2 were struggling and continued to struggle from what they saw and did during the war. For

our family history, we were part of agricultural Appalachia, which is rural. They noted that in their small town if something like that (abuse) was happening, people would know. How much does the abuse narrative in U.S. history and people's experiences focus in more urban areas? How much of it is about what each individual person considers normal or problematic behavior?

Another thing that has surprised me a little bit are women's comments about not being able to rely on people who are not related to them. Again, my lived experience is different. My village were the ones who were our emergency contacts. We spent over six years being the emotional and instrumental support of the childless man across the street from us. That was part of who our village was and he was a key linchpin within the neighborhood family. I don't think he assumed we would step-up to fill those roles, but we did. Neighbors did for Brice. And I see the beginnings of the new next-door neighbors doing the same for my parents as they age. Maybe we can't assume or rely on it, but I have watched people stand up.

Appendix J: Coding Scheme

1. Where I Came From
 - a. “Traditional family”
 - i. Siblings and parents
 - ii. Rough home life
 - iii. Religion
 - b. Extended Family
 - i. Connected to extended family
 - ii. Disconnected from extended family
 - c. Big Events
 - i. Moving
 - ii. Family of origin deaths
 - iii. Parental divorce
 - iv. Leaving home and independence
 - v. Health challenges

2. How I Made A Living
 - a. Education
 - b. Work and career

3. Where I Lived and Loved
 - a. Relationship History
 - i. Short-term lesbian relationships
 - ii. Long-term lesbian relationships
 - iii. Short-term lesbian relationships after heterosexual divorce
 - iv. Long-term lesbian relationship after heterosexual divorce
 - b. Parenting
 - c. Claiming their Sexual identity

4. My Life Today
 - a. Singlehood and Sexual Identity: Pathways and Satisfaction
 - i. Pathways to singlehood
 - ii. Satisfaction with singlehood
 - iii. Openness to dating
 - b. Community Connections
 - i. Activities
 - ii. Organizations
 - c. Closest Circle
 - i. Siblings
 - ii. Next generation
 - iii. Friends
 - iv. Previous legal family
 - d. Anticipating the future
 - i. Housing
 - ii. Support