BUILDING IDENTITIES, BUILDING COMMUNITIES: LESBIAN WOMEN AND GAYDAR

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines identity and community building among lesbian women through the use of 'gaydar' or 'gay radar'. 'Gaydar' is commonly understood as the ability of lesbians, gays and queers to identify other people whom they believe are lesbian, gay or queer without explicitly being told. A total of eleven self-identified lesbian women participated in two loosely structured focus groups which examined how and why gaydar is used in everyday life. The data reveals that gaydar is used by lesbian women as a tool for building identities and communities. Gaydar can be conceptualized as central to the process of identity formation and maintenance because it allows women to represent themselves as lesbians and recognize the lesbian representations of other women. However, the potentially stereotypical cues upon which gaydar is based may result in a construction of lesbian identity which is limiting or essentializing. Gaydar can be conceptualized as a community building tool in relation to several conceptualizations of community: imagined communities, political communities, locality-based communities, and personal communities. The women who informed this research also recognize that the use of gaydar as a community building tool may result in the construction of a homogenous community which does not recognize the full diversity of lesbian experience. Notwithstanding this problematic, a fuller understanding of the phenomenon of gaydar may provide valuable insight into the ways in which individual lesbian women construct and experience identity and community in their everyday lives.

Keywords: Lesbians, Identity, Community, Representation, Gaydar

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Chapter 1:

RESEARCH QUESTION AND CONTEXT

This thesis investigates the phenomenon of gaydar and the roles it plays in the lives of some lesbian women. Gaydar has not been extensively researched previously and thus this work is primarily exploratory. I cannot claim to provide any definitive answers about either gaydar, lesbian identities or lesbian communities. If anything, the results of this research only generate more questions. I hope that they are questions which will force others to further investigate, understand and challenge the phenomenon of gaydar.

Defining Gaydar among Lesbian Women

'Gaydar' has been constructed as a common sense phenomenon within many of the lesbian, gay, and queer cultures in Canada and the United States. It is referred to with little or no explanation or elaboration in alternative newspapers and magazines which are produced by or for North American gays, lesbians and queers.

The word 'gaydar' seems to have emerged as a short form for 'gay radar.' On a superficial level, 'gaydar' supposedly allows lesbians, gays or queers to identify other people whom they believe are lesbian, gay or queer without explicitly being told. This recognition may occur instantaneously or over a period of time. In some cases, gaydar is considered to be a means of identifying individuals who may come out as lesbian, gay or queer in the future.

The concept of gaydar is potentially problematic because it relies on the recognition of identity categories which are virtually impossible to define. In this context I have used the word queer to refer not only to gays and lesbians, but also to those who are bisexual, transsexual, transgendered or in some other way not 'straight'. However, the identities 'lesbian', 'gay' and 'queer' are unstable categories which are subject to perpetual redefinition. This redefinition occurs as new identities emerge, others disappear, and all of them shift in relation to specific social and historical contexts. Thus, while some women assert that 'straights' who are queer positive or active within the queer community may also have and use gaydar, others would argue that having and using gaydar is an indication of 'queerness' in and of itself. These problems of category definition and recognition are inherent in the construction of gaydar.

Accordingly, addressing the concept of gaydar among lesbian women is further problematic because it requires some notion of who is a 'lesbian'. This thesis primarily addresses the gaydar experiences of white, young, able-bodied, urban, middle-class, university-educated lesbian women living in southern Ontario. Their perceptions and experiences of gaydar cannot be generalized beyond these social-structural constraints. Even within this defined group, each woman's experience may vary based on her own specific circumstances, beliefs, and social group. However, there are some common perceptions and experiences of gaydar among some of the women from this group. It is this (however fleeting) commonality which forms the basis for the investigation of gaydar as a phenomenon.

Current Literature

The phenomenon of gaydar seems to have gone virtually unnoticed by researchers to date. This may be due in part to the historical and systemic devaluation of research into areas which fall outside the canon of mainstream sociological inquiry, including those which address the social experiences of lesbians, gays and queers. As such, there has been very little previous interrogation of the phenomenon of 'gaydar'. Although there has been some investigation into the ways in which lesbian women recognize other lesbians and lesbian representations (Munt 1998, Inness 1997, Evans & Gamman 1995, Khayatt 1992), many of these investigations do not discuss the ways in which this ability affects the daily lives and experiences of lesbian women. Other authors refer briefly or informally to the phenomenon of gaydar (or the general ability of gays and lesbians to recognize other gays or lesbians) in the context of other work which investigates gay and lesbian lives without addressing the subject in detail. Many of these scholarly references to gaydar seem to reflect popular notions that gaydar (or the general ability of gays and lesbian to recognize other gays and lesbians) is an everyday, common sense occurrence which requires little or no further elaboration.

The limited research which specifically addresses the phenomenon of gaydar seems to focus primarily on the experiences of gay men. In her article "A Family Among Strangers: Kinship Claims among Gay Men in Public Places," Gardner (1994) uses anthropological models of kinship, group membership and kin exchange to describe and explain the strategies used by gay men to recognize other gay men in public spaces. Her

work is based on in-depth interviews with young gay men living in Indianapolis, Indiana. She asserts that gay men "suggest that they have either greater than usual discernment or something in the nature of a sixth sense that allows them correctly to perceive and label members of 'their own kind' ... and gay men spoke of this ability as gaydar" (Gardner 1994: 102). Gardner suggests that the motivations for these gaydar-based kinship claims may include the desire for informal support systems and a sense of comfort or safety.

Esterberg (1997, 1996) is one of the few researchers to specifically address the phenomenon of gaydar in her work on lesbian and bisexual women's identities. The women who were interviewed came from a variety of racial, educational, religious and class backgrounds. Esterberg examines the way women use gaydar to play 'spot the dyke' and briefly enumerates 'what a lesbian looks like' based on this process (1997: 86-90). However, this investigation comprises only a small portion of Esterberg's work and she fails to provide extensive detail. Despite her brevity in this area, Esterberg makes several crucial links between the use of gaydar and the ways in which lesbian identity is performed on a daily basis.

After searching the sociofile database, several university library catalogues (York University, University of Toronto, Wilfrid Laurier University, and University of Waterloo) and personally questioning several gay and lesbian scholars, it appears that there have been few other authors who give gaydar more than a passing mention. The relative absence of in-depth investigations into gaydar, and especially its use among

lesbian women, prompts me to take up some of the questions which are addressed in this thesis.

The Cues of Gaydar

In previous work on this phenomenon, I began to explore the ways in which gaydar is experienced by lesbian women in their daily lives. This work outlined the cues which comprise gaydar, the cultural and practical value of gaydar and the ways in which women learn gaydar (Noack 1997). Although some women described gaydar as being enacted in an instant flash of recognition based on an aura, feeling or appearance altering which made lesbian women stand out, they were also able to enumerate cues which contributed to this process of recognition. None of the cues are specifically definitive; rather, gaydar is based on a perpetually shifting combinations of different cues. Further, these cues are not only used to identify specific individuals who may be lesbian, they also seem to be used as a basis for evaluating social environments and spaces. Some women use these cues to code themselves as lesbians (Noack 1997). To provide a basis for better understanding the use of gaydar by some lesbian women, I will briefly enumerate some of the 'cues' which some women claim to use to enact gaydar. These can be analytically separated into three broad categories: visual cues, attitudinal cues and activity related cues.

By far the most commonly cited visual cue was 'short hair'. Specific hairstyles or unusual hairstyles also constituted visual cues. Other cues inscribed on the body included

piercings, tattoos, short nails or leg and armpit hair. There was some debate surrounding body size as a cue. Some women cited a slightly larger than average body type as a cue, especially for butch women. Another frequently mentioned cue was the appearance of physical strength in women. Physical appearances were seen to be augmented by clothing cues. A general cue seems to be androgynous dress or comfortable clothing which doesn't restrict movement. There were also specific items of clothing considered to be 'lesbian dress' including plain t-shirts, flannel button-down shirts, army pants, low-waisted hip-hugging jeans, boxer shorts, black spandex sports bras, Doc Marten boots, and Birkenstock sandals. In addition to clothing cues, the overt icons of the gay and lesbian movement were also identified as more explicit signifiers. These include pink or black triangles[1], freedom rings, rainbow paraphernalia[2], and specific gay and lesbian slogans on shirts, stickers or pins (Noack 1997).

One of the most significant visual cues which was identified was eye contact with other women. Women described 'the look' as occurring when another woman met their

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[1] The pink triangle symbolizes homosexuality. During the Nazi holocaust gay men in concentration camps were forced to wear an inverted pink triangle to signify the reason for their internment (Stewart 1995: 194). Some lesbian women were forced to wear the black triangle symbolizing antisocial behaviour (Stewart 1995: 27-8). Both symbols have been reclaimed by the lesbian and gay liberation movements.

[2] Freedom rings (which are small metal rings in the colour of the rainbow and are usually worn on a chain around the neck) and the rainbow flag are both symbols of the lesbian and gay liberation movement (Stewart 1995: 90, 211). The rainbow motif was adopted in 1978 by the San Francisco Pride Day committee and although it has undergone several variations, it has been an enduring icon (Stewart 1995: 211).

gaze and then hesitated or lingered for a moment. In conjunction with eye contact, body language was also considered a significant cue. Several women asserted that lesbian women had a way of carrying themselves that conveyed a sense of power or an attitude of defiance. Sometimes this was manifest in a 'walk' or a swagger while at other times it was manifest in sitting with legs and arms apart. This finding is supported by the women who participated in Esterberg's research who talked of "a certain swagger when you walk" as a signifier of lesbian identity (1997:81). Women also identified the way that women interacted with other women as a cue for gaydar. The combination of some or all of these visual cues form the basis of gaydar, especially in cases where potential lesbian women are completely unknown (Noack 1997).

The women who participated in this research also identified attitudinal cues as components of gaydar. On a broad level, lesbian women were described as defiant, strong and independent. The reflection of personal attitudes and norms through specific types of language was also considered a gaydar cue. 'Telltale' language included the use of the gender neutral terms, the use of the third person plural (they instead of he or she) and the use (and understanding) of specific words including 'out', 'partner', 'closeted', and 'het'. The political opinions expressed by a woman were also considered to be an attitudinal cue. Participants identified that lesbian women were perceived as feminist, open-minded, queer-positive, vegetarian, leftist, environmentally aware and anti-organized religion. Despite some controversy surrounding the stereotypical nature of these perceived political affiliations, they were often identified as a cue for gaydar (Noack 1997).

Finally, women identified a variety of activity cues as components of gaydar. Some of these were related to specific places while others were related to occupations or hobbies. The common places in which participants looked for (and found) other lesbian women included coffee shops, the weight room at the gym, the university campus, and women's dances. Hobbies and interests which were considered to be cues included playing pool, golfing, canoeing, weight lifting, motorcycling, and line dancing (associated specifically with older lesbians). Women also identified specific types of literature, film or music that were associated with lesbian women. These included science fiction novels, films with lesbian plots or sub-plots and music by lesbian artists. Finally, there was an association between lesbian women and non-traditional occupations for women. These activity cues, in combination with attitudinal cues and visual cues form the basis of gaydar for the women who informed this research (Noack 1997). While this list of gaydar cues is not exhaustive, these findings are similar to those of other contemporary scholars who have investigated the ways in which lesbian women are able to recognize other lesbians (Esterberg 1997, Khayatt 1992).

Although many of these cues may represent elements of a constructed stereotype, all of the women who informed this research used gaydar and were able to regularly identify other women whom they thought were lesbians. However, it is important to recognize that none of these cues are a necessary or sufficient means of determining 'lesbianism'. This is especially apparent when one considers the continuing problem of defining who is a 'lesbian' or a 'heterosexual' on a larger scale. Although there has been

some theoretical debate over whether gaydar can exist at all, some gays, lesbians and queers believe that it does exist and accordingly it must be considered as a social phenomenon. My goal was to investigate empirically the ways in which the phenomenon of gaydar affects the everyday lives of lesbian women.

Research Question

The work below continues my investigation into this phenomenon through an analysis of the ways in which lesbian women may specifically utilize gaydar in relation to their need for a sense of identity and community. This thesis will outline the ways in which some lesbian women are able to use 'gaydar' or 'gay radar' as both an identity building strategy and a community building strategy. Although lesbian women's experiences of identity and community may be intrinsically interdependent, for theoretical purposes I will address 'lesbian identity' and 'lesbian community' as separate but related constructs. These theoretical constructs will then be considered in relation to the ways in which some lesbian women use gaydar as an everyday strategy for negotiating identities and communities in their social world.

The limited existing research in this area combined with the potential breadth of the topic at hand necessitate that this work will only provide an initial exploration of the ways in which some lesbian women use and experience gaydar in relation to their identities and communities. Further, this work focuses on a relatively homogenous group of self-identified lesbian women and their use of gaydar to identify other women whom

they perceive as lesbians. I do not address the implications of lesbian women's use of gaydar to identify gay men or bisexual men or women. In addition, the use of gaydar by gay men, bisexuals and other queers may be fundamentally different than that of lesbians and thus is beyond the scope of this research. Despite these limitations, this research may provide an important basis for further research into gaydar among lesbians as well as a point of comparison for research into gaydar among gay men, bisexuals and other queers.

As both identities and communities are necessarily located within specific social and historical moments, before I can consider this research question I feel compelled to provide some contextual grounding. As gaydar is primarily based on the construction and recognition of lesbian representations, I will provide a brief history of lesbian representation as a basis for interpreting the construction and use of gaydar. Finally, since my own status as a lesbian woman affects the way in which I approach this research I will provide a brief outline of my own personal and academic context in order to begin to relate to the reader the perspectives and assumptions which I bring to this work.

A Brief History of Lesbian Representation

The constructions of 'lesbian', lesbian identities and lesbian representations have shifted dramatically since the original naming of 'lesbianism' as a deviant category by sexologists in the late nineteenth century. Although a fully detailed history of lesbian identities and representations is beyond the scope of this research, I will briefly outline some of the events which have influenced contemporary lesbian representation in North

America and alert the reader to some of the extensive work done by other scholars in this area.

The historical origins of modern Western lesbian identities are ambiguous (Vicinus 1993). Some historians have identified the roots of modern identities in romantic friendships, Boston marriages, passing women, bulldykes, butches and femmes and numerous other identifications (Vicinus 1993: 434, Faderman 1991). These relationships were defined as 'lesbian' based on a totality of experience rather than specific genital or romantic encounters (Vicinus 1993). In contrast, early sexologists focused primarily on masculine traits and psychological 'inversion' as defining criteria for the label 'lesbian' (Faderman 1991). These charges of deviant masculine behaviour among women increased as feminist ideology and the women's liberation movement began to gain credence (Faderman 1991).[3]

Throughout the early twentieth century, lesbian representation in North America was often limited or stigmatized because of its pathological implications. The further impetus to regulate sexuality and thus morality via state apparatus ensured that few women would willingly identify themselves as lesbians (Kinsman 1996). This moral regulation, combined with the relative isolation of many lesbian women resulted in little

[3] For a more detailed analysis of the construction of 'lesbians' and lesbian relationships prior to the twentieth century, see Faderman (1991, 1981), Vicinus (1993), Lesbian History Group (1989). For a more general analysis of the construction of homosexuality in general, see Weeks (1989, 1986) and Kinsman (1996) for Canadian context.

perception of 'lesbians' as a veritable social group. The further impact of McCarthyism in both Canada and the United States resulted in limited social representation of lesbians until the mid-1960's.[4]

Feminist movements and ideologies have continually provided a forum for the issues of some lesbian women. The feminist insistence on a woman's right to control her own body became a framework which legitimated women's right to reject sexual relations with men (Weeks 1989). Through feminist networks, lesbian women were able to generate a political consciousness which was distinctly removed from that of gay men. This emerging lesbian political consciousness resulted in the increased representation and recognition of feminist lesbian women and lesbian-feminists. The women's movement also worked to legitimate the construction of 'lesbians' as a widely recognized social group with specific (political) interests and agendas. The outgrowth of early lesbian activism within the feminist movement resulted in the emergence of the political ideologies and practices which characterized the 'Lesbian Nation' movement in the 1970's.[5] The predominant influence of the women's movement has ensured that lesbian

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[4] This is a very abbreviated interpretation of this historical period. Authors have identified specific cultures and subcultures of lesbian women who were active during this time. For a more detailed analysis of lesbians in the early twentieth century, see Faderman (1991). Also Kinsman (1996) and D'Emilio (1983) for an interrogation of the experiences of both lesbians and gay men.

[5] For more on the effects of the feminist movement on individual lesbian women and lesbian political mobilizing see Stein (1997), Ross (1995) and Maggenti (1993).

women have fought for and achieved representation in contemporary discourses, if only in a marginal capacity.

Another significant influence on contemporary North American lesbian representation has been the gay and lesbian liberation movement which emerged following the 1969 Stonewall riots. This impromptu political action represented the intersection of civil liberties ideologies with the cry for gay rights (D'Emilio 1983). The uprising at Stonewall is recognized as the birth of the modern lesbian and gay liberation movement (Stewart 1995, D'Emilio 1983). The mobilization of gays and lesbians as a political community has resulted in the increased visibility for lesbians and gay men, as both activists and citizens. As equal rights for gays and lesbians have slowly been incorporated into legal and social mores, lesbian and gay representation has increased dramatically.

Since Stonewall, the politics of 'lesbian' representation have increasingly become a site of contention. The lesbian feminist ideologies of the 1970s were called into question as the 'sex wars' of the 1980s emerged. Debates concerning the relation of sexual politics and practice to identity developed as lesbian feminists clashed with self-styled sex radicals (Duggan & Hunter 1995). Pornography, phallic representation and S/M became contentious issues within the lesbian community (Duggan & Hunter 1995). Lesbians of colour, older lesbians, lesbians with disabilities, and lesbian mothers all struggled to be represented as 'legitimate' lesbians at a time when the label 'lesbian' seemed to be up for grabs (Faderman 1991, Hall 1993). In academia, lesbian theorists

embraced the emergence of postmodern ideologies to firmly assert that there was no universal lesbian identity or politic. Some women who were uncomfortable with the lack of defined lesbian identities and representations returned to a modified version of the butch-femme roles of the 1950s and 60s (Morgan 1993). Others sought to continually challenge the ever expanding limits of sexuality and identity. The debate surrounding who is a 'lesbian' is still continuing and will quite likely never be resolved. All that is assured is that 'lesbian' can no longer be conceptualized or represented as a static category with rigid distinctions.

The initial construction of Acquired-Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) as a 'gay disease' in the 1980s resulted in the epidemic having a distinct impact on representation within North American gay and lesbian communities. Drawing on the political networks generated following Stonewall, some gays and lesbians began to advocate for treatments for AIDS, effective care for People Living With Aids (PLWA's) and prevention programs aimed at stemming the spread of AIDS within their communities (Crimp 1989). Sexually explicit videos, comic books and pamphlets demonstrating safe gay sex were produced and circulated (Speck 1993, Saalfield 1993, Crimp 1989). The direct action group ACT-UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) contributed to gay and lesbian visibility through a series of full colour glossy posters and brochures depicting gay couples in romantic poses and carrying messages about safe sex. Activist video collectives began to document the struggle for funding for AIDS research and extended care for people living with AIDS (Saalfield 1993: 21). This focus on

activists and activism often highlighted the lesbian women who were caring for gay men with AIDS and organizing the fight for a cure (Schwartz 1993). Additionally, factions within the queer community began to call for increased representation of same-sex sexual desire to provide a contrast to safe sex advertisements which so explicitly linked sex and death (Crimp 1989). As this new focus on queer desire emerged, so did explicitly sexual representations of lesbians and lesbian sex. By providing the impetus for increased visibility among gays and lesbians in North America, the AIDS crisis has made a significant impact upon popular representations of lesbians and gay men.

In 1990 a number of ACT-UP members who were interested in addressing broader issues within the gay and lesbian community founded Queer Nation (Faderman 1991: 300). Politically, Queer Nation attempted to encompass the concerns of everyone who wasn't 'straight' through direct political action surrounding a broad range of issues. The ideology of Queer Nation openly rejected any notion of binary identity systems in favour of a single 'queer' identity (Kennedy 1994: 196). However, this 'queer' identity quickly became monopolized by the political interests of the dominant group of white, middle-class gay men (Faderman 1991: 301). As a result, the diverse population initially attracted to Queer Nation, including many lesbian women, became disillusioned and began to look for other places to voice their politics. Without their diverse base of supporters, Queer Nation quickly lost momentum and virtually disappeared. However, the rejection of categorical identities by Queer Nation visibly highlighted the fluidity of many identities and made the possibility of lesbian representation increasingly problematic.

Ironically, just as members of lesbian communities were coming to the full realization that there was no single lesbian identity or image, the North American mainstream media began to explicitly create and promote 'lesbian chic' as fashionable. 'Lesbian chic' portrayed images of lesbians as more 'feminine', less political, and wearing a trendy wardrobe (Esterberg 1997: 94-5). Some members of lesbian communities hailed this trend as an increase in lesbian visibility (Hamer & Budge 1994, Brandt 1993). Lesbian actresses, musicians and comediennes were in high demand and found their careers soaring (Kasindorf 1993). Lesbians and gay men also began to have a greater influence in political circles (Kasindorf 1993). However, the North American mainstream media were also heavily criticized by some members of the lesbian community for their appropriation of lesbian culture and imagery for profit (Clinton 1994). Other members of lesbian communities denounced 'lesbian chic' for its sanitized, white, young, middle-class representations of lesbianism (Brandt 1993, Esterberg 1997). This fuelled numerous debates surrounding popular representations of lesbian women - it was too stereotypical, it was homogenous, it represented unrealistic ideals of beauty, it portrayed lesbians as only having butch-femme roles, it didn't portray butch-femme roles, and the list goes on (O'Sullivan 1994). Several years later these debates surrounding lesbian representation in the mainstream media have virtually disappeared as 'lesbian chic' is no longer in fashion. It is yet to be seen what effects this brief media fascination with lesbians will have on future lesbian representation, imagery and gaydar.

Most recently, lesbian representation and gaydar have become topics of interest among advertising executives who have realized that gays and lesbians have access to disposable income and are brand-loyal consumers (Kinsman 1996, Mitchell 1996). This recognition of gays and lesbians as a social group is only possible because of the visibility inspired by the lesbian and gay liberation movement. The further 'discovery' of gays and lesbians as a niche market has led many companies to target lesbians and gay consumers (Penaloza 1996). These efforts have included the sponsorship of lesbian and gay events as well as the creation of marketing campaigns aimed at gay and lesbian shoppers. Efforts to woo 'lesbian dollars' have focused on first creating a lesbian ideal image and then catering to (lesbian) consumers who are attempting to attain that image (Clark 1993). However, aside from a few daring companies, advertisements featuring gay couples are few and far between, as many corporations worry about offending their straight audiences (Mitchell 1996). According to Report on Business Magazine, the solution seems to lie with gaydar - producing ads which are queer to those who know what they're looking for and innocuous to those who don't ("'Gaydar' goes Commercial" 1996: 93). These capitalist interests are fuelling some of the current research into lesbian representation and gaydar.

The influences on lesbian representation throughout history are varied and numerous. I cannot hope to enumerate them all here; rather I hope I have been able to provide some context for the current changes and debates which surround lesbian representation. Without the influences of feminist and lesbian and gay activism,

contemporary North American representations of lesbian women could be radically different.

Personal Context

My own approach to this research is unquestionably influenced by the scope of my own experience as a lesbian woman. I 'came out' in Toronto in 1991. I was sixteen. ACT-UP was in the news and my friends all knew about safe sex (although whether they needed to practice it was still in dispute). Queer Nation was still being touted as the best thing in queer activism even though it was already collapsing. Debates surrounding identity politics were (and still are) continuing around me in both my personal and academic life. Lesbian chic has come and gone since I started my investigations into gaydar. I was a baby dyke, walking down Yonge street with my first girlfriend when we spotted the Newsweek cover that vaulted lesbianism firmly into the mainstream in 1993. Last year I walked into the campus convenience store to pick up the issue of Time magazine featuring a photo of Ellen Degeneres and the large caption 'Yep, I'm Gay.' Living in a large urban centre like Toronto, I have easy access to lesbian magazines, film and cultural events. It's fair to say that I have never truly experienced the social isolation that many lesbian women of the past did. Admittedly, my own appreciation of gaydar didn't emerge until I moved from Toronto to Waterloo to pursue my undergraduate university degree. I attended a small university with a conservative framework and

relatively little accommodation of diversity. It wasn't until I arrived in this environment that I began to appreciate the importance of gaydar in my own life.

My first introduction to the phenomenon of gaydar happened fairly soon after I had come out. I was travelling with friends when the conversation turned to 'celebrities who you think are gay.' I was completely stumped about the list of people my friends rattled off. It didn't take long before I asked the infamous question - 'How do you know that?' - and the principles of gaydar were explained to me in the same indistinct way that plagued my initial questioning about this research ('they just LOOK gay').

My own gaydar developed primarily through interaction with the lesbian community in Guelph. I went to their bar (while it still existed), hung out at the women's dances and just generally got to know the community there. I suspect that this is one of the reasons why the results from the discussion group in Guelph weren't that far from my own perceptions of gaydar. I'm also firmly rooted within the university community, which seems to be associated with a certain type of lesbian representation. I'm white, twenty-one years old, middle-class, vegetarian and feminist. I have short hair, a cat and a wife. Similar to some of the women who participated in this research, I wanted everyone to know that I was a lesbian when I first came out but now I've settled into my new identity and it seems to matter much less. Except in a few specific environments, I am out in my everyday life and I just generally assume that everyone knows that I'm a lesbian. I don't work too hard at broadcasting my sexuality except when I feel the need to make the point that not everyone is heterosexual - usually in the context of the classroom.

I personally find the topic of gaydar intrinsically interesting and I find it even more amazing that many of my 'straight' friends don't even know gaydar exists. I'm frustrated by the lack of academic research into gaydar and lesbian culture but I anticipate that more research will be done as more lesbian women begin to overcome the overwhelming heterosexism of the university environment. I hope that this exploration of gaydar is one small step in the right direction.

Chapter 2:

METHODOLOGY

The study of gaydar among lesbian women poses some unique methodological problems and challenges. This chapter will illuminate some of the problems encountered in relation to data collection and ethical considerations, as well as explain the ways in which these challenges were addressed. A brief explanation of the data analysis process will also be given. Finally, I will briefly outline some of the limitations of this research which stem directly from my methodological approach.

Past investigations into the intricacies and details of lesbian lives have relied heavily on qualitative interview data. In most cases this data has been obtained through a one or more directed 'life history' interviews (Stein 1997, Weston 1996, Ross 1995, Faderman 1991). Gardner's research into gaydar-based kinship claims among gay men is based on in-depth interviews with informants solicited through posters and newspaper advertisements (1994). Esterberg's discussion of gaydar also relied on interviewing as a means of data collection (1997). The exploratory nature of this research combined with the precedent set by prior researchers in this area prompted me to investigate qualitative methods as a means of gathering data.

Data Collection

I initially planned to collect data using a series of one-on-one in-depth interviews with self-identified lesbian women. Prior to actually beginning data collection it became apparent that this approach would be problematic. Informal discussions of gaydar with friends and potential research participants revealed that some of the women were having difficulty articulating their experiences of gaydar. By far the most common response to my queries about the construction of gaydar was 'I don't know how I know, I just know.' I suspect that this inability to articulate the processes of gaydar may be the result of several factors. First, there seem to be relatively few opportunities to discuss gaydar in everyday social settings; although my experience is limited, I have found that among groups of lesbians and gay men, gaydar is simply taken for granted while among other (predominantly straight) groups, many are simply not aware that gaydar exists. This perception was supported by some of the women with whom I initially attempted to discuss gaydar. Second, gaydar seems to be somewhat intuitive in nature (Noack 1997, Gardner 1994). Thus, the lesbian women with whom I spoke with may not have previously consciously identified the cues which comprise gaydar or the ways in which they use gaydar.

In an attempt to overcome the problems which individual women seemed to have when asked to articulate their gaydar experiences, I opted to use a series of focus groups to collect the research data. The emphasis on group discussion gave participants the opportunity to listen to and interact with other participants in an informal social

environment. Further, the interactive nature of the focus group allowed the women to use the responses of other group members as a stimulus for conceptualizing and articulating their own experiences of gaydar.

The women who informed this research were solicited using a snowball sampling method based on a series of 'contact people'. I initially approached three of my friends from different areas (Toronto, Kingston, and Guelph) who had shown interest in my research to act as 'contact people'. I asked each of these women to approach some of their friends to participate in the research as well as to provide a space in which the group could meet. After their initial informal agreement to act as a contact person, I formalized arrangements by sending each woman a package containing an explanatory letter (Appendix A) and information sheets (Appendix B) to give to potential participants. In the letter I explained what would be required for hosting a discussion group and asked my friends to approach their respective communities to solicit participation in the research. Each contact person was asked to choose a convenient date and time and arrange for six to eight self-identified lesbian women to participate in the discussion. In total, eleven self-identified lesbian women informed the research.

The problem of defining 'who is a lesbian' based on an identity category which may be perpetually shifting significantly complicated the process of identifying potential research participants. In order to avoid the uncomfortable position of being forced to definitively outline who may be a 'lesbian', I chose to rely upon criteria of self-definition. Similar strategies have been used by other researchers of lesbian lives to allow for a broad

range of experiences and identities (Esterberg 1997, Faderman 1991). As a result of this reliance on self-identification, some of the women who participated in the research would conventionally be defined as bisexual women and not all of the participants were currently in relationships with women. Similarly, participants were asked to talk about gaydar in relation to women whom they (and not necessarily others) would identify as lesbians. The interactive nature of the focus groups soon revealed that there were various opinions about who actually was a 'lesbian'.

Two focus groups were conducted. Four women participated in the first focus group which was held on February 23, 1997 in Kingston. Seven women participated in the second focus group which was held on March 9, 1997 in Guelph. The women in the sample were primarily Caucasian; one woman identified herself as bi-racial. Ages ranged from early twenties to early thirties. One woman was a mother. All of the women were attending or had attended university and all of the women were able-bodied. The level of education which all of the research participants had obtained suggests that they were primarily from middle or upper class backgrounds. The overall characteristics of the sample group were reflective of the social groups of both the contact people and myself.

Each of the participants was asked to sign a consent form (Appendix C) prior to the beginning of the discussion. At my request, the discussion groups were organized as somewhat informal events with refreshments and a casual atmosphere. The discussions were audio taped and each lasted approximately two hours. I also took brief notes throughout each discussion. I used a series of prompt questions (Appendix D) to begin

and occasionally guide the conversations but for the most part the discussion was self-generating.

Unfortunately, late into the data collection process I was informed by the third contact person (from Toronto) that she would be unable to host a discussion group. It is worthwhile to note that the barriers which she encountered were directly related to the nature of this research and its relation to marginalized identities. Although the contact person from Toronto had spoken with several women who were interested in participating in the research, several of them expressed concerns about the safety of disclosing their sexual orientations. Additionally, the contact person herself was experiencing personal circumstances which made it potentially threatening to be associated with other lesbian women. Given the non-private nature of her living arrangements, the contact person felt that she would be unable to provide a safe space in which the group could meet. Because of the concerns which she and several other potential participants had raised surrounding the disclosure of their identities, the option of meeting in a public space was unsuitable. As a result, I was forced to cancel any meeting with this group of women. This experience highlighted the fact that some lesbian women perceive interaction within an explicit 'lesbian community' as dangerous. This may reinforce the need for women to conceptualize themselves as members of imagined lesbian communities via gaydar. Concerns about safety and disclosure are predominant ones for many lesbian women and have the potential to seriously affect any research done in this area.

The data collection took place under the auspices of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Wilfrid Laurier University in conjunction with my undergraduate thesis entitled Gaydar: Women, Cues and Identification. However, the rich and voluminous nature of the data obtained from the focus groups was unexpected and the temporal scope of the initial project allowed for only a cursory examination and analysis of the results. As a researcher, I felt that it would be irresponsible to fail to use this data to its full potential, especially upon consideration of the limited work which has been done in this area. Upon completion of the initial work, each of the participants were sent a copy of Gaydar: Women, Cues and Identification along with a letter, a form requesting feedback on the work (Appendix E) and a self-addressed, stamped envelope. In the letter, I explained that I wished to continue using the data from the focus groups in conjunction with my graduate studies in Sociology at York University and that if anyone had concerns about my continued use of the data they were welcome to contact me. None of the women indicated any concerns about my continued use of the data. Only one of the feedback forms was returned by mail, however several of the other women who participated in the research gave me feedback in person during informal personal visits. In part, their comments on the original paper initiated the questions which I have raised in this investigation.

Ethical Considerations

Research which involves gay men and lesbians requires that a number of ethical concerns be taken into consideration. The continued existence of homophobia and heterosexism in contemporary society makes it potentially dangerous for some women to openly identify themselves as lesbians. These concerns were highlighted by the experience of the third contact person whom I approached. An awareness of the need for some women to remain 'closeted' prompted me to try and ensure that participation in this research would present as little risk to the participants in relation to the benefits which they received. As a matter of principle, I find the practice of 'outing' people for political or personal reasons reprehensible. I endeavoured to ensure that none of the participants was further 'outed' because of their participation in the research.

There was a moderate risk to the participants of being 'outed' as a lesbian because of their participation in the research. However, each of the participants had already identified herself as a lesbian to my 'contact people' and the women to whom they could potentially be 'outed' were other lesbian women. Accordingly, the disclosure of sexual orientation through participation in a focus group did not present a significant risk. Additionally, I also asked my contact people to be aware of any potential relationship conflicts within the group so as to avoid any unnecessary embarrassment. I anticipated that the women who participated in the research would benefit through the acquisition of a fuller understanding of how they enact gaydar and the outcome of the discussion groups led me to believe that this was the case. Also, the informal nature of the discussion groups

made them far more like a social event than an official research setting. Many women indicated that they enjoyed participating in the research and appreciated the opportunity to engage in conversation with other lesbian women.

The confidentiality of participants was achieved by providing each participant with the opportunity to use a pseudonym in both the discussion and the final document. In both cases individuals were referred to by their first names only. The use of pseudonyms during the focus groups themselves was less necessary since in each case the participants were previously familiar with each other. As a result, I generally discouraged this option so as to avoid confusion. However, almost all of the participants chose to use a pseudonym in the final document. Each participant was given the opportunity to choose the pseudonym which they would like to use for themselves in the final paper - a process which served to dispel tension and generate laughter in each group as both realistic and less realistic pseudonyms were contrived. The consent forms, audio tapes, and written notes taken during the discussion are kept secure and are accessible only to myself.

The guidelines for conducting this research in an ethical manner were initially set out by the Wilfrid Laurier University Department of Sociology and Anthropology Ethics Committee. This Committee reviewed and approved a research proposal for this data collection. Further, I agreed to abide by the rules governing data collection which are outlined by York University's ethics policy. Finally, the ethic of this research project was approved by my thesis supervisor, Dr. B. Hanson. This satisfies the ethical requirements

for research under the auspices of the Graduate Programme in Sociology at York University.

Data Analysis

The audio tapes and written notes collected during the discussion groups formed the basis of the research results. The audio tapes were partially transcribed and then augmented with information from the written notes. This information was then coded using broad categories of inquiry which were generated from the data itself. During the process of coding, the data from each of the two focus groups was integrated. For the purposes of this thesis, the data relating to identity and community formation form the basis of analysis, while data relating to other topics is only incidentally addressed. The participants themselves provided some of the analysis of their own answers and where possible I have included their interpretations. In some cases I have provided participants' interpretations as well as my own alternate interpretations. The results and analysis are presented in an integrated format.

Methodological Limitations

Some of the limitations of this research are directly related to my methodological choices. The use of 'contact people' and snowball sampling resulted in a sample which was relatively homogenous. As I previously stated, the women who informed this research were primarily white, middle-class, in their twenties, university educated, and

able-bodied. It is possible that the gaydar experiences which the research participants describe are simply a phenomenon of being able to identify women who are most like themselves. Although this is a possibility, some of the women explicitly spoke of their gaydar in relation to people who were not like themselves. Also, the difficulty of identifying 'who is like oneself' and in what way and at what time is subject to the same problems of definition and fluidity as concepts such as lesbian identity or community. Accordingly, it is difficult to defend this possibility as a sole theoretical position. In each of the focus groups, some of the women were aware that they spoke from a limited frame of reference and that it affected their experience and understanding of gaydar. Further study of this phenomenon will need to include women from all racial backgrounds, cultural backgrounds, educational backgrounds, stages of life, age groups, and abilities.

Additionally, this research only included women who were 'out' or who actively identified themselves as lesbians, at least to the contact people. Generally, the women who participated in the focus groups were active in their respective lesbian communities and were in specific personal and social situations which allowed them to openly identify themselves as lesbians. Experiences of gaydar, lesbian identity and lesbian community are likely significantly different among women who do not openly identify themselves as lesbians. However, there are significant difficulties involved in both theoretically defining these women in relation to lesbian identities and practically soliciting research participation from this group of women. Research on lesbian experience is virtually always limited to those women who are willing to openly identify themselves as lesbians.

This is a somewhat tautological problem which has been experienced by many researchers (Stein 1997, Esterberg 1997, Faderman 1991).

A further limitation to this research was precipitated by the regulations of the institution under whose auspices this data was collected. As a matter of policy, Wilfrid Laurier University only allows research to be conducted with participants who are over eighteen years of age. Research involving people under eighteen years of age can only be approved provided full consent is obtained from the parents of the minor. My initial research proposal provided for the participation of women over the age of sixteen as several teenage women with whom I had spoken expressed an interest in participating in the research. I hoped that collecting data from teenage lesbian women who had recently come out would provide especially valuable insight into the relation between gaydar and the formation of a lesbian identity. However, for some young lesbian women, the process of obtaining parental consent may be impossible; many teenage lesbians fear coming out to their parents before they are financially and socially independent (Travers & Monahan 1997). Based on the fact that the legal age of consent for sexual acts (and by implication sexuality) is sixteen, I argued that I should be allowed to include women between the ages of sixteen and eighteen in the research without obtaining parental consent. Unfortunately, this aspect of the proposal was rejected by the ethics committee and so the research only includes women who are over eighteen years of age. I believe that the rejection of this section of the proposal was more a matter of routine policy than a rejection of the argument presented. With more time and resources I may have been able to get

permission to conduct this research with women between the ages of sixteen and eighteen through an appeal to the larger University Ethics committee. I suspect that this rejection resulted in the loss of a valuable source of information and I hope that I will be able to pursue an investigation of gaydar among teenage lesbian women at a future date

In conjunction with the limitations described above, the small sample size - eleven women from only two geographical locations - necessarily limits the universality of the results. However, with the recognition that these results are located in the specific characteristics of the participants, they do provide substantial insight into the phenomenon of gaydar. Despite its limitations, this research on gaydar provides a basis for future, more extensive studies of gaydar which may potentially address the full diversity of lesbian experiences.

Chapter 3:

THEORIZING LESBIAN IDENTITIES

In a traditional social psychological framework, identity is conceptualized as a "cognitive construct referring to organized sets of characteristics that an individual perceives as representing the self definitively in relation to a social situation, imagined or real" (Troiden 1988: 27). However, contemporary sociological understandings of identity recognize that our self-perceptions are far less stable than this definition implies. In part this shift has been motivated by an awareness that identity development continues throughout the lifespan and is not completed upon reaching adulthood. Current understandings of the self in relation to a social context recognize that fluidity is now virtually inherent in the notion of identity. Calhoun argues that "the constitution of identities has... been presented as a more or less harmonious process resulting in a normally stable and minimally changing identity. Thus we have been led by our theories to underestimate the struggle involved [in] forging identities, the tension inherent in the fact that we all have multiple, incomplete, and/or fragmented identities... and the possibilities for our salient constructions of identities to change" (1995: 218). This more recent interpretation emphasizes the role which specific social and historical cultural moments play in the construction and reconstruction of identities.

An awareness of the specific cultural circumstances in and through which identities are experienced has been brought to the forefront by many notable cultural

theorists. In his work addressing the Black diasporic experience, Stuart Hall asserts that "identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within the narratives of the past" (1990: 225). Enmeshed in this conceptualization of identity is the recognition that our social identities are perpetually in the process of 'becoming'. Rutherford argues that "identity is never a static location, it contains traces of the past and what is to become. It is a contingent, a provisional full stop in the play of differences and the narrative of our own lives" (1990: 24). An awareness of the fluid and contingent nature of identities in the contemporary context means that all theorizing around identity is potentially contestable. I would argue that this is no reason to stop theorizing; rather it is cause for all investigations of identity to be recognized as an artificially static understanding of a perpetually shifting phenomenon. It is with this problematic in mind that Munt calls for academics to take up a strategic essentialism which concentrates on the deployment of lived and experienced identity practices rather than identities themselves (1998: 23). Munt insightfully argues that this strategy "allows for the individual trajectories of identity to be celebrated, but not reified; the trick to keeping all these plates in the air is realizing that this project is imaginative and therefore consists of a constant negotiation between honesty to an authentically felt, lived self, which accumulates its own past, and the awareness that the self does not provide and exclusive truth" (Munt 1998: 23). It is with this contingent understanding of identity that I will approach the lived identity experiences of lesbian women.

The recognition of the importance of specific socio-historical contexts is crucial to understanding lesbian identities. Contemporary lesbian identities are rooted in the work of the early sexologists who constructed "lesbian" as a medical designation to denote the female sexual deviant (Faderman 1991, Weeks 1986). The rise of the gay and lesbian liberation movement facilitated the recognition of 'lesbian' as a political and social group that was not necessarily defined by its deviant status. As society becomes increasingly tolerant of homosexuals, a critical mass of women who define themselves as 'lesbian' have emerged to continually challenge and redefine lesbian identities. Although lesbian identities were initially based on sexual practice (or desire), in recent decades lesbian identities have been constructed as socialized sexual identities (Whisman 1993). The construction of 'lesbian' is now based less on the possibility of physical sex between women, and more on a complex of social behaviours, traits, and attitudes (Whisman 1993, Hall 1993). However, like other identities in contemporary society, definitions of lesbian identity are multiple, shifting and continually subject to reconceptualization based on the cultures, contexts and experiences of both individual lesbian women and lesbians as a social group (Esterberg 1997, Markowe 1996). With the recognition that I cannot hope to represent the identity experiences of every lesbian woman, I will address some of the common experiences of lesbian identity in contemporary North American culture including identity formation, daily identifications, and cultural representation. I will also briefly address the problems which essentialist constructions of identity pose through their potential to become stereotypes.

Identity Formation

Contemporary social theorists have challenged traditional models of identity formation which rely on progressions through a series of defined 'stages' or 'steps'. However, many theorists still seek to illuminate the process by which we come to understand ourselves as members of a specific identity category. Central to these understandings of identity formation, especially as it relates to lived social experience, is the idea of recognition. The relation between identity and recognition is explained by Calhoun who argues that "identity turns on the interrelated problems of self-recognition and recognition by others. Recognition is vital to any reflexivity, for example, any capacity to look at oneself, to choose one's actions and see their consequences, and the hope to make oneself something more or better than one is" (1995: 213). With the need for both self-recognition and recognition by others as a central requirement for identity formation, the process of identity signification becomes paramount. Only through identity signification - those social meanings which allow an identity to be recognized - can individuals conceptualize themselves or others as members of an identity group. In this context, identities can and must be performed in everyday life. Feminist theorist Judith Butler addresses this reconceptualization of identity in relation to the performance of gender: "In the place of an original identification which serves as a determining cause, gender identity might be reconceived as a personal/cultural history of received meanings subject to a set of imitative practices which refer laterally to other imitations and which, jointly, construct the illusion of a primary and interior gendered self" (Butler 1990: 138).

I would argue that this notion of identity is applicable beyond gender; the stylized repetition of acts, the way in which bodily gestures, movements and styles which are identified as identity performances by Butler are equally applicable to the construction of contemporary lesbian identities.

In contrast to a contemporary understanding of identity as performative, classic sociological understandings of lesbian identity formation have relied on the formulaic classification of a "gay trajectory" (Ponse 1978). Past theorists, most notably Ponse and Cass, have worked to delineate 'stages' of identity formation among lesbian women. Contemporary theorists have heavily criticized these models of identity formation for their reliance on existing identity structures (Troiden 1988, Kitzinger 1987). Despite this criticism, these models of identity formation seem to have some applicability to women who came out as lesbian in the specific social-historical context in which the theories were generated (Stein 1997).

Further debate has focused on the role of same-sex desire or activity in the formation of lesbian identities. Some theorists deny any link between sexual activity and a social identity: "There is a theoretical and empirical difference between 'doing' behaviours associated with lesbianism and 'being' a lesbian" (Jenness 1992: 65). While this distinction is possible on a theoretical level, other scholars insist that the stigma which surrounds same-sex desire necessarily influences the formation of lesbian identities: "It would indeed be liberating if I or any lesbian , were allowed to love another woman and be supported in that love without having to feel that my or her identity is

intrinsically connected to it. But because of social scripts, their confines and the discriminatory practices of US society, there is no recourse for an out lesbian but to have sexual orientation integrated into her collective and daily consciousness" (Trujillo 1997: 271). I tend to support this latter view which recognizes that the voluntary adoption of a 'deviant' or stigmatized sexual identity is in some way rooted in sexual desire.

Regardless of the actual influence of same-sex desire or romantic activities, contemporary notions of lesbian identity formation recognize both its performative and fluid nature. In her recent investigation of the process of lesbian identity formation, Markowe argues that coming out is the process leading to the self-identification of a lesbian identity and the process of revealing that identity to others (Markowe 1996: 38). This personal and social revelation is based in the performance and recognition of a lesbian identity, based on one's knowledge of the social category 'lesbian'. As such, the process of coming out is not a definitive temporal moment; rather it requires a continuous redefinition of identity performances based on what is socially recognized as a lesbian identity. "Gay identity is not constituted in a singular moment of coming out; rather, it is a lifelong process that is influenced by one's community" (Inness 1997: 138). Thus, identities in general and lesbian identities in particular require continuous maintenance through everyday social interaction. I support this position which advocates the need for constant identity redefinition in response to complex and frequently changing social environments.

Everyday Identification

Although identities are profoundly personal, they are also intrinsically social. The lifelong process of constituting and maintaining one's identity is influenced by the identifications which we experience on a regular basis. In many ways our identities are defined by whom we are most similar or dissimilar to in our everyday encounters. Thus, identities must be performed and reflected in our everyday social experiences. The role of identifications in creating and maintaining identities in relation to a social context is explained by contemporary feminist theorist Diana Fuss who argues that 'identification' refers to an internal recognition, a "detour through the other that defines a self... a question of relation, of self to other, subject to object, inside to outside" (Fuss 1995: 2-3). These identifications can also be conceptualized as a (conscious or unconscious) recognition of the representations of others. However, it is important to note that the process of identification is based only on perceived representations. These "detours through others" may have very little to do with what others perceive or represent themselves to be. It is entirely possible that what is denoted by a specific 'representation' and what is recognized in the process of 'identification' are not the same, however representation and identification have still occurred.

Despite this potential for incongruity, the concept of identification is dependent on the existence of representations. It is through a representation that we assign a social meaning to a specific set of appearances, traits, behaviours or symbols. Without some form of conscious or unconscious representation, there would be nothing with which to

make an identification. Similarly, without the ability to identify the category which an individual is portraying themselves as a member of there is no representation. Thus the two concepts and actions are intrinsically interdependent; without either one the other could not exist. It is, however, important to note that the link between identification and representation is not direct. Both are highly dependent on the meaning assigned to the representation or identification by the active interpreter. The possibility that mis-representation or mis-identification may occur is of little importance. Rather, it is our perceived identifications and representations which facilitate the ongoing process of identity construction. Simply, only by seeing ourselves reflected in others are we able to form an unconscious identification with others which then may become manifest as a conscious identity (Fuss 1995).

The everyday identification of lesbian representations form the basis for lesbian identities. While lesbian representation and identification are easily conceptualized on a theoretical level, an understanding of the manifestations of lesbian representation and identification on a daily basis is far more problematic. One of the most prominent difficulties in this area is the diversity of lesbian women. The intersections of age, race, class, ability, sexual practice and other categories with that of 'lesbian' make the development of definitive rules of representation and identification impossible. Stein suggests that identification is based on 'subtle, shared codes of understandings... [which] vary with region, race, ethnicity, class and other factors but share in common the sense of

being "other" (Stein 1993, xvi). These shared codes of understanding seem to comprise the basis of gaydar.

One of the difficulties which I encountered during my investigation into lesbian representations is that there seem to be very few definitive criteria which are used in the process of identifying lesbian women. Gaydar seems to be based primarily on the intuitive recognition and interpretation of several intersecting visual and interactional cues (this finding is supported by Esterberg 1997). Assertions that gaydar is an 'instantaneous' and 'undescribable' phenomenon suggests that many lesbian women have developed alternative ways of knowing which are not explicitly manifest. Both my own experiences of gaydar and the experiences which other lesbian women described lead me to argue that the identification of other lesbian women through gaydar comprises a form of intuitive knowledge. This intuitive knowing seems to be based on an interpretive framework which is constructed through participation in lesbian cultures.

Representing Identities

In my view, identities are inseparable from the cultural context in which they are constructed and recognized. The representations of specific identity categories within each cultural context are further subject to social interpretations and influences. This reliance on cultural signification means that popular culture and media significantly influence perceptions of identities and identity categories. Popular culture creates and reflects the myths and ideals of a society (Fiske 1990) as well as providing an interpretive

context for individual experiences. Cultural productions also play an intrinsic role in the process of 'sexual socialization' which works to define the social construction of sexuality (Weeks 1986). The constant reproduction of specific images makes it possible for a generic 'ideal' or identity type to be created in the social consciousness. When these 'ideal' identity images are widely disseminated they come to be understood as immutable social categories.

The isolation of many women who form and maintain lesbian identities results in an intensification of the effect of popular cultural representations. Jenness finds that "prior to the adoption of a lesbian identity, the meanings associated with the term lesbian derive from cultural typifications. Typifications are cognitive representations of a supposed banal group" (Jenness 1992: 67). The typifications of 'lesbians' which are perpetuated through popular culture may be a primary source of lesbian identification and representation for many women. Markowe finds that certain aspects of the media, particular plays, books, films or television programmes have strong positive or negative influences upon individuals, especially those who are just coming out (1996: 102). While some cultural representation of lesbian women occurs in the mainstream media, there is a far greater quantity of lesbian representation in media directed specifically at gay and lesbian audiences.

The gay and lesbian communities have only recently amassed the critical mass of consumers necessary to generate widely disseminated cultural production. The rise of urban ghettos and the decreasing stigmatization of homosexuality have made it

increasingly profitable to produce media aimed specifically at the gay and lesbian communities (Binnie 1995). Historically, cultural production from both queer and mainstream sources has been aimed primarily at the gay male consumer (Clark 1993). Gay men are perceived to have greater earning potential than lesbian women by virtue of their gender and thus more disposable income. However, the recent awareness of lesbian fashion consciousness (Clark 1993) as well as increasing equity in access to financial resources and power for some lesbian women as a result of feminist initiatives has resulted in lesbian women becoming conceptualized as a viable consumer group for whom to produce cultural material and events. A rise in consumer and advertiser interest has supported the development of several glossy magazines aimed primarily at the lesbian market such as Curve and Diva.[6] Similarly, lesbian-centred films such as Go Fish, When Night is Falling, and The Incredibly True Adventures of Two Girls in Love have been released into mainstream cinemas. This cultural production aimed primarily at lesbians has also been made possible by the development of broad North American market; most major lesbian magazines and films are produced in the United States with the intent to market them throughout the US and Canada.

Further dissemination of lesbian cultural production and images has occurred as a lesbian presence has slowly been incorporated into a mainstream market. Throughout the

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[6] These magazines and films appear to actually be aimed at a lesbian audience and should not be confused with those lesbian representations which are intended to appeal to the heterosexual male voyeur. For more, see Noack (1998).

popular media sitcoms such as Ellen, comics such as Lea Delaria and musicians such as Melissa Etheridge have incorporated lesbian themes while still maintaining a primarily heterosexual target audience. Similarly, numerous lesbian characters have begun to emerge in popular films, television shows and literature (Hamer & Budge 1994). Lesbian presence in the media has been further augmented by increasing lesbian representation in mainstream women's magazines in conjunction with lesbian 'chic' (Kasindorf 1993).

The wide dissemination of both lesbian and mainstream lesbian-themed cultural productions provide a dearth of lesbian representations which may serve as a basis for lesbian identities. However, many lesbian representations in popular culture are based on complex cues and significations. For lesbian women gaydar serves as a means of interpreting lesbian representations based on their own identifications. In this way, the potential for a range of identity recognitions and performances is accommodated.

Stereotyping Identities

Identity representations in popular culture have the potential to be intrinsically problematic. The fluidity of identities makes the possibility of providing a 'true' representation (or theory) of any identity virtually impossible. Stuart Hall argues that the complexity of culturally situated identities exceed the binary structures[7] of representation

[7] Here Hall refers to the us/them, centre/margin, self/other dualities which are central to cultural representations. Each representation has the potential to be defined in relation to both what it is and what it is not.

(Hall 1990: 228). Thus the relatively static representations of popular culture provide little basis for an identity which is subject to redefinition. Rutherford argues that "identification, if it is to be productive, can never be with some static and unchanging object. It is an interchange between self and structure, a transforming process. If the object remains static, ossified by tradition or isolated by a radically changing world, if its theoretical foundations cannot address that change, then its culture and politics lose their ability to innovate. Its symbolic language can only conjure up the past, freezing us in another moment" (1990: 14).

The 'frozen moment' of cultural representation often emerges as a stereotype. In relation to identity formation, identifications and representations, stereotypes have both positive and negative consequences. The possibility for stereotypes to stunt the potential for the fluidity and diversity of identities is great, however, stereotypes may also provide an 'easy' site for identification. In specific relation to lesbian identities, Munt argues that "subcultures have long recognized the damage a negative stereotype can do, but stereotypes hold a function of self definition. They can short-circuit more complicated messages and are able to communicate a lot of information quickly and concisely" (1998: 7). Thus stereotypes provide a valuable tool for negotiating a social environment without being subject to information overload.

Even in a contemporary context, lesbian stereotypes tend to rely on the image of the masculine lesbian, the bulldagger described by the early sexologists. Although there has been some variation on the intensity of masculine signification upon the lesbian body,

this gender disruption is still central to the representation of lesbian women (Weston 1996). This reliance on dated conceptualizations of lesbians speaks to the potential for identifications which 'conjure up the past'. However, the existence of stereotypical lesbian images may provide a means for some lesbian women to achieve everyday visibility in a society which is permeated with heterosexism. Conversely, other women may be able to hide their sexual identity through a deliberate rejection of stereotypical lesbian cues. Regardless of their potential use, these stereotypical representations fail to represent the racial, class, gender and age diversity of lesbian women. As a result, the formation and maintenance of lesbian identities becomes especially difficult for women who cannot make an identification with these cultural representations. However, upon consideration of the role which the media plays in the process of identity formation, a lack of lesbian representation may be just as problematic as stereotypical representations.

As a tool for the recognition of representations, gaydar may have a significant influence on the formation of lesbian identities. An awareness of the cues which comprise gaydar make it possible for lesbian women to both represent and obscure their sexual identities. Further, gaydar potentially allows lesbian women to make identifications with lesbian representations. Gaydar also seems to be informed by cultural representations of lesbian women in both the mainstream and gay and lesbian media. However, lesbian women's experiences of gaydar are also characterized by the continuing tension between a desire for lesbian visibility and the desire to reject stereotypical, essentialist representations of lesbian women. This struggle for fluid, multiple and non-essentializing

lesbian representation (and identification) seems to mirror the difficulties of theorizing lesbian identities in a contemporary context. The investigation of gaydar in relation to lesbian identities may provide significant insight into the ways in which these problematised identities are formed, maintained and experienced on a daily basis.

Chapter 4:

GAYDAR AS AN IDENTITY BUILDING STRATEGY

Within the theoretical framework outlined in the previous chapter, lesbian identities are constructed as unstable, multiple and shifting. While this is well articulated on an abstract level, this construction is rendered far more problematic at the level of lived experience. The lesbian identities which are experienced by some lesbian women on an everyday basis appear to bear only a passing resemblance to the fluid and unstable identities which are so articulately theorized by postmodern and queer scholars. The lesbian representations which are identified through the enactment of gaydar are potentially static in the fleeting moment of recognition - you cannot actually see their fluidity. In my own lesbian identity/identities, the fluidity which I know exists must often be temporarily suspended so that I can consider myself a social actor and adopt an identity from which I can create political agency. These potential contradictions between the fluidity of lesbian identity as it is theorized and the everyday experiences of some lesbian women have prompted my further investigation into the relation between gaydar and lesbian identities.

The results of the focus groups reveal that both being recognizable as a lesbian and being able to recognize other potentially lesbian women may provide the everyday recognition necessary for identity formation. The roles which the awareness, use and learning of gaydar can play in the process of forming and perpetually renegotiating

lesbian identities are discussed below in relation to the coming out process, daily identity maintenance, looking for lesbian partners, and media portrayal of lesbians. Finally, the stereotypes which gaydar potentially perpetuates and the effect this may have on the construction of lesbian identities are addressed.

Lesbians Coming Out

For some women the process of constructing a lesbian identity may take many years. However, several of the focus group participants asserted that once they had claimed a lesbian identity, it was important to be recognizable as a lesbian, at least for an initial period. This assertion reflects the need for identity recognition as it is theorized by Calhoun (1995). Often this initial visibility is based on the adoption of styles of dress or mannerisms which others may perceive as 'lesbian' - the cues which comprise gaydar. The adoption of these lesbian signifiers allows women to perform a lesbian identity within a social context. Additionally, an awareness that the ability to recognize gaydar's cues may be limited to those who are within the queer community or who are queer positive may provide a certain measure of safety for women who are still hesitant about their identity performance.

> When I was first coming out, I wanted the world to know. I wanted to have a pink triangle on my knapsack and I had my little ring in one ear and a longer earring in the other and I made sure I had my L.L. bean plaid shirt

> on at all times... I had this need for people to know and somehow I felt safe cause I figured that people who weren't lesbians wouldn't pick up on the signs anyways - and I don't think they ever did... As I got older and more self assured I felt less of a need to identify myself like that [but] at the beginning it was very important. (Beth)

> I went through a period like that [where I felt the need to identify myself] - it lasted about three days. I got a t-shirt from my brother that said 'I can't even think straight' and he gave me a leather jacket with the clips and stuff. But I got over it pretty fast and now, no absolutely not - I don't try to identify [myself] at all. Too paranoid. (Addy)

The lived experiences of these women support theories which assert that representation to and recognition by others is an integral part of identity formation. By being visible, some lesbian women may feel that they are able to declare their 'new' membership in a cultural group. However, as these women become increasingly comfortable with their identity, their need to be explicitly visible as a lesbian may fade. Women also spoke of their awareness of this phenomenon in their use of gaydar to recognize other potential lesbians, commenting that when they saw someone who appeared to be blatantly lesbian, it was likely that they had recently come out.

By using the cues which trigger gaydar, some women are able to openly declare their membership in an identity category and yet still feel confident that other, non-lesbians will not recognize their declaration. This is not to say that they are not recognizable by individuals who are not lesbian. In fact, the stereotypical nature of some of the cues which focus group participants described virtually assured that their performance of a lesbian identity was apparent to everyone. However, through the adoption of these lesbian cues or appearances, some women who have come out as lesbian are able to acquire an important moment of identity recognition - they are able to look in the mirror and see themselves as a lesbian.

Being Lesbian Every Day

After this initial period of visibility, the desire to be recognized as a lesbian in daily encounters seems to be dependent on a variety of circumstances including the length of time you've been 'out', political motivations, safety, and personal circumstances. Some women asserted the value of daily identity representation and identification:

> It's really important [for me] everyday to send a signal somehow to someone that I'm not who you think I am... It's really important to me to assert that I am queer and I will always be queer - that I'm not straight... I do consciously send signals and I do consciously look for them in other people too. (Juliette)

This use of gaydar's cues may allow some women to perform their lesbian identities on a daily basis. Additionally, the use of gaydar to recognize the potentially lesbian representations of others may provide the basis for making everyday identifications with other lesbian women. Together, these potentially daily representations and identifications contribute to the continuous process of identity formation and reformation.

Some women spoke of their desire to be visible in their everyday lives in conjunction with their political affiliation with groups which promote lesbian visibility such as the Lesbian Avengers. Many women spoke of safety concerns and the ways in which they selectively coded themselves as lesbian based on the perceived safety of their environment. Some women also implied that a more nuanced understanding of gaydar's cues allowed them to select the types (and number) of people who were able to recognize their lesbian self-representations. By using overt symbols or slogans, they perceived that their lesbian identities would be apparent to virtually everyone. However, more obscure cues, such as the use of specific language or less overt symbols (such as the labrys or black triangle) would primarily represent their identities to those 'in the know' - other lesbians, gay men and queers.

In contrast to those women who actively performed their lesbian identities, some women spoke of their conscious choice not to code themselves as lesbian because of their desire to challenge some stereotypical lesbian representations.

> I deliberately avoid [coding myself as lesbian] in a lot of ways - in terms of dress and I've thought of cropping all my hair off and then I think no - I'm not going to just do it to make a statement... The culture I come from is very straight I'm so used to operating in those circles. (Gabrielle)

Although the women who informed this research spoke about intentionally representing or not representing their own lesbian identities in their daily lives, there also seems to be a perception that many lesbian women exhibit 'cues' even though they do not deliberately code themselves as lesbian. Through their social interaction with other lesbian women, some women may seek to mimic or blend in with their peers and as a result of this process unintentionally code themselves as lesbians. These 'unintentional' performances can be compared to the ways in which our compliance with social scripts causes us to unintentionally perform gendered identities (Butler 1990). Regardless of whether lesbian performances are intentional or unintentional, the understanding and use of gaydar potentially allows women to represent themselves as lesbian and identify other potentially lesbian women during their daily social interactions.

Looking for Lovers

For some women, the experience of constructing lesbian identity is intertwined with the process of realizing sexual desire for other women. Although on a theoretical level lesbian identity is not necessarily tied to sexual relationships, the two seem to be

more closely related on a practical level (Trujillo 1997, Esterberg 1997). Accordingly, gaydar's function as a means of identifying potential lovers may potentially contribute to the definition or redefinition of a lesbian identity based on sexual desire. Interestingly, some of the women who participated in the focus groups indicated that they found 'lesbian cues' attractive, and that if they were attracted to a woman it was likely because she had 'lesbian cues'. Finding potential partners does not seem to be the primary use of gaydar, however it may reinforce the potential for lesbian desire.

> [If] I'm attracted to them I'm probably desperately hoping that they're a lesbian and I'm looking for anything that will validate that feeling. (Beth)

> If they [other women] don't know [they're lesbians] yet and you kind of think they are [lesbians] it's because you're picking up those things about them... What you're finding attractive is the things that you normally are looking for. (Katherine)

> Sometimes [gaydar] is picking up but sometimes you just want them to be on our side. (Robin)

It is difficult to surmise what role sexual attraction may play in the identification of lesbian representations for each woman. Because these identifications seem to be based

on the construction of desire as opposed to the actual enactment of a relationship, they have the potential to be equally present for both women who are actively seeking partners and for those women who are in long-term, committed relationships. This everyday use of gaydar to identify lesbian representations which are considered to be sexually attractive (however personally that is defined) may provide another means of performing a lesbian identity which is based on desire for other women.

The Media makes the Lesbian?

The construction of identities is rooted in specific social, historical and cultural contexts. As a result, popular culture and media have an impact on the construction and perception of lesbian identities in a social environment. For some lesbian women, especially those in isolated or rural areas, media representations of lesbians may be a primary reference point for the construction of a lesbian identity. The presentation of overtly lesbian women in the media is a relatively new phenomenon. These representations are the result of the activism of the women's movement and the lesbian and gay liberation movements which advocated for and generated the increased visibility of lesbians as a social group. The further presentation of 'lesbian chic' by the mainstream media signifies an interesting (yet temporary) valuation of a previously stigmatized identity while carefully delineating its representational limits (Hamer & Budge 1994).

Many of the women in the focus groups talked of their frustration with the lack of lesbian representations in the popular media. One woman identified the lack of role models for women in general in the media and her reaction to one celebrity's coming out:

> Before I came out, I was mad that k.d. lang came out because I had no one to identify with and she was like this strong crazy quirky woman who didn't give a shit what anyone thought and I was like damn, it's another person. If you're weird or strong or whatever then you've got to be a dyke and I was mad because there isn't anything - like if you're straight you've got teen magazines and that's far from empowering you know. (Sal)

Both before and after coming out this woman looked to k.d. lang as a role model upon which to base her own emerging identity. However, during the period of time when their sexual orientations were not congruent, there was a sense of disappointment and betrayal. This woman's reaction reinforces the importance of the portrayal of sexual orientation among role models. The representation of lesbian women in popular culture and media contribute to the social recognition of 'lesbian' as a valid identity category. Further, these representations work as a reference point for the changing definition of lesbian identity in relation to a specific cultural moment.

Other women who participated in the research explained that they used gaydar to recognize potentially lesbian subplots in television shows, film and literature which had no overt lesbian representations.

> When you're watching old movies and you're looking for lesbian or gay subplots and of course they're not written in but you see them because you want to see yourself reflected in other things and you don't see yourself reflected in popular culture - well except for this horrible lesbian chic stuff we're not even going to talk about that - and so you look. (Juliette)

In this way gaydar may be conceptualized as a tool for constructing lesbian representations. This example exemplifies the process by which identifications may occur where representations may not necessarily be intended.

Unfortunately, lesbian representations in popular culture may also limit conceptualizations of lesbian identity through their potential to perpetuate stereotypes of lesbians and lesbian culture. This contradiction was recognized by some of the women who participated in the focus groups.

> I don't think [the media] is interested [in showing lesbians]. I thought I liked that show Roseanne because they didn't take what the straight population perceives as a lesbian. This woman was a cosmetician and she

had long blond hair and was very effeminate and for a mainstream audience I'd rather see that portrayal because it's showing them that not all lesbians are leather and short hair - it is a diverse population. (Beth)

I don't think that popular culture can do justice to any culture. I don't think it does justice to straight culture, because what it looks for is the lowest common denominator. It has a certain ideology that it wants to portray. I don't think it does justice to any culture, let alone queer culture and I don't think it ever will. It does tend to portray either extreme [of lesbian women] - either the ones that look so straight you go 'how can they possibly be queer' they're so feminine looking, they're so mainstream looking you know it's intentionally done to subvert the stereotypes. And then it shows that [butch] stereotype. There's not sort of a spectrum in between that it shows. (Juliette)

These women recognize the contradictions between mainstream lesbian representation and their own diverse experiences of lesbian identity and culture. Ironically, those representations of lesbian women that do not seem to be based on stereotypical perceptions of lesbian appearance may not be embraced as lesbian representations. Instead, they may be constructed as merely a 'straight woman trying to play a lesbian' or

as a false representation. This circular logic virtually ensures that the full diversity of lesbian women cannot be adequately represented in the media.

Lesbian Stereotypes

In many ways, gaydar is based not on a range of lesbian identities but on popular representations of lesbian women. In order to be identified as lesbian, these media representations are often based on cultural stereotypes. On an everyday basis, lesbian women may actually perpetuate these stereotypes through their use of gaydar. Many of the gaydar cues which were identified by the focus group participants can be related to common stereotypical images of lesbian women, including the masculine lesbian, the androgynous lesbian, butch-fem lesbians, and lesbian feminists. By looking for and identifying women as lesbians based on cues which are based in stereotypical notions, lesbian women essentially require that a woman adopt these cues so that she may be visible as a lesbian. Ironically, lesbian women are aware of their own perpetuation of these stereotypes, and yet they still use gaydar. Esterberg's investigation into lesbian identities reveals a similar contradiction between lesbian women's awareness of stereotypes and their use of gaydar (1997).

The results of this research reveal that the construction and perpetuation of these lesbian stereotypes through gaydar have both benefits and drawbacks. Several women who informed this research theorized as to why some lesbian women work to mimic

lesbian stereotypes in their self-presentation. These analyses reinforce the participants explanations of why they code themselves as lesbians.

> I think there is this impulse... 'I don't want to be mainstream, I don't want to be normal, I don't want to be straight, I don't want to be all these things' and so you purposely set yourself up to stand out - particularly in the pride parade. I mean you go to be seen, that's what the pride parade is about - the spectacle, it's about being seen, it's about standing out. (Juliette)

> I wonder if we see more of the 'card-carrying' lesbian and bisexual women in those who are just coming out because you have to find that community or you want to be identified by other people. Then as you find your friends or community or become more self assured there's less of a need to become such a stereotype... that's your way of affirming who you are and having people recognize you. (Beth)

This use of stereotypical cues to identify oneself as lesbian potentially constrains and limits the fluidity of lesbian identity. If the recognition (both by self and others) which may be necessary for the affirmation of a lesbian identity is intrinsically rooted in popular representations there may be little potential for 'unique' lesbian identities to be

constructed. By insisting on cultural and social conformity in representation, gaydar has the potential to limit the fluidity and diversity of lesbian identities.

Some of the women who participated in the focus groups recognize that the cultural reliance on stereotypical lesbian constructions has made it difficult for them to come to identify as lesbians. Those women who do not fit traditional stereotypical images, and thus are rarely identified through gaydar, seem to have more difficulty defining and redefining their lesbian identities in relation to a social and cultural context.

> For a long time I felt very uncertain because I thought I didn't fit a proper code, a proper stereotype. I thought I'm not up on my theory, I don't have short hair and it's certainly not red and I only bought my doc martens last year. I almost felt not legitimate because maybe there's the code built up in some ways. It's taken me a while to say this is okay, to just be you know, you. (Gabrielle)

One woman spoke of her own failure to embody lesbian stereotypes and her response when she was identified by others as a lesbian.

> As someone who gets nailed as heterosexual a lot and doesn't get 'dinged'[8] at all I know that it certainly is empowering to have somebody say 'Oh, you were dinged.' (Robin)

These unusual moments of recognition which occur when gaydar moves beyond lesbian stereotypes may make it possible for women who do not fulfill traditional notions of what a lesbian looks like to identify themselves as lesbians in relation to a social construction of 'lesbians' as a group. Thus, for some women stereotypical lesbian representations provide a site for the construction or reconstruction of a lesbian identity in relation to a specific social and cultural context. For other women, these same representations may prevent them from representing or identifying themselves as lesbian women. The problems seemingly inherent in the definition of lesbian identities only further complicate the problem of the influence of stereotypical lesbian representations by potentially asserting that without being able to represent oneself as a lesbian in a social context one cannot claim a lesbian identity. The reliance of gaydar on socially constructed stereotypical lesbian representations may further inhibit a woman's ability to make identity claims.

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[8] In one group of women whom I spoke with the word 'ding' (or a 'ding') was commonly used to denote someone who was thought to be a lesbian.

Gaydar and Lesbian Identities

The process of building and maintaining a lesbian identity is potentially influenced by gaydar in a series of ways. An awareness of gaydar and its cues allow women who have recently come out to declare their lesbian identities while feeling relatively safe. Further, by adopting lesbian cues, women are able to represent and define themselves as lesbian in social context. This potential to be recognized by self and others is central to the process of identity formation. For some women, the performance of a lesbian identity is incorporated into their daily lives through the adoption of specific styles of dress, presentation, or other cues. The recognition of lesbian identities as performances based on specific attributes reveal their potential for constant change in relation to a social context. Other women may not consciously perform their lesbian identities on a daily basis, but instead may unconsciously mimic the cues of the lesbian women with whom they socialize to embody unintentional identity performances. An awareness of the cues which comprise gaydar further reinforces the everyday identifications of lesbian women by revealing potential same-sex partners. The confluence of sexual attraction with the cues of gaydar results in the potential for multiple and shifting representations of lesbian women based on experiences of desire. Finally gaydar facilitates the identification of lesbians in the popular media who may serves as reference points for the definition of lesbian identities in relation to a contemporary social context.

Unfortunately, gaydar also has the potential to reinforce representational stereotypes of lesbian women. Those women who cannot represent themselves as lesbian may have difficulty defining their lesbian identity in relation to larger constructions of lesbians as a social group. Although this problem seems to be inherent in the construction of gaydar as a phenomenon, the women who informed this research were acutely aware of these contradictions. Despite this problematic, gaydar may be a valuable identity building tool for some lesbian women because it potentially allows them to constantly redefine their lesbian identities in relation to the lesbian representations which they encounter in their everyday social environment.

Chapter 5:

THEORIZING LESBIAN COMMUNITIES

Like identity, the concept of 'community' has been subject to constant redefinition within a sociological context. Classic theoretical definitions of community often rely on the work of Ferdinand Tönnies which contrasts the familiarity of community or gemeinschaft with the cold, impersonality of society or geschellschaft (Worsley 1991). In this construction, community is conceptualized as a primarily rural phenomenon which is characterized by kinship ties, common neighbourhoods and friendship or mutual affirmation between members (Tönnies 1967). In recent years, sociologists and other academics have moved beyond the rural/ urban, gemeinschaft/ geschellschaft, community/ society distinctions originally outlined by Tönnies to generate conceptualizations of community which are more relevant to modern society.

Contemporary theories of community are based on the notion that "a community exists when a group of people form a social unit based on common location, interest, identification, culture and/or activities" (Garvin and Tropman 1992 cited in Fellin 1997: 3). This more general conceptualization has prompted investigations into the understanding, organization and experience of community among many contemporary groups. In conjunction with the increasing diversity within community studies, traditional notions of the community as static or locationally bound have been rejected in favour of more amorphous definitions. Like the common identities upon which they are potentially

based, communities are fluid and perpetually shifting. Further, an increased awareness of difference and diversity among community researchers has led to the recognition of the multiple experiences and manifestations of community which may be situated within a single large community. In this framework, all theorizing of community is provisional and contingent on a specific cultural moment and interpretation. The potential for each individual to experience and define their community in a unique manner results in a theorizing of community which can only be understood in relation to the specific socio-cultural context of its members.

This awareness of the diverse and fluid nature of communities has made the understanding of contemporary lesbian communities increasingly problematic. Similar to other marginalized subgroups in North American society, lesbians have developed their own cultural communities outside those of the dominant culture. As a result of the development of specifically lesbian identities, the increased visibility of lesbians and gays and the emergence of 'gay ghettos', contemporary community theorists have been able to begin to investigate the existence and experience of lesbian communities. However, lesbian 'identity politics' have combined with a feminist consciousness of diversity to make it virtually impossible to come to an understanding of who may be members of a lesbian community or communities. Although the recognition of a single, cohesive lesbian community is both practically and theoretically problematic (Whisman 1993, Hall 1993), I maintain that it is still possible to conceptualize a series of overlapping and interrelated lesbian communities. Despite the problematizations of theory, it is

indisputable that some lesbian women experience and participate in communities in their daily lives. Although it is arguable that the communities in which lesbian women participate on an everyday basis are not necessarily 'lesbian communities', on a practical level I would assert that self-identified lesbian women who interact in social groups with other women who identify themselves as lesbian may experience some sentiment of 'lesbian community'. This assertion is based on an awareness of the pervasive nature of heterosexism in other communities to which lesbian women may belong. However, it is highly unlikely that these potential experiences of lesbian community are static or essentially 'lesbian' in any way. The problems of definitively delineating both 'lesbians' and 'community' virtually guarantee that any interpretation of lesbian community is subject to multiple interpretations, manifestations and subject positions. With this conditionality in mind, this chapter will briefly outline some of the current interpretations of lesbian communities using four related constructions of community: imagined communities, political communities, locality-based communities, and personal communities.

Imagined Communities

The concept of an 'imagined community' was first coined by political theorist Benedict Anderson in relation to his reflections on nationalism, but the applicability of this concept extends far beyond the nation-state. Anderson defines a community based not on spatial location or personal interaction, but instead on shared systems of

mythologies and semiotics. Through these shared cultural contexts, an imagined community is built in which "members... will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson 1991: 6). It is important to stress that in this context the use of the word 'imagined' is not a negative term used to describe the unreal, but instead refers to that which is perceived in the imagination but may not be experienced as a clearly-defined, spatially-limited, physical entity. Anderson supports this assertion, arguing that the distinction between genuine and false communities is in itself irrelevant - the style in which the community is imagined far surpasses any practical existence (1991: 6). Further, Anderson explains that the nation can be characterized as a community because "regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each... [it] is always conceived as a deep horizontal comradeship" (Anderson 1991: 7). Thus, the imagined community is characterized by a disperse membership who share a common mythology, semiotic system and perception of homogeneity.

As a result of the continuing marginalization of lesbian women and gay men in contemporary society, 'imagined communities' have been a primary form of community construction among this group. In the case of lesbian communities, this 'imagining' is also distinctly historical in nature. Although lesbians have been almost completely invisible in historical texts, recent scholars have sought to identify the 'hidden lesbians' in history (Duberman, Vicinus & Chauncey 1989, Lesbian History Group 1989, Faderman 1981). The renaming and reclaiming of 'romantic friends', 'mannish women',

and 'educated spinsters' as the earliest members of the imagined lesbian community has served to create a sense of historical continuity (Faderman 1991, Vicinus 1993). Although the women identified by these scholars did not necessarily identify as 'lesbian' per se, the identification of intense romantic or emotional relationships between women may allow some contemporary women who identify as lesbian to acquire a notion of themselves in relation to a historical cohort. This exposition of women throughout history who could retroactively be identified as 'lesbian' is one enactment of the 'lesbian continuum' originally identified by Adrienne Rich in the early 1980s (Rich 1981). This identification of historic 'lesbian' communities may serve as one basis for theorizing the construction and existence of contemporary lesbian communities.

A variety of scholars have effectively utilized Anderson's notion of 'imagined communities' in relation to contemporary queer and lesbian communities. In a telltale link to (queer) nation and sovereignty, Ingram, Bouthillette and Retter outline the problems of limiting our understanding of queer communities to gay neighbourhoods or ghettos. Instead they argue that "linkages across regions are leading to new forms of queer 'sovereignty,' [which is] determined as much by shared ideologies, desires and resulting networks as spatial proximity" (1997: 172). This emphasis on shared ideologies as a means of defining queer communities is echoed by Rothenberg in her investigation of contemporary urban lesbian communities. After qualitative interviews with lesbian women residing in Park Slope, Brooklyn she maintains that lesbian communities are often defined more by 'the idea of community' than by a specific spatial location or even

cultural interaction (Rothenberg 1995). The recognition of the role of shared ideologies, desires and experiences in constructing communities highlights the potential influence of other social structural variables (race, age, class, ability) in conjunction with sexual orientation as a basis for community formation. The potential importance of these imagined communities for lesbian women (of all races, ages, classes and abilities) is described by Freitas, Kaiser and Hammidi who identify the production of 'experiential spaces' which "provide refuge and confirmation of same-sex desire and culture" (1996: 85). Echoing Anderson, these theorists argue that lesbian (and gay) communities are based on the recognition of queer "spaces that are cultural and symbolic and that open from the use of codes and styles" (Freitas, Kaiser and Hammidi 1996: 85). These interpretations of lesbian communities by contemporary theorists support the use of Anderson's notion of imagined community as one basis for defining contemporary lesbian communities.

Based on the work of these previous scholars, I will refer to the development of 'imagined communities' among lesbian women. An imagined lesbian community is one which is perceived to exist by individual lesbian women and consists of lesbian (or lesbian-positive) women who share similar values, ideals, lifestyles and past experiences at that time. As a result, "we feel a sense of community, of shared identity, with these other inhabitants of our social space, and in doing so, create a sense of community" (Esterberg 1997: 119). These imagined communities are not necessarily centred on lesbianism - they may be just as heavily influenced by manifestations of race, class, age or

ability as they are by sexual orientation. Whatever its composition, for lesbian women, this 'imagined community' may be the basis for political action, social groupings or even the designation of the social category 'lesbian'.

Political Communities

An expansion of Anderson's notion of nationalistic imagined communities leads to the recognition of political communities in contemporary society. These are communities which are 'imagined' around a shared politic or movement. A good deal of contemporary theorizing about community has resulted from the political struggles of the British Left (Rutherford 1990, Mercer 1994). Mercer argues that in this manifestation of community, valuing the 'difference' among community members is crucial to understanding the multiple facets of social oppression (Mercer 1994: 260). The constructions of political communities are perhaps also the most likely to shift rapidly as members coalesce, disband and regroup around multiple issues. Further, the provisional nature of politics itself necessitates that these political communities be perpetually shifting (Rutherford 1990). While some experiences of political community may be as intangible as those of imagined communities, there is also the potential for members of political communities to interact and share specific experiences.

Normative constructions of lesbian communities often incorporate an adherence to specific political beliefs and values (Esterberg 1997: 137). The emergence of a lesbian political community cannot be considered without acknowledging the influence of the

feminist movement. In conjunction with feminist organizing, lesbians were able to form political groups around issues of concern to them (Faderman 1991). With the emergence of lesbian feminism as a distinct social movement, specific ideologies and issues dominated lesbian political organizing (Ross 1995). Needless to say, these political communities were far from all inclusive. The schisms in lesbian politics became blatantly apparent in the multiple understandings of sexuality which emerged from the sex wars of the 1980s (Duggan & Hunter 1995). Political organizing among lesbians of colour, disabled lesbians and older lesbians further emphasized the diversity of the lesbian community and the failure of earlier political movements to incorporate the concerns of all lesbian women (Esterberg 1997). There is currently an unquestionable diversity among contemporary lesbian political communities, however a discussion of all the issues and debates taken up by these groups is beyond the scope of this research. Nonetheless, it is clearly evident that the tradition of activism initiated by both the feminist and the gay and lesbian political movements continue today as many members of lesbian communities form political movements around issues which affect their lives.

Locality Based Communities

In contrast to imagined or political communities, most common interpretations of 'community' focus on locality-based or geographic communities which centre around social interactions in a specific physical space. In this conceptualization, 'community' and 'neighbourhood' become virtually synonymous to indicate a "geographically bounded

area of people who share particular characteristics... and who maintain social interactions with one another" (Rothenberg 1995: 171). Although geographic communities are often identified in relation to specific urban areas, conceptions of locality-based communities also include rural communities and communities located in large institutions. In the ideal locality based community "a sense of belonging [is] said to be associated with the social relations within the particular geographic area (Stacey 1967: 14). In this context however, the process of delineating the boundaries of locality based communities has become problematic (Effrat 1974: 15). Within this framework, I believe that it is possible to argue that locality based communities may also include those based on a perceived network of some (but not all) spaces within a geographically defined area. The identification of 'neighbouring' evaluates and defines locality based communities based on the proximity of community members to others whom they would feel comfortable relying on in minor emergencies (Effrat 1974: 16). By integrating this concept with that of the 'natural community' based on social or ethnic commonality (Effrat 1974), I would argue that a locality based community can be delineated based on the neighbouring practices of members of like groups. This is especially relevant to large urban centres where housing costs and overcrowding result in many neighbourhoods where the social and ethnic makeup is less homogenous than in rural and suburban areas. Thus geographic communities are loosely based on a shared territory and local social systems, but the members of a 'community' within a territorial area may be determined more by shared social or ethnic backgrounds than location.

The construction of locality-based communities of gays and lesbians is apparent in many urban centres across the globe including San Francisco, Amsterdam, Sydney and London (Binnie 1995). More recently, scholars have begun to reveal the numerous and diverse gay and lesbian communities in many smaller cities and rural areas which have been subject to less international attention (Beemyn 1997). In Canada throughout the 1970s, openly gay businesses and services emerged clustered around specific urban locations to create locality-based communities or gay ghettos in Toronto and Vancouver (Kinsman 1996). In this context, the connotation of 'gay ghetto' is not an intrinsically negative one. In fact, most gay ghettos are areas which have been or are being gentrified. When used in a non-derogatory manner, 'gay ghetto' simply refers to that area of town which is the 'centre' for gay and lesbian businesses and as a result attracts a large gay and lesbian residential population. These gay ghettos are characterized by a number of gay institutions, a locally dominant gay subculture which is isolated from the larger community and a residential population that is substantially gay (Levine 1979: 195). Castells and Murphy further argue that the establishment of gay spatial locations was a central key to the establishment of gay community, culture and power in North America (1982). The locality based gay and lesbian communities located in ghettos provide important spaces from which gays and lesbian can initiate political communities and generate cultures.

Unfortunately, these locality-based gay and lesbian communities are often centred on economic interests which inequitably favour the development of communities which

cater to white, gay men (Binnie 1995). Based on his study of the gay community in San Francisco, Castells agrees, explaining that lesbians have little influence on the space of the city because of gender based income discrepancies (1983). Studies of lesbian communities show that lesbians are less territorially conscious and instead focus on lesbian-friendly or lesbian-safe spaces which are often based on social rather than economic networks (Rothenberg 1995). Although there is some sense that locality-based lesbian communities are located in recognizable queer ghettos, they are just as likely to be dispersed throughout urban centres as an amalgamation of smaller, lesbian-centred spaces. This conception of a locality based lesbian community is based on the perceived connection of a variety of lesbian friendly spaces including lesbian bars, women's bookstores, specific gyms and lesbian owned businesses. This collection of spaces may also often be mediated by specific times; the perceived lack of a lesbian clientele in some areas leads to the gay bar designating one night a week as 'women's night'. These considerations force me to consider lesbian space slightly differently that the 'gay and lesbian space' of many of the widely recognized urban ghettos.

These insights lead me to speak of an implicit or explicit network of lesbian spaces scattered throughout a specific geographic area as a locality based lesbian community. This is not done in exclusion of the recognition of the potential for 'lesbian ghettos' similar to the lesbian and gay ghettos which are currently dominated by gay men, but until lesbian women gain the access to power which is currently enjoyed by (gay) white men, it is unlikely that these will thrive. Instead, I maintain that it is far more useful

to recognize the somewhat untraditional locality based lesbian communities which already exist.

Personal Communities

Finally, personal communities which "focus on the membership of an individual in multiple communities" (Fellin 1997) overlap with locality-based and imagined communities as they are determined by the network of a single individual community member. In this definitional framework, community "refers to interpersonal interaction characterized by informal, primary relationships" (Effrat 1974: 3). In essence the personal community of any one individual is unique based on their present experience and circumstance. However, in this form of community study, both the intensity and dispersion of interpersonal relationships and the content of these relationships may provide valuable insights into patterns of human social interaction (Effrat 1974: 3). While this concept of personal communities is less widely used, a focus on personal communities broadens the scope of notions of community to include both real and potential social interactions with both formal and informal networks (Fellin 1997). Additionally, the notion of personal communities provides a means of investigating each individual's unique experience of community participation.

The limited visibility of lesbian women in public spaces has resulted in many lesbian communities being based on interpersonal social networks. After a study of gay communities in San Francisco, one author asserts that lesbian women rarely have the

territorial assertions of gay men; instead "their world attaches more importance to their relationships and their networks are ones of solidarity and affection" (Castells 1983: 140). The importance of these informal networks is historically evident in the culture of the Paris salons of the early 1900s (Benstock 1989). Additionally in her studies of lesbian communities in the Netherlands, Schuyf asserts that "a sense of the social: the company of like others... was essential to a lesbian's life" (1992: 53). Lesbian women's reliance on interpersonal social networks as a means of experiencing community may be equally prevalent in a contemporary context. Despite significant gains which have been made in combatting homophobia, many lesbian women still live in fear that their sexual orientation will be discovered. For many of these women, participation in informal social networks provides a relatively safe means of experiencing lesbian community. Esterberg finds that some lesbian communities can be conceptualized as "many smaller overlapping social circles or friendship networks" (1997: 119). This may especially apply in rural areas where informal social clubs provide a monthly gathering to women who would rarely otherwise participate in 'lesbian and gay' events or activities which are characteristic of larger urban centres. While there has been a significant amount of research which highlights the individual stories of lesbian women in particular contexts (Stein 1997, Weston 1996, Ross 1995), there has been limited investigation into the ways in which the informal networks between lesbian women shape their experiences.

Despite limited investigation into this area, there is little doubt that lesbian women rely on informal social networks as a means of generating a sentiment of lesbian

community. These social networks may provide the only basis of 'lesbian interaction' for women who are closeted in their daily lives or who are living in rural areas.

A Note on Community Diversity

It seems that in all constructions of community, however contrived, the issue of difference remains a contentious one. The concept of community provides a valuable means of talking about social groups, but it is not unproblematic. The assignment of the label 'community' often serves to obscure social inequality and social judgements within groups of people (Elias & Scotson 1965). The naming of a community necessarily draws boundaries which delineate those who are inside the community and those who are not. In recent years however, scholars have begun to interrogate the ways in which constructions of community create a false perception of the homogeneity of community members. Further, the incorporation of diversity has now become conceptualized as a necessary component of community formation. Cultural theorist Jonathan Rutherford argues that "the cultural politics of difference means living with incommensurability through new ethical and democratic frameworks, within a culture which both recognizes difference and is committed to resolving its antagonisms." (Rutherford 1990: 26). He goes on to argue that this process of resolution will require that we recognize the otherness within ourselves and transform relations of subordination and discrimination (1990: 26). Thus, in order to be culturally worthwhile, communities must work to encompass the differences which they currently expose.

The challenges of diversity have become particularly apparent within contemporary North American lesbian communities. It is apparent that the construction of any collective sentiment between lesbian women is necessarily mediated by race, class, or political views as well as other variables. Just as lesbian women have been challenging feminist organizations to include their issues, lesbian women of colour, lesbians with disabilities, and working class lesbian women have been challenging the lesbian community to represent their issues. Nardi and Schneider argue that "with a growing recognition of the way lives are organized around social class, race, ethnicity, rural/urban location, age and gender, in future years the study of gay [and lesbian] community... must seriously look into these differences" (1998: 174). Lesbian academics have similarly called for a recognition of the diversity which is embodied within our communities while at the same time recognizing that political value of perceiving a 'community' (Hall 1993). While many scholars, authors and filmmakers have done their best to illuminate segments of the hidden diversity within lesbian communities (Silvera 1992, Parmar 1993), there still remains an unresolved tension between the value of a community identity as a basis for political organizing and the ways in which that construction of community potentially ignores and erases difference. I cannot resolve this tension (even if I wanted to), however, the influence of these competing notions must be considered in relation to any investigation of lesbian communities.

Conceptualizing Lesbian Communities

Community is constructed and experienced though a variety of different means. There is no single defining factor which 'creates' a community. Rather, communities may be defined by any combination of shared experiences, ideologies, locations, identities and more. Current literature reveals that there are several conceptualizations of community which are especially relevant to the everyday experiences of lesbian women in communities. While these community forms are theoretically separable, in practice it is difficult to delineate exactly where one ends and another begins. In the process of everyday social interaction it is virtually impossible to analyse which sentiments of community can be allotted to each conceptualization. Despite these practical difficulties there can be little doubt that the results of this research show that the construction of each of these forms of community is facilitated by the use of gaydar.

Since lesbian women are rarely congregated in easily identifiable, segregated spaces, the recognition of imagined communities becomes a necessary tool for the study of lesbian communities. Without a notion of 'imagined community' there would be a limited concept of homosexual women (more than one individual) as a social phenomenon. This recognition of an imagined community of lesbian women is enhanced by the notion of a shared politic which brings lesbian women together. Further, the recognition of locality based communities which include networks of specific spaces within a geographic location allows us to generate a conception of locality-based lesbian communities despite gay men's dominance of lesbian and gay ghettos. This framework

also permits the identification of residential lesbian communities which are not economically driven or based around business areas. Finally, the notion of personal communities is a valuable framework from which to consider the communities built by lesbian women who are outside of urban centres or who are closeted in their daily lives. While these conceptualizations are necessarily overlapping each intuits a slightly different understanding of community. For each of these interpretations, gaydar functions as a community building tool in a slightly different manifestation.

Chapter 6:

GAYDAR AS A COMMUNITY BUILDING STRATEGY

When I asked lesbian women to talk about why they used gaydar, the themes of community and community building consistently emerged and re-emerged. Based on the conceptualizations of lesbian communities outlined in the previous chapter, this chapter will reveal the ways in which lesbian women perceive and use gaydar as a tool to build imagined communities, political communities, locality based communities and personal communities. Finally, I will address some of the problems associated with incorporating a full range of lesbian identities into these community building processes. Hopefully, a fuller understanding of gaydar as a community building tool will provide valuable insight into the construction of contemporary identity based communities and the role of the individual in the process of community building.

Imagining Lesbian Communities

The cues which gaydar relies upon constitute shared sign systems which seem to be a central component in the construction of imagined lesbian communities. In order to generate a sense of lesbian community which is not necessarily geographically located, individual lesbian women must see themselves reflected in social encounters. These social encounters often consist of direct (personal or impersonal) contact with other lesbian women or indirect contact with representations of lesbian women. In order for

these encounters to be recognizable as 'lesbian' encounters, lesbian women must be able to identify other women who they perceive to be lesbians. Conversely, women who identify as lesbian must also represent themselves as lesbians (so that they may be identified). Without the ability to identify other potential lesbians or represent themselves as lesbians, lesbian women would be unable to construct an imagined community or to conceptualize themselves as a distinct cultural group.

The shared mythology and sign systems of gaydar provide a means for recognition of other lesbian women without the need for direct social interaction. When focus group participants were asked why they tried to identify other women whom they thought were lesbians the overwhelming response was a desire for a sense of self-affirmation or self-reflection.

> Part of it is looking for self-affirmation... You want to see yourself reflected in other things and you don't see yourself reflected in popular culture. So you look... I'm not the only one, I'm not the only one on this street today... because where else do you get yourself reflected back - certainly not in mainstream discourses. (Juliette)

> You want to feel a part of something - like you're not the only one. You go anywhere and you try and find a friend, somebody you can talk to...

> [That's] a major way you identify at that time in your life [and] that's what you're going to look for. (Sam)

> You're aware of your marginality and if you can identify other lesbians, or gay men for that matter, on the street you're going to notice them and you want them to notice you. Not necessarily so that you're going to be picked up but you want to say you're not the only one on Princess Street. (Beth)

For lesbians who are closeted or isolated in their daily lives, gaydar may function as a means of simply identifying that there may be other lesbians who interact in their social environment. Some women indicated the need to be able to identify other women with whom they could relate or feel a sense of sameness. Discussion participants recognized the overwhelming heterosexism in society and cited gaydar as a means to counteract that heterosexism on both a personal and a social basis. By conceptualizing themselves as members of a larger community of lesbian women, individual lesbians may gain a sense of support and self-esteem, despite their invisibility in mainstream discourses.

The visibility of individual lesbian women, whether intentional or unintentional, also works to reinforce a sense of community and collective identity for lesbian women as a group. In many ways, lesbian communities are defined by their most visible members. Thus, individual choices surrounding where and how to be visible as a lesbian may

dramatically affect not only individual women's experiences of community but also general perceptions of lesbians and lesbianism. The women who informed this research asserted that the visibility of women as lesbians serves as a reminder that no single woman is alone in her struggles for representation or recognition:

> I think it's a large part too of... fighting heterosexism everyday or living with heterosexism every day... You know everybody assumes that you're straight... well not everybody, but it's nice to see when you assume someone is queer they might assume you're queer too. (Syd)

In this way, gaydar works to create some sense of collective identity and consequently, community. Through their identification of other lesbians in the course of their daily activities, lesbian women are able to conceptualize themselves as a part of a larger imagined lesbian community.

Communing through Lesbian Politics

The women who participated in the focus groups asserted that many of their experiences of community were related to shared political affiliations. Political activism was considered a prominent cue for gaydar. This may be informed by the overall perception that lesbians were 'more political' than their heterosexual counterparts. While there was an awareness that not all lesbian women are politically active, the increased

visibility among politically active women results in lesbian women being able to easily identify communities of activism.

> I think that lesbians and gay men and bisexual men and women tend to be more political because they have more that they feel they need to fight for, but I don't think that means that every lesbian and gay man or bisexual man or woman has to hold a placard - why should they? (Beth)

This perception of political awareness within lesbian communities extends beyond gay and lesbian issues to encompass a wide range of political and social oppressions. The political community which is imagined through these criteria is one which is socially aware about a broad range of issues:

> I don't want to essentialize, but I tend to view lesbian culture as more aware in general of other marginalized people and so the language they use around ethnicity or race or patriarchy or oppression tends to be more localized in that kind of an aware group. (Gabrielle)

Ironically, the discussion participants recognized that members of their own communities did not necessarily share the political awareness that they ascribed to other lesbian communities. The influence of feminism on shaping lesbian politics was also noted by the

women who informed the research. There was a perception that feminist awareness was central to both lesbian identities and communities:

> When we met people when we were first coming out, we like came out in this very feminist sort of setting and proceeded to meet an entirely different community. And we were terrified because they weren't feminist and we just had assumed that all lesbians would be I guess [and] 'cause we sort of felt that we had to be like their way to be queer. (Sal)

> I think that women who overtly identify themselves as feminist I'm more inclined to think that they might be possibly lesbian... because feminist is such a dirty word these days 'cause there's been this big backlash... even women on campus who say well I agree you know in equity and blah blah blah, but they will never call themselves a feminist because that's a dirty word, that means I hate men... whereas women who overtly say, yeah of course I'm a feminist I'm more inclined to think well yeah, they might be [lesbian]. (Juliette)

Thus, an espousal of feminist politics is considered a gaydar cue. The recognition of political affiliations as a cue for gaydar allows women to imagine themselves as part of a larger activist community. The visibility of both feminist and gay and lesbian activism in contemporary North American society virtually assures that perceptions of lesbian community include some sort of political affiliation. For women who are not politically active, these perceptions may result in a sense of exclusion or isolation. However, women who support a lesbian or feminist political agenda may be easily able to identify and define their communities through gaydar. These imagined political communities provide a sense of solidarity and reinforcement through shared activism.

A Lesbian Location?

Many of the lesbian women who participated in this research also spoke about their use of gaydar to both identify and construct a sense of locality based lesbian communities based on a series of small interconnected lesbian spaces. The spaces which were identified as 'lesbian spaces' were those in which it was possible to be visibly lesbian without fear of harassment or rejection. Participants identified many locations in which lesbian women were more likely to be visible including women's bookstores, queer businesses, and women's dances. There seemed to be an assertion that in these locations fewer cues were necessary to identify other lesbian women - you were considered queer unless obviously coded as straight. This sentiment echoes my personal discussions with gay male colleagues who assert that in highly concentrated geographic

locations (eg. the Church/Wellesley area of Toronto) they virtually stop looking for cues and assume that everyone they encounter will be gay or lesbian. These geographically concentrated communities potentially create an atmosphere of assumed 'normality' which is similar to that which heterosexuals experience in their daily lives.

Some locations which are related to lesbian cultural repertoires were also identified as likely locations for encountering visibly lesbian women. These locations included coffee shops, weight rooms and on university campuses. The relation between queers and coffee shops may be related to the construction of coffee shops as counter-cultural spaces. Lesbian (and gay) neighbourhoods and spaces in many urban cities are concentrated in areas which have a large number of counter-cultural institutions, including queer-friendly coffee shops and cafes (Adler & Brenner 1992). 'The Steps' of the Second Cup in Toronto's gay ghetto is a widely recognized cultural icon. The link between lesbian women and weight rooms may be related to common perceptions of lesbian women as butch or physically strong. Finally, university campuses may be considered a place for finding lesbian women because universities are considered more tolerant of 'diverse lifestyles' and also may have a higher concentration of women who have recently come out. Previously identified links between women who have recently come out and a period of high visibility may result in university campuses having many women who are highly visible as lesbians. The commonality between all of these locations is their construction as 'safe' spaces for lesbian women.

The need to both find and create 'safe' space by using gaydar and by coding oneself as lesbian was a recurring theme in the discussions of lesbian visibility. Homophobia and ignorance result in both real and perceived threats to lesbian women in their everyday lives and necessitate that lesbian women find spaces where they are free from fear.

> If you're queer you need to find the safe spaces. You need to find each other... because there is that dominant mentality. You look for each other and you need to find each other. (Juliette)

> If I'm going somewhere that's safe... like if I have a women's studies class I'll wear my [freedom] rings... [or] a little necklace with two women's symbols. (Electra)

Although it is difficult to identify specific locality-based lesbian communities in the same way in which it is possible to identify gay ghettos, many of the women who participated in this research did encounter what they perceived as lesbian spaces in their everyday lives. The construction of geographic lesbian communities is possible because gaydar allows some women to identify and denote specific lesbian-friendly locations. The perception that these spaces are interconnected via lesbian culture and cultural symbols makes it possible to create a sense of locality-based lesbian community.

Personally Lesbian Life

Lesbian women's reliance on interpersonal networks was often evident when the women who participated in focus groups spoke of the importance of casual social interaction. This process of building personal communities seems to be parallel to and reinforced by the process of learning gaydar. Women spoke of informal networks as a means of transmitting the practical cultural information necessary to utilize gaydar. While initial perceptions of lesbian representations may be reliant on media depictions, it is through the process of social interaction that cues and signs which gaydar is reliant upon are learned. Several of the women who informed this research spoke of their own process of learning gaydar:

> There's a mentoring system right. You start learning from each other [by paying] attention to each other's friends and attention to each other's relationships and we started introducing each other to other people and you become introduced to a community. And not everyone in the community fits your stereotype and you go okay, so there's not just the shaved head and the body piercings but there's the long hair and the Birkenstocks and the leg hair and the earth-loving mamas, okay so they're lesbians too. It's like learning to talk - you build a vocabulary. (Juliette)

> The more people you meet and the more magazines you read the more you can get a wide span. Every place you go,... every circle of people is a little bit different - like in Ottawa there's the hockey hair scene. (Sal)

One woman specifically identified the way in which she learned to recognize other lesbians through her own 'snowball sampling' method of meeting lesbian women and their friends and the friends' friends until she acquired her own social network:

> Well, there was k.d. lang and there was this person and then I was hanging around with this person and other people and I said not k.d. lang, not k.d. lang and then you just build up a kind of a repertoire of coding I guess. (Addy)

Many of the women I spoke with explained that they were able to begin to gain a sense of lesbian community through this informal social interaction. The process of socialization in a queer cultural environment also taught these women gaydar which enabled them to further expand their personal lesbian communities. The sentiment of lesbian community generated through informal social networks may be the first sense of cultural belonging experienced by some lesbian women.

Diversifying Lesbian Communities

While there is little doubt that gaydar is a valuable tool for building lesbian communities, this use of gaydar may also limit perceptions of community diversity and encourage a false sense of homogeneity among lesbian women. The stereotypical basis of some aspects of gaydar results may result in an essentialist construction of lesbian identities and communities which exclude women from non-dominant age, class, racial and ethnic backgrounds as well as women who challenge lesbian stereotypes. Further, many contemporary discussions of lesbian identification stress that the diversity of the lesbian community often makes it impossible to have shared codes of understanding. On a theoretical level, I argue that gaydar can be used to construct many communities of lesbian women based on each woman's notion of who is a member of her community. If one recognizes that each potential community of lesbians (and there are many) create and construct different representations and identifications, each of these communities can be seen to have different yet overlapping constructions of gaydar. Accordingly, the lesbian communities which are recognizable via gaydar are necessarily limited by the social experiences of each woman who uses gaydar as a community building tool. The description of gaydar which is contained in this research, then, is directly limited by each individual participant's notion of who is a member of their 'community'. Communities which are constructed via gaydar have the potential to be communities of 'sameness' or communities which merely reflect the specific identifications of each woman who uses gaydar as a community building tool. However, these individual descriptions of gaydar

also overlap to create a larger, more universal description of the phenomenon of gaydar which may be able to transcend some (but not all) of the diversity within lesbian communities.

Unfortunately, these theoretical distinctions are easily blurred and the essentializing tendencies of gaydar are much more problematic on a daily basis. However, I was surprised to find that all of the women who participated in this research recognized that their use of gaydar was problematic on some level. In each of the discussions there was a recognition that because the cues which comprise gaydar are learned primarily through personal social interaction there was little potential for recognizing lesbian women from different cultures, races, ethnicities and class backgrounds. The problems of recognizing and interacting in lesbian communities which reflect the diversity of lesbian women was blatantly inherent in the relatively homogenous social makeup of the sample group. This lack of pluralism may reflect the limited diversity in the social networks of both the 'contact people' and myself in the solicitation of these 'contact people'.

Most of the women who participated in this research asserted that they had a great deal of difficulty using gaydar outside of the very specific cultural context which they participate in:

> Ninety percent of the high school students in the school near here I would think are gay... it just wouldn't work out percentage wise..I think its a style of that particular age group and culture and class... I think in older women

there's probably a much more diverse looking population than if you look at lesbians in their late teens or early twenties. (Beth)

I rarely attempt to try and register with someone who's not of my cultural background whether it be ethnically white or... just because I think it's too easy to misread it. If I know that this person is from another culture then maybe their patterns of eye contact are different, maybe their patterns of spatial body contact are different... I'm always confused whether it's a cultural specificity or a gay lesbian cultural thing. (Juliette)

I did do research in this country where the population is like 99% black and I had the same problem you did [identifying lesbians from different cultural backgrounds]. I had this really good friend who I suspected nothing of until the day I left... I thought it was cultural... This person had long black hair and dressed very stylishly like [lesbians] down here... and I had no idea in the world. (Addy)

I think maybe here it's more of a wardrobe thing - if you wear certain tag lines. But when I've been away - I still have an awareness of a strength or an independence - not exactly a swagger but there is something, some kind of a presence there. (Laura)

Many of the discussion participants asserted that their gaydar was only applicable within their particular experience and surroundings. There was apprehension surrounding attempting to use gaydar on anyone who was not of a similar ethnic or class background. Women also talked about their ability to use gaydar being located within a specific geographical location, especially the university environment. This ability was also linked to an awareness of class dynamics.

> [My gaydar] is tied to limited range of social interaction within the university and so I have very few [lesbian] friends outside the university because this is the culture which I belong to. So it's not only class and race but it's also the culture of the university that I can most confidently identify people in... because there's a certain kind of awareness within the university of the uses of labels of the uses of feminist criticism, feminist critique. (Juliette)

> I assumed that they [lesbians] were all university educated. I assumed that if you were going to come out you had to be in a very supportive open environment and I perceived that to be a university environment. I was very surprised when I met lesbians who weren't of a university milieu... I was surprised to learn that women from other social classes, not that there were lesbians but that they could come out. (Beth)

The limited ability of women to use gaydar to recognize other women outside of a very specific cultural context necessarily limits the diversity which lesbian communities constructed via gaydar can embody.

Some women also expressed concerns that gaydar's partial reliance on stereotypes of lesbian women created the potential to construct a homogenous community and isolate those women who do not conform to lesbian stereotypes. Women acknowledged that gaydar was valuable because it provided a sense of sameness, however, they also recognized the need to be able to recognize diversity within the lesbian community. These sentiments were commonly expressed as concerns about labelling and essentializing lesbian identities and communities:

> It's a fun game to play when I'm walking down the street but I'm very reluctant to label people. I would never want to label anybody. I would hate to be labelled myself. (Beth)

> I think that there are women who conscientiously don't try to code... because they don't like the idea of being labelled, slotted, one way or the other. (Juliette)

> That's where I have a problem with this whole gaydar thing - we seem to want all of these women with these strong characteristics and who do

> things that aren't typically female things to do - we want them on our side. Why can't these women who have these strong characteristics be straight? Just think how much better of a world it would be if more straight women had these characteristics. (Syd)

This recognition of the need for diversity is closely related to the continuing debate over identity politics within the lesbian community. There seems to be an ongoing struggle between the need to be visible as lesbians and the need for lesbians to be visibly different. One participant succinctly explained this tension:

> I feel like there's this huge tension in the community between the desire to be recognized as just as valid and just as... I want equal access, I want equal rights, I want equal opportunity, I want equal everything but I don't want to be swallowed up. So there's this tension between these two desires... Do you concede to please mainstream society and to blend in or do you stand out side and are always discriminated against?

While no one expressed a desire for gaydar to disappear, a number of concerns were raised about its effectiveness as a community building tool. Hopefully in the future it will be possible to expand the content of gaydar so that communities based on gaydar will be able to transcend more of the diversity of lesbian experience.

Gaydar and Lesbian Communities

Despite a recognition of the problems which gaydar can pose, all of the women who participated in this research use gaydar as a means of negotiating their social environments. In discussions about the practical uses of gaydar elements of community building emerged as a recurring theme. A closer investigation of lesbian communities and community building reveal several distinct conceptualizations of community which are especially relevant to contemporary lesbian experiences. The utilization of gaydar to recognize other women as lesbians promotes the construction of an imagined lesbian community. This imagined community may provide support and identity affirmation even though there may be little direct social interaction between its lesbian participants. This imagined community may also be influenced by real or perceived political affiliations. Gaydar also allows lesbian women to identify and create locality-based communities of lesbian women through the process of creating and expanding lesbian-friendly spaces. In addition, gaydar facilitated the perceived connections between these spaces to allow for a recognition of geographically delineated lesbian communities. Finally, the social networks which comprise the personal communities of lesbian women are expanded through the process of learning and enacting gaydar. The construction and reinforcement of these personal communities through gaydar provides a tangible support network for many lesbian women. In relation to imagined communities, political communities, geographic communities and personal communities, the phenomenon of gaydar can be conceptualized as a valuable community building tool.

Unfortunately, the value of gaydar as a community building tool is somewhat mediated by the potential for gaydar to foster perceptions of homogeneity within lesbian communities. Hopefully as research into gaydar and contemporary lesbian communities is expanded it will begin to reflect more of the diversity of lesbian identities and experiences. Notwithstanding this problematic, reflections on the utilization of gaydar in the everyday lives of lesbian women provide unique insights into the construction of contemporary lesbian communities and the role which individual lesbian women play in this process of community building.

Chapter 7:

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Gaydar is a common sense phenomenon which permeates the gay, lesbian and queer communities. Previous research has examined the cues which comprise gaydar, the cultural value of gaydar and the ways in which gaydar is learned. However, further investigation reveals that gaydar is valuable as a tool for both identity and community building. Focus groups with self-identified lesbian women reveal how gaydar is used and experienced on an everyday basis in relation to sentiments of identity and community.

Contemporary lesbian identities are constantly being subject to redefinition on a theoretical level, but this fails to take into account the relatively stable identity experiences which some lesbian women enact on a daily basis. For the women who informed this research, a knowledge of gaydar and the cues which comprise it influenced their identity formation and maintenance in several ways. The cues which comprise gaydar allow lesbian women to declare their 'new' membership when they are coming out, and thus they become recognizable as lesbians both to themselves and others. This experience may be central to their identity formation. Further, the ability to make daily identifications of the representations of other lesbian women allows lesbians to maintain and modify their identities in relation to a shifting social context. An awareness of gaydar also informs the identity performances of lesbian women on a daily basis. The use of gaydar to identify desire for or sexual interest in other lesbian women also facilitates

identifications with a sexually based identity. All of these factors combine to make gaydar a useful tool for the construction and maintenance of lesbian identities in lived experience.

Unfortunately, this use of gaydar as an identity building tool has the potential to be problematic. Because this identity building strategy is based on the recognition and identification of lesbian representations, it may work to essentialize lesbian women and limit diversity. The influence of popular culture in making representations visible as lesbian has resulted in a stereotypical portrayal of lesbians which fails to account for the diversity of races, ages, classes, abilities and genders which are espoused by lesbian women. Interestingly, this potential for gaydar to create conceptualizations of lesbian identity which are limiting and essentializing is recognized by the women who inform the research and integrated into their awareness of gaydar.

Despite theoretical debate over the constitution of lesbian communities, gaydar also seems to provide a means for lesbian women to experience community on a daily basis. An 'imagined community' based on shared signs, symbols and mythologies is enacted by lesbian women through their use of gaydar. The women who inform this research asserted that the moments of mutual recognition created through gaydar promote a sense of belonging and inclusion in a larger community. Sometimes this awareness of imagined communities is manifest in relation to specific political experiences or movements. The use of gaydar also allows lesbian women to identify and conceptually link lesbian places to imagine a network which creates a lesbian space within which

community may be based. Finally, the process of learning gaydar creates and maintains personal networks of lesbian women which can be conceptualized as personal communities. None of these communities are static. As each woman's understanding of gaydar and lesbian identity shift, so do the communities which she may conceptualize or participate in. Regardless of this shifting (or perhaps because it can accommodate it), gaydar can be conceptualized as a valuable tool for community building among lesbian women.

However, similar to its role in identity building, the use of gaydar in community building may be problematic because of its reliance on stereotypical representations. The communities which are constructed and imagined through gaydar are rarely able to encompass the full diversity of lesbian women. The communities experienced by individual women through the use of gaydar are based specifically on a sense of sameness or shared experience. Thus, each construction of gaydar and thus 'community' is limited by specific experiences, some of which may be related to social structural variables such as age, race or class. The communities which are constructed and experienced via gaydar play an important role in some women's lives, although they equally have the potential to exclude other lesbian women from community experiences.

The focus group results leave little doubt that gaydar is used in many ways by lesbian women. This research has shown how gaydar influences the lived experiences of lesbian identity and community. Although the women who use gaydar are aware of the problems of using gaydar as a tool for building identities and communities, they still

assert its valuable function. As gaydar is based on cultural constructions of lesbian representation, it is necessarily fluid and thus will require continuous and culturally specific examination. There are still many aspects of gaydar which are deserving of further research.

Areas for Further Research

This exploratory study provides an initial insight into the phenomenon of gaydar. It is hoped that future research will pursue and initiate a more comprehensive examination of the purpose and construction of gaydar as it relates to both identity and community. There are many areas which are only mentioned briefly (and some not at all) in this initial work which require further study.

The theoretical construction of lesbian representation, especially as it relates to identification needs extensive development. This development must necessarily be coupled with research into the real, enacted processes of representation and identification. Future elaborations of lesbian identification and representation must be able to fully incorporate the diversity of the lesbian community. The study of gaydar may provide a bridge for linking theoretical and practical notions of lesbian representation and identification.

In conjunction with research into the diverse uses of gaydar, additional research may address the ways in which individuals deliberately create or disguise cues in themselves in an attempt to 'pass' as a member of a certain group. Using research into

those who are transgendered as an outline, it would be valuable to examine the ways in which members of the queer community attempt to 'pass' in a mainstream sociocultural context. This research may include an examination of the ways in which gaydar in its full diversity is used, enacted and learned.

There is only limited research into the relationship between the imagined communities conceptualized through gaydar and their relationship to larger lesbian cultures and other lesbian communities. The recognition of the contextually and culturally specific nature of this research indicates that any further research done in this area must include the collection of detailed background information on each of the participants including both social structural characteristics (age, race, class, occupation, place of residence) as well as experiential characteristics (how, when and where they came out, the role of lesbianism in their everyday lives, their interactions with the queer community).[9] Further investigation may detail the myriad relations between the many diverse communities which consider themselves a part of the larger lesbian community. Also, the ways in which gaydar is learned and enacted within each of these small communities may provide a key to understanding social coding and interaction.

The means by which gaydar is learned is especially deserving of further research. By examining the coming out process and the degree to which individuals interact with the queer community or media it may be possible to more accurately determine how

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[9] Thanks to Laura, one of the focus group participants, for providing this valuable feedback after her experience of participating in this research.

individuals are able to learn gaydar. An investigation into gaydar among women who have recently developed a lesbian identity may provide significant insight into the relationship between gaydar and identity building.

Further research may also address how the learning and possession of gaydar works as a form of cultural capital within the gay and lesbian communities.[10] By defining and understanding what comprises gaydar it may be possible to conceptualize it as resource which queers utilize to help them negotiate their daily lives. It is the 'everyday' nature of gaydar (as opposed to symbolic or ritual cultural events) which may make it a particular viable topic in relation to the concept of cultural capital.

Finally, this research generated insight into the phenomenon of gaydar exclusively in relation to lesbian women from relatively homogenous social position. Similar research pertaining to lesbians from different ages, races, classes, abilities, and contexts as well as research including gay men, and bisexual men and women would be especially interesting. Further comparison of the findings between these groups may also provide significant insight into cultural similarities and differences between these communities. It may also be interesting to address the perceptions and experiences of gaydar with heterosexual participants. By comparing the experiences of gaydar between people of differing sexual orientations it may be possible to generate necessary or sufficient universal characteristics of gaydar. Additionally, research addressing shared experience as

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[10] Thanks to Dr. Judith Abwunza for suggesting that further research be done in this area.

a basis for similar constructions of gaydar would be an especially valuable component of understanding this phenomenon and how it is learned.

Long term research may document the changing composition and use of gaydar by queers. This may provide insight into both changes within the queer community and changes in the relationship between the queer and mainstream communities. The phenomenon of gaydar may possibly be used as an indicator of changing cultural and social values over the span of several decades.

These are what I consider some of the most productive areas for future research into the phenomenon of gaydar. There are many more areas which have been briefly addressed in this paper which may also be of interest and make a significant academic contribution. The relation of gaydar to identities and communities result in it being a fluid phenomenon which shifts and changes constantly. The specific nature of this research results in it being especially helpful for those who are working in social, historical and cultural contexts similar to my own. I hope that extensive research into the phenomenon of gaydar will be done in the future and if I have been able to contribute to that in any way than I have accomplished what I set out to do.

Appendix A:
LETTER TO CONTACT PEOPLE

Hello everyone!

I've talked to each of you about my thesis in varying degrees of depth over the past little while, but in some way or another you've agreed to help me by getting a group of your friends together for me to talk to about lesbian coding. Sorry for the formal type of letter, but for all sorts of research reasons it's important that each of you get the same instructions and this is the easiest way to make sure everyone gets the same information.

For each discussion group I would like to be able to talk to 6-8 women who identify themselves as lesbians about how they identify other lesbian women and how they represent themselves as lesbians. I would like for you to provide or arrange for space for this discussion to be held and to contact your lesbian friends (or their friends) and ask them to participate. The space should be one which is private, large enough for the group and quiet enough to allow for the audio-taping of the conversation. The friends which I am asking you to invite should identify themselves as lesbians, be over 18 years of age and be willing to participate in the research. It would be beneficial for me to work with as diverse a group of people as possible. For the purposes of everyone's comfort, I also ask you to be aware of any potential conflicts among the group (i.e. fighting ex-girlfriends, the new girlfriend of someone's ex, etc. etc.). Other than that, the people you invite to participate is completely up to you. I imagine everyone will have their own unique perspective on this topic and I'm interested in everyone's ideas so don't worry about what you think your friends think about lesbian coding.

I am enclosing in this package ten copies of the "Information to Participants" page for you to give to people when you ask that they participate in the research. It's just a little bit more information about what I'm looking for and what will be required of the people who participate. There are extra copies in case people want to take them and think about the project. If you run out, please feel free to photocopy more or let me know and I'll send you more. I've also enclosed two copies of the "Consent Form" for you to show people if they want to know what they're going to be asked to sign. It contains pretty much the same information as the "Information to Participants" form, so you don't need to give them out. I'll be bringing enough for everyone when I come.

Thanks again for doing this for me. I'm hoping that if this research goes well I'll continue working on the same area of research for my master's thesis (and then maybe I'll have money to pay all the people who help me, but for now I just have to rely on goodwill). On the other hand, everyone who participates does get to spend the afternoon hanging around with a bunch of other women and just chatting about life, which is

something I think we don't do enough of and I imagine it'll be fun. I intend to keep the discussion groups really informal and casual, so no worries about it being all stuffy and academic-like. When you've chosen a date and time that's good for you and your friends to get together and chat let me know so that I can make travel arrangements. Also, please don't hesitate to call me if you have any questions or ideas or comments or just want to chat about the nature of the universe. I can be reached in the evenings at home at (519) 743-7046 and during the day at the school at (519) 884-1970 x. 3659.

Hope to hear from you soon,

Andie

Appendix B:
INFORMATION TO PARTICIPANTS

"Gaydar": Women, Cues and Identification

In the lesbian community we often think we can identify each other in daily interaction: passing on the street, seeing each other in a grocery store, travelling on the same bus. The identification of other women whom we think are lesbians enables us to create an imagined community, to assert that we are not alone in our sexual orientation. Within the gay and lesbian community we refer to this phenomenon as "gaydar".

You are being asked to participate in an exploratory research project concerning the social codes which lesbians use to identify one another in daily interactions and the ways in which lesbian women are able to learn these codes. Since many lesbians assert that "they don't know how they know [other women are lesbians], they just do" a group discussion format may be the most useful for generating specific information about how we identify other women as lesbians. By sharing ideas and information we may all come to a greater understanding of how we enact "gaydar" and how it is related to our social worlds.

Your contribution to this research will involve participation in a single discussion group session which will last approximately two hours. During this discussion session you and 6-7 other self-identified lesbian women will be asked questions about how you identify other lesbian women as you encounter them in your everyday lives. Questions surrounding the process by which we learn these codes will also be posed.

You will be given the choice of using a pseudonym to identify yourself in the discussion group, the final paper or both. The audio tapes and written notes pertaining to the discussion will only be accessed by the researcher and the research supervisor. You have the right to limit the area of discussion or refrain from answering any question. Also, you may withdraw from the study at any time.

Your participation in this research will make a valuable contribution to increasing the knowledge which is available about the everyday lives of lesbian women. This is an exploratory study designed to provide further insight into the phenomenon of "gaydar" among lesbian women and prompt further research into this neglected area. If you wish you may request a copy of the final paper for your own interest. I hope that you will consider participating in this project and helping to broaden our understanding of the ways in which lesbians interact with their everyday social worlds. If you have any further questions about this research please contact me at 884-1970 x.3659.

Andie Noack, Researcher

Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo

Appendix C:
CONSENT FORM

"Gaydar": Women, Cues and Identification

You are being asked to participate in an exploratory research project concerning the social codes which lesbians use to identify one another in daily interactions and the ways in which lesbian women learn these codes. This involves your participation in a single discussion group session which will last approximately two hours. During this discussion session you and 6-7 other self-identified lesbian women will be asked questions about how you identify other lesbian women as you encounter them in your everyday lives.

You have the right to limit the area of discussion or refrain from answering any question. Also, you may withdraw from the study at any time. The interview will be audio-taped and written notes will be taken by the researcher; Only the researcher and the research supervisor will have access to this data. After the research is concluded the audio tape will be erased and the written notes will be destroyed.

If you wish you may choose to adopt a pseudonym for the duration of the discussion, for identification in the final document or both. In any case, only your first name and the city location of your discussion group will be used to identify you. Your complete anonymity in this study may be compromised if you are known to other members of the discussion group. For the purposes of respecting the confidentiality of all of the research participants, you agree not to disclose information concerning the identity of the other participants or the nature of the discussion to anyone who does not take part in the research process.

If you wish you may request a copy of the final research for your own interest.

Full Name (please print)_____

How would you like to be referred to during **discussion** (first name only)?_____

How would you like to be referred to in the **final paper** (first name only)?_____

Do you wish to receive a copy of the final research? YES NO

If yes, to what address would you like it to be sent (available April 1997)?

_____

I agree to participate in this research project in accordance with the conditions specified above.

Signature of participant:_____

Signature of researcher:_____

Date:_____

Appendix D:
DISCUSSION PROMPT QUESTIONS

At one time or another I think most of us have had the experience of walking down the street, passing a woman we don't know and thinking "she's a dyke". Usually one or both of us smiles, nods and gives a knowing look and then we move on. In the gay and lesbian community we refer to this phenomenon as "gaydar". Today I would like us to talk about what the specific components of "gaydar" are and how we learned them.

How do you identify other women whom we think are lesbians?

What are some of the specific cues that you look for when you are trying to assess whether or not another woman is a lesbian?

Describe what a lesbian looks like. How does this description take into account different manifestations of race, class, ability, age, sexual preference etc.

Are there physical cues which cause you to think that another woman is a lesbian?

Are there fashion cues which cause you to think that another woman is a lesbian?

Are there verbal cues which cause you to think that another woman is a lesbian?

Are there attitudinal/value cues which cause you to think that another woman is a lesbian?

Are there movement cues which cause you to think that another woman is a lesbian?

Do you think these cues change with women of different ages, classes, races, abilities, sexual preferences etc.? How do they change?

Do you intentionally create these cues in yourself so that you are identified by others as a lesbian?

Do you think that you unintentionally create these cues in yourself and as a result you are identified by others as a lesbian?

How did you learn what these cues are? Are you ever wrong? When? Why?

Do you intentionally or unintentionally teach others these cues? How?

Can people other than queers learn these cues? Will they ever be as good at identifying the cues as queers are? Why or why not?

Do you think some of the cues are based on social stereotypes? Which ones? Why or why not?

Do you think that the media successfully captures these cues when portraying lesbians? Why or why not?

Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your experience or understanding of "gaydar"?

Appendix E:
FEEDBACK LETTER AND FORM

Andie Noack
c/o Dr. I. Irwin-Zarecka
Department of Sociology and Anthropology
Wilfrid Laurier University
75 University Avenue West
Waterloo, ON N2L 3C5

May 1, 1997

Dear Participant,

Enclosed is your copy of the thesis 'Gaydar: Women, Cues and Identification'. I would like to take this opportunity to thank you again for your participation in this research. This is one of the few studies to examine the phenomenon of gaydar and it would not have been possible without your contribution.

Although this research provides an initial examination of gaydar there is still extensive work to be done in this area. I personally intend to continue my research into gaydar in conjunction with my graduate studies in Sociology at York University. Thus, I consider this document to be a small part of a larger research project. If you have any concerns about my further use of the data collected during your focus group please contact me at (519) 743-7046, by email at noac8120@mach1.wlu.ca or indicate your concern on your feedback form (please include your name if you do so).

So that I may guide my future research, I am interested in knowing what your reactions to this work are. What do you think I am right on about? What do you think I am wrong about? Do my descriptions accurately reflect your experiences of gaydar? If you would take a moment to complete and return the attached form when you have had a chance to look at the final document it would be very much appreciated.

Thank you again for your participation in this research. I hope that everyone has a good summer and a fabulous pride day.

Sincerely,

Andie Noack

PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK FORM

Gaydar: Women, Cues and Identification

The completion of this form is completely voluntary. If you would like to put your name on it please do so, but if you would rather not, please feel free to omit it. This form will only be read by the researcher, the current research supervisor and future research supervisors. I value all of your responses and I hope that with your help I will be able to continue my research in the most pivotal areas of gaydar.

1. How does the description of gaydar in this research reflect your own experiences of gaydar?

2. How does your experience of gaydar differ from that described in the research?

3. What areas do you think future investigations of gaydar should focus on?

4. Do you have any other comments about this research?

Name (optional)_____ Date_____

PLEASE ATTACH A SEPARATE SHEET IF YOU NEED MORE ROOM

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