

THE CONSTRUCTION OF SPACES FOR POSITIVE SEXUAL IDENTITY  
DEVELOPMENT DURING HIGH SCHOOL AMONG HETEROSEXUAL AND NON-  
HETEROSEXUAL YOUNG WOMEN

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In this qualitative study I investigated the ways in which young women create positive, safe spaces for their own sexual identity development during high school. Few topics are as emotionally charged as discussions about any aspect of sexuality, sexual identity, and sexual intercourse. Few adults even wish to acknowledge the desire much less the sexual practices of teens and young adults. My focus was on the strategies employed by self-identified straight, lesbian, bisexual and queer female students during their senior year of high school to create positive, safe spaces for sexual identities to emerge. This sample is a heterogeneous group of young women of similar ages and who were enrolled in a college or university at the time of their interview. Using a reflective interview method, I asked the young women of this study to do a retrospective recounting of their high school experiences. The resulting accounts provide an accurate, coherent view of the dilemmas faced by these young women. With the very public arena of high school as the backdrop, young women shared their stories of the ways in which they: made friends and negotiated status and peer cliques, managed reputations, made decisions about engaging in sexual activities, learned to acknowledge and to recognize their sexual desire, and came to know their sexual identity. This dissertation provides an analysis of dilemmas and strategies faced by these young women as they carefully waded through the institutional structures that may have been only minimally supportive in the process of their sexual identity development. I elaborate on key concepts of the creation of positive, safe spaces, girls' sexual desire, silencing of girls' talk of sexuality, and building communities of support. This dissertation informs a broader audience of parents, high school teachers, counselors and administrators, and college counselors and student life personnel, including residence hall directors and staff.

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## **PART 1: THEORETICAL FOUNDATION**

High school is a place often as hated as it is revered; it is a place where we begin our cultural training and experience our development towards adulthood with a yet unknown place in society. It is a venue where sex, sexual practices, sexual attitudes, and sexual identity always seem to be at the forefront of a thought or action. A girl may choose to engage in any activity similar to that of other girls, except that for her, the result sends her world spiraling out of her control. “How can this happen?” she asks, “I didn’t do anything wrong!” This girl may find herself to be the subject of rumors and ridicule by her school peers. How does a girl create positive and safe spaces for her own sexual identity development in an atmosphere that may or may not support what she feels or how she sees the world?

This dissertation is presented in three parts. Part one provides an overview of the study, methodology, distinguishing features of the study, and the contributions this research makes to the study of girls’ sexual identity development and the development of agency as girls create positive, safe spaces during high school.



## **CHAPTER 1: CREATING SAFE SPACES FOR SEXUAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT IN LATE ADOLESCENCE**

Few topics are as emotionally charged as discussions about any aspect of sexuality, sexual identity, sexual intercourse, and acknowledgement of other sexual practices by teens or young adults. At the forefront of the debate is the question of whose role it is to talk to adolescents about any topic beginning with the letters s-e-x. Through comprehensive sex education programs, schools have attempted to provide information to adolescents about choices, pregnancy and disease prevention, and have tried to take a morally neutral stance on these issues. There is direct opposition to this stance by moral conservatives who argue that comprehensive sex education programs promote increased sexual activity and that the only answer that may curb teenage sexual practices are “abstinence only” programs (2003).

In their study of adolescents’ preferences for sources of sex education, Somers & Surmann (2004) found that many teens prefer that their parents be the source of their sex education. They indicated that when the teens considered information received from their parents to be important, they were more likely to listen to their parents. Somers & Surmann point out that adolescents listen to their parents based upon the “adolescent’s perceptions of the relative importance of communication by parents, not just frequency of communication (p. 49).” However, when parents do not talk to teens because their parents are uncomfortable in discussing sexual issues, adolescents may be left with little or no accurate information about sexuality,

sexual identity, or sexual practices. An aversion to conversations about sex by adults can leave adolescents with few places to turn for accurate, useful information (Brick & Roffman, 1993).

Having few places where adolescents can talk or get information about sex is not new. On any given summer evening during the early 1970s, the boys and girls of my neighborhood gathered under the streetlight at the corner. It was during the early evening hours when the plans for the after dark games were decided. We had weekly games of hide and seek and Red Rover that often included over thirty boys and girls. On many occasions there was an underlying current of childhood attraction that was a minor factor in the division of teams; we wanted to “hide” with whom we liked, though we did not always get to do so. As pre-teens, I am not sure we thought much about what drove us to like a particular boy or girl except that we all had a lot of fun playing together. Neighborhoods play a significant role in adolescent identity development. They shape what adolescents do, who they choose to do things with, and who they choose to tell about what they did (Ross-Leadbetter & Way, 1996).

On one particular night the girls were gathered at Allison’s house for a sleepover. Being invited to the party was a signal of inclusion and status. Declining the invitation carried with it rejection of not only attendance at the party, but also of the person giving the party. This rejection could (and often did) lead to exclusion from the next party, regardless of who was having the next party or your reason for not attending. Not being “allowed” by your parents did not constitute a legitimate rejection of a party in my neighborhood.

We sat around Allison’s basement eating, listening to music, talking, and of course, waiting for the neighborhood boys to start knocking at the windows or making other noises to get our attention, activities we had come to expect as a part of the sleepover party scenario. In the middle of our pre-teen chatter, Suzie, who happened to be my best friend, announced to us, “I

know how women have babies!” Suzie relayed to us her version of the physical mechanics of intercourse as she had come to understand it. We all listened with intense curiosity followed by disbelief at what we were hearing. Elizabeth exclaimed, “No way! That’s not even possible!” None of us could imagine such a physical possibility or the likelihood that this tale could be even close to true.

This group of girls in 1970 had no idea what to name what we had just heard. Open discussion of sexuality was simply nonexistent for us. We could not imagine such an activity being physically possible much less any thought that it could be remotely enjoyable. That Suzie would have information that the rest of us were lacking, was not unexpected. When it came knowing things unrelated to schoolwork, Suzie was always a little ahead of the curve.

Julie, Suzie’s mother, was “the” divorcee’ in our neighborhood, had 3 children, and lived with her parents. Julie was a frequent topic of neighborhood gossip because she was a single parent who drank beer and who had boyfriends. Some of the girls in our group were not always allowed to play at Suzie’s house because of Julie’s lifestyle. Many adults were appalled at her affinity for beer, laughter, and her own remarkable kind of fun.

Julie’s alienation from some neighbors came at a time of change in U.S. culture. Second wave feminism was emerging, civil rights battles were being fought and won, and John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. had already been assassinated. Parents were trying to keep the reins on their daughters, some tighter than others, so that we did not get into “trouble,” a word I later came to learn was synonymous with sexual activity and pregnancy. The message to us was that Julie was “trouble,” her behaviors were unacceptable, and that we should never act like her. Many parents in the neighborhood had already begun indoctrinating their daughters with lessons that “bad” girls developed “bad” reputations, just as Suzie’s mother had.

Prior to Suzie's tale of intercourse, my friends and I all believed that pregnancy was something that naturally followed when two people fell in love and got married. We did not know that people had to actually do anything physical; pregnancy just happened after marriage. Until Suzie's story, the only thing we knew of conception was what occurred on the Dick Van Dyke television show, which ran from 1961 through 1966. When Laura Petrie was pregnant, all she did was prepare a romantic dinner for Rob and then made a big announcement that she was pregnant. Until this particular evening, the "Laura Petrie method" was all we knew of female sexuality. After all, we never saw Rob and Laura doing more than giving a kiss on the cheek, and they slept in completely different beds which were separated by a nightstand.

We all challenged Suzie that her account of sexual intercourse could not be humanly possible and at that moment, Allison's older sister, Olivia, came into the basement. Suzie challenged us by saying, "go ahead, ask Olivia." Olivia was a quiet girl who frequently smiled, but spoke very little. She was a teenager, a seventeen year old senior in high school. In my neighborhood, being a teenager brought with it a position of status, and we referred to everyone within that collective age group as "the" teenagers. To us, being a teenager meant almost being an adult without being our parents. It came with privileges that included driving in cars and the ability to hang out someplace other than on our particular street. It meant freedom! We were all anxious to grow up.

Because Olivia was one of the teenagers, we thought she knew *everything*, so it was natural for us to turn to her for "the" truth. As Suzie rattled off her tale of intercourse and making babies, Olivia's face blushed red as we all clamored, "Is it true?" She seemed unable to utter even a single word and simply nodded her head affirming Suzie's story, then ran quickly up

the basement stairs! It seemed to me that Olivia could not get away from us fast enough, but I did not understand why. What had we asked or done to make her leave our party?

Together that night we learned similar lessons about sexuality and furthermore, we affirmed that sex was something you did not talk about; it was not an allowable topic of conversation. We all agreed that we should not tell our parents that we learned this wild tale of making babies. Suzie had told us something that we were not sure we were “allowed” to know and given the stigma of Suzie’s mother, we inherently understood that our only option was silence. At the age of 11 years, none of us would have dared to go home to talk to our mothers about sex, partly because prior to the party, we did not know that such a thing existed and therefore hadn’t yet classified it as a topic related to any transition to adulthood. Our understanding of Olivia’s reaction was that discussing sex was an offense as grave as using profanity; it wasn’t said in front of or to parents and was not permitted for use and discussion until we reached high school.

High school was a place we were anxious to attend. We would be free to be “grown-ups” and we would learn how to do all of the fun things, though we did not know what those fun things might be. High school was a place, at least in theory, where we believed we would discover the answers to the many questions about how we could become adults. We had no idea as to what high school would be like, only what our older siblings or neighbors had told us, but we often spoke of “when I am a teenager and in high school...” It was going to be where we would develop our hopes for the future, a place where we would finally grow up, gain freedom from our parents’ rule and become young ladies instead of little girls. High school was “the” place to be for all of us!

The ways in which messages about sexuality were transmitted to girls was not unique to my neighborhood. During “health” class in the following year, grade 6, the teachers separated my class with the boys going with a male teacher and the girls going with a female teacher. It was in this class that we were exposed to the school curriculum of sex education. I remember learning about the female menstrual cycle and nausea and the biological process of pregnancy. There was no discussion of any kind regarding sexual activities. Cleanliness during one’s menstrual period was the key point that we were taught weekly. The lesson that sex was not to be discussed with adults was further reinforced in this setting.

Despite the school’s best efforts at keeping us apart, the girls and boys compared notes from our classes. The fact that we were separated made the curiosity even greater and we discovered that we learned very different lessons. The boys spent their time talking about girls’ bodies in relationship to their own bodies. They made fun of us because we told them that the female teacher did not give us any information about boys’ bodies. The boys acted as though they had gained some advantage over us that we did not understand, but which angered us. I can remember all of the girls in my class confronting the teacher and asking, “Why do the boys get to learn about us and we don’t get to learn about them?” The girls in my class only learned about our bodies in relationship to ourselves.

The questions put forth by the girls in my class reflected our feelings of frustration about the whole issue of sex and sexuality. We were learning things in odd, technical ways yet had no way to connect our new knowledge to anything we had experienced. Neither the school nor our parents spoke of sexual desire or arousal, just simply a biological perspective absent of any context of emotions or physical sensations. We were left to discover the intricacies of desire in our own ways and to gain our own understanding about what sex meant to us.

Adolescent girls are often left to approach their first sexual experience with confusing emotions about the excitement and dangers of sexual encounters (Pipher, 1994). Once we entered high school, it seemed that there were things girls were expected to know about sex. There was peer pressure to appear sexually savvy placing us in positions where we had to present ourselves as being sexually knowledgeable. We were left to learn how to negotiate between societal expectations of girls' sexual behaviors and the real world of boys' expectations of girls' sexual behaviors, with little adult guidance. Each girl faced dilemmas about her sexuality during high school. Our own expectation of our sexuality was not addressed, leaving each of us to make our own determinations about what we felt or wanted to do. As a part of her work with high school adolescents and peer relationships, Eder (2003) notes that the transition period to high school is one where girls reject childhood in order to present themselves as more adult-like. This rejection of childhood also often results in a rejection of sexual innocence.

My friends and I anticipated that high school was going to be a great place for us to grow up. In preparation, we had learned that a "bad" reputation, such as Julie's, was to be avoided or that it came with sanctions such as social alienation by the girls with "good" reputations. We had learned from our neighborhood that within some same-sex spaces, we could obtain limited information about what the expected behaviors were when we were with boys. It was a system of heteronormativity which was built into our "training" as sexually developing girls; we knew of no other possible objects of desire except for boys. There was simply no language through which we were able to discuss matters of sex, to express our confusion, or to ask our questions during this important phase of development.

High school is an important phase of development where most girls are faced with their own sexual development. Many girls are coming from circumstances where little informed

discussion has taken place regarding their emotional, physical, and psychological development. Girls are expected to make sense of the tale of sexual intercourse. The media promotes notions that girls are sexually assertive in initiating what they want sexually, with little evidence that these same girls are making informed choices regarding their own sexual activities. Recent news accounts of a steady increase in sexual confidence and activities among girls seems to stir an adult fear of the ability of girls to control their own sexual destiny (Wm. D. Mosher *et al.*, 2005a; W.D. Mosher *et al.*, 2005b; Tolman, 1996a). Yet while such reports may stir adult fear about girls' ability control their sexual activities, little, if anything is done to advance the notion that more explicit conversations about sexual feelings and girls' options must take place.

Adults expect girls to make sound, informed decisions about their own sexual practices, yet sexual education is most often presented to girls as a choice between pregnancy and disease prevention or of abstinence-only (Wiley, 2002). As girls' bodies continue to develop and girls become aware of their physical desires and yearnings, without conversation to connect feelings with mechanics and rules about who is permitted do what, many girls may have no idea as to the activities from which they are to abstain.

In these days of abstinence-only sexual education, authentic and accurate pictures of the broad expanse of sexual behaviors and experiences without condemnation seem to be missing from the public discourse (Brick & Roffman, 1993). Our culture seemingly remains ignorant of sexual desire (Tolman, 2002; Fine, 1988), attitudes, and behavior as these exist among young women. Few adolescents report the ability to have honest conversations with adults about sexuality (Tolman, 2002), despite naming parents as their preferred source of accurate sexual education (Somers & Surmann, 2004).



Some girls face their sexual development alone and with little input from supportive adults. Many girls explore sexual development within the public space of high school by participating in activities, such as cheerleading, which may bring opportunities to get to know male athletes. Others are involved in extracurricular activities such as band, student government, the school yearbook, and other clubs and activities which were not sports related, but provide girls with access to other students, both male and female. The ways in which girls structure their supportive networks during high school and the effectiveness of those networks are largely ignored within the context of girls' sexual identity development. This lack of attention to the ways in which girls are able to create positive, safe spaces for themselves within high school is where my study makes its significant contribution.

### **The focus and methodology of the study**

In this study, I investigated ways in which young women created positive, safe space for their sexual identity development during high school. I used a brief questionnaire and a longer, more detailed reflective interview. My focus was on the strategies employed by self-identified straight, lesbian, bisexual and queer (LBQ) students during their senior year of high school to create positive, safe space for sexual identity development. Studying a heterogeneous group of young women of similar ages and who were enrolled in a college or university at the time of their interview, provides a view of the dilemmas these young women faced as they created positive, safe personal spaces for themselves in the public arena of high school. With high school as the backdrop, young women shared their stories of the ways in which they made friends, managed reputations, and made decisions about engaging in sexual activities, and came to know their sexual identity. Sexual identity was a concept of which some young women were

keenly aware as in the case of some of the women who identified as LBQ, or significantly unaware as in the case of some of the women who identified as straight.

In order to obtain the data for this study, I conducted interviews with twenty young women between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one years, who were all enrolled in a post-secondary school at the time of their interview. In order to recruit participants I sought assistance from my teaching colleagues and by contacting student organizations in colleges and universities in and around the area. One goal that I had for using a reflective interview method was that I wanted to have detailed experiences from young women which would go beyond what could be simplistically answered or ranked from a survey. I asked each participant the same initial guiding questions so that she could reflect on her high school experiences. Each interview began with the question, “tell me about *your* high school experience.”

This open-ended, general question provided an opportunity for each young woman to choose her starting point for her story. It provided me, the interviewer with an opportunity to hear which events, experiences, issues, and stories each young woman spoke of first, second, and so on. Typically, I found that the stories shared in the beginning of the interview were of less significance to the participant than later stories that each shared as she became more comfortable in the interview. There was one young woman, Stephanie, who began her story with her experience of being called names by many members of the boys’ ice hockey team, which was an on-going experience central to her high school experience. After the initial questions, I then asked clarifying questions when I was uncertain about my understanding of what any particular young woman was telling me.

The very brief questionnaire was completed just prior to the interview. It was used to gather basic demographic information such as age, race/ethnicity, size of high school attended,

sexual activity and sexual identity during high school and at the time of the interview. This questionnaire allowed me to obtain the same consistent data from each young woman. One purpose of the questionnaire was to begin to create an atmosphere that was non-threatening. Once each woman answered the questions regarding sexual identity and sexual activities, I was able to proceed from a point of “knowing.”

“Knowing,” for the purpose of this study is defined as having inside information or awareness of something in particular. In this case, knowing meant having information about a young woman’s sexual identity and/or sexual activities during high school and at the time of the interview. I had a limited amount of time with which to ask my questions and to get each young woman’s story and use of the questionnaire helped me to gather information that I needed in an efficient manner. After I examined the questionnaire, I was able to proceed with the interview knowing how each woman identified and with each woman knowing that I would soon ask about sexuality. This questionnaire served as an “ice-breaker” in the establishment of my relationship with each young woman.

The use of the questionnaire to break the ice for my interviews often served as a catalyst for beginning our conversation. For example, Karen, Coral, and Laura all began speaking about high school as they completed the questionnaire. Maria was concerned about answering the questions “correctly” and asked me for clarification of some of the questions. In each case, when a young woman spoke while completing the questionnaire, we began to develop our rapport. By asking me initial clarifying questions, the participants were able to utilize agency to reverse our roles momentarily to reclaim control over the interview. I strategically used this trend as a way to develop a balance between our positions and to minimize the power differential from my position as the interviewer who was scrutinizing their experiences for the purpose of this study.

After our momentary role reversal, I found that for some of the women our initial question and answer opportunity when I was asked the questions made the interview more conversational rather than interrogative. I believe that for six of the young women, this style created a more comfortable atmosphere as each began her story and felt it was on her terms.

My relationship with each young woman had to be established rather quickly because the young women of this study did not have a lot of available time to spend with me. Each was very busy with her involvement in studying, school activities, social activities, and, in many cases, working one or more jobs to pay for college. Having the questions “what was your sexual identity during high school and what is your sexual identity at present?” opened the door for many different kinds of stories from these women. These stories allowed me to achieve my goal of obtaining coherent stories of development and of experiences, both positive and negative, that each young woman experienced during high school. I wanted to be able to hear each woman’s story from start to finish as she remembered it and as she chose to frame it.

The goal of my interview method was to portray accurate stories and to figure out how the pieces of each young woman’s story fit together in relationship to her life story and to the extent to which there are parallels for the other women in this study. As each woman self-reflexively spoke of her recent past, I was able to document the ways in which her experience was similar to others and where it diverged from others’ experiences. In some cases, the interview became a positive, safe space where I provided an opportunity to be vocal about sexual desires, activities, peer experiences, and affirmation of their sexual identity. In the cases of four of the young women, I provided a friendly voice of encouragement for them to speak freely about their journey toward recognizing their ability to purposefully make choices about their

sexual activities. High school memories for some people are indelibly imbedded, making high school a point for significant emotional reflection and reflexivity (Keyes, 1976).

Establishing a comfortable rapport was necessary so that each young woman would talk to me and feel confident that I would respect her confidentiality. High school presents a number of social challenges for students and the ways in which each student chooses to cope with, or resist those challenges is different. Some students choose strategies that are dangerous and dysfunctional, such as excessive drinking of alcohol, illegal drug use, and direct or indirect bullying. The reflective interview method allowed me to look at the challenges faced by young women during high school and it enabled me to document what these young women did that went right. In other words, I wanted to learn what these young women did that was different from their peers, who faced similar challenges, which enabled them to create positive, safe space during sexual identity development.

A distinguishing feature of this study is that the diversity of my participant group was built into the study. This study is not a comparison study of straight and LBQ women. The use of simplistic categories where women are *only* “straight” or *only* “lesbian” are unproductive for a discussion about the processes by which each young woman came to know about her own sexual identity. Each young woman was faced with core dilemmas and choices about what she felt, what to do about how she felt, when to do something, and eventually, who to talk to about her feelings and activities. In this study, straight girls are not portrayed as “the” normative group to which the others were compared. Likewise, LBQ girls are not portrayed as being a deviation from “the” straight norm, thereby implying their sexual identity was perhaps caused by some pathology that resulted in the young women turning away from heteronormative expectations. Instead, this study portrays young women as they faced a complex path of sexual identity

development leading each to a stronger sense of identification which for some, included options of sexual flexibility where either sex could be the object of desire. This same complex path allowed other young women to discover that they had a specific desire that resulted in sexual relationships only with men or only with women.

With heterosexuality de-centered from the discussion I provided each young woman with an opportunity to discuss peers, boyfriends, girlfriends, relationships, and group membership without fear of rejection by me. This relaxed conversational environment enabled each young woman an opportunity to present her own personal journey of discovery. I did not want the women to feel pressured to situate themselves within rigid categories of sexual identity. Hard-nosed groupings such as heterosexual or lesbian leave little space for any young woman to process her various feelings, whether they are emotional or physical.

Despite my concerted effort to avoid comparison, it would be irresponsible of me to ignore the areas where the young women's experiences diverged and where one group might be advantaged over the other. One of the key distinguishing features of this study is that there are core dilemmas each young woman, regardless of her sexual identity, must face and those core dilemmas are more similar than they are different. Differences are not a negative condition in this study; differences provide insight into the strengths each young woman accessed from within her personal toolkit to create positive, safe space.

Finally, my goal in using a reflective interview method was to document areas of success for each young woman. The distinguishing feature of this element is that I asked women to speak reflexively about their past high school experiences and then to relate it to their present situations. This study examines the emergent process of sexuality as often being polymorphic in adolescence where sexual activity may not be equated with an active processing of sexual desire

or identity. As each young woman determines her sexual identity with increasing maturity and experience in young adulthood, past sexual activities may not be indicative as to the ways in which she claims her sexual identity in the present.

### **Key terms and core dilemmas of the study**

Key terms and core dilemmas have emerged from the data of this study. These terms and dilemmas provide the conceptual basis for noting the ways in which my study addresses issues that past research approaches have missed. I will explicitly define the key terms and core dilemmas regarding the creation of positive, safe spaces during high school for young women and the ways in which this study adds to the research of adolescent sexual identity development.

In this study, I operationally define *positive safe space* as a physical space, within or outside of the walls of schools. It is both a literal and metaphorical expression of peer groupings, friendships, and social communities. Positive safe space serves as a place for learning, socializing and identity development. For this study, I use the following definition of space: “the opportunity to assert or experience one's identity or needs freely (Mirriam-Webster, 2006).” Ross-Leadbetter & Way (1996) identify ways in which school practices such as peer sexual harassment, racism, and assault undermine girls’ sense of agency. They say, “[we] appeal to adult women to create “safe spaces” with adolescent girls for girls and women to preserve their cultural connectedness...and collectively transform the obstacles to their growth (p.14).” While Ross-Leadbetter & Way appeal for “adult women to create safe spaces with adolescent girls,” they failed to acknowledge that some young women almost instinctively create positive safe spaces on their own.

In his discussions of the ways in which socioeconomic status and rigid curricula can serve to silence low income students, Dimitriadis (2005) points out that marginalized students

“choose to stake out meaningful spaces for themselves in and against often hostile sets of social, cultural, and material circumstances (p.234).” He adds that “those most marginalized are under constant surveillance and are continually silenced.” As girls experience overt hostility or the less obvious silencing, there is a need for the creation of positive, safe spaces that are meaningful to them as they progress through high school and become young women. This study is designed to recognize the ways in which young women create those safe spaces, sometimes with the help of adult women, sometimes despite negative efforts of adult women and men.

Situated within positive, safe space lays the issue of *place*. Place can be the literal location of school, work, a friend’s house, a local park or any other physical location where these young women spend their time. The physical location of place has an impact upon the ways in which a young woman may portray herself to her group or to those outside of her group. Physical location also may dictate the frequency and availability by which any young woman may engage in sexual activities.

Place can also be a metaphorical expression of the ways in which a young woman understands her “place” within a given group or as being “out of place” with a group. She may feel that it is not her “place” to tell her best friend that her best friend’s boyfriend is dating another girl. A young woman may not feel that it is her “place” to explain the hazards of a particular decision that a friend might be considering. Place can also be where the young woman feels she can function without fear for her life based upon authentic or a performed representation of herself within the structures of group membership. Place is where a young woman feels safe even under circumstances of conflict. It is where a young woman’s self esteem may be nurtured and strengthened or ignored and shaken to a lower level. It is a young woman’s



“place” to define her sexual identity in a way that she feels comfortable, if she chooses to name a sexual identity at all.

Past research addressing the issues of sexual identity development and related bullying harassment during the school years have focused on lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, and (LGBQ) experiences, as though male and female experiences are the same (Athanases & Larrabee, 2003). Young men often face more explicit and violent means of harassment during the process of sexual development. The need for demonstrated masculine behavior is often shrouded in sexual prowess of boys and those who do not participate in such activities can easily be labeled by peers as “gay.” Other boys who do not exhibit strong characteristics of manliness are targeted for rejection, humiliation, and harassment on a daily basis (Frieman *et al.*, 1996). I have chosen to focus this study on the actions, experiences, and related harassment and bullying that is experienced by girls.

As sexual desires and longings begin to emerge during adolescence, there is pressure placed upon young women to be sexually active. I define *sexual activity* as actions that produce physical, sexual pleasure. *Sexual identity* may or may not be related to sexual activities and given the avoidance of such topics in the current curriculum of high schools, many students do not know what is meant by sexual identity (Mayo, 2004). Simply stated, “sexual identity is a socially recognized label that names sexual feeling, attraction, and behavior” (Savin-Williams, 2005). This is not to say that sexual identity is a simple thing; it can be complex and confusing especially when someone is asked to give a name to her sexual feelings, attractions, and behaviors. When girls have had little or no informed discussion about sexuality, sexual activities, and sexual identity, they have a more difficult time naming what it is they think they are feeling. They simply do not have the language with which to operate. During the process of

interviewing these young women, each had the opportunity to discuss as much or as little as she was comfortable discussing. This study highlights ways in which young women lack opportunities for such informal, private discussions regarding sexual identity and sexual activities.

As I explored positive, safe spaces for the creation of sexual identity development, the notion of healthy sexual identity kept coming to the forefront. “Healthy” is a term often bantered about in reference to lifestyle. A person who lives a “healthy” lifestyle is often thought to have good eating habits that are within acceptable dietary guidelines. “Healthy” lifestyle may indicate a regular exercise regimen in combination with the dietary standards and may include little or no alcohol use. When considering healthy sexual identity, issues that may arise link sexual identity to pathology. Heteronormativity implies that sexual identity is heterosexuality. However, there are women who are heterosexual who are not comfortable in expressing desire for men, and women who are LBQ who are very comfortable in their expression of sexuality. Furthermore, if young women deny their sexual desire for other women, they may make choices to engage in heterosexual relationships. While they may conform to heteronormative standards, they may never have a healthy sexual identity.

I define *healthy sexual identity* as a state of being whereby a person feels sexually comfortable within her own body, comfortable with her own sexual desires and resulting sexual activities, regardless of the ways others may believe she should act. This “healthy” sexual identity includes the opportunity to express one’s sexuality freely, when she so chooses. Her choices may include public displays of affection such as hand-holding or kissing, or private intimate sexual encounters. In other words, “healthy” sexual identity includes the embodiment of sexual desire as directed to members of one or more sexes and the freedom to acknowledge

and express that desire to another human being without concern of others' impressions or opinions about that desire. This approach contributes to the literature which acknowledges that sexuality can be a positive and healthy state of being. However, I will add to the research a position that when heterosexuality is removed from the pedestal of normalcy and LBQ sexual identities are not demonized, young women may not feel so pressured to engage in unwanted sexual activities. Young women might then be able to recognize that sexual identity is an on-going process of development and not something that is defined simply by their engagement in sexual activities.

Young women also face core dilemmas during the construction of sexual identity. One dilemma that arises is when there is an attempt to place young women into rigid categories with labels and rules that strictly apply to specific "groups" of girls, perhaps based upon stereotypes or inaccurate perceptions of girls' lived experiences. For example, the straight and LBQ women in my study each had experiences of interacting with, dating, and engaging in sexual activities with boys, yet many people may believe that because they identify as LBQ that they have simply never met or been involved with boys. Bisexual women were less willing to force themselves into a totally exclusive category of sexual identity that would limit options for relationships and sexual engagement, if they were sexually active. Each young woman faced conflict between what she felt, what she wanted to do or not do sexually, and what she believed was expected of her by the larger community of school peers, teachers, and other adults within her life.

Circumstances of conflict often arise from issues within or around social group structures and memberships. The peer social categories within schools where students learn to negotiate within, between, or around certain hegemonic group structures often simultaneously serve as both places of safety and of conflict. Some of these young women experienced conflict because

they were not part of a popular or labeled group and others experienced conflicts because they *were* part of the popular group. Regardless of group membership, circumstances of conflict constantly entangle each young woman as she works to construct her own sexual identity and positive space.

While the trendy labels for “leading crowd” may have changed over the years, the basic structure has remained. Some of the current labels include the “popular group”, “jocks” (which is often a subgroup of the popular group), “skaters”, “gay kids”, “Goths”, and more. Within each group there are explicit criteria of membership combined with an underlying status or stigma if a girl does not meet the criteria. Eckert (1989) explains the common understanding that most adults have of the dynamics of high school peer groups,

Most of us who have attended an American public school recognize the opposition between a “leading crowd,” who enthusiastically participate in, and receive the sponsorship of, the school; and a “rebellious crowd,” who reject the hegemony of the school and in turn feel largely rejected by the school (p. 2).

Operating outside of the established groups are those students who consider themselves to be undefined. These students are not members of any named group they operate on the fringe of the other groups and claim to have no real prerequisites for determining with whom they will be friends. Oddly, within the context of this study, these non-groups emerge as specific groups complete with membership criteria. Sometimes that criterion is simply that a person has been successfully rejected from other higher status peer groups and is now “qualified” to join the “loser” group, a name that is sometimes used. Regardless of where a group was situated within the social hierarchy of the school, many young women identify their positive, safe space as being located around or within these social groups.

According to the young women who identified as straight, sexual identity was rarely discussed while in school. Instead, topics focused on dating and sexual activities in which they might have engaged while dating one particular boy. Some young women did not have a word in their vocabulary with which to sexually identify, they were only able to identify what they *did*, not who they were as sexual beings. For example, one young woman simply wrote, “boys” in response to one preliminary survey question that asked, “What was your sexual identity during high school?” Others proclaimed, “I am not gay!” during our interview when I asked them to describe their understanding of their process for developing a sexual identity. As we proceeded through the interviews, I often had to explain to heterosexual girls what I meant by sexual identity, because of their heteronormative assumptions that everyone wanted to be with boys.

The pressure to conform to the heterosexual norm can be a source of confusion about the behavioral expectations of girls. Most girls enter high school with little knowledge of sexual desire and intimacy, though some may already be sexually active. Self-esteem is often at its lowest during the adolescent years (Gilligan, 1977, 1991; Gilligan & Brown, 1992) and the dilemmas of group membership, conflict, sexual behavioral expectations, sexual identity, desire, and place remain significant during the high school years. Although high school technically comes to an end, many young women continue to deal with emotional experiences, both positive and negative, well into their adult lives as evidenced below in Pipher’s (1994) experiences as a psychotherapist:

The way girls handle the problems of adolescence can have implications for their adult lives. Without some help, the loss of wholeness, self-confidence, and self-direction can last well into adulthood...Most women struggled alone with the trauma of adolescence and have led decades of adult life with their adolescent experiences unexamined. The lessons learned in adolescent experiences are forgotten and their memories of pain are minimized ...each woman wants something different and particular and yet each woman wants the same thing-to be who she truly is, to become who she can become (p.11).

Twice as many women as men suffer from depression, worldwide. This statistic remains unchanged from year to year, though involvement in psychotherapy can be an effective treatment for some women. In order to obtain relief from severe feelings of worthlessness, most women are engaged in the therapeutic process for at least one full year (NIMH, 2005). Lewisohn *et.al.* (1993), claim, “The stresses of adolescence include forming an identity, emerging sexuality, making decisions for the first time, along with other physical, intellectual, and hormonal changes. These stresses may explain the rate of depression among adolescent girls.”

I believe this study provides alternative views to this rather bleak state of adolescent and adult women described by Lewisohn *et al.* (1993). Through their interviews with me, the women of this study will demonstrate that the journey described by Pipher (1994) in which she states that each woman wants to “become who she can become,” actually begins during high school.

As each young woman spoke of having created a positive and safe space for herself, I witnessed the emergence of her inner strength. Each young woman completed high school and was able to reflect upon the lessons learned on her road to identifying as a sexual woman, however varying the definition of “sexual” might be for each individual.

### **Struggles for language within the context of sexual identity**

As I previously stated, traditionally conservatives have made LBQ women the focus of pathologies that are perceived to stem from their “choice” of sexual orientation and/or non-conforming lifestyle. At issue here is the use of the word “choice” as it is often used in rhetoric by politicians, religious leaders, the media, and other outlets of public discussion whereby any sexual orientation other than heterosexual may often be considered a “choice” versus what is “natural.” *Choice* indicates an informed selection from a wide variety of possibilities. It is a

term that is laden with context and innuendo, such as choosing to be lesbian or an implication that a choice to engage in sexual activities will label a young woman a “slut.” When applied to sexual identity, choice is primarily used when an individual identifies as anything other than heterosexual, again giving rise to this notion that we are all born heterosexual until something goes wrong or we are lured away from the “right” path from some wayward force or person (Watney, 1987).

When educators, conservative politicians, clergy, and other societal factions promote an idea that sexual identity is a choice, they create an argument of a “choice” between “right” (straight) and “wrong” (gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, transgendered, etc.). Using this argument, making the “right choice” would be the way adolescents become straight, making the “wrong choice” would be the way adolescents become gay, lesbian, etc. The straight girls in this study did not indicate that they made any choice between being straight, lesbian, or bisexual. Some were not able to apply a name to their sexual identity, indicating that they had no conscious recognition of making an informed choice about their sexual identity. In one case, the young woman did not know what to claim as sexual identity, but selected “bicurious” because it was anything but straight, lesbian, bisexual, queer, transgendered, or intersexed.

The LBQ women did not see that they made any conscious, informed choices regarding their sexual identities. Instead, each chose to acknowledge her feelings of sexual desire. Each of the lesbian women said that she responded to feelings of sexual desire that were notably absent when she dated boys. Responding to the feelings does not, in any way, mean that each young woman was immediately sexually active with another young woman.

Students can become polarized in this dilemma of “choice” in sexual identity, and it becomes problematic for those who are perceived to be members of the “wrong” group. For

girls who made the “wrong” choice, social exclusion and social humiliation were sanctions applied by girls who made “right” choices. However, the right and wrong choices are not consistent issues that relate well to girls’ sexual identity. There are many other “choices” faced by all girls such as a decision to engage in oral sex, sexual intercourse, or to remain abstinent, to name a few, that also have strong consequences or sanctions. Social exclusion and rumor of sexual activities that girls have performed, which may or may not have actually happened, can be sources of distress for young women. In general, suicide is the third leading cause of death among all adolescents in the U.S., with girls attempting suicide at a higher rate than boys by a ratio of 3:1 (NYCPRC, 2005).

Statistical studies have substantiated genuine risk factors such as overrepresentation of LGBQ in teenage suicide statistics (it is estimated that thirty percent of all teen suicides are LGBQ), dropout rates, and victimization through bullying (GLSEN, 2002; Shaffer *et al.*, 1995; Wyss, 2004). These statistics are indicative of the historical perspective which encourages a tolerance toward suicide attempts, alcohol/drug addiction, and high school drop-out statistics by using the mental disorder model. This model portrays LBQ adolescents as being “at-risk” or as suffering from a variety of diagnosable mental illnesses (Savin-Williams, 2005). Perhaps it is a backlash of the not-so-distant past that motivates detractors to promote research that presents negative views of lesbian/bisexuals. Homosexuality was once considered to be a mental illness that was diagnosable in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM). While some action began in 1973 with the change from homosexuality to ego-dystonic homosexuality, it was not until 1986 and publication of the DSM III when homosexuality was completely removed as a mental illness diagnosis (Herek, 2005).



As research has focused on the issues of LBQ adolescents as problematic, those statistics paint one picture of the experiences of these students. A reverse view of the same statistics provides an insight that the majority of female students who define themselves as lesbian, bisexual, or queer have not attempted suicide or quit school. Such statistics minimize the distress felt by many young, straight women while in high school and reduce “safe schools” initiatives to focus on anti-bullying campaigns. I will illustrate in this study the ways in which anti-bullying initiatives miss answering the dilemmas faced by young women during high school because they fail to include anti-gay and sexual harassment.

The repression of useful discussion about sexual development accentuates the ways in which young women, regardless of self-identified sexual identity, face circumstances of conflict when it comes to any outward expression of sexuality. It is the presence of these opposing forces of conflicts and positive experiences that has guided me to ask the question, how do these young women create positive space for themselves during high school? There are many issues that are happening simultaneously for these young women that have an impact on the choices each has available and that determine whether she has strength to assert herself against those repressive forces. The creation of a positive high school experience is left up to the students to construct coping and conflict strategies in order to create a safe and enjoyable space where learning and socialization can occur. Perhaps, it is in this positive space where young women are able to develop their strength of character and make determinations for success in their futures.

### **Denial of sexual desire**

Sexual feelings and expressions are a central means and mode of establishing and recognizing one’s own sexual identity. Although many adults choose to ignore or deny the sexual development of their own children, sexuality cannot be truly denied. Parents do not like to

consider their children as sexual, feeling beings nor do children like to consider the reverse. One problem that this mutual denial of sexual feelings by parents and children presents is that they rarely speak with each other about such things as feelings of sexual desire, sexual identity, and sexual activities. This taboo against open, honest discussion between parents and children about sexuality leaves girls without language to express the stirrings within their bodies and without informed methods for making choices about sexual activities. Ignorance of girls' sexual identity development results from the wider cultural tendency to frame female sexual identity in terms of sexual passivity, whereby women exist in relationship to men (Birden, 2005).

In an everyday world, adults and teenagers assume that everyone's sexual identity is "naturally" heterosexual. Therefore, sexual identity development is ignored. The implication is that there is nothing to develop. This false assumption that everyone is born heterosexual brings forth the theoretical underpinnings of hegemony, whereby a dominant group of society imposes their construction of society as a right or correct way of living. To apply the term hegemonic in terms of heterosexuality implies that the "right" or "correct" group in this case, heterosexuals, will be the most capable leaders and citizens within this hegemonic construction of a society. It implies that heterosexuality is an abbreviation of *hegemonic heterosexuality*.

The U.S. military's policy of "don't ask, don't tell" when it comes to accepting lesbian, gay, queer, transgendered, or bisexual men and women into the armed forces is an example of the ways in which this idea of hegemonic heterosexuality provides that only the "right" group can become leaders is false. If the military were to allow for "open" display or talk of lesbian, gay, or bisexual sexual identity, they would have to recognize that lesbian, gay, and bisexual

men and women within the military who have performed their jobs in a manner in which the military classifies as heroic and comparable to those with the “right” sexual identity. Apple (1979) argues,

The concept of hegemony refers to a process in which dominant groups in society come together to form a bloc and sustain leadership over subordinate groups...The dominant culture never demands the field entirely: it must struggle continually with residual and emergent cultures... (p.15).

In a hegemonic construction of a heteronormative society, problems are often attributed to sexual promiscuity and perversion. An LGBQ identity is often believed by some to develop through a process of indoctrination via membership in and exposure. Gay-straight alliances (GSAs) which are now present in many schools, have been opposed by parents and community groups in efforts to prevent such opportunities for exposure and so-called indoctrination (Cloud, 2005). In this case, hegemonic heterosexuality demands that the dominant culture will continue to “struggle with residual and emergent cultures” in order for straight students to sustain leadership over the LGBQ students.

Schools rarely offer a complete and open curriculum of sexual education and often train women into positions of passivity and victimization instead of positions of sexual self-interest (Fine, 1988). In the case of the straight girls in this study, many had never encountered a need to name their sexual identity or to consider that they had a process of sexual identity development. They understood the terms gay and lesbian as being different from them, but did not have terms to describe themselves. It seemed for the straight girls that because they fit into a socially promoted profile of hegemonic heterosexuality, there was no identity to develop because it was “naturally” present.

In contrast, as I interviewed young LBQ women, I noticed a greater awareness of their emerging sexual identity. Many did not conform to the socially promoted heterosexual expectations that they experienced during high school. Each of these women was able to articulate that she understood sexual identity to be a complex mixture of desire, behaviors, social construction, and categories which she saw as more fluid than set. As I listened to the young LBQ women of this study tell their stories, I noted emerging themes which collectively began to articulate a process of sexual identity development. Included were the following components: awareness of desire; understanding of and resistance to public expectations, social inclusion or exclusion, positive safe space, choice, and sources of support and hope.

### **Recognizing sexual desire as a core dilemma**

In this study, I define desire as a strong feeling of wanting or wishing for something to happen; a strong sexual feeling that may or may not result in sexual activity. As young straight and LBQ women shared their stories of being conscious of the stirring of desire within their bodies, a few shared the confusion they had with reconciling what they were feeling with what their feelings meant for them. Some young women were confused about what their feelings meant in relationship to desire toward men or women, and what it meant within their bodies. With the exception of one young woman, straight and LBQ girls were each concerned about being labeled as “sluts” or “whores.” Tolman (2002) explains that to “know” desire is

To “know” one’s own body means to have knowledge about it and also the ability to feel the feelings in it, to have access to the range of physical sensations that course through one’s body, providing information about the experiences-emotional as well as physical-that one is having. Feeling desire in response to another person is a route to knowing, to being, oneself through the process of the relationship... (p.20-21).

Each of the LBQ women expressed some conscious awareness of her feelings of sexual desire, which in many cases began without a dating relationship with any particular person, regardless of sex. The feeling of desire was a physical feeling within her body. This is not to say that the straight young women were completely naïve about desire and its relationship to self. The young women of this study who were straight expressed desire in language that was more indirect. These women had a greater tendency to express desire more as being connected to an actual relationship rather than to a specific feeling unto itself.

With desire at the forefront, each young woman recounted her understanding of what were acceptable expressions of desire within her own setting, actions that were acceptable behaviors of expression for girls of any sexual identity. All of the women seemed to take into consideration their physical and emotional safety and each exhibited through her words a striking consciousness about possible negative reprisals from an outward public demonstration of her desire. One woman, who identifies as lesbian, expressed a longing for an opportunity to publicly express feelings of desire for someone who she was dating. She saw heterosexual couples walking down the hallway of the school holding hands or sitting together at an event, arm in arm while at the same time feeling the existence of the “rules” of hegemonic heterosexuality. LBQ women more openly expressed a conscious understanding that there are “rules” to be followed when engaging in public displays of affection.

Nestled within this issue of understanding public actions is the emergence of an outward acknowledgement of personal sexual identity. For LBQ women, the idea of sexual identity surfaced as a “named” concept. Heterosexuals acknowledged sexual identity similarly to their awareness of desire. They acknowledged their sexual identity from a relationship perspective, in other words, “I date men” or “I have a boyfriend.” They did not seem to consciously consider

how their sexual identity had developed until I asked. Most of the straight women never had to acknowledge their heterosexuality; everyone just always assumed they were straight. LBQ women first acknowledged that they were LBQ and then considered what not being heterosexual meant to them.

Once an acknowledgement of sexual identity occurred, each woman, whether LBQ or straight, faced a “choice” regarding participation in a straight, lesbian, bisexual, or queer relationship. This is not to be confused with my previous discussion of “choice” as referring to the hegemonic argument that it is one’s choice to be lesbian, bisexual, or queer. I have argued that sexual identity is not a “choice,” but there are those who make choices to deny the existence of their feelings for other women or for men. However, all young women had choices to make about with whom they would date and become involved, and whether or not that involvement was sexual.

These were choices regarding participation as active, sexual beings with sexual desires. Many of the young women in this study proudly stated that they were not sexually active. Others proudly acknowledged that they were sexually active women. Rarely, however, was desire actually named as such when a young woman recognized and acted upon it by engaging in physical activities that brought sexual pleasure. Some young women expressed that they felt strong desires and wanted to be sexually active, but had not yet found a partner.

Finally, throughout my interviews with these young women, regardless of their experiences, was a hope for the future; *their* futures. From each woman’s story was her personal vision for her future, unique to her dreams, goals and desires. None had yet conceded to following a set of expectations placed upon her by some peer or societal group. Each young woman could name at least one pivotal moment where she was in some way pushed to conform

to some standard of behavior with which she disagreed. Many found that for them, hope about the future emerged as being critical during the creation of positive and safe spaces during the development of a sexual identity. In other words, these women maintained a perspective of high school as being a temporary and transient space where they could expect, over time to change and develop their future as adult women.

Retrospective interviewing was a useful method for collecting data because it afforded me an opportunity to speak personally and candidly with each young woman. All women were at least eighteen years old and, throughout the interview, each had an opportunity to think and reflect on her experiences and to share her recollections and interpretations of herself as both a high school senior and as she saw herself in the present, one to three years later.

Some young women who responded to my appeals felt the need to explain their decision to participate in this study. One straight young woman wanted to be sure that I was aware that she saw herself first as a Christian with the remaining aspects of her identity as secondary to the Christian aspect of her identity. She also explained she wanted to ensure that I had a balanced perspective of viewpoints, inclusion of women from secular schools, women who were sexually inactive, and women who believed their own experience to be dissimilar to that of any other young woman. This young woman also wanted to make sure I knew she was straight and not sexually active during high school or at the time of our interview.

Interviewing was an avenue of data collection which allowed me to provide each young woman who participated with a chance to tell her story of positive high school experiences in relationship to sexual identity development. Each young woman has provided me with the narrative of her story. These women set the stage for me, the listener, to experience and imagine what it might be like to be any of the storytellers, reacting to the plethora of experiences each

woman shared with me. I present the young women in portraiture in relationship to the emergent themes of positive, safe space, healthy sexual identity, choice, bullying, labeling and reputation that this study addresses.

My study is an unfolding of dilemmas faced by young women who, during high school waded through institutional structures that may have only occasionally been supportive to their development. This is a qualitative study based upon these interviews and a structured questionnaire which allowed me to collect consistent demographic and case data for data analysis. I report the findings from detailed interviews of seventeen young women who were currently enrolled at a community college or university at the time of the interview. Though I spoke with twenty women, I used only seventeen interviews because the digital recording of my three interviews was lost when my computer crashed and the data could not be recovered. Some of the women attended high schools in large, urban areas with a richness of diversity; others attended high school in small, rural towns where everyone not only attended the same school but also socialized together; and still others in suburban areas where groups stayed together according to high school and borough or township residency.

I listened to these women openly tell their stories of school conflicts and the risks that stemmed from almost any decision they had to make. How would each woman's decision affect the peer group or if she made a decision to be sexually active or not active, could she share that decision with a friend and remain confident that the secret had not been disclosed to the public? Many of the women set the stage by describing themselves as they saw themselves in high school parallel to the way they viewed themselves at present.

Many young women presented themselves initially as passive actors in an institutional system that seemed simply too confusing to manage. Some maintained friendships with children



in younger grades, placing themselves in positions of mentorship, while they were high school students. While they began as passive agents, they became actors who took hold of the reins of their own development, each as an actor with the agency to direct her sexual identity development in a way that worked for her.

My findings show how one group of young women who, to some may hardly seem to be a homogenous sample, share similar struggles and triumphs. Through much of the current research, women and men are divided into samples according to sexual orientation. Focusing on differences between groups may play a role in the view of one group as the “normative” to which the other is “deviant.” As researchers continue to contrast groups, it is possible to completely miss or simply undervalue the multitude of forms and modes of resistance as each young woman faces her own process of sexual identity development. Some forms of resistance are essentially the same and for some women it may be the very act of resisting the “normative standard” of sexual identity development from which she draws her strength, be she straight or LBQ. Other dimensions, risks, and choices are simply different because each woman is different, not because her sexual identity is different. Missing from this study was a group of young women who might have identified as lesbian during high school, but currently identify as heterosexual. Further study would also focus on the experiences of this group.

Ultimately, I examine the deeper issues that have come forth in this study in relationship to the stories of these women. The stories themselves are intriguing and rich. The underlying struggles with experiences of power and oppression or domination and subordination that arise in the conflicts faced by these young women are not ignored in this study. The ways in which

bullying by and of peers and sexual harassment are portrayed as just as relevant and prominent as the ways in which these young women created positive and safe space despite at times experiencing open hostility.

I move within and outside of the stories in my deeper analysis of the ways in which these struggles are constructed by young women during their last year of high school, regardless of sexual identity. This analysis provides a look at some of the ways in which sexual desire is portrayed or ignored. I also observed the ways in which sexual identity emerges in young women, sometimes without the woman being consciously aware that it has, in fact, emerged. The ways in which these women construct their own sense of what is important as they foster and develop their own sexual identities is also examined within this study.

These stories I tell in order to provide a more balanced example of research whereby straight and LBQ women are portrayed as agents in their lives within and outside of the school. They are not portrayed as victims, but as young women who possess strength of character and resilience as they survived, endured, or overcame high school, as young adult women. Ralph Keyes (1976) wrote of high school,

Based on my own experience, interviews, and related readings, I've found that: a) high school is the source of indelible memories, b) these memories focus on comparison of status, and c) status comparisons continue long after graduation, in a society shaped fundamentally by high school (p. 24).

My study is based upon four specific research questions. What factors contribute to female students' positive high school experiences during the senior year of school? What role, if any, does educational context (rural, urban, suburban school) play? How do females create positive,

safe spaces for themselves during the senior year of high school? What role, if any, do the experiences of non-heterosexual females play in the selection of post-secondary choice and location by these women?

## **PART 2: CORE DILEMMAS**

In order to provide an expansive perspective of how young women create positive and safe space for themselves during high school, I chose to use a heterogeneous sample of young women who are undergraduates in colleges or universities. By doing so, no one group is selected as the “norm” to which another is compared; each woman named her own sexual identity. From the synthesis of the information gained from the personal interviews with these young women, this section identifies core dilemmas that were common among the group. Each chapter provides explanations of a core dilemma, supported by details from the stories of these young women.

Regardless of their sexual self-identity, each has had to contend with alienation, being the subject of gossip, sexual harassment, bullying, and in two cases, sexual victimization. Sometimes there was a price to be paid for popularity or for the desire to be a member of the popular group. Bullying, inclusion with/exclusion from their own member group, decisions of sexual activity or non-activity, to tell or not to tell of engagement in any sexual activity were experienced in some way by each young woman, no matter her degree of celibacy or form of activity. What becomes evident in this study is that sexual identity entails daily choices in which sexuality is negotiated through both voluntary and involuntary circumstances. What is striking is the extent to which these accounts demonstrate the young women’s capacity to take control, deal with consequences productively, and to act proactively and with compassion and fortitude on their own behalf.

In this section, these young women speak poignantly of what Giroux (1996) describes as high school as contested space, where their behaviors were monitored by others at their school. In some cases, girls' actions were used against them through gossip and an establishment of a negative reputation. In other cases, gossip and reputation became a means of bullying and sexual harassment.

Four of the young women in this study stated that they allowed inaccurate presumptions about their sexual activities to persist. As they spoke of their portraying themselves as having sexual desire, some of the young women appeared uncomfortable acknowledging such feelings. Some of the young women did not challenge inaccurate presumptions because it kept them included in a particular social group; others did not want to go through the efforts of challenging the gossip infrastructure that existed among and between social groups. These young women were challenged almost daily to portray themselves in a way that exhibited an awareness and savvy regarding their own sexual desires while still coming to terms with feeling their bodily sensations.

The dilemmas in this section also clearly illustrate the consequences of schooling that is characterized by gender differences where women's bodies are subordinated to men's. Sayer and Walker (1992) say that,

gender relations are relations of power. The power of men over women involves three basic elements: control over women's labor, control over women's childbearing powers, and control over women's desires and affections—thus sexuality is a constitutive element of gender, and its forms are always socially mediated, whether encouraged, channeled, or repressed (p. 34).

Within schools, little if any, information is offered to girls about acknowledgement or recognition of sexual desire. As previously stated, both abstinence-only and comprehensive

sexual education programs leave girls with few opportunities to gain useful information outside of the information about pregnancy and disease prevention. In the mediated environment of schools, these young women struggled with decisions as to whether or not to admit or even label their sexual feelings or to remain silent and acknowledge her feelings only to themselves.

## **CHAPTER 2: GIRLS AS SEXUAL BEINGS**

Fine (1988) referred to the “hidden discourse of desire;” Tolman (2002) referred to “dilemmas of desire.” What continues to remain steadfast is a cultural taboo which prevents adults and adolescents from speaking candidly about sexual desire, more specifically, female sexual desire and sexual identity development. Discussion of girls’ sexuality continues to be missing from the curricula within schools. While there is some discussion included in classes such as health, biology, and sexual education; the content of these courses is primarily focused on sexual reproduction and disease prevention (Wiley, 2002). What is lacking is discussion which includes not only the biology of reproduction, but also sexual identity development and feelings of desire. Girls’ sexual development and experiences occur both privately within their bodies and publicly within the confines of the school environment. The continued absence of a comprehensive discussion leaves girls with limited strategies to recognize, understand and manage desire. Instead they are left with silence or a promotion of abstinence as the only way to deal with their own desire and development. Emihovich & Herrington (1997) noted,

Girls’ desires are almost never discussed, only the consequences of their sexuality, specifically pregnancy. By pretending that female desire does not exist, girls are given few strategies for incorporating it into their lives or for planning how to handle it (p.156).

Girls will experience desire within their bodies regardless of strategies employed by adults to contain this desire. Abstinence-only programs do not address options for girls to understand how to handle their feelings.

Fine (1988) investigated the ways in which sexuality is often managed inside schools and summarized the ways by which discussion of sexuality education is framed and limited. According to Fine, the following boundaries exist within the standard curricula of many public school classrooms: “(1) authorized suppression of a discourse of female sexual desire; (2) the promotion of a discourse of female sexual victimization; and (3) the explicit privileging of married heterosexuality over other practices of sexuality (p.30).” Fine (1988) indicates that the conservatives who promote this stance argue that sex education courses are designed to terrorize children by teaching them about sexual abuse, incest, and disease; therefore sexuality education should only be discussed in the home where family can dictate morals and behaviors.

Fine argues that conservative opposition to comprehensive sexual education “presumes there is a causal relationship between official silence about sexuality and a decrease in sexual activity” and that by not teaching about sexuality, “adolescent sexual behavior will not occur (p. 31).” Studies prior to and after Fine’s study have documented that negative sex attitudes and promotion of abstinence-only programs do not prevent adolescent sexual activities; they only prevent the use of contraception because teens may feel guilt about their sexual activities and avoid taking responsibility for their choices (Emihovich & Herrington, 1997; Fine, 1988; Tolman, 2002). Consequences of emotional guilt, denial, or a sullied reputation for violating abstinence-only pledges may leave sexually active young women alone with little or no adult support (Wiley, 2002).



Female passivity discourse depicts young women not as sexual beings with desire but as the subject of men's desire. Women wait and respond to men's desire rather than acknowledge and act upon their own desire. However, women are held responsible for sexual activities that can result in pregnancy or disease. Women are blamed for their actions, for not delivering a sound "no" to the male actor. For proponents of this discourse, the only acceptable female response is the practice of abstinence. Girls will experience desire within their bodies and abstinence-only programs do not address viable options for girls to learn how to recognize, understand, and handle their feelings.

Instead, abstinence-only programs have been heavily funded by the federal government since the passage of Title V, a provision of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (PRWORA) in 1996, followed by the Special Projects of Regional and National Significance (SPRANS) in 2000. The idea of Title V came from a position by moral conservatives that comprehensive sex education programs were in need of reform in a battle against out-of-wedlock births and PRWORA allowed states to employ a number of strategies to discourage young women from becoming sexually active. These strategies included family caps and an end to direct payments for teenage mothers who were dependent on state welfare systems (Hymowitz, 2003).

Currently, sexual education programs vary in their messages from school district to school district. Some districts may still promote comprehensive sex education programs, but with federal funding tied to abstinence-only programs, more and more districts are employing abstinence-only programs. Opponents of abstinence-only programs argue that such programs promote distorted and inaccurate information regarding sexual activities. Dramatic representations of risk are presented by Hymowitz (2003),

Today's abstinence programs share a few standard features...They teach, as the Title V definition puts it, that "sexual activity outside of the context of marriage is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects." They aim to impress youngsters with the costs of ignoring the message... (p. 10).

Within today's abstinence programs, there is little discussion provided regarding non-heterosexual activities unless framed within teaching about sexually transmitted diseases and the fatalities of HIV/AIDS transmission. There is no positive presentation of homosexuality within these programs, leaving the needs of segments of the student body without adult support for development.

Abstinence-only programs frame sexuality as being fraught with tragic consequences in order to dissuade young men and women from acting upon their feelings of desire. Yet, young men and women are engaging in sexual activities at a rate which alarms some adults. Oral sex is not considered to be the intimate activity it was to their parents and teenagers "view it so casually that it needn't even occur within the confines of a relationship. Some teens say it can take place at parties, possibly with multiple partners (Jayson, 2005)." While adults continue to stumble over definitions of sexual morality, adolescents continue to develop feelings of sexual desire and choose to engage in sexual activities. They consider oral sex to be less risky with no chance of pregnancy and less chance of contracting sexually transmitted diseases (Halpern-Felsher *et al.*, 2005). Young women and men who have participated in comprehensive sexual education programs and who have open discussions about sexuality with supportive adults in their lives, tend to delay sexual activity, contrary to the position of abstinence-only programs (Brick & Roffman, 1993; Parker, 2001; Somers & Surmann, 2004).

In the late 1980's, Fine concluded that the needed *discourse of desire* was missing from the official curricula of the U. S. public schools. Naming desire would elicit a conversation of

pleasure and sexual entitlement; it would support girls exploration of what feels good or bad, of knowing one's body and feeling the range of feelings physically and emotionally (Fine, 1988; Tolman, 1996b, 2002). As Tolman (1996) stated, "research on adolescent girls' sexuality arouses such anxiety and controversy that woeful neglect of this topic has been tolerated..."(p. 257).

### **Mislabeling girls' sexual desire and passion**

To understand the ways in which girls develop positive spaces during high school as it relates to sexuality and sexual identity, the issue of desire cannot be ignored. In interviewing the young women of this study, I observed that many framed their sexual identities in the object, a specific person(s) of their desire. As has been noted in earlier studies (Emihovich & Herrington, 1997; Tolman, 2002), girls tend to express sexual desire in the context of relationships and sexual activity. This approach redirects the focus from self to the other and leaves girls with little opportunity to develop language to communicate their bodies' emerging sexual desire. Once girls place the focus of desire on the other person, they begin to internalize the idea that women are passive about sexuality and desire and are active as care-givers.

In the role of care-giver, girls are then socialized to believe they have few options about their own desire and sexuality. With limited language to communicate their physical feelings girls are left with euphemisms for their bodies' actions and reactions to desire. Expressions such as, "we got together," instead of "I wanted to touch him/her," or "while we were talking," rather than saying "we were dating and fighting our own physical desires because we were not ready for any sexual activities" are not uncommon ways of coding references to desire and sex. In their

use of language, the women I spoke with were no different than girls in past studies (Emihovich & Herrington, 1997; Tolman, 2002; Young, 2005) giving testimony to the consistency of notions that girls do not feel comfortable speaking directly about their own sexual desire.

Girls experience few, if any, venues where sexual desire is discussed in meaningful or helpful ways. Desire is “a strong feeling of wanting to have something or wishing for something to happen; a strong sexual feeling or appetite.” I have had conversations about sexual identity, making indirect reference to feelings of sexual desire and have consequently experienced complete conversational redirects from the person to whom I am speaking. The topic is often muted and deflected into a discussion of anything *except* sexual identity or desire. As I shared in chapter one, when I was a pre-teen, I learned the social nuances of female sexuality as a topic that is silenced. As an adult, I have often been amazed with the speed and skill by which people can change a subject when it is emotionally uncomfortable. Sexual desire tops the list of what I call conversational panic moments. *Conversational panic moments* (CPMs) are those that occur when one conversant is uncomfortable with a topic and begins to squirm physically and conversationally, while desperately seeking to change the subject. In more severe cases, the conversant may quickly part company of the CPM source, perhaps by citing a sudden realization that she has an appointment for which she is late.

Often when young women realize their feelings of sexual desire, talk with friends may result in acknowledgement of their feelings being used against them by peers perhaps resulting in being labeled a slut. Whether or not there has been actual engagement in any sexual activities is often not considered when such events take place in the teen social world. Labeling, such as being called a slut, can be used as a mechanism to silence the voice of young women. It is a word used to describe women as sexual objects, leaving little room for healthy sexual

development and expression (Wiseman, 2002). A lesson to be learned in such a dynamic may be that sexual desire is to be discussed indirectly and disguised within language.

When young women openly express feelings of sexual desire and are labeled as “sluts,” dating or invitations to parties with members of a desired popular group may increase. Conversely, these opportunities may come with a high price, such as an expectation of sexual activity which will further enhance the slut label. Young women in these positions may choose to retreat from socialization with such groups or they may choose to accept invitations to enhance their position in the social hierarchy.

Young women may refuse to engage in sexual activities and choose to make clear that reputations are not always an accurate reflection of actual engaged activities (Mayo, 2004). Rather than admit defeat, the date may continue to spread stories more consistent with the public reputation of his date rather than his/her actual experience. Again, because there is little discourse about female desire in high school, a young woman may be unable to adequately defend herself verbally from the assault on her reputation (Tolman, 1996b). Instead, she may be faced with the option of simple denial that any activities ever took place. Protestation of the rumors can often lead to an idea by peers that the more a young woman protests; the more believable the rumor. This may lead a young woman to the untenable position of silent endurance.

Tolman (2002) presents clearly the double-standard under which men and women are conditioned to operate: men are sexual predators and women must be protected from sexual predators. She says,

...we parcel sexuality out, assuming that normal boys but not girls have “raging hormones”- and that normal girls but not boys long for emotional connection and

relationships...We have effectively desexualized girls' sexuality, substituting desire for relationship and emotional connection for sexual feelings in their bodies (p. 5).

I often had to ask the women more direct questions about sexual feelings and activities, because of the indirect ways in which they often approached the subject. For example, when Alanna spoke with me about her experience of beginning to acknowledge her sexual desires, she spoke of “dating” a particular girl. She said,

I started dating when I was about sixteen and was dating this girl, so I started spending a lot of time with her. I really liked being with her and we were together a long time [sexually involved], almost nine months before our families found out about us. People gradually found out.

She later clarified that for her “dating” included sexual activities. Alanna was from a small town and worked and hung out at the local mall during high school. She described her town as being “small, more rural than urban” and that everyone knew each other. When she and her peers participated in any socialization, she said “you could count on seeing everyone else in the town.” There was one movie theatre, the mall, and the center of the town. From her vivid description, I could imagine the center of town as the central location where the town youth congregated and socialized.

Alanna was a confident, young woman who, initially, was very guarded, but who did not hide her emotional sensitivity. During the course of our interview Alanna allowed herself to speak more deeply of her thoughts and emotions. As she became more comfortable speaking with me, Alanna shared her experience of her family and peers finding out about her sexual orientation. In response to my seeking clarification about how “people gradually found out,” Alanna carefully chose her words to describe the events.

Donna: When you said you were dating somebody and that people gradually found out, had you been “outed” or how did that happen?

Alanna: I had told my friends [about her sexual identity] and they were great with it. They just accepted me and it was great. I had cousins that went to my school and they started hearing things and ran home and told the family, so I had to lie to the family...I had two groups going, one who knew [her sexual identity] and one who didn't. My mom found notes...searched my room & read them while I was in school...first I "played it off" and said, oh that's just joking, it's someone else...then after a while, the shit hit the fan so I finally admitted it was true.

Being "outed" is a term that is often used among LBQ individuals to denote that someone's actual or perceived sexual identity was publicly revealed. Alanna's mother found notes that her girlfriend had written, disclosing their feelings of love and desire for each other.

Alanna said she looked out the window one evening to find her girlfriend's mother and her girlfriend pulling into her driveway. All she could do was to look at her girlfriend, who could do little more than look back. Alanna did not know what had specifically transpired, but knew immediately that she was about to be confronted about their relationship as she went on to say:

It went really bad. It stunk. I remember, the girl I was dating at the time, I remember seeing her mom's van pull in the driveway. My mom had called her mom when she found all this stuff. So then it was me, this girl, and both our moms. We had this big confrontation at my kitchen table...had we had even one minute to talk we could have made something up, but finally we just said it [their emotional and sexual relationship] was true and her mother freaked out.

It was apparent that the pain Alanna felt was still present. As Alanna spoke, I realized that she used a coded language when she really meant sexual desire and sexual activity. For Alanna and some of the women I spoke with, desire was expressed simply as "feelings" and sexual activity was expressed as "dating," "seeing," or "being involved with" someone. Sexual activity and desire were framed within the context of the object of the woman's desire rather than directly stating that she had engaged in any specific sexual acts.

Coral was a sophisticated young woman who exuded self-confidence in her poise and conversational style. After she listened to my introductory questions, Coral took the interview by the reins and proceeded to tell me her story. When I attempted to ask for clarification, she explained that she had to tell me the whole story, in order, so that I would understand; I jotted down my questions and waited to ask them at the end of her story. Coral spoke quickly and purposefully as she condensed a four-year high school experience, including her dating and peer relationships, into one contiguous monologue. During one particularly long soliloquy, I found myself wondering how she possessed such a skill that allowed her to speak so quickly and for so long.

Coral was from a large metropolitan area where she had attended a private, Catholic school. She described the community in which she lived as one that was very diverse racially and ethnically. Whether Coral had a boyfriend or girlfriend was less relevant to her story than it was for me to understand that having that boyfriend or girlfriend meant that she was sexually active with that person as can be seen in the following exchange,

Coral: I had this boyfriend who I was with for a while, but we were actually a part of a group of friends. I was with him a lot and we were really close...

Donna: Were you involved with him sexually?

Coral: Yes...I told you, he was my boyfriend.

Donna: So when you say that he was your boyfriend, are you also saying you were sexually involved?

Coral: Yes. Otherwise, he would be just a friend.

After that exchange, Coral continued to share her story of personal exploration, taking care to ensure that I understood what she meant. When she began to address that she could be bisexual,



she spoke of the “feelings” and “crushes” she had for the girl. Coral used journaling as a method for sorting out her confusion over her feelings for another girl who was within her circle of friends. She said,

I remember writing at one point “Melissa trusts me. That’s a good feeling but it’s a little weird.” And it had been something that was like going on in the back of my mind for a long time but I didn’t really realize until that point and it was like “you know, I think I have a crush on her.” I’m like now that I had figured out what’s going on, and you know, I realize it’s ok to admit this because it’s not anything that needs dealing with. And then as soon as I said that, it turned into this huge thing that I couldn’t get away from [does not complete statement], and it’s like now it leads to well, if I like this girl, what does that mean?

Coral then said, giving me a small grin, “and then later we got together and she was my girlfriend, but I *have* to tell about *that*!” Coral shifted from the past to the present throughout her story demonstrating that she is in the process of her sexual identity development and that it is not complete simply because she is now in college.

Later, Coral shared the story of how she and her girlfriend became involved. She was very aware of the socially constructed categories of sexual identity and the boundaries that each exuded. She discussed the limitations of there being an expectation that she be straight, lesbian or bisexual. Coral was unwilling to say that she felt she should “be” one way or another. To Coral, her focus was how she felt toward a particular person, regardless of that person’s sex.

As I listened to Alanna and Coral’s interviews, what became noticeable was a common language used to describe sexual desire and activity. The most startling revelation I had of this common coded language was that I clearly understood it. I probed for clarification because I wanted to make sure that I was correct in what I thought each woman was telling me. As I began my analysis of their coded words and stories, I soon began to realize that I understood their language, because I, too, had often used similarly coded language.

Despite the difference in our ages, as women, we seemed to speak a similar language of sexuality and desire. From these women, I began to see that sexual identity or preference did not matter; the coded language occurred regardless of male or female objects of desire. This indirect conversational manner of relating experiences of female sexual development may be the result of an ingrained standard of expression for girls' sexuality as lived within our bodies and in congruence with the expectations of the external world. Without opportunities for open discussion of sexuality and desire, girls do not have the communicative means to express their feelings. Instead, they are left with euphemisms for sexual desire.

Young (2005) provides the following account of the ways in which girls (and women) simultaneously live within their bodies and negotiate the external world.

...woman lives her body as *object* as well as subject. The source of this is that patriarchal society defines woman as object, as a mere body...This objectified bodily existence accounts for the self-consciousness of the feminine relation to her body and resulting distance she takes from her body. As a human, she is a transcendence and subjectivity and cannot live herself as mere bodily object. Thus, to the degree that she does live herself as mere body, she cannot be in unity with herself but must take distance from and exist in discontinuity with her body (p.44).

In other words, in order for girls to begin to acknowledge, understand, and communicate feelings of desire, they must first learn that there are constructed standards by which they must operate. Secondly, they must distance themselves from any direct acknowledgement of desire. With each interview I conducted, it became clearer to me that the standards by which each young woman operated in relating her struggles with desire were similar to my own.

### **Awareness of the sexual reputation of oneself and others**

Of the young women who participated in this study, many articulated in some way the expectations of behavior and language that they had learned along the path of their development.

Some of the straight girls expressed that while they themselves were not *sluts*, *whores*, or *easy*, (common terms used by the girls who participated in this study), although there were girls in their schools who had such reputations. Some participants were labeled, regardless of their actual sexual identity and often as a result of rejecting the sexual advances of one or more boys. The following interview excerpts demonstrate the ways in which each woman, through her use of language, protectively paralleled herself and her reputation with that of other girls. In each case, care was taken by the participant to communicate sexual development and activities on the part of other girls. The women were not yet ready to discuss expression of their own desire directly to me. Each woman appeared to be concerned about the way in which I would interpret her activities in comparison to those of the girls she described. It was clear to me at the beginning of the interview process, the women did not want me to think of them as anything they perceived might be negative, especially anything linked with sexual desire and activity. They did not want me to think of them as “sluts” and several stated so explicitly.

Lisa, who is white, went to an urban, public high school. During her interview, she was cautious about the way she portrayed herself to me. She spent a lot of time at the beginning describing the racial diversity of her school system, emphasizing that she had friends of other races and that her best friend during high school was African-American. It seemed important to her that I understand that she did not approve of or condone the racial conflicts that occurred at times in her community and school. Lisa seemed to also be concerned with being labeled as a slut.

Donna: What kinds of activities do you think contributed to the way you feel about high school?

Lisa: ...from the start I just had a respect for myself. You know, cause I saw the other girls just went out and had sex with anybody and like I said it would eventually get talked about you know because they were having sex with a lot of different guys and I mean, I don't want to be that person.

As the interview progressed, Lisa opened up and shared more of her own experiences of sexual development. Again, the communicative issue of “having a boyfriend” or “being involved with a guy” arose as I learned of Lisa’s eventual sexual activity.

Kim, who went to a private, faith-based school emphasized that her moral beliefs and strong connection to her Christian faith guided her actions and that abstinence until marriage was very important to her. She responded to my request for participation because she “wanted to make sure that faith-based [high] schools were represented in my study.” As she led me through her high school journey, she expressed that her school was similar to public schools in the prevalence of talk of sexual activity and of parties which included alcohol and drug use. As presented below, she emphasized that she was not participating in these activities.

...there were people doing a lot of things that *I* wasn't doing—as far as partying and drinking and smoking and being sexually active and stuff that allowed them to have a good time but didn't end up being a good time at all for them, it seemed. They all talked about each other.

Kim became the subject of gossip and collusion by a group of girls with whom she had been friends. She made a decision during her 10<sup>th</sup> grade year that she wanted to become a leader which she defined as, “somebody known for caring about everyone, not just connected to one specific group.” This particular group of girls seemed to interpret her action as a rejection of their friendship, a claim Kim denied to me. She said she wanted to remain friends with these girls, but their expectations of group exclusivity were something with which she would not

agree. The resultant attack on her character confused Kim; she questioned what she had done to deserve such mean and untrue gossip from her former friends.

Lisa and Kim were each concerned with my impression of them as high school girls who were surrounded by many activities in which they could choose to participate. Their concern was an extension of the concerns they had about their reputations during high school. Girls quickly learn that the term associated with girls' sexual desire is slut or easy, and they could gain such a reputation regardless of their actual participation in sexual activity. Often simultaneously, girls learn that reputations bring both opportunities for inclusion and exclusion from desirable social groups.

Chrissie identifies as straight and went to a suburban high school, though she labeled it as "rural" on her background survey. It was unclear whether Chrissie just did not care about the context of her school's location or if she was unable to distinguish between her definitions of rural and suburban. She moved to the northeast from Georgia just before the start of her senior year. Chrissie's goal was to be a part of the school's "popular group" and she was willing to conform in whatever way necessary and to tolerate anything her group doled out to her. She was very aware of her reputation in her school, though she did not appear to be upset by it. Her group gave her a nickname of "Chrissie-'ho," 'ho being a derivative of the word "whore." Chrissie describes her perspective as to what happened for her to earn the name:

Donna: What kind of impression do you think others had of you in terms of your sexual activities?

Chrissie: Like I was very active because I know a couple parties I'd make out with guys and automatically that means we did something. Like, if we go to another room and like make out that means that we had sex. So I think, though, towards the end I was kinda perceived as slutty... I mean it didn't really bother me because a lot of the girls I can think of at my school were. Like a lot of people were "oh she's a 'ho." So I mean it didn't really bother me that much...I think it's a negative thing but I

guess it, I don't know cause I got it. I actually got a nickname, "Chrissie-'ho" because my name's Chrissie. And like, I was like "oh no, that's so mean" you know.

Donna: It did not bother you at all?

Chrissie: I guess it was oddly positive but, I guess it was more like a cool thing. Like guys are like "pimps". I don't know.

It was clear to me from her physical demeanor as she shared this story that Chrissie *did* care what others thought of her. She shifted in her chair, broke her eye contact with me and focused her eyes on the floor rather than on me. As she reflected on her high school behavior, Chrissie expressed to me that she realizes she may not have been as nice as she wanted to be. She said others would describe her peer group as "bitchy" because of the ways in which they acted and treated others.

Chrissie seemed most concerned that I should understand that she is now different from the ways she acted during high school, however she still relished her popularity, even though she developed a reputation as "'ho" in order to gain that popularity. Chrissie viewed her reputation as "'ho" to be something tangible she could use in order to remain part of the popular group. She struggled between how she thought she was supposed to feel about such a nickname and the ways in which the nickname became a vehicle that transported her into the popular group, much in the same way that having a "cool car" affected her membership in the group. High school was a very important time for Chrissie and she described high school's importance to her as "...like even now like I remember, "oh my high school". You know what I mean? Like to me its always going to be, like, my glory days sort of."

## **The silencing of girl talk**

Lewis and Simon (1986) wrestled with the notion of patriarchy as it plays out not only in society but also within the classroom through the silencing of females. As they worked to explore the relationship between language and power, what emerged were the ways in which women have been silenced in the classroom, which also carries over into other aspects of their lives. They specifically addressed the intentional or unintentional styled use of language as a method for silencing women. Schieffelin & Ochs (1986) stated,

...the process by which children and other novices learn to use language in ways that fit a culture's norms of appropriate feminine and masculine behavior is called

*language socialization*.... the influence of language as a powerful tool of *gender* socialization has, until recently been largely overlooked in child language research (p.84).

As she shared her story, Nicole provided me with several instances where the action/inaction of teenage and adult males eventually resulted in her silence. Nicole's interview was especially interesting to me because of the way in which she moved back and forth on a "bad" and "good" continuum of self-identification. Like Alanna, Nicole was a cautious young woman with an intense gaze that told me she was evaluating everything I did and said as I conducted the interview. When relating her high school experiences Nicole portrayed herself in a myriad of ways. On one hand she said she was a "little social butterfly" and part of a popular group. She later changed that description to say that she and her group navigated high school on the "fringe" of other groups, never really as "full, participating members" of any single group. Nicole said she and her friends were considered "bad" by some classmates because they "drank alcohol and smoked weed, but ...we weren't known as potheads or anything." She also described her group

as leaders. Nicole's circle of friends was "kind of like the outs" but that moved freely within, around, and between other groups, including the most popular group.

During our interview, I frequently wondered if Nicole was trying to shock me with some of her tales of attending drinking parties while in the eighth grade, smoking marijuana, and being thought of as "bad." She spoke freely of conflicts she had with other girls and the ways she navigated within the social system of her school. As she described herself moving among groups and simultaneously labeled as "bad," "popular," or "a leader," it seemed important to Nicole that I understood and accepted all that she had revealed. It became apparent to me that Nicole had laid her groundwork to "test" me for the authenticity of my motive for the interview and to determine if she could trust me with her truths. Only after she completed her assessment did Nicole begin to share her thoughts about her own sexual victimization and development during high school.

...There was a lot of sex going around. The sad part is nobody in our school, like the teachers, there was never a discussion....I was raped at a party in my senior year, But other than that, even to this day, there's still a lot of pressure, but I have not had sex.

Nicole had attended a party where beer was a beverage of choice. She drank one beer and then went to the bathroom. While there, a young man much larger and stronger than she, forced his way into the bathroom and raped her. Out of fear, for three months, Nicole did not tell anyone what happened. When she finally told her parents, her father wanted her to press charges against the rapist but she refused to. Because of her refusal to press charges, Nicole's father took the position that the rape must not have happened and his stance strained their relationship.

Prior to the rape, an adult male friend of Nicole's parents from the neighborhood, stalked Nicole and her sister and looked in their windows when they showered and dressed. Nicole and



her parents pressed charges against the man; however her experience with the court process reinforced her distrust for the adult system of protection. When she testified against the neighbor who was looking in Nicole's windows, she said that the man's defense attorney reversed the story and implied that Nicole was intentionally dressing in front of windows. Nicole was outraged that she could somehow be blamed for the actions of an adult male.

As evidenced by the two stories, Nicole had lost faith in the ability of adults to protect her from harm and to support her. Nicole's experience is much more violent than that of Lisa, Alanna, Kim, and Chrissie. The court system provided her with a feeling of further victimization through the cross examination of the (mostly male) attorneys during her stalking case. Her father gave her a message that if she did not loudly and publicly proclaim her victimization and subject herself to further scrutiny within the judicial system that her claims were not to be believed. It was clear to me from this interview that Nicole learned much more than to be concerned about reputation. She learned the conditions under which she, as a woman, is expected to be silent.

Darla was a quiet young woman who, during our interview, came across as angry and fearful. At times she made eye contact, but mostly she did not. She carried herself in a way that made her look self-protective and smaller than her actual size. When I asked Darla why she chose to participate in my study, she said she did not know, but that she thought her story could be useful to someone because she had a "horrible experience" during her senior year of high school. In the beginning, Darla did not speak in direct terms; she referred to activities, events and social circles as "stuff." I realized that there was a fragility about Darla to which I had to pay attention.

As the interview progressed, Darla described her high school and the conditions under which students were expected to learn. She referred to school as having a lot of “drama,” and when I asked for clarification, she said the following:

People fighting over stupid stuff and you could pay attention in some of your classrooms, like if you were in a scholar’s class it was better because everyone was paying attention, but if you were in mainstream people just sat there and talked all period. It kind of sucked but...

Despite these issues, Darla described her years from ninth through the end of eleventh grade as having been happy and that she had fun. She socialized with friends, participated in various after school activities and described her group as just “regular kids.” She explained that they were not part of the most popular group but that they had a good time and enjoyed school.

During her senior year, her enjoyment of school came to a sudden halt. Darla had been dating a boy for several months and believed that they had a good relationship. She trusted him and decided that she would engage in sexual activities with him, because she “had made it all the way to seventeen years old without having had sex.” Darla describes her experience with this boy:

...he took a picture of something that he shouldn’t have and he went around and showed it to everybody and after he took it he said, “Thanks, you just made me \$40.” Like, he was on probation and supposedly his PO officer knew about it and she didn’t do anything about it. All this stuff, I could’ve put him back in jail or wherever he was. He just put me through so much stuff my senior year, I just quit going. Still to this day whenever he sees me, he doesn’t give up on it.

As we continued our discussion, Darla painted a story of trust, intimacy, risk, betrayal, technological assault, adult intervention, and adult lack of action. This boy had made a bet with his friends that he would engage in sexual activity with Darla. While engaged in a sexual act with Darla, he used the camera in his cell phone to take her picture so that he could prove to his

friends what he had done. The next day, he showed the picture all around the school. As Darla tried to have adults intervene on her behalf, she was left disappointed by their lack of engagement in her problem, including the security guards.

This young man was on probation in the juvenile system and Darla relayed her experience to the probation officer who was a woman. Throughout this sequence of events Darla was eventually betrayed by the probation officer, the school security guards, the guidance counselor, and the principal. In the end, when the boy's cell phone was taken, no adult involved in the situation was able to find the picture Darla claimed he had taken, even though she, her sister, many classmates and underclassmen, and some of the security guards had seen the picture. Darla was present as he showed the picture to many of her peers and she saw him show at least one security guard. No disciplinary action was taken against the boy because the school administration lacked the proof of the photo.

As Darla told this experience, her anger was evident. This young man lived in her neighborhood and she often encountered him. For Darla, the nightmare continued each time she saw him and especially when he attempted to engage her in conversation. This young man continued to harass her. I asked her why she did not press charges with the police or file for a restraining order with the courts. Darla said, "They didn't believe me when it happened and he had the picture, just because they couldn't find it, why would they believe me now?"

Gilligan & Brown (1992) note in their study of girls' development that the girls who participated in their study struggled with finding ways to express strong feelings and engaged in a practice of self-silencing. They found that as they followed the girls over time, as each grew older, she learned new ways of expression, often trading away her ability to express her feelings of anger and outrage with a "...relational impasse that shuts out their experience or shuts down

their loud voices (p.97).” Gilligan and Brown found that girls often “...felt pressure to not know what she knows or at least not to say it...” in the struggle to remain visible and public when they received messages to be silent and unheard (p.97).

The young women with whom I spoke talked around the subject of sexual desire, activity, and identity, even though I had been very clear and direct that these topics would be a focus of my study. As previously noted, the women spoke in a coded, indirect language when I asked questions about the kinds of activities that took place in their school. When I asked questions about their own sexual development, some women responded with complete silence until I rephrased the question and gave permission to speak openly. Accessing the experiences of these young women was an especially challenging task during these interviews; many of them needed my permission and reassurance of my commitment to their confidentiality before they would share their own experiences.

As we proceeded through the interviews, I was tested by some young women so they could gauge whether or how I would judge them while others simply remained guarded throughout the interview. A consistent pattern I found in all of the interviews was this nonverbal ballet that we did as each young woman decided if I could be trusted with what she wanted to remain private. Each time, when I broke the silence, or what seemed to be a rule of the unspoken, and directly reassured each woman that her story would not be linked with her name in any way, each made the decision as to how many of the private details of her sexual development she wanted to tell me.

These women had learned through many different avenues that talk of sexual desire and activity was not to be done so openly. To do so carried a risk of reputation damage and betrayal of trust. Betrayal of trust included betrayal by a young woman’s friends, by the adults in her life,

by those she had been intimately involved, or by those who simply made up stories for their own purposes of self-elevation within certain social circles.

### **The marginal silence of being LBQ**

Maria always felt different from the time she began attending her suburban high school. From early in high school, she found herself to be attracted to other girls, though she had not connected that attraction to being lesbian or bisexual. During the ninth grade, when she was fourteen years old, Maria did not know about sexual identity, she only knew how she felt. Maria had also received strong cues from peers and adults which left her knowing that she should not publicly share her struggles with same-sex attraction. She did not feel that her high school was a safe environment where she could have open dialogue with other girls. Maria shares her involvement in a group activity where the overall question that was presented was, “do you think you are bisexual?”

I remember I was at a party when I was fourteen. We all went around a circle and asked a question, like, do you think you are bisexual. Everyone was like, oh maybe, or I don't think so. A lot of girls said maybe, maybe, maybe, but I was the only one who said probably. I remember thinking, like one girl looked at me like “you're daring” and I was kind of like really? Everyone there had basically admitted to being bisexual but I don't think anyone was taking it seriously. I thought they might think I was lying, but at the same time, something felt right about what I said. I just felt right, and I was fourteen years old.

Maria said she was not the only girl to say “yes” that day, though she saw their answers as being more make-believe than true. While the activity provided an opportunity for Maria to speak about her desire for other girls, she believed that others were not being genuine and did not pursue the discussion. She was profoundly aware that she needed to maintain her secret rather than to actively disclose it.

As Alanna previously explained, she was out to her few close friends, but had chosen not to publicly come out to everyone. She also knew that within her rural town, being known as LBQ would be negative and possibly leave her subject to harassment, criticism, and rumor. The coming out process is always one that is full of risk and sacrifice. One must be willing to risk being exiled from family and rejected by friends. Geographic location has emerged as having significant relevance to a person's decision to come out publicly. "One correlation that emerges repeatedly is that those people harboring negative attitudes about homosexuality are more likely to have grown up in the Midwest or the South, in rural areas or small towns" (Birden, 2005).

Alanna was forced to come out as a lesbian and the information became known throughout the school and her town. Alanna's father made it clear that if she was going to "do anything" that she should drive to the next town in order to do so. Alanna had to struggle not only with the emergence of her sexual desire, but also with negative reactions by her parents, peers, and town members. Rarely are parents excited to learn that their child has become sexually active. However, when parents find out that their child is sexually active with a same-sex partner, there is usually a period of shock and denial that occurs. Some LBQ youth experience severe responses from the parents that result in the physical abuse and rejection of the child, with approximately 3% of youth being thrown out of the family home (Savin-Williams & Dube', 1998). Alanna's "punishment" for her same-sex relationship was a forced separation from her girlfriend, except for when they saw each other at school.

As previously stated Alanna told her friends the truth and received tremendous support from them. Her cousins who also attended the high school carried rumors home to their parents and soon Alanna had to contend with her family which she describes,

I had a couple cousins that went to my high school which ended up being a big problem because they ran and told the family so I had to lie to the family. So then

I had two groups going and all my friends knew. I was living a secret life with my family. Things on the school level were really great. All my friends were really accepting, really cool and everything. Then I'd go home and I had to be a different person.

How had Alanna learned that she should remain silent about her feelings when she had really no experience with her own feelings of desire and sexuality? After dozens of interviews with adolescent girls, Tolman (2002) surmises that when girls have not been provided a vehicle to discuss the feelings within their bodies, the absence of the language of desire becomes a training ground that teaches girls that they should not express their sexual desire. Alanna could no longer contain her sexual desire, but had no one to which to speak about it.

### **CHAPTER 3: BULLYING AND HARASSMENT, GIRL STYLE**

While considering the dynamics of high school and the kinds of behaviors girls encounter in schools, I began to wonder how anyone could possibly develop academic skills during high school in the midst of the development and inner workings of peer social structures. There are demands from family, friends, peers, teachers, and counselors. Given the multiple structures encountered each day as girls negotiate their roles and positions with family, peers, and schools, it is a wonder that any academic learning is achieved. Each social structure carries with it a set of expectations and rules which govern behavior, often conflicting with each other.

A girl initially has her ordinal position within her family structure. She may be the oldest, youngest, only girl with one or more brothers, one of many girls, an only child, or any combination based upon the number of children or other family members who reside within the household. Families carry with them expectations about behavior, some consistent with a traditional view of girls'/women's roles and position within the broader society. Expectations of girls' behavior are unique to each family system. These views are each juxtaposed with each girl's expectation and sense of self. For example, a teenaged girl may have personal aspirations to achieve academically and to pursue professional dreams. Her family may promote the ideal of a traditional female where a girl might be expected to put her own aspirations second to marriage



and child rearing. Her resistance to this particular scenario may appear through a variety of behaviors that occur in the home, socially with her peers, and at school. These behaviors may be unacceptable to her parents.

In this chapter, I will define bullying and demonstrate the ways in which bullying among girls is indirect and therefore, almost invisible. I will provide examples of the ways in which the young women of this study reported their experience of indirect and direct bullying. In addition to stories of exclusion and alienation, I will also provide examples of the ways in which some of the young dealt with their victimization at the hands of their classmates. Finally, I will examine the ways in which indirect forms of bullying are less visible, leaving girls who are victimized to develop their own strategies for creating safe, positive spaces in high school.

This research then, complements what has been written about the young adults' resistance to the status quo of a given culture and high school as a site of resistance. McLaren (1999) regards resistance as "oppositional student behavior that has both symbolic, historical, and lived meaning and which contests the legitimacy, power and significance of school culture in general and instruction in particular (p.146)." Giroux (1996) adds, that high school is a political space "interrogated as a site of resistance and inclusion where radical subjectivities can multiply, connect and combine in polycentric communities of identity and resistance (p.132)." Within the context of resistance, a girl may use the space of school or the neighborhood to rebel against any attempt by her family to force her to conform to the family standards. In other words, some girls may act in direct opposition to the standards of the family when they are in school or other public spaces. In doing so, she may be making a "choice" to assert her identity as a young woman who disagrees with the "rules" as set forth by her parents. This assertion of her identity and resistance to the rules then may place her within a community space of other "resisters" who also assert

themselves against their parents' rules. It is often the very act of resistance that provides for a development of community space and a sense of belonging among other like-minded "resisters."

Within the family, a girl may already be faced with teasing, taunting, name-calling, or any host of unpleasant treatment inflicted by siblings. If her parents fail to prevent such occurrences or to reduce a hostile family environment, she may believe that the behaviors of and between the siblings in the family are condoned by the parents. Parents often attribute sibling conflict, mistreatment, and violence as typical sibling rivalry. If the girl is ridiculed by her parents, by older or younger siblings, she may find herself faced with choices about how to best combat the mistreatment. She can fight against the family, a choice that could result in further alienation from within the family system.

This same girl can choose to conform while in the presence of her family and then behave differently in situations outside of the family presence. In this case, this pretence of conformity can be referred to as being "performative." Butler (1990 and 1999) says that "acts, gestures, enactments...are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means" (p. 173). Some girls choose to perform according to the expectations of family, friends, and the culture at large. Others may choose to resist such conformity and behave independently of expected social norms such as style of dress or use of language.

Regardless of how the girl may feel, she has the option of performing behaviors that she realizes will keep her in good standing among friends. The expected behaviors of her family, however, may be diametrically opposed to those of her friends. Thus, the girl performs as a traditional "good girl" at home, conforming to the rules and standards of the household, displaying herself as asexual and assuming her duties as daughter and sister within the family.

Once outside of the grasp and view of the family home, the same girl may choose to adjust her clothing in ways that allow her to display her body as sexual, one to be desired by others. She may also engage in sexual activities and other behaviors of which her parents would not approve.

Within the neighborhood, the same girl may have her position within her neighborhood structure. Like the family system, she had choices about how she will react to neighborhood expectations of her role and position. She may also find that on her way to school she has to negotiate within the culture of her school bus, where seat location may be a symbol of status. Finally, the formal school culture as promoted by school officials and by school students comes with its own set of expectations and performative choices. McLaren (1999) explains culture as,

...a construction that remains a consistent and meaningful reality through the overarching organization of rituals and symbol systems. Symbols may be verbal or non-verbal and are usually tied to the philosophical ethos of the dominant culture. School culture is informed by class-specific, ideological and structural determinants of the wider society (pp. 5-6).

Students become acclimated to the culture of their school as soon as they enter the K-12 system. As students reach middle school, well-defined divides begin to develop among the student body which continues throughout high school. The negotiation of the role and position that many girls learn when situated in various places such as family, school bus, and schools may result in some girls taking negative action towards other girls. These negative actions may include social exclusion of girls who may be seen as weak or lacking qualities that may qualify them for membership in desirable social groups. The “popular group” may target these same girls as subjects for gossip. Gossip, whether true or not, can be used against girls as a form of indirect bullying where it results in a form of character assassination where a victim’s reputation is negatively labeled.

## **Tyrannies of “popularity”**

Many students divide into groups with names such as the “popular” group, jocks, hippies, gothics, skaters, gifted students, and those who don’t fit into any of the groups. The students in the lower ranked groups often become the targets of victimization. Whether a student or group is ranked lower is a subjective decision dependent on which group is ranking and targeting the student. These students are physically weaker than their peers, suffer from low self-esteem, anxiety and insecurity, and are usually socially isolated (Banks, 1997). Girls who do not present themselves in the latest fashions, hairstyle, and make up trends are often excluded from their schools’ “popular” group.

Popular groups often have a hierarchy of power and privilege even within their own group. There are those who are the *most* popular, are often the leaders who seek to gain the most recognition from the school peer group at large. Girls who are a part of the popular group, but who are not at the top of the hierarchy are often harassed and victimized by their own group members. Their group members may expect behaviors to include exclusion or gossip about peers who are not group members. Often, the code of conduct required for group membership may include rules regarding what other students group members are permitted to befriend. Chrissie provides an example of the price she paid for membership in the popular group.

We partied a lot and but I felt like I was friends with a lot of other people that sometimes, like, [my group] didn’t like. Like I was friends with a lot of girls in younger grades. And that was how I, like, always had a best friend in a younger grade. And sometimes [the girls in my group] would get mad if I hung out with somebody else. They would just act like I was dissin’ them, was being mean to them. Like, [the girls of my group would say] “I can’t believe you’re doing that” or like, they made me feel bad about it. And I know this one girl she was like, you’d call the leader; she’d pressure me into having parties when I wouldn’t want to.... She was really deceitful. She actually stabbed her best friend in the back really quickly over [a race to become] homecoming queen.

Chrissie had peers who were younger than she was and who she had known from her neighborhood. She claimed to be “friends” with the younger girls, but when she socialized with girls outside of her high-status social group, she was ostracized for breaking her group’s expectations of her conduct. Chrissie paid the price of exclusion and was talked about by her own group. Later in her interview, Chrissie revealed that when she now sees girls with whom she went to high school, they do not talk to her. Reflectively, Chrissie said, “I guess I wasn’t as well-liked as I thought.” From the outside of the group, all looks to be fun and joy; however, the view from within the group can be intimidating and cruel (Wiseman, 2002).

At the start of her discussion about her group and her relationship with peers outside of her “popular” group, I saw, through her physical demeanor and animation, that she was happy to have been part of the “popular” group. As she proceeded to describe the expectations of the group and reflect on them, she had a moment of realization that maybe things were not quite as good for her as they seemed at the time. The view from within her group was one that required her to take care in what she did so as not to defy any of the group expectations or she would face “punishment” from the group leader. Chrissie was frequently persuaded to have parties when her parents were out of town, regardless as to whether she wanted to have one. It was an expectation that she would have parties when the group leader told her to have one. It seemed that Chrissie’s penalty for breaking the “rules” was that she was to have a party on the impulse of the leader of her group.

Kim, who was introduced in chapter two, also experienced indirect bullying. Her school was very small, with strict rules governing disruptive, damaging, or sexual behaviors. Kim said

that if it “became known” that someone was sexually active, they would be terminated from the school. While she knew of students who were sexually active and others who drank alcohol and experimented with drugs, she pointed out that the teachers could not prove anything unless it was done on school property, which students avoided doing. Kim wanted to be a part of her school’s “popular” group when she began high school and successfully joined that group. Echoing Chrissie’s experience of the internal fighting within the popular group, Kim said,

Even though they’re friends, I mean, you could be somebody’s best friend one second and the next second they’re talking about you behind your back. And then, I’d say around 10<sup>th</sup> grade I switched gears kind of and decided I wanted to become a leader, somebody known for caring about everyone, not just connected to one specific group.

Kim’s decision to leave the popular group so that she could have a more eclectic group of friends became a point of contention between her and her friends from her former group. The retribution from the popular group came during Kim’s senior year.

I don’t think I really felt it till the end of my senior year when, you know, I realized, ok, these girls that I had left aren’t voting for me for this specific award. Because I switched gears and you know when I thought I was good friends with everyone, really, they felt like I had turned my back on them and said “forget you.” There was a, it’s just an honor award. I went to a small Christian school and it was, um, basically, [the award went to] the person who treated everyone the best, who was the strongest Christian example, um, who just portrayed the most Christ-like attitude. So, when it came down to that, it, you know, I found out that I wasn’t in the room when they voted and these people were trying to get everyone to vote against me.

Kim expressed her hurt over the campaign against her. She was dismayed at the behaviors exhibited from students who were “supposed to be Christian,” as she phrased it. When I asked how she responded to this group, Kim said that she finally confronted one of the girls about the active campaign to have others vote against Kim.

I did confront. Just specifically the one and she said ...you know, she denied it basically and said “I wasn’t trying to do anything. I just thought this other person should win”. And, you know, I had people saying she definitely said “don’t vote for Kim, no matter what you do, don’t vote for Kim.”

Just as in Chrissie’s case, Kim paid the price of popularity. When she wanted to broaden her friendships to include those who were not a part of “the popular” group, the group did not display much direct action except to say, “oh, you want to be friends with *them* now.” This group did not openly take action against her for leaving the group until almost two years later.

While it is evident that children in school will engage in activities of teasing and playing out of a spirit of friendship, there must be a line between what is acceptable playing and what crosses the line into bullying, harassment, and violence. If bullying is as Olweus (1993) describes, “exposure, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students (p.9)” then the line must be drawn according to a common definition of *negative* actions. Olweus (1993) states, “it is a negative action when someone intentionally inflicts, or attempts to inflict, injury or discomfort upon another, repeatedly and over time (p.9).”

The school setting is one that should provide an atmosphere of safety, but this is frequently elusive for many students. The United States claims one of the highest rates of bullying among students in kindergarten through twelfth grade with 77% of children reporting either victimization or having participated in violent or harassing actions toward other children at some point during their enrollment in school (Nansel *et al.*, 2001). Another definition of bullying is, “the unprovoked physical or psychological abuse of an individual by one student or a group of students over time to create an ongoing pattern of harassment and abuse (Whitted & Dupper, 2005).”

The research on bullying indicates that indirect attacks employed by girls are often brief and go unrecognized because they do not often elicit an outward reaction from the victim. Teachers often are not clear as to which indirect actions may constitute bullying and therefore may not intervene even when faced with a situation because the behaviors may go unrecognized as bullying. Physical aggression as bullying is what most frequently comes to mind for many teachers and other school personnel because it is seen as more serious and worthy of intervention.

### **Bullying, sexual harassment, and anti-gay violence**

Recently, scholars have begun to recognize that bullying appears in different forms and styles which are often determined by sex. Girls are more likely to use indirect approaches such as exclusion, intimidation by staring, spreading rumors and name-calling (Reid *et al.*, 2004; Rigby, 2004; Whitted & Dupper, 2005). Indirect methods involve intentional actions that lead to the social exclusion or damage of a child's reputation so that no one will want to socialize with the child. Boys, on the other hand, tend to engage in more direct, physical bullying such as hitting, tripping and taking belongings (Viljoen *et al.*, 2005). What the research has not done is to separate the methods of bullying employed by girls of various racial and ethnic groups. Current research makes generalizations about the behaviors of girls and of boys. As indicated above, girls employ indirect methods, boys employ direct methods. Such generalizations are rarely prescriptive of the behaviors and actions of individual girls and boys. Study of the ways in which girls and boys of various racial and ethnic backgrounds engage in "bullying" with other students would be a valuable topic for further study.



The use of technology within schools and within the personal lives of boys and girls has afforded many opportunities that can enhance learning. Many schools have the financial resources to provide computer-based instruction in academic subjects. Such uses of technology teach boys and girls how to use technology that has become a part of everyone's personal, academic, and professional lives. When various pieces of technology are misused, it can provide both girls and boys with new methods of bullying through the use of email, instant messaging, and telephone text messaging. Although researchers have begun to recognize the prevalence and effects of female bullying tactics, teachers, counselors, and other school personnel may not intervene to prevent to stop indirect attacks. Research indicates that bullying unfolds within the peer context, meaning away from the view of teachers, administrators, or other adults who could intervene (Reid et al., 2004). Students are intelligent and savvy enough to perpetrate their abuses upon each other outside of the view of the adults in charge.

The terms bullying, sexual harassment, and anti-gay violence lay within three distinct lines of inquiry, with little cross-over. Bullying has traditionally been viewed within a social psychology perspective, sexual harassment from within law and women's studies, and anti-gay violence from within law (e.g. hate crimes) and gay and lesbian studies discourses (Rofes, 2005). Research on bullying has expanded and moved forward in efforts to teach young children not to bully or to ask an adult to intervene if the child witnesses another child being bullied (Parker, 2001; Rigby, 2004). However, because there is such a separation of disciplines where discussion takes place about sexual and anti-gay harassment, there are few, if any, programs that address these issues when boys and girls are in high school (Rofes, 2005).

Bullying and bully prevention programs tend to be more prevalent at the elementary and middle school levels, while anti-gay and sexual harassment tends to increase at the high school level. Sexual harassment occurs in the hallways, playgrounds, buses, and any other place young women and men tend to gather. Overall, eight in ten students (81%) experience some form of sexual harassment during their school lives. Girls are more likely than boys to experience sexual harassment (81% vs. 79%), regardless of the sexual identity of the victim (American Association of University Women, 2001).

For students who are physically smaller and weaker and who are perceived to be members of a sexual minority (lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered - LGBT), the rate of bullying is often greater than that of the general student population. While the exact rates of harassment of these students are difficult to accurately document, according to 2001 statistics reported by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Educator's Network (GLSEN), as many as eighty percent of LGBT youth are verbally, physically, or sexually harassed.

For the students who experience school violence, whether members of sexual minorities or heterosexual, 35% report that teachers and staff "never or only sometimes" intervene when they witness such actions (Whitted & Dupper, 2005). While these statistics are demonstrating that children are frequently being harassed and assaulted, school performance of the victims suffers through increased absenteeism and lower test performance (GLSEN, 2002). At least in part because of such treatment by peers and educators, LBGT youth drop out of high school at a rate estimated at 28 percent compared to 10.9 percent of youth in general (NCES, 2002).

Moreover, LGBT youth represent approximately 30 percent of all reported completed teen suicides, although such youth are estimated to constitute 10 to 20 percent of their age cohort (PFLAG, 2002).

These statistics demonstrate a remarkable level of awareness on the part of the young women and men as to what is taking place in schools. National, state, and local policy makers argue the social constructs that lead to what is often perceived as a culture of sexual promiscuity in high schools. Meanwhile, young women often live in a school culture where the lines between rules and actions blur and where they encounter unwanted situations where they feel they have little or no recourse.

If the bullying rate in the U.S. is approximately 75% of students, sexual harassment is at approximately 80%, and anti-gay harassment at a rate of 80%, school districts are not fulfilling their legal and constitutional obligation to provide a safe learning environment. Until we, as educators, begin to recognize that these are not separate problems and they are all occurring within the confines of high school space, adding to the distress of students, how can we say that school anti-bullying programs are effective at preventing school violence? As long as schools are unable to openly discuss sexual identity with students, neither comprehensive sexual education nor abstinence-only programs will address the issues of sexual and anti-gay harassment. Both of these attempts at dealing with sexual identity development of high school students lack the key component for success: appropriate venues in which teens can discuss their issues and ask questions about what they are experiencing. Adults often do not take bullying seriously unless violence or a threat of violence exists. When adults do not recognize indirect

bullying as being hurtful, nor do they recognize sexual and anti-gay harassment as being related, then adolescents are left to resolve their own problems with the perpetrators at the school.

Celeste, who identifies as “bicurious,” went to an all girls, private school for her entire schooling experience. She was with the same girls from first grade, until she graduated from high school. Celeste described her school as one where the students were either “very, very wealthy or very, very smart.” She said, “in general, everyone’s very wealthy. Like there are very few kids who don’t have you know, \$100/week allowance or more.” Within this small, elite school, according to Celeste, were expectations of image whereby girls were supposed to conform to the image projected upon them. She describes her school,

Everyone had like this expectation. They would say, “Oh, you’re Celeste” and they would have this image. So there was never anything that was really me. Like if I liked [a different] group, and I really like to change groups, everyone was like, “oh you like that group” and so you went out with them forever, which was a little retarded. They never expect you to change at all. Even now, you’re supposed to stay with that group. Everyone like, girls that I don’t know will contact me, because there’s like a network online and they will say “I want to be your friend”. I’m like; you were a bitch to me in high school. Why would I want to be your friend now?

In Celeste’s case, she felt that there was a price to be paid for changing groups within her school. She also felt that she had to live up to certain expectations within the school social structure and could never really be herself. She said she was included in the group because she had “a cool car.” However, Celeste tried to keep a safe distance between her school social group and herself. She felt that she was different not only in terms of her ideas about sexual identity, but also because her parents are divorced and her father lives in the Philippines. Celeste traveled to be with her father during vacations and school breaks because she said she did not get along with her mother very well and that her father was her support system.

Celeste explains that she needed to have a support system because she became the victim of gossip and as a result was socially isolated from all of her peers at her school. As a result of technological communications such as online journals, she had the following experience as told by Celeste.

My senior year everyone thought I was a lesbian for a couple of months, then that blew over. One of my friends is bisexual and it was no big deal. She went to another school, but I have an online journal. I would talk to her about stuff and had that in my journal. A lot of girls found out about it. It was an overnight thing. One girl had a party and they were looking at different people's journals and when they got to mine, I had written stuff because I was trying to be supportive of my friend. They all read it and said "oh she is so then she must be too" but I wasn't gay and it was all over school that I was. Like I was at school on Friday and everything was fine and then the party was on Sunday and by Monday morning people wouldn't talk to me anymore. Like kids that I knew in younger grades were hearing about it and I was like, "you guys....NO". Like my friends knew I really am straight but I don't really know what I am.

Interestingly on the background survey and throughout our interview, Celeste identified herself as "bicurious" both presently and during high school, yet when relaying the ways she was forced to defend herself, she allowed her friends to assume that she is straight. Celeste described that she felt that there was a pressure within her school to be straight, partly because of stereotypes that lesbians go to all-girls' schools.

I felt there was pressure to be straight. Everyone was straight that's just the way it was. A lot of girls hugged each other and stuff but if you weren't like, part of their group, they would say stuff about you. It happened a lot of the time. I think it was fear of because all girls high school - school girl - lesbian, all that stuff. But it was like so opposite. Many times it was like if you acted anything like they could think you were [lesbian], it was like, get out. There were a lot of things that weren't accepted. Like with sex, there were a lot of girls who were active and so they thought everyone should be, but there was a lot of other stuff too, like how to dress and act. So there was a lot of stuff where there was pressure, it was hard to be like a "normal" person.

Celeste struggled throughout high school with the pressures to conform. She wanted to be able to express herself naturally and be who she felt she was. There was a price to pay at her school for failure to conform to the norms of the “popular group.” That price was social isolation and alienation.

Even teachers were subject to the gossip and verbal cruelties of the girls at Celeste’s school. Celeste said that there were two teachers at her school who were a lesbian couple. She said the school talk caused a lot of problems for them,

It [the teachers being a couple] caused a lot of problems. They got a lot of crap from the girls, a lot of mean things, a lot of jokes. Things like rumors spreading and people would say stuff while they [the teachers] were near. It wasn’t like they couldn’t hear stuff, they weren’t deaf, and so they could hear what girls were saying.

It seemed that the paranoia regarding lesbianism at Celeste’s all girl school spared no victims. She said it was also rumored that one of the administrators was also a lesbian. Celeste said she now knows that this administrator is straight, though during high school, she was inclined to believe the gossip about her, despite Celeste’s personal experience.

Stephanie, who identifies as straight described her own confrontations during high school where she was harassed on a daily basis. Her boyfriend was an athlete, but because he would not participate with his teammates in sexual prowess of women, his teammates excluded him from team social functions. The boys on this team used Stephanie as the target to harass her boyfriend rather than to bully him directly. Stephanie explains her dilemma with her boyfriend’s teammates,

During my sophomore year I started dating one of the guys from the hockey team, he was one of the less desired hockey players. He wasn’t like the rest of them. He was more down to earth, so, you know, I gravitated towards him. And when we started dating, because they had a negative experience towards him, it reflected on me and I got I’d say, made fun of, picked on, harassed. [His

teammates didn't like him] because he didn't do drugs. He didn't, I mean, he, he wasn't with a whole lot of girls. Like I mean, these were the "Casanovas" of the school. They had all these girls who flocked to him. Girls flocked to him, but for his personality. I've always just gone with the flow and I don't like attention drawn to me. I like to blend in with everybody else. But when this came out, the attention was drawn to me. I didn't have a name to them. I was "so-and-so's girlfriend", you know. I mean, they used to call me the "AFLAC Duck" and they would all quack at me. I don't know why they called me that. They'd do it to me as I'd walk down the hallway and they'd go "AFLAC", whatever and I hated that, so...

Stephanie was not harassed by the girls in her class. She had a few friends with whom she was close and then started dating her boyfriend. Based upon her description, it seems that Stephanie was targeted because her boyfriend's teammates were unable to upset him directly through their behavior; instead, they harassed his girlfriend. She struggled with being a center of attention and with ignoring the boys and said that things escalated during her junior year,

It really escalated my junior year, and I mean, it was to the point where they were harassing me at lunch and I would cry. I'd never; I always said I'd never cry at school. I would never let anyone else see me cry.

Just as in Celeste's case, Stephanie was excluded from "the" popular social group and endured verbal harassment directed at choices she made. Celeste chose to befriend a girl who identified as bisexual; Stephanie chose to date the hockey player who was the least liked on his team because of his refusal to conform to their standards of behavior.

Prior studies (Banks, 1997; Nansel et al., 2001; Viljoen et al., 2005) have focused on comparisons between the ways in which boys and girls differ in their bullying techniques. These findings have been useful for identifying the indirect types of behaviors that girls use on other girls and the direct or sometimes violent, types of behaviors boys inflict on other boys. However, Stephanie's experience opens another facet of in-school harassment that requires

further exploration. In Stephanie's case, she was a victim of what would be technically termed, "indirect bullying" perpetrated by boys.

The hockey team, with exception of her boyfriend, talked about her and made fun of her, even giving her a nickname after an animal used in an insurance commercial. Typically, this indirect style of negative behavior has been associated with the type of punishment given out by girls. Yet, the on-going harassment of Stephanie was covertly executed against her, providing her with little, if any, recourse against them. Again, this illustrates the ways in which anti-bullying campaigns are not useful for high school adolescents. We must begin to look at the issues directly and not get caught in technical terminology. What these young women experienced was harassment and oppression forced upon them and received by them.

Perhaps indirect bullying is not what is doled out by girls, but is instead received by girls. In an attempt to harass their teammate, the boys on the hockey team at Stephanie's school targeted Stephanie. One of the social values often taught to boys, by their parents, is to not hit girls, leaving teasing and taunting to be other alternatives of choice. If the cultural value states that boys should not hit girls, then is the real issue about the ways in which girls *receive* harassment? Boys are taught not to hit girls and girls are taught that it is not nice to hit anyone, regardless of sex. For both boys and girls, the options for voicing displeasure about the nonconformity of girls, is to socially isolate, gossip about, tease or taunt girls. Regardless of the sex of the initiator of the harassment, within the confines of school space if the recipient is a girl the harassment will most likely will take an indirect form.

Maria, who identifies as lesbian, went to a suburban school in an area she described as, "very white, and middle and upper middle class kids." Maria felt alienated from the time she began high school. Her school was large, approximately 2,000 students and she said that the



social position you had in middle school basically carried over to high school. She said she was always in an “outsider group.” Maria’s sister also attended her high school and was a major support system for Maria from Maria’s sophomore year until she graduated. They are of Latin descent and Maria was aware of only two other “Latin kids,” as she referred to them. She noted, “I wasn’t friends with the other Latin kids, just because you’re Latin, doesn’t mean you’re friends.” Maria presented the social hierarchy of her school, as she interpreted it,

There were the usual groups, the popular group...I don’t know how to describe it. Me and my sister would talk about the kids at school and my friends. My friends were usually some sort of outsiders at the school. We were sort of, tended to make friends with people on the periphery of the social scene. Like band geeks and those that were “goody two shoes” but they were fun kids, some of them were. We called a lot of kids, what we called the “middle kids” like, those are the kids that want to fit in, they try really hard and don’t really think for themselves. There were the preps, most of the school was preps that wore Abercrombie and Fitch and other name brand clothes. All they wore were like khakis and other name brand clothes. They weren’t like, particularly interesting. I guess everyone else were the dorks or like, punks. They looked like punks, they dressed a little differently. I guess they were skateboarders, but not necessarily. They wore baggy pants and Converse sneakers and had piercings and were a little different and they didn’t like the preps.

Maria never felt comfortable in classes or in speaking to people she did not know. Despite her shyness, she tried to be a part of the school activities. She joined the cross-country track team, an experience that still angers and frustrates her as she reflects upon the experience,

I was involved in a lot of extracurricular activities. Choir was like a class you took, but there were musicals we got involved in, I did musicals all four years. I did cross-country running every fall. I have my complaints about that. It felt very clickie, the cross-country team. Most of the people who got involved in sports were preppie it seemed. Or the middle kids. All the kids that wanted to conform were the ones who were in sports. It wasn’t the creative kids like from the drama club, theatre. Some of them did those things, but there was this mindset that you were only supposed to do certain things. Me and my sister did cross-country. We just didn’t fit in and we weren’t really fast runners. We were some of the worst runners, the whole time. And we were always kind of by ourselves. Like, I was on the team for four years and there are some girls who never spoke to me. I knew them *all four years* and they wouldn’t speak, even on the team. It was a bad

experience and it still upsets me. Just how I felt alienated within this team made me upset, and I just put up with it.

Maria's frustration is apparent as she recalls the alienation she felt on the team. During her first year on the cross-country team, Maria did not have her sister present for support because her sister was one year younger than she. Instead, Maria befriended two other girls on the team who were also what Maria classified as, "the worst runners." She also explained that the team had pasta parties prior to track meets. At these pasta parties, the girls who deliberately alienated Maria and her sister pretended to be inclusive. They provided coaches and other adults present with a performance of team unity at these dinners, unity that did not exist according to Maria,

There was one girl who I kind of clicked with and one other girl. There was me and these two girls and we were just different from the other girls. We were all the worst runners. I think we were more independent thinkers. We would all hang out and we were supportive of each other within the cross-country team. Those girls would stay amongst themselves and we would talk to each other and sit together on the bus. It was like there was a wall there, some invisible wall and they would pretend we weren't there. Sometimes we'd pretend like things were ok. Before a meet there would be pasta parties we would all go to and we'd all be together there. It was a presentation of team unity that wasn't really there.

Different from Stephanie's case, Maria did not believe she was ever directly targeted by any group of students for harassment. Instead, she did not fit into the "popular" group and was not willing to be one of the "middle kids" who tried hard to become members of the "popular" group by dressing and acting as they thought that group wanted. Maria had a strong need to be herself to the extent that she could do so and still protect her identity as a lesbian. The penalty she believed she paid was in the social exclusion she felt, specific to her membership on the cross-country track team. Maria found ways to gain acceptance in other arenas within her school setting.

Unlike Celeste, Stephanie and Maria, Bonnie, who identifies as straight, refused to tolerate bullying of any type. She stated that had a relatively large group of friends, but most would not stand up against gossip and other negative talk. Bonnie stood up for herself, somewhat aggressively and explains her strategy,

I was mean to everybody if they were mean to me. I don't know. I'm always; out of my friends I guess I'm the mean one. I'm always the one, the "big mouth" that speaks their mind! I always, I never hold back. Like I'm always the one that, like I'm like "this person said this". I'm not afraid to confront anybody about anything. I'm always the one that's like "oh I heard" or "why are you saying all this" or, I was always the one that would confront people! I got in a fight one year with some girl because she was talking about me. She kept edging everything on. And, like, cause she like, I don't know, she used to be my friend and she like started like a fistfight with me, in the hallway. I beat the crap out of her and nobody ever said anything to me after that!

According to Bonnie, after her physical display of intolerance for gossip, she had no further problems with gossip being spread about her during high school. She was not socially excluded or isolated as a result of her aggressive response to gossip, perhaps out of fear of her reprisal. As I listened to Bonnie, I wondered if others from her school might call *her* a bully, because of her direct confrontational style. Bonnie was concerned for herself and her reputation and refused to allow gossip and rumors to be spread, so she took direct action.

With exception of Bonnie, the young women who participated in this study who were victims of bullying, were soft-spoken and did not like to be the center of attention. When other students engaged in verbal harassment or gossip designed to damage the girl's reputation, there was little resistance on the part of the victims. Stephanie and Chrissie did not take action against the students who caused them problems. Chrissie did not take action because she took the

treatment she received to be a condition of her membership within “the popular” group at her school. Stephanie did not like to be the focus of attention and was afraid of what people thought of her.

Bonnie and Kim chose to confront the issues directly, with Bonnie’s confrontation resulting in a physical fight which left her free of further harassment. Kim eventually won the honor award, despite the active lobbying against her by her former friends. Celeste spoke with two teachers about her social alienation from the other girls and received some support from them, but she said of the months during which she was socially exiled,

No one would make eye contact with me in the hallways and they definitely would stop talking when I walked into the room. I was like “oh crap, I’m the talk of the high school.” I would cry the whole night; I couldn’t believe people would do that and think the nasty things they said about me.

Celeste’s primary support came from her father who was in the Philippines. She spoke with him regularly by telephone and he encouraged her to keep looking to her future when she would go to college and be finished with the girls at school.

### **Girls as quiet victims**

Oppressors are students who have a need for power and control. They appear to feel satisfaction from bullying others and often defend their actions by claiming that the victim has somehow provoked the action (Banks, 1997). Bullies are those in the revered crowds who possess strong self-esteem and were often taught to “fight back” physically as a way to handle problems. Recent research (Craig *et al.*, 2000; Reid *et al.*, 2004) indicates that teachers often fail to intervene in bullying because they do not recognize the indirect behaviors as being serious. Indirect bullying is even less likely to be reported than direct, more aggressive styles. (Reid *et al.*, 2004) report that, “rates of telling will not increase unless pupils believe that they will be

supported. If a school appears to indirectly condone bullying behavior by ignoring it, intervening infrequently...bullying will continue and reporting will seem futile (p.246).”

Many teachers underestimate the seriousness of any particular incident or that incidents collectively lead to despair from those students who are repeated targets of bullies. Most anti-bullying programs are centered on the early grades and little is focused on high school anti-bullying programs. With a focus on academic standards in the middle and high schools, anti-bullying initiatives are often lost (NYSSB, 2003).

Celeste and Kim’s schools were very focused on academic standards and excellence. Celeste noted in her interview that 99% of the students in her high school have gone to college. The academic rigor of this private preparatory school is designed so that graduates of the school are able to gain acceptance into top universities. Celeste’s list of colleges to which she applied included all top-ranked Ivy League and private universities; she was accepted to several of those to which she applied. Both young women looked forward to going to college both as a pathway to her future plans and also because it meant they no longer had to attend school with students who had harassed them.

Chrissie, Stephanie, or Maria did not seek assistance with their situations. As previously stated, Chrissie did not see her mistreatment at the time it occurred as anything more than what came with membership within her “popular” group. She spent much of her time catering to the “party needs” of the group, as Chrissie expressed when she referred to the group leader telling her when it was time to have a party. Chrissie always obliged.

Stephanie sought the support of two girlfriends who talked to her about her treatment and who would emotionally support her. She said,

I could have easily gotten stuck, and gotten sucked into like depression and you know, I could have committed suicide because I hated it so much. But I had my boyfriend, I had my friends, my close friends—we're talking about like two girls that's it, to push me through that. It doesn't matter, it doesn't matter, keep going, keep going, and you have to mature.

Stephanie also sought support from her boyfriend, who encouraged her to “ignore them,” meaning the boys who made fun of her. She was unable to ignore them, but things finally got better for her when she was a senior. Stephanie reflectively described the way in which she felt she got through the harassment and successfully created a positive, safe spaces for herself through the previously mentioned support of friends and her boyfriend, but also through her own maturation process,

My high school experience was a learning and growing experience into adulthood. I think it had positive aspects, out came the negative but with that I got positive. So I would still say it was a negative experience overall but I grew from that and I think that I'm a stronger person for it. You kind of just basically have to wait for yourself to mature.

Like Stephanie, Maria waited silently to find her positive, safe spaces which occurred for her in the theatre arts classes and through her involvement in school musical productions and other acting venues. In each case, the young women indicated that they waited patiently, matured, and learned to manage the harassment, as in Stephanie's case, or the alienation as in Maria's case. Because the harassment and alienation continued throughout high school, they each developed strategies that enabled them to better ignore the actions of other students.

Bonnie was the standout, among these young women, as she took aggressive action to prevent her from being the talk of the school.

In the management of bullying behaviors, each young woman had to make choices about how she would handle each situation. Each handled these challenges in ways that were congruent with her personality style. Stephanie, Celeste, and Maria did not like to be the center of attention and therefore, took minimal, if any, direct action toward those who excluded or openly harassed them. Bonnie chose a more direct and proactive approach to rumor management regarding her own reputation. Chrissie did not initially recognize that she was often taken advantage of by the leader of her “popular” group, and only began to notice the ways in which she had allowed herself to be manipulated. Still, she did not outwardly demonstrate a significant level of frustration or distress, as did Stephanie, Celeste, and Maria.

If girls in high school continue to be the recipients of various bullying styles, school officials and teachers must learn the ways in which this is manifested in observable behavior within the school. Much of anti-bullying programming is concentrated in the early years of schooling and is neglected during the high school years as the focus for teachers and students turns to future goals of college and career. Bully victimization, whether indirect or direct, carries long-term consequences in the form of lower self-esteem, higher levels of anxiety and depression (Whitted & Dupper, 2005).

The actions of members of the exalted popular groups within many schools are often ignored. As a member of *the* popular group, Chrissie was harassed and bullied into having parties at the whim of the group “leader.” By ignoring or failing to that recognize bullying and harassment appears in many forms, young women such as Celeste, Stephanie, Kim, and Maria

have to actively create positive, safe spaces that were not a part of or within the domain of the “popular” groups in order for high school to be bearable. As social hierarchies within schools persist whereby one group holds a higher position than another, they are reflective of the gender power relationship where school is a mediated space that involves control over women’s labor, childbearing powers, and desires and affections (Sayer and Walker, 1992). Young women’s sexuality, desires, and activities are mediated by the popular groups’ abilities to spread gossip and create negative reputations of the young women who are not a part of that group.



## **CHAPTER 4: SCHOOL AS A SPACE FOR DEVELOPMENT**

As each girl negotiates the embodiment of her sexual desire, attempting to maintain a balance between her own desires and the pressures of her peers, she must also negotiate within and among groups based upon pre-existing social group hierarchies as defined by the student body. Each girl may serve as an agent over her own life, empowered to distinguish her bodily sensations from her own emotional needs and from the peer pressure to have a boyfriend and engage in sexual activities. In order to make such distinction, each girl should be knowledgeable enough to recognize that bodily sensation is different from emotional responses. She should also be able to acknowledge that a relationship exists between bodily sensation and emotional responses. Tolman (2002) explains that there is a relationship between women's bodies and embodiment as a lived concept, experienced through feelings and desires that are not addressed for most girls during their adolescent developmental process,

Embodiment is the experiential sense of living in and through our bodies. It is premised on the ability to feel our bodily sensations, one of which is sexual desire. While the body is the site for the experience of, though not necessarily the incitement of, sexual desire, no one lives in a vacuum. Sexual desire may be in part a bodily process regulated by hormones, but being embodied—feeling and knowing the information that comes to us from the world in which we live through the sensations and reactions that occur in our bodies—is in part a social process that shapes our experience of sexual desire... (p. 50).

Schools can provide confusing and sometimes contradictory messages to girls regarding sexuality and the display of girls' bodies as sites for boys' sexual excitement and entertainment.

Some schools may have dress codes designed to keep the physical displays of girls' bodies to a minimum, yet have a cheerleading squad made up of girls who wear revealing clothing while performing gymnastic maneuvers in front of large crowds at sporting events.

During high school, the notion of "body" includes: girls' bodies as they develop; boys' bodies as they develop; girls' and boys' bodies in relationship to other girls; other boys, and in relationship to each other; girls' and boys' bodies each unto themselves and, that boys' and girls' bodies collectively form the student body. The student body as a unit is monitored and shaped by policies of school boards, administrations, teachers, and staff. Amid a curriculum of standardized doctrine and expected academic performance, the student body is also expected to conform to school district policies of behavior. For example, the student body as a unit may be expected to achieve state and federally mandated academic competencies. However, when the focus is shifted from the student body to the bodies of students, curriculum and discussion of sex education may become tightly controlled, if permitted at all (Mathison, 1998; Parker, 2001).

The "student body" is a metaphorical joining of boys' and girls' bodies together to form a single entity. These nuances of bodies and embodiment become conceptualized as "hidden curriculum". MacGillivray (2004) describes features of school-life which serve to indoctrinate students to the rules and regulations of school operations. These features are referred to as the "hidden curriculum." He says, "As far as sexual orientation, students come to embody the established order of the dominant heterosexual society, which is also taught (explicitly or implicitly) though the hidden curriculum of the schools...where heterosexuality is presented as the only option (p.88)." Hidden curriculum, according to McLaren (1998) refers to "the tacit ways in which knowledge and behavior get constructed, outside the usual course materials and formally scheduled lessons (p.187)." Schools promote heteronormative practices through

activities such as the prom, an event that is celebrated in some schools as a large, group, pseudo-wedding. Some high schools include a “couple’s promenade” where each couple is announced and displayed to an audience consisting primarily of parents and other relatives of the participants. In some cases, single-sex “couples” may attend the prom, but most of the time, these single-sex couples are not actual couples. They are typically pairings of girls who were not asked to attend the prom by a boy and are therefore permitted to purchase tickets with a friend. These messages of what are “acceptable” couplings are supported through heteronormative practices that promote the elections of prom queens and kings. Prom “courts” are boys and girls selected from and elected by, the student body. They are often, but not necessarily, members of the school’s “popular” group.

Heteronormative messages are also promoted within the academic curriculum when teachers communicate with students, and express questions and expectations differently to boys and girls. For example, McLaren (1998) states that,

when boys call out answers without raising their hands, teachers generally accept their answers; girls, however, are reprimanded for the same behavior. Teachers are twice as likely to give boys detailed instructions on how to do things for themselves; with female students, teachers are more likely to do the task for them. Boys are taught independence and girls are taught dependency (p.187).

Such differences in treatment by teachers provide students with imbedded images of “boy” or “girl” behavior. These images are taught outside of the subject-specific curriculum taught with a given school system. There is little, if any, opportunity for students who defy the heteronormative influence and who are lesbian, bisexual, and queer to receive support for their non-conformance.

Within school systems, the concept of “body” as a single element carries with it heterosexual connotations of sexual desire, activities, and intercourse. While schools promote and make reference to the “student body,” they often fail to acknowledge the bodies of the students as spaces that are subjective and where bodies do not fit neatly into rigid standards of strict sexual abstinence or of total sexual promiscuity. Students’ bodies are situated along a continuum of sexual possibilities of both identity and sexual activities. Bodies of students do not fit snugly into stringent categories of heterosexual, lesbian, or gay sexual identities, where heterosexuality is promoted as “normal.” Though many, if not most students feel pressured by schools as bureaucratic institutions and by peers to conform to heterosexual standards. If they do not actively conform, some students make choices to remain silent and to not acknowledge their non-heterosexual desires or sexual activities.

Bodies of students work both in unison and in opposition to each other. This changeable dynamic may present some girls with choices that are in conflict with their future plans. “Choice” again appears as a dilemma, where each girl presumably shares in the planning and control of her destiny and future circumstances. However, not all young women face the same kinds of opportunities. Young women often have very different options. Socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, sexual identity or other social strata may privilege some groups over others.

### **Privilege and opportunities**

Issues of privilege and resources often emerge and have a significant impact on the kinds of social and academic opportunities girls of any socioeconomic background might have. The kinds of opportunities that girls of different socioeconomic backgrounds encounter may be limited depending on the physical location of their high school. If it is in an area where students come from many different socioeconomic backgrounds, the school may or may not have

adequate resources to provide students with a variety of quality learning opportunities. Some girls may also experience or witness privilege depending upon where the high school peer group is situated within the high school social hierarchy. For example, Denise had not considered college as an option while she was a high school student. She was not a member of a high status group and came from a working-class family. Denise was not encouraged to take college entrance examinations and was not actively involved in any discussions with guidance counselors or teachers regarding her future plans and was not encouraged to consider college. She was not enrolled in any high school advanced placement classes nor did she participate in any activities that might draw attention from colleges who offer scholarship money. Denise describes how she began attending a community college,

After my senior year my dad told me—because I had a lot of trouble, he said if I wasn't going to some sort of school by the fall that I was out [of the house]. I would lose stuff like health insurance. I'd lose that. I would also lose my car insurance and stuff like that. So my dad definitely got me to do something. Then I also just didn't want to kind of slide through life. I wanted to actually do something with my life.

For Denise, her choice to attend college was a financial decision. She could attend a community college and maintain her health and car insurance under her father's insurance plans or she could choose to live independently and pay her own insurance and living costs.

Denise portrays herself as having willingly made the choice to attend her local community college. Yet her options were limited because she had not been encouraged to take the steps necessary to develop an educational and career plan for her future. Denise implies that the community college was her only “choice” when her father gave her an ultimatum. Her enrollment in a post-secondary school has now allowed her to access information that will assist her in planning a specific career course for her future. Entwined with her desire to keep her car

and insurance, Denise acknowledges wanting to “do something” with her life. It seems that the economic realities of adult life had some impact on Denise’s present choices.

In her research on adolescent school groups and interactions, Eckert (1989) referred to the “leading crowd,” a term which, within her study, eventually evolved into “jocks.” The young women I interviewed referred to the popular group, with strong emphasis on the word *the*, implying that there was only one actual popular group. All of the women in this study, regardless of their race, attended schools that were predominantly white. The “popular” group or “preppies” is often the terminology and group delineation used by all of the students. It is understood and consistent as it is based upon social class divisions (Eckert, 1989; Morrow & Torres, 1995; Perry, 2002) within the high school and surrounding community culture.

The popular group was often described as having an affinity for name brand, designer clothing, used as a symbol of wealth status, most frequently based upon the wealth of the student’s parents. Some students highlight their family’s socioeconomic status, while others may play down their socioeconomic background (Perry, 2002). Conflicts between and within social groups are reflected in my interviews with these young women as they explained peer group dynamics and the kinds of choices each young woman felt were available to her. Each young woman was able to actively recognize and explain the criteria required for “membership” within school peer groups.

This awareness of differences based upon the socioeconomic standing of particular groups of students was present in my interviews. Celeste, who was introduced in chapter three, indicated that it was common for girls in her high school to receive one hundred dollars or more per week from their parents, as an “allowance.” She described her high school peers as coming

from “very wealthy” families. Celeste took care in her description of her school to be sure that I had a sufficient grasp of the level of financial privilege she and her peers enjoyed as high school students.

In another demonstration of the awareness the women of my study had of socioeconomic differences, Abby described the membership criteria within her school for *the* popular group.

Most of the popular kids lived in the nice big houses in [a wealthy community] they were like “I’m better than you” and stuff like that. They made fun of the kids that didn’t live in the nicer houses. I mean I lived in a three- bedroom, two-story house but it wasn’t one of the \$250,000, three- story houses.

As girls find space to develop within the arena of high school, they learn an early lesson that privilege is often determined by group membership, conformity, and socioeconomic status. The girls in this study learned that their options for group membership had a tendency to be limited to groups where the students were similar to them. As Maria states, “there wasn’t much cross-pollination” between groups or as Abby pointed out, “if you tried to join another [higher status] group, you’d probably get rejected.

### **Groups in the school cafeteria**

High school is a place that is often as hated as it is revered by those who attend. It is a venue where adolescent boys and girls negotiate between the changes in their bodies and the world of high school academics, activities, and social groups. As the young women spoke of the ways in which they became a part of a group during high school, many saw themselves as belonging to their own *created* groups where membership required civility, inclusion, and niceness about each member. To be a member of one’s created group is to not be a part of a named category such as *the* popular group, skaters, jocks, or cheerleaders.

Instead, some women proclaimed their membership within *their* group which they and their friends developed. Creating a new group rather than working to join an existing group provided a significant space for the empowerment of some of the young women. For example, Coral proudly referred to her group as “the loser lounge,”

I had a tight-knit group of friends for the most part. We sat at this table in the cafeteria that we called “The Loser Lounge” cause we were kind of like the “left-overs” when everybody else had made their groups of friends. We were all just kind of “there”. We ended up; we were really close by the end.

Coral was proud of being part of “the loser lounge” where each member reclaimed her or his sense of agency as they chose to name themselves “losers.” This group chose to create a group and select a name that if used by the popular group would have been pejorative, rather than being a source of strength for each member.

Several of the young women in this study identified the cafeteria as a primary site where the dynamics of group hierarchies play out. These women often made jokes regarding themselves, their group, and the relationship each had to the “popular group” within the culture of their particular school. Just as Coral referred to her friends as “the loser lounge,” Alanna describes her group as; “they were kind of like the dorky music kids.”

Some groups served as spaces of empowerment and agency for some of the young women. For example, Laura’s group served as a sort of “life boat” for those students who had run into conflicts within their own groups or who did not have a group of their own.

My table essentially was the “catch all table,” that’s what they called it. If somebody was having a fight with somebody in their group, they would come and sit at my table. My group started off as five or six people, we lost a couple then picked up another table that split between two different groups.



Girls' abilities to create social peer groups that lie outside of the pre-established high school social order demonstrates one of the ways in which young women were able to act as agents for their own lives and develop positive, safe spaces. Their ability to form and later name their group demonstrated a form of self-promotion that is normally reserved for "the" popular group.

The school lunch cafeteria often served as a space where many of the young women of this study were able to situate themselves in proximity to or away from *the* popular groups, but where their own unique group that had its own criteria for membership. Some groups situated themselves near the popular group which may provide a feeling that their group had a higher position on the hierarchy. Others moved as far away from the popular group as was possible as a sign of complete rejection of the group members and group rules.

Throughout these interviews young women seemed surprised when I asked them to describe for me what they believed the criteria was for membership within their own group. It seemed that until then, they had only considered that they did *not* meet the criteria of the other groups. These young women reflected on the social and hierarchical dynamics of the high school lunch setting and some commented that they had not thought about "entrance criteria" for their group, but acknowledged a conscious awareness of the criteria for groups to which they were not members. However, after reciting the criteria of the popular groups, each girl listed what she believed to be the criteria for membership within her own group. The requirements for membership by each young woman's created group was often antithetical of the criteria of the popular group.

Sometimes lunch scheduling resulted in a separation of peer groups. Depending on the way a student's schedule may be adjusted, she could find herself in a position where she is not scheduled with anyone in her social group. Changes in the schedule and the resultant group

formations served as empowering opportunities for some young women or could serve as a space of further crisis and alienation for others. Maria explains the importance of the lunch scheduling,

Lunch was *big*. You randomly got assigned to one of three lunches and sometimes none of your friends were in your lunch and maybe one year they were all in your lunch. Sometimes your lunch would change with the semester and you would lose all of your friends and the next semester be in another lunch and have to form a whole other social lunch group. Lunch was where people really defined their friends.

Even as Maria explains the possibility of social disaster, where a student may be scheduled for a lunch hour that was different from her “usual” group, she notes that it is important to form a new lunch group. Her statement that “lunch was where people really defined their friends,” speaks to the challenges that the supposed “simple” act of eating lunch can bring within a high school environment.

From a student perspective, lunch is not about the food, nor is it about the practical need for students to have a significant break from the rigorous structure of the classroom; lunch is *all* about friends and social groups. It is here where girls are often able to create a group space for themselves and where they are able to place their group within the social hierarchical structure by the physical proximity to or away from the popular group.

### **Extracurricular activities**

The young women recognized that the cafeteria played a significant role in the social dynamics that are performed within, around, and among other student peer groups. However, this is only one space where groups emerge. Not all social groups are formed within the cafeteria context. Extracurricular activities also played a role in the ways in which the women of this study maintained agency within their lives, when it was at all possible.

Chrissie, who is white, transferred from a large, southern, rural high school in Georgia to a much smaller, suburban school in the northeast. Chrissie wanted to be a part of the “cool group.” Chrissie defined the cool group as the group that was most popular, who had cool cars and parties, had an abundance of requests for dating, and most of whom were cheerleaders and football players. In describing her arrival to her new school she said,

...like as soon as you move somewhere you start like, whether you know the people or not, putting labels on people. And like right away, I was like, “that’s the cool group.” ...so I became friends with them because I got into cheerleading and so most of the girls were cheerleaders... ever since I was younger I kind of liked to be in the cool group. And then finally when I was a senior I was in the cool group because I had parties and had a cool car. I know I was in the cool group.

Chrissie, Coral, and Laura each demonstrate through their experiences ways in which girls create ways to identify with a group. This group identification sometimes leads to the creation of safe space for those who, most likely, would not have been considered for group membership within the popular group. Laura and Coral each described their groups as “catch all” groups or as “left-overs” once the higher status groups had been formed.

The women in this study each faced “choices” about which activities each would participate. “Choice” is once again about making a “right” choice that will lead to adult financial autonomy where each young woman is no longer dependent on her parents, and where she feels she has earned her “freedom.” This particular choice can be illusory and may show itself as an internalized structure of peer status privilege that may later be interpreted as having made a “wrong” choice. The pressure to choose options that the upper end of the social hierarchy finds acceptable and appealing may, at times outweigh the practical need to prepare for the future as an adult. In the meantime, if students or their parents are not savvy in the ways of lobbying for

classes that will prepare the student for further education, students may select schedules based upon what classes most of their friends are taking. Eckert (1989) explains,

...students are expected to view their curriculum as the product of their own choice. At the same time, the question of adult occupation becomes more concrete and directly dependent on curriculum and the “choice” of occupation, or at least occupational level is made almost simultaneously with the “choice” of curriculum. ...the social structure of the student cohort dominates virtually all aspects of life...choices are restricted not so clearly by adult judgment as by peer social boundaries (pp.11-12).

Young women may choose to participate in many extracurricular activities and will likely choose the same activities as their friends in their peer group. Some students may choose activities and make new friends as a result of their involvement, as was Maria’s hope when she joined the cross-country track team. She soon discovered that she was not a part of the already established group on the team and could not gain entry because she was not a very fast runner.

### **Adults in girls’ lives**

Throughout this study, I have explored the experiences young women encountered as they thought about high school reflexively, meaning that from their current positions situation within a college environment, they described their experiences and considered the meanings of those experiences. Themes of the operation of school cliques and young women’s relationships to or within those cliques emerged from these stories. Imbedded within many stories are experiences of social exclusion and alienation, such as in the cases of Maria and Stephanie, or social inclusion with subordination to a group leader, as in Chrissie’s situation. There were also stories of victimization that crossed the line from “bullying” to breaking the law, as in the cases of Darla and Nicole.

When Darla first shared her story of sexual victimization with me, my immediate reaction produced thoughts that perhaps she had not told any adults about her ex-boyfriend's outrageous behavior, thus the reason that there was no intervention. I was surprised when I found that Darla *had* reported her ex-boyfriend to the security guards, teachers, and to the boy's parole officer. Yet Darla continued to be victimized by this boy, without adequate, if any, adult support during her crisis.

Darla told her mother what had happened and her mother encouraged her to tell the "authorities at school." She told all who would listen, but none were able to stop this boy's continued harassment and embarrassment of Darla. Darla was proud of the fact that she waited until she was seventeen years old to become sexually active. She felt betrayed by her ex-boyfriend, school officials, and security personnel at the school, and disclosed to me that she had sought the help of a therapist.

Darla went to a therapist, but because of her family financial circumstances she was left to depend on her local community mental health agency. While such agencies provide important and crucial services to individuals in crisis such as Darla, they are frequently under-funded which then limits the number and variety of therapists who work for the organization. When a client enters such an agency and requests service, she may be placed on a waiting list because of the limitations of staff and the constant need for service by the community. Because of the high demand for services and low resources of the agency, clients rarely, if ever, are able to select the therapist they see.

People who have the financial resources may choose to select a therapist who works in a private practice. Individuals who cannot afford to pay out-of-pocket expenses for therapy are left with little "choice" regarding which therapist in the community mental health agency they

are able to seek out and develop a therapeutic relationship. Community mental health therapists provide quality therapeutic services to their clientele, however, the clients of community mental health centers often do not have comparable choices about who they select as their therapist to those who are able to pay for private therapy services.

The client-therapist relationship is crucial to the success of therapy. It is important that the client trusts and feels understood by the therapist. Darla described her therapist as being more than forty years her senior. While age difference is often not a detriment to the therapeutic relationship, it presented problems that impacted Darla's therapeutic experience. Darla said that she felt judged as soon as she began speaking with the therapist. When Darla mentioned the ongoing humiliation perpetrated by her ex-boyfriend, she said the therapist changed the subject. Darla recounts her experience,

She just changed the subject. I went back to it because I was really angry and needed help and she just asked me how I felt about my mother. My problem was not with my mother, it was with this boy. She [the therapist] seemed to be nervous about it when I brought it up, so I finally just let it go. I didn't go back to her, but I think I should see someone.

When I spoke with Darla, she was very frustrated with what she felt was a lack of adult support. Darla had reported to school officials that this boy was showing pictures to everyone around the school, but the school administration had not disciplined him. She reported the problem to the boy's probation officer who was unable to substantiate Darla's claims. Darla reported it to school security guards, but Darla believed that the boy had developed a "buddy" relationship with the guards which added to reluctance on their part to adequately investigate the incident. Darla spoke to her mother who encouraged her to take action, but together they were unable to prove that the boy still had the picture on his telephone. Darla's lack of physical evidence that

the picture existed and her experience with the boy's probation officer, left her wary of the criminal justice system and she opted not to press charges.

Nicole also had a negative opinion of the criminal justice system. As her story slowly unfolded during our interview, Nicole made it clear to me that her father's role had been instrumental in encouraging her to press charges against the neighbor in the voyeurism case. Nicole told me of her experience on the witness stand when pressing charges against her neighbor. I waited to hear her tell me that her father supported her through a rape trial, as he had done with the voyeurism case. I was surprised to find that she did not press charges; Nicole refused to go through another trial in which she was a victim. I previously noted that her experience with the criminal justice system added to her distrust of adults, the extent of which is expanded upon through the rest of her story.

When Nicole described her experience of having been watched by an adult male neighbor, and then having been raped at a party by a young man who barged into the bathroom while she was there, she showed little emotion. She appeared to be so resigned to what had taken place that she no longer felt anger or other emotion toward the events. I later found this unemotional display to be Nicole's false bravado. While she spoke, I gently probed for more information about her feelings at the time, what actions she had taken, and the results gleaned from those actions.

Nicole began to feel more comfortable in our setting and permitted herself to display her feelings of disappointment and anger towards her father and the men involved in both events. She initially said that what had happened, meaning the rape and voyeurism by the neighbor as she dressed and showered, did not matter to her. Yet it appeared to me that these events and their lack of a just conclusion were *very* important to her. Nicole had twice been victimized. On

both occasions she had been accused by males of either “asking” for the victimization or of making up the story. First, the defense attorney for the neighbor whose voyeuristic tendencies brought her and her family to press charges against him, suggested that she somehow had invited him to watch her. Later, her father accused her of manufacturing the story of her rape that occurred at a party she attended. Nicole first describes the voyeurism which she calls stalking, followed by her rationale for not pressing charges against the boy who raped her:

He lived down the street and was a very good friend of ours that just looked in our windows, looked in our showers while me and my sister were taking showers. I don't know. Big ordeal. I ended up going to court and had to testify because he saw me in the shower. And after that experience I will stay away from the courts as much as I possibly can. Basically, I don't know if you've ever had to testify, but the other, whoever is questioning you, not your attorney, but the other attorney; they like to try to twist your words and try to confuse you. Hell, I was like seventeen at the time—sixteen when it happened and seventeen when I had to testify. It's NOT fun, especially when you're the victim of something. And I can only imagine if it was a rape charge going to court and there was drinking, stuff like that. I had a beer, like I was definitely not drunk. I knew exactly what I was doing at all times and all I did was to go into the bathroom and he just followed me in there. But I didn't even want to imagine that [testifying against him in court].

Nicole began to express her emotions and thoughts as I listened and provided her with the opportunity to speak and be heard. She acknowledged her anger and feelings that she had been betrayed by her father and by the legal system.

I guess I am just really mad about what happened. I mean, I didn't do anything wrong and I still got blamed. Even my dad didn't believe me. I wasn't the one who was wrong. They were wrong, all of them. Those men, my dad, that lawyer. They don't know what it is like to go through something like that. They just think you should just tell about it and that's it. But when my dad didn't believe me and said if I didn't press charges then I must not have been raped, I just gave up. He didn't understand how hard it was to testify with that lawyer twisting everything.

Nicole was angry. I believe Nicole had been angry from the time these events happened to her, but she had not been afforded many opportunities to be believed without also being blamed.



Nicole imposed social isolation upon herself by the time she graduated. She had decided that having two good friends was much better for her than having many so-called friends that were not really friends, but who expected her to engage the activities they chose.

Unlike Nicole who self-imposed her withdrawal from social peer groups, Maria struggled with her feelings of alienation and spent most of her time with her sister. She described her sister as being surer about herself than Maria was about herself. One reason she attributed her sister's different comfort level at school was her sister's heterosexuality and so "she fit in better," according to Maria.

Maria was very aware of her attraction to other girls, but she was unable to give meaning to how she felt. She describes her feelings and her process of sexual identity development as,

I had a crush on a girl all through middle school, but I didn't associate that with being gay, exactly. I didn't associate that it meant I was gay, it was just sort of natural that I liked this girl and I thought, is this obsession a crush? I started to think about it and realized that I actually liked a lot more girls than her. I started to think to myself, oh yeah, she's cute and she's cute... Like before that, it was just this one girl and every once in a while some other girls, but I didn't recognize what it was, because I never met anyone else who was gay.

Even though Maria was going through a process of self-exploration, she was able to situate herself in positive, safe spaces where she felt comfortable. She described her high school as being "very big, it was a campus." Maria felt that the size of the school afforded her protection from harassment by others. She said it was easy to "not really fall through the cracks, but to hide in them."

Maria found her space in the theatre arts class where she described the teacher as "an awesome theatre arts teacher...he was so funny and great...and he encouraged weirdness." It was through this teacher's class, and with his support, that Maria was able to finally express

herself. She loved performing and was naturally funny. She was recognized for her talent and describes the experience,

I was one of the better or funnier kids in the class and was most enthusiastic. I remember I got recognition for it. For being weird and funny and a lot of middle kids were in that class. But I was cool in that class and so suddenly, I was cool and like some of these kids, I'd see them later in the hall and they'd be like, what's up? And I felt good. Yeah, that's the place. It wasn't until my junior year that I felt that was cool and that things were better.

Just as in the earlier case of Coral and the “loser lounge,” Maria reclaimed her sense of personal agency against the school social structure by proudly claiming her “weirdness” while having the support of the theatre arts teacher. By doing so, she no longer felt alienated. She found her positive, safe space within the school's theatre arts department, where she eventually experienced recognition for her performances. The recognition of Maria's talent by the teacher and her fellow classmates allowed her to transcend the differences with other status peer groups and she found that the “popular kids” were saying hello to her in the halls.

Schools serve as one space for the development of boys and girls. When it comes to the bodies of students, schools seek to maintain separation of the sexes when issues of desire, sexual activity, or sexual identity emerge. However, the student body is seen as the most important functional unit of any given school, regardless of whether it is a primary, secondary, or post-secondary educational setting. Under an unspoken proclamation of heteronormativity, boys and girls are united as the student body, where in some schools, girls who are cheerleaders and boys who are athletes are held in high esteem as members of “the” popular group.

Girls who are not members of high status peer groups may feel alienated and powerless. The activities of the school cafeteria seem to be most critical to social survival during high school. With the exception of one young woman in this study, none were members of “the”

popular group. As they now look at high school from an analytical and reflexive perspective, many recognized that they were not at the bottom. Abby stated this realization by saying, “I was not part of the most popular group, but I wasn’t at the bottom of the totem pole either.” This active recognition that she was not at the “bottom of the totem pole” indicates Abby understands that there was a social position during high school.

The creation of a social group, regardless of who eventually become members, seems to be an integral part of the creation of positive, safe spaces during high school. The young women of this study who chose to create, rather than work hard to join an existing group, found that being a part of a “named” group seemed to place them in a higher social position within the school. The initiative of creating the group served as a space of empowerment for each young woman who became part of a newly created group such as the “loser lounge,” “dorky band kids,” “leftovers,” and “theatre arts kids.”

The presence of adults in the lives of these young women appeared to be marginal, at best. These young women reported having had experiences similar to those already documented in the discourse of bullying. There were adults present much of the time; however their input and impact with high school adolescents were minimal. Darla and Nicole found some adult support, but in the end did not have their victimization experiences resolved in a manner that made them feel that justice had been served. Darla had difficulty in finding adults who would take her plight seriously and help her. Maria found support from the theatre arts teacher, though she had to seek out the theatre and get involved without suggestion from guidance counselors or other teachers. This is not to say that parents were not supportive, many young women named

mothers or fathers as providing adult support to them. However, young men and women spend hours each day at the school. It appears from the stories of these women that school personnel are needed in order to provide a more supportive environment for young women's development beyond 'reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic.

### **PART 3: METHODOLOGICAL AND CONTRIBUTIONS**

In part one, I introduced the focus of the study which included key terms, such as positive, safe spaces; healthy sexual identity; sexual activity; place, space, and desire. I also outlined core dilemmas and the ways girls negotiated those dilemmas of desire, bullying, sexual and anti-gay harassment, and the ways that school may serve as a space for development for girls. In part two, I provided detailed accounts of the stories as told to me by the young women who participated in this study.

Part three provides the summative information and synthesis of the data provided by these young women through their interviews. I return to the dilemmas of positive, safe spaces and silencing and provide an analysis of these dilemmas in relationship to the stories of the young women. This includes further discussion of positive, safe spaces as a literal and metaphorical construct used by girls to work around the silencing that continues to stifle informed, useful discussions about sex, sexual identity, and sexual activities.

Also in this section, I provide further examination of the constructs that girls must negotiate as they struggle to recognize, acknowledge, tell others, and/or act upon their feelings of desire. At times, circumstances that appear to be negative and problematic, such as “bad” reputations, can be used strategically by girls who choose to do so. I examine the ways in which girls are able to construct communities of support during high school. The agency that is developed during high school to strategically construct positive, safe spaces become further

developed and useful as they begin college as young women. Finally, I provide a clear, summative listing of the lessons learned from the stories of these young women about the ways in which they negotiate the terrain of high school at the time when sex is a constant topic among girls (and boys), but mostly in the absence of adults.

## **CHAPTER 5: CHANGING NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES INTO PERSONAL TRANSFORMATIONS**

Throughout this study, my primary goal has been to explore the ways in which teens carve out positive and safe spaces for themselves during late adolescence and early adulthood. Most accomplished this goal. The women of this study willingly shared with me their peer relationships and experiences within the context of high school. As each woman thought about her development, she had the opportunity to engage in a reflexive process about those experiences, making sense of her past as she created a story during the interview. For some women, creating positive spaces was a much more challenging proposition than it was for others. The women of this study shared experiences that covered a broad spectrum, ranging from joy to annoyance to serious humiliation, harassment, and victimization. Yet, having had such experiences, they all developed and refined their agency to become empowered and in control choices they made in response to the situations.

To reiterate my initial definition, *positive safe spaces* is a physical space, within or outside of the walls of schools; it is also a literal and metaphorical expression of peer groupings, friendships, and social communities. Positive safe spaces serves as a place for learning, socializing and identity development for the young women when they were faced with issues such as confusion, taunting by or exclusion by peers or humiliation when their purported sexual activities were thrust into the public arena of school gossip.

Regardless of which group a woman belonged to, many of the participants of this study were faced with at least one negative experience that precipitated a change in the way in which that young woman saw herself in relationship to her peers. Each woman identified one or more negative events where she actively struggled to create a positive safe space for herself.

### **The interview process as transformative for the storyteller**

Some of the women noted that this interview was the first time they had given much systematic thought to labeling and recalling their own developmental process from high school to the present. A few of the women recognized the ways school peer experiences were presently affecting their younger siblings, but some had not, until I asked, considered the ways in which their school peer experiences influenced their own development.

During each interview there was at least one moment when the woman said, “I never really thought about that.” The mysterious “that” was different in each case. Laura’s most significant revelation during the interview occurred when I asked how she was able to reconcile her personal values with those transmitted to her by her all girls’ Catholic school. Based upon what Laura had been sharing, her values and the school’s values and rules were largely divergent. When she was in high school, Laura had also not given tremendous thought to the ways in which she was different from her peers. Laura is a self-described rebel who enjoyed rattling the cage of the school status quo.

Laura said she “was just who she was.” She liked being different and because she was dating boys, her style of challenging authority and posing alternative views were tolerated at the school. In other words, it was Laura’s experience that because she conformed to a heterosexual role and dated boys, it was acceptable for her to act differently in other ways. She told one story of having to care for a “baby” for a few weeks. The “baby” was actually a doll that was to be



cared for just as they would care for an actual human baby. The goal, as portrayed to her class, was to teach each girl responsibility and parenting skills. Laura described to me, her dislike of the exercise and revealed that in order to be able to complete the exercise, she made her baby “a cross-dressing baby named Archie.” Her decisions to have her “baby” cross-dress and to name it Archie was accepted by her teacher at her Catholic high school.

As I thought about Laura’s description of the activities and lessons she learned in her school, I was struck by the continued domestic training of girls during high school. Laura used terms like “open-minded” when describing the functioning of the school and the ideals that she felt were promoted by the school. She felt her that her school encouraged “free-thinking.” In contrast, as I repeatedly reviewed Laura’s interview, I saw the school as traditional and conservative, promoting traditional roles of women through their partnering with a “brother” school for social activities and through, as it was referred to by Laura and other young women of this study who also had the experience, the “baby class” exercise.

I explicitly questioned how Laura could continue to have such allegiance to a school that, in my opinion, promoted ideas and philosophies that were in opposition to Laura’s. After having reviewed the interview numerous times, I realized that I was injecting my own biases and experiences into Laura’s story. During the 1970’s, I attended an urban, public high school and can recall having a class which focused on teaching girls personal grooming and how to care for and bathe a baby. I remember hating all of the mandatory home economics classes during high school, which also included cooking and sewing classes; skills designed to make a girl “marriage-ready.” As an adult, I often thought that it would have been much more beneficial and practical if the school had taught me how to change the oil in my car or how to repair any number of items that seem to regularly break within my house.

I found myself wondering if so little actually changed for girls over the past 30 years. In some ways, things have changed for girls. Today, girls *and* boys now learn how to care for a baby in the “baby” class. Through Title IX legislation and its subsequent enforcement, girls have opportunities to participate in sports and to be eligible for collegiate scholarships based on academics, sports, or other school-based activities. Girls are able to select vocational classes such as automotive repair and carpentry classes, yet they often “choose” not to do so. There is a stronger curriculum to promote the development of girls’ skills in the sciences and in mathematics. These are some overt changes that have taken place that affect the lives of girls by empowering them with skills, academic knowledge, and vocational opportunities. Yet, these young women’s stories show that in other domains, little has changed.

As Laura continued to talk about her school, she focused on the benefits she received as a result of the academic rigor of her school. Laura is currently on a full academic college scholarship. She explained some of her school’s policies and events both while she was a student and after she graduated. Laura frequently described her school as being place that “was liberal and open-minded and encouraged free-thinking.” As she described some of the school rules and policies, I thought of the school as conservative and that it seemed to encourage conformity and tradition. Laura provides an example of what she thought of as “open-mindedness” at her school,

They were teachers but they became more friends, like teacher-friends. It was how is your boyfriend, are you still dating him? Or for example, I found it really interesting there was a huge, huge thing about my boyfriend when I went to my senior prom because he was African-American. Several teachers commented to me that they were proud that I didn’t care that somebody may have a problem with it.

Laura felt supported by the statements made to her by her teachers, while I was suspicious that the teachers had even raised the subject for discussion. If inter-racial dating was accepted, I asked myself, why did the teachers have the need to broach the subject in such a way? Laura also described her school as “a Catholic school that had to be conservative in its administrative policies” as she related the following story:

Donna: What was the atmosphere from teachers and administrators regarding the students’ sexual activities and openness of discussions?

Laura: In terms of sexual orientation, it wasn’t an issue that was addressed, so it wasn’t a controversy. Nobody in my class was stereotypical lesbian teachers. I mean, everyone had long hair or had long or decent length hair. Piercings weren’t an issue because they weren’t allowed in the school dress code. You all had to wear the same uniform or dress up in a particular manner. At the same time, I know after I left, a student came in who was a member of an LBQ group at her former school and it was on her transcript as an activity. They wouldn’t let that transfer over to her transcript at my school.

Donna: What happened then?

Laura: Essentially it was nullified when she transferred. At the same time I went to graduation last year in drag and nobody said anything to me. I wasn’t asked to leave, I wasn’t told to get out. At the same time, people were a little surprised but there wasn’t a huge deal made out of it. There was a teacher who had been the teacher at my grade school. I went to school with his daughter and then he transferred to the high school as a coach. When I saw him, he didn’t say anything except, “good to see you!” so it was OK. And he is now a coach on the basketball team. I think it [the way students were treated by teachers and administrators] was all very person-dependent. I mean the administration had to say that nobody was permitted to express themselves in any way, shape or form, so they were consistent about it all.

Because I was confused about Laura’s claim of her school as “open-minded and liberal thinking,” I asked her if she could give me evidence of her claim. She thought for several seconds about my question and said, “It actually got worse after I left, so I am glad that I got out

when I did.” After further discussion with Laura, I learned that there was a Dean of Students who Laura trusted, often sought advice from, and who provided her with guidance during high school. She described the Dean, “as the bridge between the students, then the teachers and administrators...she was a good person to have there.” After this lengthy story and discussion, Laura stopped for a moment and said, “I guess the school was pretty strict, but I had a good relationship with the Dean, so I didn’t get caught up in the rules too much.”

Laura’s interview process grew from an initial bland recitation of a description of her high school classmates and the peer social structure to an animated and often colorful description of her development within the context of her urban, girls’ Catholic institution. As she spoke, Laura would stop as she realized she was contradicting herself, in her description that the school was liberal, yet very strict. From all appearances (both through her physical animation and her very descriptive accounts of events and people), Laura liked high school and respected the quality of the education she received. As she relived her experiences for me, she did not simply reiterate events as though reading a list of key ideas. Instead, Laura engaged in active analysis of her memories of high school. She often stopped speaking and verbalized her contradiction between the ways in which she *wanted* to interpret the policies of the school versus the ways those policies were administered. Laura said during our interview that the Dean of Students with whom she felt comfortable and actively sought guidance from, was a significance and positive influence on her.

When Laura returned to her school the following year for the graduation ceremony, Laura’s dress violated most aspects of the school dress code that she says she understood and believed to be fair at the time she attended because the dress code had to be followed by everyone. Laura had enacted her final rebellion against the rules of the school by violating the

dress code and countering the heterosexual role to which she had conformed as a student. She dressed in “drag,” meaning she “switched” genders by dressing in male clothing, and she noted that “dressing in drag was great!” The lesson to Laura was that what is acceptable can change, with time. Since she was no longer enrolled at the school, the strict rules of dress and behavior no longer applied to her, so her “radical” change in behavior was not an issue for teachers at the school.

Laura said that dressing in drag to return to her high school for the following year’s commencement made her feel great and she takes great pride in having done it. It was evident from her posture and enthusiasm while she spoke that Laura was proud of the person she was while attending high school and in whom she is presently becoming. Laura reported that this interview was her first opportunity to pull together the threads of her experiences so that she could begin to see a newly woven fabric of experiences, ideals and expectations that now contribute to the person into which Laura has developed.

Denise, who attended a suburban, public school, said she had not thought about the fact that different peer groups did not join together. As she described the segregation between her school’s “popular” group and her own group, she realized that there was a social stratum which she did not cross. Denise said, “It was real rough I guess. You can’t really like cross from one group to another group. Um, if you are in a group of your friends then that’s it. I guess I never really thought about it.” She stopped talking for a moment and made a face that indicated to me she did not like her new realizations. Denise seemed to consider her thoughts only for a moment then shrugged them off in a way that appeared to minimize the emotional threat these ideas may pose for her. She then proceeded to depict the popular group:

You know, the beautiful people, people with money were friends. The ones that are into cheerleading and the ones into football. Like, most of them had parents

who went to [our high school] and who were also in those activities. So like once your parents are in it, then you're in it. It's weird.

In contrast, Denise represented her own group as follows,

Money wasn't an object with us. Or you know looks weren't an object with us. Moreover like what was on the inside, like, what kind of a person you are. We weren't really into the whole football/cheerleading. Our parents have some money but not as much as others. And, uh, we just kind of drifted through. Didn't do much drugs or anything. We, uh, kind of hung out at the pool hall. Basically spent our weekends at [a local restaurant] or sitting in a parking lot somewhere just talking.

I do not know the extent to which Denise's thoughts about the ways in which the groups were structured in relationship to each other made her feel badly, but her facial expression and body posturing indicated some discomfort with the idea. Denise struggled in three instances, to not compare herself to the "popular" group, although she made mention of the socioeconomic class differences within her school. She frequently referred to the popular group as "they" and would stop and say, "I mean, the popular kids/group."

Denise's struggle was sometimes expressed in terms of what she did *not* say. When I asked Denise to describe her own group and the kinds of activities they enjoyed, her voice was upbeat and happy, in stark contrast to the ways her voice trailed off when she referred to the other groups. During the following brief exchange, Denise appeared to want to criticize the "popular" group, but stopped herself before she did so.

Donna: What would your group of friends say about you?

Denise: Probably that I'm a nice person and like to have a good time.

Donna: Define "a good time".

Denise: Goin' out. Going to do something with not, not being like cheap but not spending too much money. You can have more fun without money than...

Without finishing her sentence, Denise switched the focus of our discussion from herself to teachers at her school. She shared a story of two male teachers who had been rumored to have sexually molested some female students. Denise did not know either teacher and there had never been actual proof that these accusations were true.

Denise's community is one where affluence and poverty coexist and in her school, affluence is displayed through designer name-brand clothing worn by students and the cars they drove. I asked Denise what she thought might happen if a student tried to cross over to another group and she said in a matter-of-fact tone, "You'd probably get rejected." Though the specific titles of the groups may change over decades, what remains are systems where peer groups are delineated to denote a student's place in the school's social hierarchy. Denise described a system that placed limitations on the kinds of choices that girls from different levels of the social hierarchy had available to them. Denise was not in the group that provided access to the boys in the popular group. Instead, Denise countered the high school access system by having a boyfriend who is ten years older than she. Denise was able to create a positive, safe space and remove herself from the social stratification based upon money, by having a boyfriend who is much older than any of her peers. The age of Denise's boyfriend was of significant value in the school social system because it meant she made different kinds of choices from those of her peers. In other words, she removed herself from the hierarchy by having a boyfriend who was already graduated from high school and who was already establishing himself as a professional.

Alanna, who was involved with another girl when she was 16 years old, said she knew from an early age that she was attracted to other girls. She dated a couple of boys, but was unhappy and realized that she felt a sexual desire and intensity toward another girl who she

eventually began dating when she was sixteen. She said, “when I realized my feelings toward this other girl, I thought, ‘oh, that’s what has been wrong before’ when dating boys. At the young age of sixteen, Alanna and her girlfriend already knew that they had to hide their relationship and remain secretive about their sexual activities. Desire, so it seemed for Alanna and her girlfriend, was difficult to contain and disguise, and eventually their “secret” was out when they were confronted by their mothers. Alanna’s lesson from the experience was that she had to be more careful about her sexual activities, but her desires never “changed” to make her desire having sex with boys.

Throughout our interview, Alanna’s anger and frustration about the way she acknowledged her desires for other girls to her family is still evident. When speaking of the ways she initially lied to her mother when confronted about notes her mother found in Alanna’s room, she kept shaking her head back and forth, as if shaking her head “no.” Alanna sighed and looked down at the table. At the end of our interview, she returned to that story and said, “I really regret having lied to my parents. I hated that and still hate that I did that. I was just young and scared.” I then asked Alanna to return to her present relationship with her parents, which she had described to me as “being really good with my family now.” As she thought about the present, Alanna looked up and said,

One day last semester, I was talking to my mom and told her I was involved with someone. She said, “you know what? It’s fine with me. I’m really cool with it. I want to be able to meet whoever you are dating” and stuff like that. So everything since then has been really good with my family. My dad’s been more accepting and you can tell—he tries to mention it without, like, using the words! [He’ll say things like] “So, how’s *life*? How are *people*?”! It has turned out real nice, but high school was rough.



As Alanna focused on her present relationship, she was able to outwardly acknowledge the negative nature of her mother's confrontation and her response of lying. However, through further dialogue, Alanna said that she also recognized the ways in which her relationship with both of her parents has improved and that she remains truthful with them about her sexual identity. As she mentioned often in her interview, Alanna focuses on the future. She was also focused on the past, and in her case, the interview afforded her the opportunity to focus on the present and her improved relationship with her parents.

Each young woman within this study had an opportunity to tell her own story. Fontana & Frey (2003) refer to polyphonic interviewing as a style "in which the voices of the subjects are recorded with minimal influence from the researcher and are not collapsed together and reported as one, through the interpretation of the researcher (p.81)." I gathered my data during the interviews by asking subject oriented, open-ended questions that allowed each woman the opportunity to engage in a free-flowing monologue of her experiences. This open discussion created opportunities for each young woman to offer stories from her own standpoint and allowed her to engage in reflective thinking about those stories. Through the interview, young women such as Denise and Laura were able to have a transformative insight into previously negative high school experiences. This insight empowered each of them to recognize that she was able to negotiate situations to her advantage.

### **The interview process as transformative for the researcher**

The interview process can be one of transformation for both the interviewee and interviewer. Denzin (1989) describes epiphanies that occur during the interview process as "those interactional moments that leave marks on people's lives and have the potential for creating transformational experiences for the person (p.15)." Alanna, Laura, and Denise, and others

developed transformative insight into their high school experiences. They each developed new insights into what had been some of the more difficult aspect of high school; the negotiation of peer groups, sexual relationships, and sexual identity. Interviewing was a transformative process for me as well as for some of the women I interviewed.

Getting started in the interviewing process was not an easy task, even though I believed I had thoroughly thought the process through. My goal was to complete twenty interviews with young women who were presently enrolled in a college or university. I wanted to speak with young women who identified as straight and women who identified as LBQ. Initially, I sent out inquiries to fellow faculty members and to student organizations at various colleges and universities, requesting assistance in the recruitment of volunteers. I had few responses and none turned into actual interviewing opportunities which meant that I needed to try another way of recruiting. I revised my letter to make a more general request seeking young women to speak about their experiences as high school seniors, including dating, peers, and other activities and again asked the help of my colleagues. Locating potential participants for a research study is a much more difficult endeavor than I had originally believed. I knew it would be difficult, but had not considered some of the situations I might have to resolve or get involved in.

Using a more general, much shorter letter was more fruitful in that it yielded volunteers who actually met me for the interview. During the early stages of interviewing I learned that I should not take being stood up for an appointment as a personal affront. Perhaps some participants did not want to speak to me and left when they got into the vicinity where we had agreed to meet, others may have forgotten or had simply gotten too busy. Scheduling appointments and being stood up was all part of this data collection process. Not all of the women who volunteered became actual participants of the study.

In order to meet my participants, I had to be comfortable in standing out in some way so that participants could find me. It was humbling to have to describe myself with graying hair and as middle aged so that the young women would be able to select me from a crowd, though we never met in densely crowded places and I was most often the oldest person present. I realize that my age alone may have been a factor that made some young women change their minds about meeting me.

Locating young women to participate in my study who were lesbian or bisexual proved to be a bit more challenging than I had anticipated. I contacted LBQ organizations on various college campuses and all responded kindly saying they would pass along my information, though to whom, I did not know. I had to learn about the internet world of teenage and young adult social engagement whereby I had to create an online profile in order to become a member of an online community. I used this avenue to simply peruse the names of the LBQ organizations with which students were participating. This enabled me to save time going from meeting to meeting and office to office trying to find which organizations on which campuses were viable resources for my study and who the contact people were. I even had one young woman make a request of me to let her add me to her “friend list,” although I declined the invitation. Receiving the email that a total stranger was making a request to be my friend made me realize how arbitrary the internet can be and how quickly a person could become a target of unscrupulous predators. I suddenly realized the vulnerability of Celeste’s online journal experience when my 21 year-old nephew found my online profile.

As a researcher who had inserted myself into a community made up primarily of undergraduate students, I felt I had to clearly state my age and list myself accurately on this website. It is crucial to maintain the highest ethical standards as a researcher. The internet

environment can be a useful resource and I felt it was important for me to maintain accurate information about myself on this site in order to maintain the integrity of this study. I had no intention of participating as a friend or peer on this website and used it only as a mechanism to locate the accurate contacts for various student organizations who I then contacted in person.

During one particularly frustrating day, I shuddered at the thought of taking out an advertisement in one of the free papers that are circulated on college campuses. The wording of such an idea escaped me; I was afraid that no matter how I worded the advertisement, it would be read and interpreted as, “wanted: lesbians and bisexual women for sex talk.” Fortunately, I did not have to go to such lengths; I simply had to find the proper entry point into the undergraduate, non-heterosexual world, a task with which I finally had success.

Through a colleague, I found out about an upcoming gay-straight alliance meeting at one of the local colleges. This meeting allowed me to meet the members, though they were mostly male. In my meeting, there was one young woman who said she wanted to participate in the study, though I was never able to confirm an appointment with her. In my undying effort, I sat outside of other LBQ organization offices on other college campuses until someone arrived who could tell me when and where the next meeting would be held and how I could get onto the agenda. Sitting on the floor outside of an office waiting for people was not the easy task it used to be for me and I stood out like a sore thumb. Because of my age, I really stood out when I attended the meetings of undergraduate LBQ groups. However, once I established who I was and that I wanted their voices in my study; the attendees of the LBQ group meetings were very gracious. After several months of frustration and disappointment, I found volunteers who were lesbian or bisexual who agreed to be interviewed and who kept their appointments with me.

Establishing rapport for the interview is essential in gaining an understanding of the participant's story and position within the story. Without presenting myself as credible and willing to listen to their stories, I would not have been successful in my recruitment of volunteers. I knew I would have to convince the LBQ groups that it was not my goal or intent to exploit their experiences in any way and provided explanation that they were not being compared to straight girls. This is a sensitive issue because a comparison to straight girls is an indirect way of affirming heterosexuality as normative and implying non-heterosexuality as deviant.

In order to gain access to the LBQ group and to have them actually talk with me, I had to be open with them about my own lesbian identity. Comedian Kate Clinton refers to middle-aged lesbians as “stealth” because we are not as readily recognizable as we were in our twenties and while I once still laugh about her use of the term, I have it found to be more true than not. I felt that I had to tell the group that I was a member of their community, though I did not feel the need to stand up and proclaim myself as lesbian as if I had entered into a twelve-step recovery program. I did not want anyone in the room to think I was posing as lesbian or trying to quickly establish myself as an ally. I needed to make sure they knew that I was “safe” and revealing myself as a lesbian provided that security for the group. I simply needed to be honest.

It was important to the groups and to me that I established that my participant group was homogeneous. The focus was on the experiences of all of the young women. This study is not a comparison between women where lesbian and bisexuals would be singled out and studied as having some pathology in development in comparison to “normal” straight girls.

### **Management of social pressure during high school**

High schools are places where youth “try out” for many things such as athletic teams and cheerleading squads, but they also begin to examine ways or “try out” to be adults. Some try

desperately to fit into the social structure, even when faced with pressures of conformity of behavior and dress with which they do not agree; others opt out of the social strata by deliberately dressing or acting differently than the school's "popular" group expects. Some students simply become targeted by members of the peer groups for no apparent reason except that the group perceives them as easy targets. Other students become targets because of their perceived or actual sexual identity, sexual reputation, or some other distinguishing feature that a group arbitrarily selects, as in the case of Stephanie who was called a duck.

Some of the women who participated in this study viewed their space as being outside of the social hierarchy, while a few proudly stated that they were a part of their school's "popular" peer group and ranked at the top of the social order. Young women who were not part of the popular groups often believed that those who participated in the popular group were unaware of how it might feel to be treated like they treated students in lower status groups or who were not members of any particular group. What became apparent to me during this study was even members within groups were targeted for jokes, gossip, and social exclusion by their own groups. Chrissie and Celeste were members of the "popular" groups and were subject to the school taunting and they knew from their own experiences how it felt to be treated in the denigrating ways in which they sometimes treated others.

Chrissie told of being the subject of jokes throughout her school's gossip network. In Chrissie's case, membership in the popular group came with a price that included being made the subject of laughter or allowing her friends to call her a nickname that others might find offensive. She said the boys were often "mean" to her. Chrissie's goal of being a part of the "cool group" when she moved to the northeast from her southern roots of Georgia, led her to

become a cheerleader. Chrissie describes her cheerleading abilities and her role as clown on the cheerleading squad:

I wasn't the best cheerleader 'cause I only did it one year before in Georgia and I wasn't the best cheerleader. So I brought a lot of laughs, like I'm "oh my God! I can't do this cheer!" And, people, they thought it was hilarious. I had a whole lot of fun. I'm really glad I did cheerleading. Like, being in front of everyone and going on the bus trips, all that was real fun. And through that you made friends with all the girls.

From this, I wondered to myself whether Chrissie made the cheerleading squad, not because of her talent, but perhaps because of her physical appearance. Eder *et al.* (2003) in their three year ethnography of a Midwestern middle school describe cheerleading tryouts,

Although school officials attempted to professionalize the selection of new cheerleaders by including cheerleaders and secondary teachers as judges, it was clear that appearance continued to be an important selection criterion. The teacher who organized the tryouts told the judges to keep it in mind as they selected the candidates...pay attention to the person's weight...if you don't like the way they look, you wouldn't like them to stand in front of you (p.104).

As I stated in chapter two, it was very important to Chrissie to be a part of the "cool" or "popular" group at her school. She tolerated being the subject of jokes as a cheerleader and eventually developed a reputation as being, a "'ho" (an abbreviated slang version of the word "whore") in the school and allowed herself to have the nickname, "Chrissie-'ho." This label was in reference to her engagement in sexual activities. Chrissie explained that she did not have sexual intercourse with everyone she dated, but the boys would tell their friends that she did. For Chrissie, her comedic cheerleading antics coupled with her sexual reputation and cool car were her tickets to popularity. I noted earlier that Chrissie stated during her interview that high school would probably always be "her glory days."

As Chrissie told her story, I began to think about the ways in which young women learn about sexual reputations and peer pressure. Chrissie learned that if she played along with the jokes and allowed her nickname to be used as a term of endearment rather than insult, that she could attain her goal of membership within the popular group. Yet when Chrissie spoke, she was conflicted about this portrayal of herself to me. She seemed to be concerned about what I might think of her and she often framed her story with phrases such as, “I know this was probably bad, but...” It was apparent that she viewed school as a wonderful, fun experience and she did not feel victimized as a sexual being. Some may believe that Chrissie was victimized through the assignment of her nickname and reputation as being “Chrissie-‘ho,” but Chrissie was eventually able to use this label to her advantage. She understood there to be a societal set of unspoken guidelines that she was expected to follow and which included the standard that discussion of sex and desire were not for “good girls.” Yet she made a choice to live as she wanted to live and “broke the rules” by displaying her sexual desire. For Chrissie, her choice yielded her intended results: membership in the popular group.

Coupled with a high school social structure of “popular” groups is peer pressure about sexual activity, style of dress and physical features, to name a few, that often surround students’ interactions, and behaviors. For example, Abby proclaimed that she “loved high school and would go back in a minute,” as she described her own social position. One condition of membership in the most “popular” group in her school was financial affluence, as similarly noted from Denise’s story. Abby said,

I didn’t have a huge group of friends, I had like my few close friends and we met each other after every class and most of us had lunch together. Um...we had a few classes together, but other than that I mean, it was a pretty good experience, you know. I wasn’t the popular kid but I wasn’t at like the bottom of the totem pole...most of the popular kids lived in the nice big houses and they were like “I’m better than you” and stuff like that... the popular group was the ones where



you had the nicest clothes, the name brand clothes, Abercrombie and Fitch, and the jocks were you had to be a jock, like football, basketball, baseball, and hockey were our 4 biggest sports.

Abby used a sarcastic emphasis as she spoke of nice, big houses and designer clothing, mocking the expectation and indicating that some of her peers thought it was disastrous if they could not fit into the popular group. While some of Abby's peers saw group status as an important part of having a positive experience, she did not.

Abby's insight into the groups, their status and membership requirements was voiced almost flippantly, but the content carried a powerful message that "popular" is not revered by everyone. This struck me and led me to think about the high school peer groups differently. Abby said,

There was, like, the popular kids, then the jocks, then like the dorky kids I guess you could say, the smart kids and then there was just like the skaters who wore the big baggy clothes and you had the just normal people like *me* and all my friends.

She laughed as she called herself and her friends "normal." By "normal," Abby mean that her friends did not stand out and draw attention like the members of the popular group. Abby's remark made me think about the ways that the research (Eckert, 1989; Eder *et al.*, 2003; Wiseman, 2002) has focused on the operation of school social groupings in contrast to this study where I place the focus on the way girls negotiate within and around the groups. The groups themselves are not the subject of this research; the individual young women are the subject. Abby's remark points to what is often forgotten, is that the vast majority of students do not fit into any of the positively or negatively esteemed categories. Abby puts into context, the social groupings and demands of membership for the small percentage of students. The vast majority of students can identify the clique groups, but most do not consider that they have membership in

any of the groups. What researchers may refer to as “outsiders” (Rofes, 2005), Abby referred to as “normal.”

Most of the women of this study described themselves in one of the following ways: as participating on the fringe of popular groups; being “just your normal kids,” having their own friends; or as being a part of their own group which was not recognized as one of *the* in- groups. With the exception of Chrissie, these women did not participate with *the* most popular of groups, and some thought that their group fell under the “geek” or “nerdy” label. The women who were not members of socially recognized “popular” groups at their school often expressed that they were happy without being members of any specific groups. Those who had their own groups felt less pressure to conform to any standards of dress or behavior that were elevated by the higher status groups such as the popular group, the jocks, or the cheerleaders. This does not mean that women of the fringe groups did not ever feel peer pressure; they acknowledged that they did. Coral, Dorcy, and Denise, among others, said they did not feel the need to heed to peer pressures put on them by their own groups. They said that no matter what they did, they continued to be accepted by their friends.

### **Sexual desire, activities, and deafening silence**

I focused my study on the ways girls created positive spaces for sexual identity development and a key factor that often arose was the creation of a support system. Those struggling with feelings of sexual desire had to decide what to do about those feelings: to act upon those desires to engage or not. For some of the women, the only discussion that occurred regarding sexuality was with friends because there were few, if any, other opportunities to have open discussion with adults and their parents. Parents were not the adult group of choice for most of the women in this study when it came to discussions about sexuality. The young women have discussions of

sexual activity because desire is rarely named for girls and instead, is often simplistically framed as sexual activity.

Denise explains that she felt the most pressure to participate in sexual activity when she and her friends engaged in discussions,

Not necessarily from the people I dated but more from like friends who had lost their virginity and they were telling me about it so now it's like "oh well, they lost theirs and now I have to lose mine." More like peer pressure with your friends. A lot of people were experimenting and trying things.

Despite the pressures she may have felt from her friends, Denise stated she was very comfortable telling her friends that she did not want to talk to them regarding which sex acts she may or may not have participated in. What was nice, she said, was that "they were always OK with whatever any of us decided to do."

Denise made decisions about if or who to tell of her sexual activities, though she did not indicate that she gave thought to the ways in which she came to understand her wanting to engage in sexual activities with a boy. Active recognition that a *process* of sexual identity development exists was much more evident in women who identified as LBQ. The young women in this study who identified as straight were much less aware of sexual identity development as a process; to them, it was simply assumed. They desired young men and in a heteronormative culture where desiring the opposite sex is presented as "normal," they had not considered the way their sexual identity developed until we spoke more about it during the interviews. Of the women who now identify as lesbian, bisexual, or queer the path to understanding their sexual identity was told to me in a way that indicated each had a greater

awareness that a process existed. Each LBQ woman I interviewed revealed having a much deeper understanding of her process of realizing her own sexual desires of first dating men and then physically desiring women.

During high school, each young LBQ woman among my participants had one or more boys whom she had dated, but later discovered that her sexual desires arose when in the company of one specific woman. For these women the issue of peer pressure was different. Many stated that they dated boys because they were expected to date boys and they had not given thought to how they actually felt sexually. Each had lacked the awareness that her sexual desire existed elsewhere, until they met another girl to whom she was attracted.

As stated earlier in this chapter, Alanna dated boys, but was unhappy. Initially, she thought that her unhappiness stemmed from not dating the “right” boy. Later, she came to a realization that she felt a sexual desire and intensity toward another girl that was not present when she dated boys. As each of these women faced her own sexual desire for a woman, each found her own ways to understand and process her experiences and new desires. Coral, Dorcy, Laura, and Maria all felt that they could never have such a discussion with a parent at the time they had these intense feelings of sexual desire for another woman.

Maria tested several different venues of expressing her desire for women, though none were direct expressions. She described a time when there was a circle of girls at a party when she was 14 years old. Maria provides insight to this event,

I remember I was at a party when I was 14. We all went around a circle and asked a question, like, do you think you are bisexual. Everyone was like, oh maybe, or I don't think so. A lot of girls said maybe, maybe, maybe, but I was the only one who said probably. I remember thinking, like one girl looked at me like “you're daring” and I was kind of like really? Everyone there had basically admitted to being bisexual but I don't think anyone was taking it seriously. I

thought they might think I was lying, but at the same time, something felt right about what I said. I just felt right, and I was 14 years old. Had someone come and asked me directly, I probably would have said no that I wasn't.

In the same instant that she was willing to say that she was at least bisexual, Maria was very cognizant that she would not have admitted directly to anyone her struggles with desiring other girls.

How had Alanna learned that she should remain silent about her feelings when she had really no experience with her own feelings of desire and sexuality? In my discussion in chapter two, I referenced Tolman (2002) in stating that when girls have not been provided a vehicle to discuss the feelings within their bodies, the absence of the language of desire becomes a training ground that teaches girls that they should not express their sexual desire. Alanna could no longer contain her sexual desire, but had no one to whom to speak about it. Sexual desire does not always have to lead to sexual activity. Emihovich & Herrington (1997) express the conflict school health personnel must face when they choose to condone silence of sexual desire and activities.

They can choose to ignore the question of adolescent homosexuality and thus condemn many of these students to a life that most of us would find unimaginable. [Children] can keep the truth to [them]selves and become totally isolated from everyone else...or lie to others and become alienated from [themselves] (p. 161).

Had Alanna been provided with opportunities and language with which to discuss her feelings, perhaps she might have been able to avoid the dramatic confrontation between Alanna, her girlfriend, and their mothers. Open dialogue may have enabled Alanna to have been honest with her mother when her mother initially asked Alanna about her sexual activities, though there is no

way to know if her mother would have responded any differently. Alanna's biggest regret of her "coming out" experience with her family was not their reactions, but that she had initially lied.

The discourse of sexual activity often centers on heterosexual intercourse. When Laura, who identifies as lesbian, was sharing her stories of Catholic school, I asked her "what do you mean by "sex," she replied,

Good point. In terms of what I am calling sex, I am calling sex is sexual intercourse as opposed to sexual activities, so that was intrinsic in the group, even the crew. Most of the time it was with monogamous boyfriends, not with multiple partners. But at the same time, boyfriends were "passed around." It was passing boyfriends from one to the other to the other and sometimes back around to the first girl he began dating.

Yet, when lesbians engage in sexual activity, heterosexual intercourse is not the activity in which they engage. Regardless of sexual identity, girls and boys engage in a wide range of satisfying activities including hand-holding and kissing, oral and anal sex, mutual masturbation, heterosexual intercourse and other sexual activities through which human beings feel fulfilled.

As I spoke with Laura, I came to a realization that in the heteronormative structure of U.S. society, heterosexual intercourse is viewed as *the* defining moment of sexual activity. Regardless of sexual identity as heterosexual or LBQ, with exception of Alanna and Maria, when these young women spoke of "sex," they referred to sexual intercourse. For the LBQ woman, does this view of sexual intercourse as the defining moment that denotes sexual activity serve as some sort of "hidden" societal requirement that sexual intercourse must be tried and rejected in order to make a valid claim that she is LBQ? Many LBQ women have been faced with a direct question by heterosexual men, "have you ever actually *had* sex?" If she answers affirmatively, many times she will face a retort that, "you just haven't had *good* sex with a man," sometimes followed by an offer from the man to provide that which she supposedly has not experienced.

If all of the other activities on the sexual continuum remained unnamed and sexual intercourse is what young men and women refer to as “sex,” there is little opportunity for a realistic discussion of sexual desire since not all sexual desire results in heterosexual intercourse. It is not until bisexual women or lesbians find themselves in their first situation where they are intensely attracted to another woman does the issue of sexual desire come into focus, while continuing to remain unnamed. As Alanna, Coral, and Laura shared their coming-out stories, each emphasized that one difficult aspect for each of them was that she did not know how to handle her intense feelings of desire. Each said that the “feelings” were different than what she felt when she dated boys, and that these “feelings” at times, drove them crazy. Maria was unable to put her feelings to words. She was confused about what it was she felt and, as I noted earlier, said, “This label [being gay] seems kind of alien when you haven’t met anyone else who identifies as gay, you wonder well, how other gay people feel? Do I feel like them?”

Watney’s (1987) argument in chapter one of the assumptions that we are all born heterosexual until something goes “radically wrong” in our development, or until we are “seduced” by someone of the same sex is clarified when considering sex versus desire. The premise of heteronormativity is that non-heterosexuality is deviant, pathological, or a “wrong” choice. This idea of pathology indicates that non-heterosexuality exists as a result of some tragic or traumatic experience that has resulted in a rejection of the opposite sex. Despite the fact that the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual decades ago, the old standard view of pathology remains present.

This myth of “inborn heterosexuality” is weakened as women’s feelings of desire and the continuum of sexual behaviors are considered. Under the pretext of heterosexuality, women are portrayed as sexually passive beings who are supposed to wait to be asked to participate in

sexual intercourse with a man. If it is a woman's sexual role to provide sexual pleasure to the man, it suggests that a woman's sexual desires should be congruent with the man with whom she is having sex. In other words, she should desire him and know what he wants sexually. However, if a woman expresses her desire for men openly in public spaces; she may be labeled a whore, just as when girls express desire for boys during high school.

Lesbians and bisexual women find themselves intensely attracted to another woman during some moment of their sexual identity development. Penile sexual intercourse is not an option, however. When all sexual behaviors are considered to be "sex," there is a wider range of possibilities for all women. The model that expects women to be "sexually passive" and wait to be asked and desired, cannot work between two women, because at least one woman must take an initial action in order for a sexual relationship to occur. There is a point in the relationship process when two women make a decision to engage sexually, together. If they *each* wait for the other to ask, then sexual activities will never happen.

Women recognize and eventually act upon their feelings of desire in order to have a sexual relationship, regardless as to what discussions may or may not have occurred during their development. With the exception of Celeste, who at the time of our interview had not yet had any sexual relationships, in the cases presented in this study each woman who is lesbian or bisexual recognized her sexual desire, engaged in extensive discussion with the woman she desired, and then engaged in sexual activities. Each then maintained silence about her sexual activities for several months after she first became sexually active with the woman. Coral and Denise chose to remain silent about their sexual activities by active choice rather than out of fear



of negative repercussions such as gossip and a damaged reputation. Whether a young woman is LGB or straight when it comes to sexual activity, self-silencing remains a key issue in the development of a *healthy* sexual identity.

When considering their sexual desires, LGB women break the silence of not only discussing, but also acting upon desire. Could it be that the anti-gay rhetoric is partly in recognition that participants in lesbian or gay sexual acts are breaking the silence and bringing desire out of the closet? Historically, members of the LBQ community struggle with the decision as to who to tell of their sexual identity and when to tell it, referred to as “coming out.” LBGT community members are often frustrated at the anti-gay rhetoric because of its focus on specific sexual acts which are often labeled by right-wing conservatives as “immoral,” however, those acts do not stand alone. Sexual activities are interfused with feelings of desire; this is a common denominator among people of all persuasions. Sexual desire exists as a foundation of all peoples’ identity. In the case of lesbian and bisexual women, desire blasts its way to the forefront, creating an image of women that upsets the heteronormative view of women as desirable, but not desiring. Instead, lesbian and bisexual women create an image of women as sexually desiring and who take the initiative to express their sexual desires through sexual activities.

To say that lesbian and bisexual women are the only women who actually experience feelings of sexual desire would be false; straight women also experience and act upon their sexual desires. But, the lesbian and bisexual women of this study spoke with a much greater awareness of their feelings of desire than did the straight women. In my interviews with straight women, during the initial moments of the interview, most spoke as though I assumed their sexual identity. Some of the women, when completing the pre-interview questionnaire were surprised

at the questions, “during high school, what did you consider your sexual orientation/identity to be” and “what do you currently consider your sexual orientation/identity to be?” Lisa and Karen stopped and asked me “what is it called when you like boys,” while Chrissie simply wrote “boys” as her answer to both questions.

Bonnie and Denise stopped when they reached those same questions and said, “I like men, so I don’t know if you want to talk to me,” indicating an assumption that if I had to ask their sexual identity, I must be seeking only lesbians for my study. When I indicated that the question was one of clarification, some women nodded and shrugged off the question, moving on in the interview seemingly assured that I knew *they* were heterosexual, and seeming to assume that, I too, was heterosexual. Unlike my decision to tell the LGBT groups that I was a lesbian, I made a choice to allow the straight young women to assume that I was heterosexual. I based my decision on a concern that some straight young women might be afraid that my study and interview was a guise to “recruit” them to be lesbian rather than a legitimate research study.

Kim was the only straight woman who was open in her belief about my sexual identity as a lesbian. I do not know how she drew her conclusion, but when she raised the issue, I confirmed that I was a lesbian. Kim was the young woman who went to the small Christian school, who when discussing her own dating activities, told me that her activities were confined to dating one boy for approximately four months, during which time they kissed. As Kim described this boy to me, she hesitated for a moment then said, “Well, you’re out so it doesn’t matter,” and immediately continued on to say, “Well, you know the Bible says it is wrong to be homosexual.” Kim then went on to say that the boy she dated turned out to be gay, and his realization of his sexual identity continues to upset Kim. Kim and I spent some time discussing her feelings about her former boyfriend because I wanted to make sure she was not feeling as

though she “caused” him to become gay. She said that she understood that she did not cause it, but that “the Bible says it is wrong” and she does not want him to live “against God,” indicating that his sexual identity was unacceptable according to her religious beliefs. Then, she just looked at me, as though she wanted to say something more to me, but she stopped and went back to discussing her encounters with girls in her high school.

Sexual desire remains a silenced topic for young women. Recognition of desire as the strong sexual feeling of wanting is a basis for young women’s choices of whether or not to engage in which kinds of sexual activities. During high school girls learn that sex is always a topic to be talked about, but rarely in a useful, informed manner. Most adolescent conversations about sex are related to who is having what kind of sex, and how often. During high school, talking about sex is mostly framed by reputations, boys’ sexual prowess, and “good girls” or “whores.” There are few opportunities for constructive, informed discussions about sexual activity, desire, or identity as separate, but entwined issues.

### **Positive spaces as both literal and metaphorical**

*Positive safe spaces* are comprised of those peer groupings, friendships, and social communities that serve as an affirming place for learning, socializing, and identity development. It is physical space within or outside of the wall of schools. It is both literal and metaphorical. Literal positive safe spaces can be found in the school theater arts building as it was for Maria, where she found a sense of belonging and a physical space where the teacher “encouraged weirdness.” The school cafeteria was a positive safe space for Coral, Laura and Dorcy, who each enjoyed their “loser” or “leftover” group. Positive safe spaces is also a metaphor I use to describe strategies these young women used to create opportunities to assert or experience one's identity, as in Chrissie’s case when she used her status as clown on the cheerleading squad or her nickname of “Chrissie ‘ho”

as a way to gain entrance into her desired social group when she was the new girl at school. Throughout this study I have referenced many negative events that the young women of this study experienced while they were still enrolled in high school. Nicole and Darla had serious experiences that many adults might find difficult to handle emotionally, yet each woman as a high school teenager and young college student, dealt with her own issues. Neither had the benefit of little adult intervention.

Stephanie, Celeste, Alanna, Kim, and Maria had problems during high school which, while not as physically threatening as those of Nicole and Darla, were unpleasant and emotionally difficult and left each with feelings of exclusion and isolation at school. The other young women expressed having had experiences which were difficult, but what they felt were “normal” or acceptable for high school and did not feel the need to elaborate on what had taken place. These women had an overall affinity for high school, with Chrissie referring to high school as her “glory days.”

Each of the young women of this study found ways to transform her negative experiences so that she was able to complete high school with an overall feeling of learning and accomplishment. These accomplishments were not only academic, but also included support systems made up of friends and peers. Of the seventeen participants of this study, four named an adult to be part of their primary support group; one was the young woman’s mother, two were teachers the young women encountered during their time as school students. The remainder of the women cited their friends as their primary source of support.

As these women portrayed the events of their lives during high school, our rapport began to build, even during our short time together. I allowed each woman to tell her story using her own voice, making me privy to intimate moments and details that occurred during her

developmental process. Each woman had the opportunity to give thoughtful consideration to the way she experienced high school events, and each reflected on the interactions and dynamics with the teachers, administrators, staff, their peers, parents, and boy/girlfriends.

For example, when I asked what about the openness of the school atmosphere for discussions about sex, sexual identity, and the range of sexual activities, Abby, Karen, Lisa, Coral, and Maria indicated that they had not thought about school “in that way.” Upon further probing, what each said in her own way was that school was not the place where they felt they had support from anyone other than their friends, especially if they needed to talk about their issues, desires, and confusion about relationships and sex. Yet, at one time or another, each woman of this study was confronted with at least one dilemma related to her peer relationships, sexual activities, and/or sexual identity.

In examining the ways in which these women found ways to care for themselves in the midst of chaos and mistreatment, I realized that many of them framed the event so that in the end, they were the victors. Alanna and Nicole each developed a way to re-frame her negative high school experiences into learning experiences. Each used her experience to determine future goals and each feels that she was forced to become more mature at an earlier age than most of her peers. During my interviews with both Nicole and Alanna, each spoke with the wisdom of tough experience and had realistic perspectives about what it might take to attain her future goals.

I am not implying that Nicole has resolved her anger and frustration from the rape via the interview. However, she appeared to have channeled her energy toward a career goal. After the rape, Nicole’s relationship with her parents deteriorated because she no longer had trust in them to protect her. Nicole made a decision to move out of the family home and to live independently

of her parents, providing her with her own space to make decisions about herself and her future.

She explains,

My senior year after I graduated, there was still a lot of drama between me and my mom and my dad. Between the three of us, and I eventually ended up moving out for a few months. Initially I was going to go to school to become a teacher. I decided that's not what I wanted to do. I never really made the decision to teach on my own. I think it was more, just figured, well, that's what everybody says I should do, so I should do it. But, um, after I moved out and I became more of me and was doing things really on my own—I had no influence by my parents. I mean that's [teaching] not what I wanted to do. My sister was in the hospital and I just, I saw how the nurses took care of her. I ended up looking it up on the Internet and I stumbled across the doctors without borders program and became interested in that.

Nicole exhibits an emotional maturity that extends beyond her 19 years and she has learned to be self-reliant. Her ability to make the decisions for her career goal independent of the influence of her parents provided her with a new feeling of independence. Nicole summarized the effects that the events she experienced during high school have had on her presently. She summarized her interview by saying,

Becoming yourself, if you do it the right way, by yourself, it is the best. Basically, if you're not influenced too much by your peers then you find out who you are and what you want to do. I'm really happy about that.

Nicole appeared to be happy with her plans and to be free of the peer pressures she faced as a high school student. She is currently a college student who is doing very well both academically and personally.

Alanna's aspiration toward a career in pharmaceuticals has her focused on her studies. She does not have any scholarship assistance to the university and she must pay the out-of-state tuition rate, which is double the rate of in-state tuition. Alanna wants to take full advantage of learning and get the best value for her tuition money by doing well as a student. While she

would like to be involved in a relationship, she recognizes that she needs to focus her time onto her coursework so that she can later progress to graduate school. Alanna explains,

It's hard. I have a lot of, like really tough classes and seems like most of the LBQ community I met, they're always running around, having a good time, going out. But I have a hard time because I *need* to study and do my work. I know a couple [students] that are like pre-med and stuff, but most of them have like, lesser majors, I guess, or they do have more free time. They're not required so many hours a week. So I have a hard time with that.

Alanna is thankful to be able to put her coming out experience behind her as she learns of the coming out experiences of other young women from her hometown. Through her now positive relationship with her parents, Alanna is able to reframe her experience from being a nightmare to being a learning experience that has helped her to become more emotionally mature. She compares her own experience to that of another acquaintance from her town,

There was one girl I knew in high school—she was 2 years younger than me and she was dating another girl in high school and their parents found out. It was the end of the world. The one girl was threatened with her life. She's still lying and denying it to them. She's like, "I don't know what happened." So it ended up, her parents just totally going off the deep end. They told her, "You're not in our family anymore. You're on your own." It wasn't that bad for me. I feel bad sometimes that I got so much luckier than most people.

After a difficult coming out process that made her home feel like a hostile environment throughout the remainder high school, Alanna created positive safe spaces by making future plans for college. She is presently focusing on her academic studies so that she can attain her professional goals and become financially self-sufficient.

Creating positive safe spaces was much more of a challenge for Darla. Her experience of sexual victimization, public humiliation, and of being repeatedly denied support from adults at the school, who expressed feeling defeated in the end. She said she believed that school was positive for her only in that she survived it, graduated, and enrolled in a college. Darla felt she

was able to learn what she thought she needed in order to be able to have a successful academic career and hopefully a more positive peer experience.

The confrontation that Darla had with her former boyfriend's probation officer and the frustration she felt with the police and judicial system when they would or could not protect her from the boy's continued photographic antics spurred Darla to want to work in the juvenile justice system. She said, "I would make sure that something like this could never happen to someone else." I understood Darla's desire to work in that system. I suspect that in the end, if she is able to find a supportive therapist with whom she can relate and is able to put the experience behind her, Darla will find interest in other career possibilities.

For Darla, encounters with her ex-boyfriend continue to take place, including one meeting that took place within the week prior to our interview. Her ex-boyfriend appeared on her street, with his new girlfriend, and he proceeded to make derogatory comments to Darla. Her rage and anger were raw when we spoke and I checked with her frequently during the interview to see if she wanted to stop and take a break because of the intensity of her emotional state.

When we reached the end of our meeting, we spoke about therapy and I provided her with ways to obtain referrals for therapy, including offering to walk her to her college's counseling center for a specific point of contact. Darla took the referral information, but declined my offer telling me she did not think the school could help her with this problem. Darla's experiences were still present, making it impossible for her to see an end to the torment. The incident with her ex-boyfriend is simply horrible and until this young man is no longer in Darla's environment to hurt her, it is probably unlikely she will feel any sense of relief, despite having graduated from high school and presently attending the nearby community college.



Lisa, Kim, Coral, Bonnie, Maria, and Chrissie each participated in various student organizations at their high schools. Lisa, who is white, had faced exclusion from some of her peers at her school because her best friend was African-American. Throughout her interview, Lisa frequently referred to the presence of racial tension at the school, though just as she did not have a name for being heterosexual, she struggled with the term “racism” and instead used the term “racial” for racism as articulated below,

I mean I saw people who are just like still racial and everything, but yet are in classes with African American students. For me, I just see everybody as equal. I mean, I think that’s one major issue right now like in the world you know, the racial that’s going on with people and everything like that. But for me I just with everything, like my best friend is black, you know. So it made me realize that everybody is equal.

The racism in her community bothered Lisa, but she did not seem to know what she could do to assist with change. She learned through her friendship that the kinds of racist remarks she heard and behaviors she saw at her school and in her neighborhood were harmful and wrong. However, Lisa maintained that others saw her as being positioned in her school’s “popular” group which provided her with an avenue of influence over some of her peers. Lisa said she did not believe she was popular, but that she knew many of her peers from the extracurricular activities in which she was involved. Lisa recognized others as being members of the popular group as she explains,

I was in like the newspaper staff and um, Student Council and stuff like that. But I didn’t play any sports, that’s why I don’t really consider myself popular because I didn’t, I wasn’t like a jock in sports. I mean I was in a couple clubs but not every single one. I guess that’s just how I got accepted with everybody because I was just myself and I treated everybody the same. Whereas the ones who were in the more popular group, they would only talk just to some people, it all depends. I mean I was friends with this person and they weren’t accepted into the popular groups, you know. I just treated everybody equally.

Lisa appeared to have some conscious awareness that she might have been excluded from the most popular group because she maintained her friendship with her best friend and because she believed in treating everyone equally and being nice to them. One of Lisa's strong characteristics was her fairness and commitment to being nice to all of her peers, not simply those who were popular.

Bonnie, who attended a small, rural high school, explained that grouping by traditional clique categories occurred in her school, but they were not exclusive groups. She positioned herself in a positive space of power that brought her protection from high school peer harassment. Through her proactive approach to rumor management, she chose to confront those who said untrue things about her and established herself as being a person to be reckoned with if anyone chose to make her a target of any kind of mistreatment.

As I reviewed each woman's strategies for converting negative high school events and experiences into accounts that played a positive role in her development, I return to my premise that traditionally, lesbian and bisexual women's problems are perceived to be caused by their "choice" of sexual identity and/or non-conforming lifestyle. Statistics substantiate genuine risk factors such as overrepresentation in teenage suicide statistics, dropout rates, and victimization through bullying. However, while these statistics paint one picture, it is important to be reminded that heterosexual young women also experience difficulties related to their "choice" of sexual identity. A majority of female students, heterosexual, lesbian, or bisexual, have not attempted suicide, quit school, or focused on harassment and bullying to an extent that it has somehow "damaged" their identity. In fact, many reflect on their high schooling experiences with positive and fond memories (Quinlivan & Town, 1999). This study focuses on the ways in which female students created positive space and experiences for themselves. High school can

sometimes be a hostile environment, yet these young women demonstrate that absent other alternatives, they will work within an informal network of systems via their friends, to develop support and positive, safe spaces.

## **CHAPTER 6: RECOGNITION AND NAMING OF DESIRE**

Throughout my findings, I have presented the stories of the young women who participated in this study. I have come to understand that there are few places where girls can obtain information that assists them in recognizing desire and distinguishing it from sexual activity. The most common ways that girls come to learn about sexuality, sexual identity, and sexual desires are from direct and indirect discussions with peers, actual engagement in sexual activity, or from information from adults who often frame sex as sexual intercourse with boys, carrying with it risk for disease and pregnancy. The young women often lacked having a useful vocabulary that would allow them to identify and name their feelings and actions instead of using terms such as “love” to mean desire or wanting to “be with” a partner meaning wanting to engage in sexual activities. During high school, discussions of sexual desire and sexual identity development are usually completely absent or are presented as deviant concepts that result in or lead to girls making “wrong” choices.

As I stated in chapter one, desire is a strong feeling of wanting or wishing for something to happen; a strong sexual feeling that may or may not result in sexual activity. There are layers to desire that include: the existence but not active recognition of desire, acknowledgment of desire to oneself, telling others about one’s feelings of desire, acting upon desire, or by ignoring

the feelings of desire. These features are a part of an interdependent process whereby a young woman may go through all or only a few of the stated layers. They can occur in any order, and the process may be recurrent throughout a lifetime.

The existence of desire without active recognition of it occurs when a girl or young woman feels a strong wanting within her body and mind, but has no understanding of what it is that she is actually feeling. She may confuse her physical desire with her emotional desires and believe that she is “in love,” which can lead to certain kinds of decisions. As conveyed to girls, sexual intercourse is something adults do when they are “in love.” This kind of explanation may often lead girls to confuse desire and love. While desire and love can, and often do, occur simultaneously, an ability to differentiate between these terms is helpful for girls who have choices to make between engaging and not engaging in sexual activities.

Alanna and Denise each felt intense desires to be with her girlfriend and boyfriend, respectively. During their interviews, each had difficulty in finding words for what contributed to her decision to be sexually active. As they fumbled for the words to name their feelings, they were describing desire, yet did not know how to actively recognize and name it. Instead, each used the word “love,” saying that she knew she loved her/him and just wanted to “be with” her/him.

Acknowledgement of desire is the active recognition of a strong wanting for something to happen with someone. If girls are provided with accurate, useful information about sexuality, they would be better equipped to make informed choices about engaging in sexual activity. Acknowledgement of feeling desire does not automatically lead to sexual activity. Young women, like Celeste, Maria, and Kim each felt desire for a particular girl or boy, but did not pursue a relationship and sexual activity. I believe it is important to note that young women can

feel desire and acknowledge that they feel something without having a name for the feelings. Confusion between the words “love” and “desire” does not preclude the ability to acknowledge the feeling, though it may have an impact on a later decision of whether or not to act upon desire.

Currently, sexual education programs have been ineffective in offering explanations to adolescents about desire. The conservative philosophy has been that positive information about sex, absent the disease/pregnancy model, will lead to young women having more sex. However, comprehensive sex education programs have also not included desire as a topic of education. However, comprehensive sexual education *can* help address the information void about sex, desire, and what constitutes sexual activity, if such programs were permitted to be truly comprehensive. Ignoring feelings of desire does not make those feelings simply evaporate, never to return. Just as the acquisition of accurate information of sex and desire does not make a woman want to go out and engage in sexual activity, it is unlikely that ignorance of desire can make the feelings vanish.

Actions centered on feelings of desire do not necessarily have to result in physical activities that result in sexual release and gratification. For example, Coral realized that she had strong feelings of desire for Melissa, who was her first girlfriend. However, her acknowledgement of her feelings did not lead to actual sexual activities for several months. Instead, she initially chose to not tell Melissa about her desire for her, but instead spent a lot of time with Melissa, enjoying her company and friendship. Coral said that when she finally developed the courage to tell Melissa, she discovered that Melissa had been having a similar struggle with her own desire for Coral.

Making a choice to tell others of their feelings of desire came with a risk of the information becoming public. Once information that is even remotely related to sexual feelings

and activities becomes public, the issue of girls' reputations becomes an issue. This issue of damaged reputation becomes a mechanism that silences some of the active discussion about desire and feelings that could lead to an informative discussion of the subjects of sex, desire, and intimacy, though they often do not. Reputation is what separates the "good" girls from the "bad" girls with good implied as pure and bad as whores or sluts. Regardless of the risks, some of the young women such as Abby and Denise each spoke to one friend and also to their respective boyfriends about their feelings. Coral, Dorcy, and Bonnie each spoke with friends about their feelings, while Celeste logged her expressions of her feelings of desire onto her online journal, a decision she later came to regret.

The final component of desire is the decision to act upon that desire. Again, the way in which a young woman arrives at this decision is related to her understanding of her own feelings. Acting upon desire involves a combination of acknowledgement of the feelings (even if those feelings remain unnamed) and a decision to become sexually active with someone specific. If girls are given the opportunity to learn about a range of emotions and feelings that include love, intimacy, commitment, and desire, they may be better able to distinguish between their emotional needs for intimacy and their physical desires.

Darla's expressed regret about her decision to engage in sexual activities with her boyfriend came after he took her picture during sex and showed it around the school. She said, "I thought I loved him and that he loved me." While I cannot claim to know exactly what Darla felt, I believe that she may have been responding to something other than love. Darla may have been responding to her boyfriend's desires and her need for emotional intimacy. How many young women have responded sexually when faced with the following dilemma, "if you love me, why won't you have sex with me?" If Darla had a better understanding of the difference

between love and desire, she may have made a different choice about becoming sexually active with this particular boy. She said she was proud that she had waited until she was seventeen to have sex, unlike girls she knew who became active at the ages of twelve or thirteen. Darla indicated that she thought she was “ready” to have sex, and that they had “been together” for five months. “Ready” implies that there is a moment or time when young women “know” that it is time to have sex and “together” means having been in a committed relationship.

Being “ready” indicates a level of maturity, sometimes only physical, that women somehow have some magical way of knowing that it is “time” to have sex with someone. As girls enter high school there still remains a sense that they are expected to have prior knowledge about sex and to appear sexually savvy. These young women have demonstrated that with or without useful information about sexuality in general, or more specifically about sexual desire, girls will make choices based upon what they *think* they know. Therefore, adults should make decisions about whose job/role it is to talk to girls about sex. The critical step is to then implement processes to allow the discussions to take place.

### **Learning about desire**

We live in a dichotomous culture that uses sexual innuendo and women’s bodies to sell products, yet we provide few opportunities for young women to learn how to recognize and discuss their sexual feelings and desires that emerge during late adolescence. Each young woman of this study spoke of having to negotiate expectations that she would engage in sexual intercourse at some point by her senior year of high school. Only four young women identified school personnel as being a resource for information and support, only two mentioned parents as a resource. Of these six, only one actually sought the help of any teacher. Instead, the five women who spoke of school personnel or parents as a resource did so in a theoretical context. In other



words, each said that *ideally* students should be able to go to parents, teachers, or counselors for information about sex, but that they did not know anyone who had actually done so. The other eleven young women indicated that they thought teachers and other personnel were aware that some students were engaging in sexual activities, but that the teachers acted as though they did not know. The overarching belief of all of the women I interviewed was that teachers did not care what the students did. Some said teachers could not do or say anything when it came to talking about sex with students because they might be reprimanded by the principal.

Most schools promote a sexual status quo, meaning they provide information that reproduces traditional notions of girls' sexuality in relationship to boys' sexuality and within the context of the risks of disease and pregnancy. While it is important to provide information about sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), it is equally, if not more important to inform adolescents about feelings of sexual desire in relationship to sexual activities. Mayo (2004), in his discussion of school sexual education programs states, "school curricula tightly circumscribe only vaginal-penile intercourse as 'sex' and the correct context for 'sex' as 'marriage' (p.65)." Therefore, school personnel are rarely, if ever, permitted to discuss sexual activity within a context relevant to their students. Sex is often presented as a future-oriented phenomenon as though high school students are not presently participating in any sexual activities, even though research indicates differently (Emihovich & Herrington, 1997; Halpern-Felsher *et al.*, 2005; Jayson, 2005).

Adolescents must have comprehensive information about sexual education which includes not only the risks of STDs and pregnancy, but also practical information to provide youth with the tools to be able to make informed choices about their behavior. However, in order to present a sexual education curriculum and have a relevant impact on adolescent students, teachers and other adults should: give clear, accurate information about risks such as

disease, pregnancy and how to cope with rumors of alleged sexual activities; be able to speak about various activities of sex, including oral and anal sex, penile-vaginal intercourse within the context of sexual identity; know the difference between desire and love, desire and committed relationships, desire and what it means to “be ready” to engage in sexual activities; feel comfortable about discussing all of the topics within the continuum of sexual activity; and let the adolescents know that adults can be trustworthy confidants who can provide accurate information needed to make informed choices.

Adults find the prospect of adolescent sexual activity to be frightening for themselves and therefore, highly problematic for the adolescents. For three young women in my study, their school peer relationships were not problematic, but the adults they encountered *were* problematic. For example, the treatment Alanna and her girlfriend received from their mothers and other family members were far more deliberate and hurtful than anything they experienced during school. As these women each told her story, one reason became clear to me as to why sexual identity development was difficult for these young women: adults expected them to “build” a healthy sexual identity while lacking the necessary tools or information, to do so. Until adults are able to openly discuss any issues related to sex, adolescents will be left to their own process of discovery. Teachers and guidance counselors should take note of the social isolates and work to assimilate them into activities that may encourage them to participate and make friends. Maria “found” the theatre arts program without assistance from adults.

### **Closets, choices, and coming out**

In recent decades, much has been made of LBQ women and GBQ men, “coming out.” However, I would argue that straight women can also emerge from a closet. The concept of “the closet” has been used for years to describe a system of heteronormativity that serves to keep LBGTQ

individuals hidden and silenced in the background of the “right” heterosexual society. “Coming out” of the closet then refers to the refusal of LBQ people to remain hidden and silent so that some Pollyannaish view of a strictly heterosexual society can remain prominent and privileged. When it comes to the topic and issues of sexual desire in women, a closet exists that is shared by straight and lesbian, bisexual, and queer women.

For straight, and lesbian, bisexual, and queer women, desire is at the forefront of the sexual awakenings as they recognize, perhaps for the first time, that they desire intimacy with another person. Desire has to be brought out of the closet as a topic for discussion and as a feeling to be recognized by all young women. Regardless of their sexual identity, the closet is a metaphorical structure used to constrain the public presence of LGBTQ people and it also exists to stifle public acknowledgement of women’s desire. If young women are socialized within a model where they are expected to be passive rather than pursuant in the expression of their sexuality, then any acknowledgment of women’s desire is contrary to passivity.

Just as women’s bodies are recognized in relationship to men’s bodies, so is the case of desire. Women’s bodies are most often presented as the objects of men’s desire, as demonstrated by the thousands of sales advertisements that use women’s bodies to sell products. The “women in relationship to men” model infers that women do not feel or have desire, desire is what men have and of which women are objects. When young women are outwardly demonstrative about their feelings of sexual desire, they rattle the cage of the status quo and may be quickly labeled as “whores” because they have made the “wrong” choice. In the world of heteronormativity, desire is something women choose to feel and act upon, whereas, men cannot help that they feel desire around women who they find attractive.

If desire is a feeling that occurs naturally within the bodies of men, then the same should be true that desire occurs in women. In other words, feeling desire for someone is not a choice, it occurs naturally in response to that person. Also, “choice” is not about a choice to be straight or LBQ. No one who participated in this study indicated having any such choice to make. Each young woman faced an expectation of heterosexuality from parents, peers, teachers, school administrators and school boards.

With no discussion of acting on desire, the only kinds of choices that these young women found available to them was participation in sexual activities with men, and in which activities they would participate, with whom, where it might occur and when. If a young woman believes her only option for sexual activity is men, when stirrings of desire towards another woman occurs, she may feel like she is in fact, “going crazy.” Both Dorcy and Coral described feeling as though they were going crazy when they were faced with their feelings of desire for another woman for the very first time.

When LBQ women recognize their desire for other women, before telling others, they must weigh the issues of rejection by family and peers, and the risk to their physical safety from those who may find their desire disgusting. One in four teenagers who admit same-sex feelings to family members is forced from their family home or physically abused following the admission (Birden, 2005). All of the LBQ women could identify at least one LBQ friend who had been disowned by her family because of her sexual identity. LBQ women, upon this acknowledgement of desire for another woman, must also make choices about acting upon her desires: should she tell the woman she is attracted to or should she remain silent? For LBQ

women, the issue of “who to tell and when” is often much more stressful than the recognition of sexual identity. Alanna’s coming out experience was difficult because of the lack of support and panicked responses from her and her girlfriend’s mothers.

As straight women recognize their feelings of desire, they also weigh issues of family disapproval and admonition for bringing their desire “out of the closet.” It is far less frequent, however, that an adolescent teen is evicted from the family home because she engaged in heterosexual intercourse. Eviction from the family home tends come in the form of reactive disapproval of the girl’s parents if her partner is of a different race, religion, or socioeconomic status. Instead, the fear by parents becomes one of concern about unplanned, early pregnancy and STDs. Straight women are often concerned about their reputation as a result of their decision to become sexually active. Many find they must defend themselves from gossip that labels them as “whores” or “sluts.” During late adolescence, young women who become aware of their feelings of sexual desire, regardless of sexual identity are faced with the decision about bringing desire “out of the closet” and acting upon that desire.

It is important for parents to offer support to their children as they develop their sexual identity and as feelings of sexual desire begin to emerge. Evicting young women from the family home as a “punishment” for nonconformity to the family values is unproductive and leaves adolescents with few options, essentially forcing a form of “parental will” on the adolescents. Attempting to force a young woman to deny her feelings of sexual desire towards a person who they find unacceptable is an ineffective means to an end that parents cannot control. Instead, parents can provide support and opportunities for their sexually developing children to

talk openly and ask questions. Parents can provide accurate information to their children and work towards a trusting, honest, open forum for discussion about anything that is troubling or confusing to their daughter or son.

### **Reputation as a source of power and positive strength**

Within their high school, some young women find themselves with a reputation based upon falsely perceived representations of their sexual activities. Of the women with whom I spoke, Chrissie found ways in which to use her reputation to her advantage. One advantage of being called a whore via her nickname of “Chrissie ho,” was the opportunity for membership within her school’s popular group, which was one of Chrissie’s goals. Although she was the frequent target of jokes, Chrissie learned to use the perception others had of her as a “slut” to maintain her membership within that group. Being talked about was in some way a recognition of her presence. Chrissie did not choose her nickname, but she did choose the ways in which she could use her nickname to accomplish her stated goal of being part of the “popular” group.

While it served one purpose for Chrissie, her nickname brought with it sexual expectations from boys. Chrissie stated that everyone at the school thought she was having sexual intercourse with every boy she dated and that the boys she had dated did nothing to dispel that perception. She had had sex with only one of the boys she dated; she did not engage in sexual activities with *every* boy she dated. Chrissie’s reputation provided her with the opportunities to make choices about what she would do sexually, and with whom, yet the boys she dated would say they had sex regardless of what actually took place. The gossip about her rumored sexual activities kept her in the popular group partly because many young men wanted to date her, presumably because they thought she would engage in sexual activities with them. Through the choices she made about engaging in sex, Chrissie placed the boys in the position of

having to falsely portray their masculinity and sexual prowess to their friends. Chrissie knew the truth about what did and did not happen between them and she had the option to confront each boy, if she chose. It placed her in a position of “knowing” a truth and, if she were to be believed, exposing the lies of the boys. She knew their purported sexual prowess to be false.

Chrissie framed desire as “if it was a boy I really liked and was dating for a while, and then I wanted to do stuff with him.” But she did not engage in activities with boys who just dated her once or twice, yet many said that she had. In Chrissie’s case, “reputation,” “choice,” and “desire” are all factors in her interactions both socially and sexually. Others “chose” her reputation for her, basing their claims on innuendo and what they saw her doing at parties with boys, e.g. “making out” as defined as a lot of kissing and body pressing in dark corners, and what some boys alleged that she did with them sexually. Chrissie, however, chose when and with whom to engage in sexual activities and how to best use her reputation to her advantage. She was able to maintain a high social status within the school as a member of the popular group. The rumor of her sexual promiscuity afforded her opportunities to date the “popular guys,” and she was able to use her dating popularity as a mechanism for her inclusion in the group. Chrissie found that she could choose to substantiate her rumored reputation by engaging in sexual activity, or she could decline to do so, leaving the boys in a position where they had to decide whether to or not to lie and say they did. If they chose to do so, Chrissie held power to expose them based on her refusal to have sex. Boys and girls both had a stake in their reputed behaviors. Chrissie believed that for the boys in the popular group, it was important for them to say they had engaged in sexual activities with her, regardless of what actually happened. For the other girls in the group, Chrissie’s reputation brought more boys to the group from which the other girls were able to get dates.

Some girls who engaged in behaviors that fell within a broad range of sexual activities felt they needed to protect their reputations from school gossip while the boys felt they needed to promote gossip to enhance their own reputations. This dichotomy of reputation illustrates that the same reputation carries very different connotations for females and males. Girls who engage in sexual activities develop a reputation as “whore” or “slut” as shown by Chrissie’s nickname of “Chrissie ho.” Boys who engage in sexual activities are exalted to a higher status position, such as “becoming men,” based upon reputed successful encounters with girls. There is not equivalent “higher status” for young women who engage in sexual activities. Girls’ sexuality is framed such that the onset of menstruation is an indicator of beginning womanhood, followed by sexual abstinence and high school graduation. Girls, it seems, become young women with the conferral of the high school diploma.

Public awareness of Alanna’s sexual identity did not create problems with her friends and peers. Alanna said that “as far as the kids, nothing really changed, except that I wasn’t allowed to see my girlfriend outside of school.” Alanna found that her most difficult problems were with, or came from, adults. The reaction from her parents and her girlfriend’s mother is still upsetting for her when she talks about it. At school, it was the girls’ basketball coach who was problematic.

One of Alanna’s friends was on the basketball team at school and the coach kept making comments to Alanna’s friend. Alanna did not know the coach personally, in fact, she had never met her. Yet, this coach repeatedly made derogatory remarks about Alanna to her friend. Alanna surmised from this that she thought “the coach was gossip-hungry and was trying to get her player to stop hanging out with me for the sake of this little town’s basketball team not getting a “bad” reputation.”



Alanna's reputation as a lesbian became known within the "tri-county area." Rather than allowing her reputation to become a problem for her, Alanna just continued doing the same activities she had always done with her friends. Eventually her "famous" standing placed Alanna in a position to be supportive to other younger lesbians who found her at her job at a mall and sought her assistance. The mall became a positive, safe space for Alanna and for those who sought her support and guidance.

Aleysia's case demonstrates another style of a young woman's use of her "bad" reputation as a source for positive, safe space. Rather than allowing false rumors to persist, Aleysia chose to confront the "sources" directly. Direct confrontation, as used by Bonnie in chapter three, is often a successful tactic in stopping the indirect bullying that is most commonly exhibited by girls.

Like Chrissie, Aleysia was a target of gossip about her reputed sexual activities. Aleysia belonged to the group of male "jocks." She was acquaintances with some of the cheerleaders in her school, but she felt those relationships were arbitrary and conditional. Aleysia described the cheerleaders as, "they were the ones that were talking about me and [what they said] would come [back] to me. They were the ones that if I couldn't, you know, drive them around in my car; they wouldn't talk to me for a week."

From Aleysia's self-reflection, it appeared that she observed her school's peer group interactions and the social hierarchy before she chose her social group. She was aware that where you sat in the cafeteria defined your group affiliation. Aleysia eventually chose to sit with the "jocks," where she was the only girl. In response to my question regarding how she became a member of a group in her high school, Aleysia echoed Maria's sentiment from chapter four

when she said, “Basically by the lunchroom. Um, where you sat, who you sat with.” Aleysia explained that she chose her social group based on the personalities of the members of the group.

Aleysia’s perspective of interpersonal dynamics within her school was more self-reflexive than some of the other young women of this study. She described herself as “the girl who was known as being nice.” Aleysia’s account of becoming friends with the male popular group, the “jocks”, was based upon her understanding that the boys were trying to protect her. They thought that Aleysia’s kind nature made her vulnerable to students with unkind motives; they mistook “kind” for “vulnerable and weak,” and in doing so, Aleysia had the freedom to develop her own reputation.

Aleysia was aware that she was a topic of gossip about assumed sexual activities spread by the cheerleaders. Aleysia battled the rumors by speaking directly with different cheerleaders. On an individual basis, she explained why she was friends mostly with the boys. Aleysia developed acquaintanceships with the girls who had been spreading the rumors about her. She did not choose to try to become a member of the “popular” group of girls. Instead, she chose a “divide and conquer” approach in which she developed individual relationships with each girl, separately from the group as a unit. This strategy provided Aleysia with power to defend, develop, and represent her reputation in a form she chose. These girls had assumptions about Aleysia’s behaviors, but as she discussed with each of them the ways in which girls “backstabbed” each other and her dislike of such dynamics, the girls began to understand her reasons for spending most of her time with the boys. The number of rumors eventually decreased, but never stopped completely.

Aleysia was not sexually active during high school, though there were many who assumed that she was. She felt that her relationships within her group of male peers taught her

how to exhibit strength and not be swayed by what others were doing. Alyesia said that the boys in her group took care of her because they did not want others to take advantage of her, implying a helplessness that Aleysia did not demonstrate at any time during our interview. Alyesia felt that her relationship with the male jocks enabled her to understand boys more than she had, which empowered her to make her choices about her sexual identity development.

Chrissie, Alanna, and Aleysia are examples of young women who each used having a “bad” reputation to her advantage during high school. Being labeled a whore or slut or being labeled as a deviant lesbian is rarely considered to be positive. The words strongly denote an image or definition of a sexually promiscuous woman who continually makes “wrong” choices about her behavior and actions. Girls and young women often become weighted down by the label and respond with depression and withdrawal from social activities. In essence, they are driven into the closet by a label that is associated with women’s public displays of desire.

However, none of these young women became trapped in being called a whore, slut, or deviant. Aleysia, Alanna, and Chrissie each used her reputation as a source of empowerment and strength. Each took control of the way in which she could use a “bad” reputation to her advantage. Chrissie’s use offered her a position within her group of choice and gave her an advantage of knowing which boys were not honest about their sexual prowess and experience. This information provided Chrissie with different kinds of choices about the ways she could interact with those same boys later in ways that might work to her advantage.

Aleysia’s direct confrontational approach provided her with opportunities to become individual acquaintances with the “popular” girls. By getting to know each girl separately from the group, Aleysia effectively nullified the gossip power of the group. This enabled her to construct her own public image as she constructed her own sexual identity.

Alanna's patience and unwillingness to bow to the pressures of heteronormative standards provided her with space to allow her parents to adjust to the shock they experienced when discovering her sexual identity. Her choice to continue socializing with friends and working at the mall eventually provided her with space to be a positive role model for other young lesbians, rather than accepting that her life is one of deviance. These young women demonstrate resilience for tolerating negative pressures from their peers and transforming the situations into sources of power. Parents, teachers, counselors or other significant adults should take notice and nurture this strength that girls and young women quietly hold and use to their advantage.

### **Dilemmas revisited**

During my interviews with these young women, I began to realize a noticeable absence of adults as being recognized as sources for support, information, protection, or anything except for food, housing and the basic needs of life. Teachers, school administrators, parents, and other adults may believe that it is their job to shape the lives of young men and women during high school. Parents offer protection from harm caused by other people, serious illness or injury from accidents. Teachers offer academic information within the context of providing adult supervision to "children" who are under their charge in the absence of the parents. Administrators offer an environment of safety through such initiatives as "safe schools" that came to the forefront after a shooting rampage brought by two students at the Columbine High School in Colorado in 1999. However, based upon these interviews, adults do not have a significant positive presence in the lives of the young women who have been introduced throughout this study.

One of the core dilemmas I presented in chapter one was what supports do young women have in the development of a healthy sexual identity? I defined *healthy sexual identity* as being sexually comfortable within her body, with her desires, and sexual activities, regardless of what others thought about her. Throughout the stories presented by these young women, they were faced with many issues and circumstances where many of the young women felt distressed and alone. More explicit examples are Darla, who was unable to garner adult support at school, with her ex-boyfriend's probation officer, or the school security guards, to stop her ex-boyfriend's harassment of her. Nicole, after testifying against an adult voyeur, determined that the criminal justice system was not a safe place to tell adults that another adult had been watching her undress and shower through her windows. As a result of her distrust of the legal system, Nicole refused to report a rape that occurred at a party where alcohol was present. This resulted in her father's stated disbelief that the rape occurred. Alanna received panic and hysteria from her parents and her former girlfriend's mother and was a target of gossip by the girls' basketball coach at her high school. Maria felt completely alienated and alone throughout her four years on the cross-country track team, and the coach never intervened or appeared to take notice. In all, only four of the seventeen women portrayed in this study mentioned the presence of any positive adult support.

Media reports of teenage sexual activities increase adults' fear that teenage sex is out of control. There have been reports of increased participation in oral and anal sex as a "less risky" alternative to sexual intercourse (Jayson, 2005; McGraw, 2004; W.D. Mosher et al., 2005b). Conservatives have been successful in promoting "abstinence-only" sexual education in high schools instead of comprehensive sexual education programs. Adults, so it seems, are the ones who most fear the development of a healthy sexual identity in their daughters. If the parents

actively recognize their daughter's sexual development, they must be able to accept that she most likely will engage in sexual activities at some time during her life. Adults have to learn to accept that adolescents are indeed sexual beings. It is through support and access to accurate information about sex, sexual desire, and sexual identity that they would be able to make informed choices about her life.

The acknowledgement of feeling sexual desire is part of the interdependent components of desire mentioned earlier in this chapter. It is within a moment of recognizing sexual desire for another woman that lesbians such as Laura, realized that she did not have desire for the man she dated even though she had intercourse with him. For an LBQ woman, this moment is one where many issues rush to the forefront. She is faced with an awareness of her feelings of sexual desire in opposition to a realization that she may not have felt sexual desire in the past. Laura became profoundly aware of the dangers she faced in revealing her sexual desire for another woman. She knew she could be rejected and then publicly ostracized from her peer group and her family. Laura, Coral, and Dorcy all noted having similar fears surface as each wrestled with the decision about telling the woman she desired of her feelings. These women made choices about who they told and whether or not they would act sexually upon that desire. They did not make a choice or determination to feel desire for another woman.

Framing sexual identity as a "choice" fails to address the larger spectrum of sexual identity versus sexual desire and activity. Sexual identity is not about "choosing" a man over a woman, but instead is about active recognition of sexual desire for another human being. LBQ women realize this recognition and speak of it as a defining moment of "when I realized I wanted this woman..." Not all of the LBQ women engaged in sexual activity with the first woman she desired and some engaged in activities with boys because they thought they were

supposed to have sexual intercourse. Each recognized that she had once made a choice to engage in sexual activities with a boy and later felt sexual desire for another woman that had been absent in her experience with the boy.

By comparison, not all of the straight women were sexually active at the time of the interviews. Kim was happy about school-sponsored drives for abstinence pledges because they fit her moral beliefs. She was adamant about following the religious doctrine of her faith and sex was something she said she would not have until she is married. Karen and Lisa had not yet had any relationship with anyone and have not had to make decisions about sex, both identified as being straight. Denise noted that she is currently living with her boyfriend who she started dating during high school. She acknowledged that she engaged in sexual activities with him, but that neither of them shared the information with friends and kept it between themselves. Denise said that she trusted her boyfriend completely. Denise made decisions with her boyfriend about the sexual aspects of their relationship, but admitted that she had not sought any guidance from her mother, with whom she says she has a close relationship.

Tolman's (2002) study of adolescent girls' experiences with sexuality and their bodies yielded similar results to what I established specifically with the straight young women of this study. Tolman said,

It was clear that acknowledging their bodies was new and different for most of them, interesting and helpful for some, confusing or strange for others, and impossible or simply irrelevant for still others. Every girl I interviewed said that no adult woman had ever talked to her before about sexual desire and pleasure "like this," that is, so overtly, specifically, or in such depth (p. 34).

Tolman's target group was young women, aged 15 – 18 years and still in high school. My target group was young women, aged 18 – 22 years and enrolled in a college or university and yet our

results were similar. This provides an element of congruency that the discussion of sexual desire is still lacking for girls and for young women.

### **Adults as supportive influences**

In this study, Coral, Alanna, Dorcy, Maria, and Laura each spoke of her realization that she was sexually attracted to another woman. None of the women spoke to any adult before speaking with her friends, and only Alanna was “out” during high school. Each was confident in her support system with those whom she trusted as friends and none were confident that informing her parent(s) was going to be easy. Each woman faced a risk of losing her relationship with her parent(s) and of being disowned, yet they took the risk and hoped for the best. Alanna realized her sexual identity and was open about being lesbian, during her tenth grade year of high school. She experienced the outrage of her girlfriend’s and her own mother, which eventually led to Alanna being forced to be silent about her sexual identity when at home.

Deliberate avoidance of discussions of sexual identity is as prevalent as the avoidance of discussions of desire. Regarding the issue of silence and systematic exclusion of LGBTQ youth in schools, Friend (1993) says, “Systematic exclusion is the process whereby positive role models, messages and images about lesbian, gay, and bisexual people are publicly silenced in schools. Often this silencing occurs by ignoring or denying the presence of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people (p.212).” Each of these LBQ women expressed her realization of her sexual identity as stemming from her sexual desire for another woman.

If the adult women who are present in the lives of high school girls are not comfortable about their own sexual desire and have never learned to speak openly about it, then the cycle of silence about desire will be passed to the next generation. As educators and parents, those who are not able to speak comfortably about sexual desire, activities, and identity are unable to be



trusted resources where young women can go to for support and accurate information. If adults want to play a significant role in the lives of young women, we must all learn to speak openly about sexual subjects even though we may have been raised in ways that encouraged silence. Adult women who developed their sexual identities and were silenced by the heteronormative closet where women are not encouraged to acknowledge, feel, or act upon desire should feel an obligation to better serve the girls who are rapidly growing into young, sexual women.

Until educators, whether teachers, scholars, counselors, or principals, step out of the shadow of fear that any mention of sex equates to moral perversion, there will not be the needed discussion about sexual identity, desire, and informed options for students living within their changing bodies. Rofes (2005) begins placing the responsibility for change into the hands of the schools of education. He says,

I am arguing for a remapping of the school as a sexualized space where a rich mix of erotics circulates and is repressed and not acknowledged in the classrooms and are not part of the formal curriculum of education schools. Instead, profound anxiety about desire is thwarted, deflected and redirected into moral panic and then projected on stigmatized populations...failure of schools of education to serve as spaces for extended conversation about desire, sexuality, and the politics of erotics has carved out huge disciplinary silences and has led to vast abrogation of responsibility on the part of the field of education. (p. 95).

Schools of education have entered into the fray of the battle of who should be doing the talking to girls and boys about sex. Political, philosophical, and religious ideology create circular discussions that result in few positive, viable solutions for young women. Parents, teachers, school administrators, and school boards battle about how much information should be provided to students about sex. School personnel do not want the responsibility of teaching specifics about sex, sexual desire, and sexual identity for fear of being accused of promoting sexual promiscuity or deviance. Parents do not feel comfortable discussing details of sexual intimacy,

sexual desire, and activities, resulting in short and uninformative discussions with their children. Political and religious leaders promote an abstinence-only stance that not only advocates the delay of sexual activities until heterosexual marriage.

Regardless of the conflict among the adults, the girls *are* already having the discussion. They create a safe space for interactions and encounters with the person who is the object of their desire. They create their own spaces among peers when things go badly and they need to have support. While the adults are debating sexual education, girls are on missions of discovery that are self-initiated. In order to be included in the discussion with girls, adults should do the following: recognize that girls may not understand differences between feeling desire and being in love; develop an open and honest relationship with their daughters that encourages discussion of sexual desire and sexual intimacy; accept that they ultimately cannot control their daughter's choices to engage in sexual activities or not, but they can be available with support and guidance if they have a negative experience.

Adults' debates about who should tell girls and young women about sexual desire, intimacy, activities, intercourse, and identity happen outside of the actual lived experiences of young women. While their parents are debating, girls are experimenting and learning about sex from each other, without the benefit of guidance, clarification and support. It is time for adults to stop arguing on philosophical grounds and become practical. Talk to the children about all of the mentioned components of desire, complexities of sexual identity without forcing heterosexuality as the only "right choice." Be available when children are struggling and learn to recognize that young women struggle with understanding how to conduct themselves as sexually desiring women who are seeking intimate relationships.

## **CHAPTER 7: BUILDING COMMUNITY THROUGH PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS**

One strategy for the development of positive, safe space that was used by twelve of the young women in this study was to maintain a focus towards the future. High school is a future-oriented space that is geared to “next” steps for students. Next steps include promotion to the next grade level, decisions about academic programs in high school, career planning, and college selection, application, and acceptance. Some students are comforted by the future orientation because it reminds them that high school is a temporary space from which they will eventually gain their release. Celeste and Alanna each noted that they believed that college would be the place that would offer them new and better opportunities to live their lives away from the micro-view of high school and their high school peers. Other students, such as Abby, found high school to be a positive, safe space and would love to return to it.

After her coming out, Alanna was alienated from her family and was forbidden to see her girlfriend except for at school during her classes and lunch. Eventually, the stress of their family pressures and separation from each other brought an end to their relationship. This forced Alanna to reclaim her space for belonging with her friends or at her job at the mall. The mall eventually became a physical space for her to connect with other gay and lesbian youth without causing disruption in her family household. She was out of sight from her family and therefore able to be more open in discussing her developing sense of sexual identity with other LBQ youth.

Alanna enjoyed her role of providing support to other gay and lesbian youth from her hometown area. It gave her a space to belong and to believe she could have a positive influence for others who were thinking about coming out. Alanna's coming out experience occurred at her home and for three years after she had been confronted, her home was not a place of safe refuge. Her work at the shopping mall provided her with the sense of community and support which had been previously rooted in her family but which disappeared when she came out as a lesbian. She noted that she had been encouraged by her father to attend college away from home because she was an "embarrassment to the family." Yet at the mall, not only was Alanna accepted, she was in a higher status position as someone other LBQ kids could come to for support.

A limit of this study was that all of the women of this study have graduated from high school and are currently enrolled in post-secondary educational institutions. Universities and moderately-sized colleges usually have residential facilities that provide students with opportunities to meet others and develop new friendship circles. These schools offer a menu of student activities from which a student could choose to participate on any given weekend. Students have less difficulty in finding ways to socialize with their peers because of the broad range of social opportunities within the schools, residential housing, and the cities at large.

The community college students who participated in this study faced different kinds of challenges in their efforts to make new friends and develop new social groups. Community college campuses are, by nature, commuter campuses, meaning most of the students are local residents who live within driving distance of the school. The general atmosphere of the community college campus is one where students attend class and leave immediately after the class day has ended. The majority of students develop their class schedules in such a way as to be able to attend two or three days per week for class, with few breaks between each class. This

type of scheduling allows community college students, most of who are employed in hourly, wage-earning positions, to have more availability to work.

Community colleges offer a variety of student organizations and athletic opportunities from which students can choose to participate, however, many students do not become active because of their work and study schedules. Of the ten women I interviewed from the community college, only one woman was active with any of the campus organizations.

Participants in this study attended a local community college, a large state-supported research university, or a large, private research university. Each woman of the study created her own space in the post-secondary educational environment. I had approached the topic of community with an assumption that students from each of four area colleges and universities might interact with each other on the basis of their mutual interests; however, I learned this was not the case. Just as groups separated themselves during high school, college students separate themselves by college affiliation.

### **Positive safe spaces to be lesbian, bisexual, or queer**

The lesbian and bisexual women with whom I spoke with each expressed a desire to belong to a group where they could meet other LBQ students. Each noted that her involvement with the campus LBQ group was helpful for meeting other gay, lesbian, bisexual, like-minded individuals. These organizations provide each with a broader sense of community belonging that some of the women lacked during high school. McMillan and Chavis (1986) define a sense of psychological community as, “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together (p. 9).” I utilized campus groups in order to locate participants for this study; consequently each of the lesbian and bisexual women of this study

was involved with an LBQ group. Each made mention that the LBQ group to which she belongs has been helpful in alleviating the social isolation she felt shortly after her arrival to her respective school campus.

I discovered that students from other LBQ groups from other local colleges and universities do not partner and associate with each other. That they do not interact was puzzling to me and I asked each woman about such a possibility. None was able to offer an explanation as to why the groups do not collaborate, except to say, “We just don’t” or “I never really thought about it.”

The university that Alanna attends is positioned in the middle of an urban, multi-collegiate community. The university is within walking distance of two other universities and one private college. Within an additional eight-mile radius of the university are the local community college, two additional, smaller universities, and one college. Yet, Alanna describes the region as “a barren wasteland for finding lesbians.” This colorful portrayal is indicative of Alanna’s frustration about not being involved in a committed relationship, a wish she has had since she began dating during high school. When I first asked Alanna if the LGBT organizations from the area colleges collaborated on activities planning and social events, she looked up from staring at the table and said, “No, we do not mix; I don’t know why.” To cope, Alanna continues to look to the future as a space for the fulfillment of her academic, professional and personal dreams, which includes having a committed relationship with another woman. In the meantime, she continues to network within her campus LBQ community in order to meet other women.

As I mentioned in chapter six, girls are already having conversations about sexuality, regardless of what the adults think or support. Similarly, girls and young women are finding ways to connect with their peers from other schools through electronic means. Internet spaces

such as *facebook.com* and *myspace.com* are virtual communities of young men and women similar in age. For example, *facebook.com* is a website where college students can register and invite existing friends to join or, they can be invited by other members, who they do *not* know, to become friends. These virtual communities allow high school and college students to develop relationships with other students who they would not otherwise meet within the physical confines of the high school or the college campus. Just as the internet has changed the way education is offered at the postsecondary level via virtual colleges and online distance learning classes, the internet provides girls, boys, young women and men access to each other from miles away.

These virtual groups may provide a sense of belonging and friendship for some, but there are risks that the people who these website members may encounter, may not be who they say they are. Anyone can create a webpage and pretend to be whoever they want to be. High school and college students, female *or* male, can be at risk for becoming involved in damaging relationships from middle-aged adults posing as young adults, girls posing as boys, or any other persona. Comparable to the halls of high schools, virtual communities are simultaneously safe and dangerous spaces where naive youth can be vulnerable, just as Celeste's experience described in chapter three. Because of her naivety that internet journals are public space, Celeste's entries were read by her classmates who then used the information to spread rumors and to alienate her.

From elementary school through college, the use of technology has been encouraged. As more people become technologically savvy, in-person, personal interactions can be less desirable. Young women and men are comfortable communicating electronically. They will often say things via email that they likely would never have the courage to say to others if they

were face to face. In my experience teaching at a community college, I have noticed an increased comfort level from students to communicate with me via email. Often students who are very shy in the classroom will develop the courage to ask questions on email. While I always answer their email questions, I often use the email to initiate a conversation with those students on a personal level privately, either before or after class. As the semester progresses, many will gradually begin speaking and participating within the class. With these kinds of students, I can utilize email strategically to gently bring them out of their secure internal space so that they will be more comfortable in participating and interacting with others during class.

I have also experienced the negative aspect of student email. Some students do not consider consequences that their email behavior might produce, such as when they insult or threaten me. Though the cases are few, I also have had students be aggressively confrontational, harassing, and excessively demanding. I have had to involve security and police in one extreme case. I have included these experiences in order to highlight that if I, who students see as an authority figure, have had these kinds of negative experiences with my own students, then the possibilities that high school girls or young college women might encounter hostility in online relationships, also are endless.

In order to assist young women in meeting and making new friends in order to build a new sense of community, that also provides a degree of physical safety, college student life personnel should encourage and foster coordinated efforts with student groups at other colleges or universities, when possible. Admittedly, not all colleges in the U.S. are in close proximity to another school, but for those that do share a region with other colleges and universities, it would be beneficial to students if relationships are developed with other student organizations. Such



intercollegiate relationships could result in students getting to know each other and developing larger, supportive communities.

Student Life personnel should promote and develop coordinated efforts with student groups. Student organizations that serve as a positive, safe space of support to LBQ individuals can be helpful in developing interpersonal skills and in providing a positive, safe space to meet new, like-minded individuals.

Alanna continues to rely on her dreams for the future when she feels sad and excluded watching heterosexual couples openly display affection in the form of hand-holding and kissing. Alanna thought that things would improve if she moved away from her small town and into a city. She is now attending a university in the middle of a sprawling urban, multicultural area that houses the four different college campuses within walking distance of each other. Alanna is still seeking a connection and commitment that extends beyond a casual relationship and casual sex.

A similar sentiment was echoed by Celeste who attends a different university in the same area as Alanna. Celeste expressed her frustration at the difficulty she had in meeting others who might be like her, but again, there are not coordinated activities between the schools. Alanna and Celeste each go to the same gay bar which hosts “under 21” nights on Friday evenings. “Under 21” nights are evenings designed for LGBT youth to socialize in a gay-friendly environment. “Under 21” references the state legal age for the purchase and consumption of alcohol and there is no access to alcohol for the patrons at these events. The bar hosts the evening, which is coordinated and chaperoned by volunteers from the Gay, Lesbian, Straight, and Educator’s Network (GLSEN). Both Celeste and Alanna said that the young men and women who attend these under 21 nights usually “hang together by school.” Here are two women with a similar

issue who often go to the same bar, yet despite their close physical proximity, I doubt they have ever met because the groups self-segregate by school.

Dorcy, who grew up in a small town in the Deep South, still has the same group of friends from high school. She has also developed a new group of friends through her involvement in the student LGBT group at her college. When Dorcy told me she was born and raised in a small southern town, stereotyped images of small, southern, rural towns exploded in my imagination. I had expected her experience of coming out to be similar, if not worse, than Alanna's northern, small town experience. I was wrong. Dorcy belonged to a group during high school that had a strong bond of friendship and an experienced understanding of diversity. She described her group as being diverse in its inclusion of boys and girls of different races, socioeconomic backgrounds and interests. Dorcy is African-American, dated boys during high school and her recent coming out as a lesbian did not create any problems for her.

Dorcy continues to maintain a close relationship with her friends and with her mother. Dorcy's sense of belonging never appeared to be disrupted and she did not feel alienated from the larger societal expectation of heterosexuality. Upon her arrival to college, Dorcy found that she needed to locate a space where she could be herself, an open lesbian. She joined the campus LGBT group, has made friends, and is very involved in the activities promoted and sponsored by the group.

Maria's high school experiences of being socially isolated appear to have left their emotional scars and she is still in a healing process. As stated previously, Maria initially participated in the cross-country track team during high school in order to create a positive, safe

space for herself. However, the cross-country track team proved to be a space where Maria felt even more alienated. Instead, Maria found her positive, safe space within the high school theatre arts program.

The LGBT group at Maria's university has become what she refers to as "a safe haven, a place where I can be with people who are different [from the societal majority] so we are all different together." Maria is, for the first time, a member of a very diverse group. Her LGBT group is diverse in interests, race and ethnicity, sexual identity, and openness of sexual identity. She enjoys watching the behaviors of some of the young gay men who are, as she said, "blatantly out and make no bones about it." Maria said she still feels very different and is self-conscious because of her sexual identity. Through her involvement with the LGBT group, she has been able to date, feel a little more comfortable, and feels she has a group to which she belongs. Maria also has her own radio show that airs weekly on the university radio station.

Coral, Laura, and Celeste also used their respective LGBT organizations as building blocks for supportive communities while they are away from home. These women, along with Maria, Dorcy, and Alanna all identify or are involved with an LBQ student organization. They share a common goal of having a career that will lead them away from their hometowns, as all expressed the desire to live elsewhere and that they want to live in a diverse community. Alanna relies on the idea that things will be happier for her in the future when she has more time to devote to developing a committed relationship. Dorcy will always appreciate her hometown where she has always had support from her mother and friends. However, she wants to live in a more gay-friendly city because in order to go to a gay establishment from her hometown, she would have to drive to Tennessee.

Coral, Laura, and Celeste hope to begin careers that will allow them to work in various international locations throughout the world. Each of these young women have the dream that someday their sexual identity will not matter so much to outsiders, those who are heterosexual and oppressive towards the LGBT communities in general. These concerns for their future are not based purely on fantasy, for each young woman is deeply aware that on any given day, she can find herself in an environment that may be very hostile towards her simply because of her sexual identity.

In their discussion of the importance of shared connections and a shared sense of history as a building block of community space, McMillan & Chavis (1986) say,

Participation in voluntary associations yields a sharing of power that leads to greater “ownership” of the community by the participants, greater satisfaction, greater cohesion...A shared emotional connection is based, in part, on a shared history. It is not necessary that group members have participated in the history in order to share it, but they must identify with it. The interactions of members of shared events and the specific attributes of the events may facilitate or inhibit the strength of community (p.12-13).

Ownership of community and shared emotional connections provide the women who belong to LGBT clubs at least an awareness, if not direct experience, of the historical and continued oppression of LGBT individuals within society at large in the United States. There continues to be increased anti-gay rhetoric used by moral conservatives in order to hasten a movement toward a U.S. Constitutional Amendment against gay marriage. Such an action would endorse and make legal the continued oppression and persecution of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered community. Such an amendment would turn the U. S. Constitution into a document that prohibits rights to people, rather than guarantees rights. Such a politically hostile atmosphere makes it even more essential for LBQ adolescents and young adults, like those I

have presented in study, to find and maintain, active communities of support. Communities of support are built on personal relationships which can serve to buffer political, religious, familial, or other forms of alienation and persecution that these young women may experience at any time during their lives.

Student organizations that support LBQ individuals provide students, who might otherwise find themselves in “the closet,” opportunities to meet others who are not heterosexual. Student life personnel should provide support to organize and assist these young women and men in creating vibrant, fun student organizations. Finally, groups from all of the local collegiate communities should partner so that young women and men have a greater opportunity to meet larger numbers of other LBQ students. Such affiliations should be supported and promoted, not held up for ridicule by conservatives who make claims that LBQ organizations exist to “recruit” unsuspecting heterosexual youth in order to “convert” them (Watney, 1987). The young women in this study who identified as LBQ each expressed their frustration at the difficulty they were having in meeting other LBQ women. By collaborating with other colleges and universities, these young women would have further opportunities to meet other young women who are LBQ and, possibly, shared interests.

### **Positive safe spaces to be heterosexual**

I have noted throughout this study that each of the young women experienced negative circumstances with which she had to contend during high school. In addition to the potentially hostile atmosphere that can exist for lesbian and bisexual women, one can also exist for heterosexual women. Regardless of sexual identity, eight in ten students experience some form of sexual harassment during high school (AAUW, 2001). None of the women who participated in this study seemed aware of any school policies that were specific to sexual harassment and

only Kim was aware of any school policy regarding sexual activities. Because of the strong religious affiliation at Kim's high school, the policy, according to Kim, was that if a student was found to have been sexually active, they were expelled from the school. This is not a policy that addresses sexual harassment, nor does it provide sexual education. *If* the policy is as Kim reports, then it does not address the fundamental issues of sexual harassment, in an environment that promotes strict sexual abstinence.

The 2001 AAUW statistics demonstrate awareness of the problems that exist and which are evident to the students, but which may not be as openly apparent to the administrators and teachers of the schools. National, state, and local policy makers often argue that there are social constructs, such as sexually explicit musical lyrics and sexually explicit scenes on television, that lead to what is often perceived as a culture of sexual promiscuity in high schools and colleges. While the policy makers argue the potential causes of the sexually charged high school environments, young women continue to live in the school cultures where they encounter unwanted situations over which they feel they have little or no official recourse. Most bullying prevention programs, as explored in chapter three, do not specifically name sexual harassment as an issue. Bullying prevention initiatives are explicitly funded whereas sexual harassment prevention initiatives exist as "stated policy" within each school district. Stated policy versus prevention initiatives makes a significant difference in the ways in which schools bring issues to the forefront of problem-solving. Without explicit funding, issues such as sexual harassment are left to be statements of policy that meet federal and state guidelines but do little to stop those who are offenders or assist those who are victims of sexual harassment.

As mentioned previously, bullying, sexual harassment and anti-gay harassment are framed as separate issues, yet for the young women of this study, they can occur simultaneously.

A lack of official dialogue regarding sexual identity, desire, and options leaves youth, specifically, young women, to each create positive and safe space on their own. This is sometimes achieved through club participation, or other supportive structures, but support is mostly obtained from friends. Those who are socially isolated and who may not have relationships with any adults with whom they can speak candidly are left to their own methods of learning and discovery about sexual identity, desire, or activities.

High school graduation provided relief for some of the young women who have shared their stories in this study. When they entered their new collegiate setting, they had already developed strategies for the creation of their positive, safe space within an even more sexually charged college environment. Some women used student club involvement to create this space, some did not. A few women, mostly those from the community college, expressed that they had time commitments that were not school-affiliated, such as having jobs, and spent their time outside of the community college engaging in family activities, faith-based activities, and relationships with boyfriends; all of the community college participants identified as straight.

Stephanie, from chapter three, who had been bullied by the high school hockey team, participated with a student club based upon her academic major, which is early childhood development, and was employed by the campus childcare center. It was a relief for Stephanie to graduate from high school and to get away from the daily torture of being quacked at and called a duck as she moved in the halls between classes. She attends the community college and enjoys being in class with young, middle, and senior adults, a factor she believes keeps behaviors restrained among some of her younger peers.

Kim, who is a now community college student, remains in her hometown and her community is one of church and her Christian faith. She has not dated anyone since her one high

school dating experience and is now heavily involved in activities at her church and continues to live her life according to her faith. Kim has not gotten involved in any of the campus clubs or groups; though she says she actively participates in class discussions. Her stated reason for coming forth to participate in this study was so that I would include a faith-based high school. The stories Kim shared of her high school experiences were very similar to the other young women. The philosophical orientation of the school was different, but many of the issues she discussed paralleled other participant's stories of peer group dynamics, inclusion versus social isolation, and sexual activities that did occur among boys and girls.

Kim will soon be transferring to another college in order to complete a bachelor's degree. Kim appears to be very comfortable in her current position as a college student and active church participant, both of which appeal to her sense of belonging and her commitment to the broader goal of redemption and salvation.

Abby's support has recently come from her mother as Abby worked to create a more positive, open, adult relationship with her. When she lived at home, their relationship was strained and they fought frequently. Abby she is now financially self-supporting and must work at least full-time, leaving her without time to participate in college clubs or activities. Her first love is art and drawing, but she is doubtful that she could have a financially sustainable career in art, so she has not yet selected a college major and is currently fulfilling general education requirements.

Abby maintains her old high school friendships and now feels that her mother and she emotionally support each other. Abby's sense of community has changed in its intensity for she now feels that she has a solid standing in her group of friends and in her relationship with her



mother. Abby's improved relationship with her mother is one illustration of a shift in access to and acceptance of adult support that Abby previously rejected.

Abby was not unique in her feeling that high school had been an overall positive experience and that she felt a strong sense of belonging. Denise, Bonnie, Lisa and Alyesia each expressed their pleasure at being able to reflect back to their high school experiences and enjoyed having the opportunity to share them with me. These women and all of the women who identified as LBQ share a belief that high school was a good time for them and are enjoying their college years. For these women, the differences they feel between high school and college are centered on continued growth in emotional maturity and the on-going process of all aspects of their development.

There are women in this study who are still in the process of discovering and developing new supportive communities for themselves. Nicole felt betrayed by adults after she testified in court. She is not involved with any college activities and prefers to maintain the social solitude she chose during high school. She does not spend time with any particular group of friends, partly because during high school she had two close friends and was never part of any larger social group. She did not allow the pressures of peer groups to determine the ways she should dress or how to act.

Nicole approached our interview cautiously. It was an approach that was reflective of her previous experiences with adults and demonstrated the wisdom of experience. From my initial impression of Nicole, I thought that hers would be a difficult interview because of her approach to me. Nicole's physical demeanor was guarded and self-protective, she sat with her arms folded across her chest and she sat in a way that allowed her body to bend together in a self-protective stance. By the end of the interview, Nicole was sitting upright in the chair. I believe for now,

Nicole's sense of community is deeply embedded within her and she uses her experience and wisdom to evaluate others, as she evaluated me. Nicole has learned to rely on herself and to trust her instincts when it comes to making decisions and appeared to be doing very well at the time of our interview. She was performing well academically and was in the process of deciding on her career goals.

Nicole chose social solitude over activities, unlike Darla who has become increasingly socially withdrawn since her experience. Nicole's choice was a proactive decision that resulted in her gaining personal agency over her activities, with whom she would socialize, and how she chose to behave. Darla's actions and attitudes reflect a more reactive stance as a result of her victimization and continued harassment by her ex-boyfriend. She does not believe she has the kind of support that might help her. Darla is visibly angry and wants revenge against her ex-boyfriend. She is upset because the only way she is known around her high school is as the "girl in the picture," rather than as to see her as a young woman.

Darla would like to see her ex-boyfriend imprisoned. She would like the adults who did not assist her to be terminated from their jobs. Darla desperately wanted an adult to take a specific action against this young man so that he could never again do to someone else what he did to her. She was unwilling to press charges with the police, because she was publicly humiliated and because she had consented to engaging in sexual activities with him. Darla felt powerless and alone.

I believe Darla chose to speak to me because she was seeking therapeutic intervention and had hoped I could provide it. I provided her with referrals for therapy and made sure she was neither suicidal nor homicidal, but I found myself in a position of explaining that I could not resolve what had happened to her. I could not rectify the wrongs that had been done and I felt

the boundaries between researcher and participant suddenly to begin to blur. I wanted to take her under my wing and help her; I wanted to be able to protect her from future pain. Perhaps it was in this moment where Darla and I became bonded temporarily in relationship to each other, she as a vulnerable victim and I as the confidant. Darla's interview was the most difficult interview to review, because it was so emotionally charged. I found it to be a challenge to my ability to maintain a researcher's position of relative distance.

While Darla's story was a challenge to me personally, I found that Chrissie, the high school cheerleader who allowed herself to be the subject of jokes, was facing challenges of her own. Chrissie's sentiment of the "glory days of high school" revealed that she no longer had a position within any peer group. She surmised that perhaps she was not as well-liked as she thought she was during high school.

Chrissie found that in her college, the people who talked to her most were "older" students, rather than those who were her age peers. Her present challenges were much different than those she experienced as a member of the "popular" group during high school. Even though she was often made fun of during high school Chrissie felt she had a place where she felt she belonged. At the time of our interview, she had not found that space in college. She had seen the college's cheerleaders perform and stated that she did not try out because she knew she was not good enough to be selected to the squad.

Chrissie had begun to construct a new identity, one based on her own inclinations rather than those of any particular group. Chrissie was now focused on schoolwork and studying, something she acknowledged she did not do during high school. Chrissie was greatly influenced by her high school peers when it came to academic studying; she did not see it as a valued

activity and could result in her being labeled as a “geek.” For Chrissie, being a “geek” had a much lower status than her status of being a cheerleader and being called, “Chrissie ‘ho.’”

Chrissie did not attend college until the spring semester because she said she had not done well in high school and just needed a break. Chrissie stated her biggest challenge at present is in “learning how to study and do well in classes.” In Chrissie’s case, it appears that in order for her to attain her newly developed goal of doing well in school, she had to redefine who she is in comparison to who she was in high school. She is not a member of any large social peer network and has come to rely on herself and has developed a stronger relationship with her parents for support.

### **Positive safe spaces for all young women**

Regardless of sexual identity, each young woman of this study discovered or created her community of support because the school environment itself was not safe space for them. By developing personal relationships, each developed strategies to protect her from or help her cope with negative events and experiences of high school. Most often, this establishment of community was comprised of friends who were from previously established peer groups or newly formed relationships. Some women had support from one or both parents, others were ostracized from their families. Adults were more present as a part of the communities of support as the girls got older and graduated high school. This again highlights high school graduation as a landmark moment when girls become young women. As these girls become recognized as young women, their relationships with their parents improved and transitioned into one where the young women sought and obtained support from one or both parents.

Sonn & Fisher, (1996) say, “People are drawn to others with whom they share similar experiences and histories and this makes them more comfortable together (p. 427).” The need for

affiliation is evident in the experiences of almost all of these women, regardless of which college they attended. Four of the community college students attend social activities at other colleges where they had friends who attend and each of those young women is considering transferring to the school where she socializes.

As I considered the ways in which these women developed new or maintained old communities of support, I have been reminded of the many different forms community can take. In the metaphorical sense, community is a feeling of comradeship among like-minded individuals. It is a way in which we select people with whom to affiliate based upon mutual agreement of philosophies, ideals, and policies. Community also involves symbolic membership within groups that are not necessarily formalized, structured groups. These groups are more commonly thought of as categories rather than communities, however to be a member of a particular socioeconomic class, have a specific religious affiliation, be a victim of crime, provides membership within a community. Women like Nicole and Darla entered into the bureaucratic communities of the criminal justice system, believing that by following legal or administrative processes they could resolve their circumstances and would have some feeling that justice had occurred. Neither woman felt she had received any assurance of justice and, knowingly or not and without active choice, now has membership within a broader community of sexually victimized women.

Community can be a physical space where people of similar ideals, lifestyles, etc, are able to gather and socialize when they might otherwise have difficulty in finding each other. These types of communities may take the form of churches, school gymnasiums, physical fitness centers, coffeehouses, and other endless possibilities. They may include residential neighborhoods where the commonalities are activities that are centered on local sporting or

recreational events. Kim found community to be within her church community and her Christian belief system. Denise's community is developing in her workplace and in her neighborhood, while Abby's community is her longtime suburban neighborhood where social activities include intensive support of her (former) high school football program.

Likewise, Alanna now has developed an open and honest relationship with both of her parents, her father is still developing in his ability to speak directly about her sexual identity, but she says he is getting much better at it. Coral first came out to her sister and sought her sister's advice in how to tell their parents. After all their discussion, Coral's parents asked about her sexual identity one day while she was getting something from the refrigerator. She acknowledged that she is a lesbian and her father asked her if she thought it was a phase. When she said it was not a phase, she said he shrugged his shoulders, said "ok" and they all went about their day. Coral's family continues to be supportive of her and encourages her to do what makes her happy in her life. Dorcy, Laura, Maria, and Celeste all have support from their families at the present. With exception of Celeste who is still not interested in dating, each of these young women have taken girlfriends home to meet their families. They all have positive, safe space within their family homes, including Alanna who faced serious in-home conflicts about her sexual identity during high school.

McMillan (1986) defines community as, "participation in voluntary associations [which] yields a sharing of power, as in the case of student clubs and organizations."

For the lesbian and bisexual women who participated in this study, their campus LGBT organization was a central point for developing community. Tierney (1992) promotes the idea that communities of difference are supportive to all, not simply the groups represented.

We learn about difference by existing in communities of difference--communities of diverse races, classes, genders, and sexual orientations. Enabling silenced

groups to speak out and ensuring that we all have equal protection enhances not only the individuals in those groups, but the entire community as well (p 44).

Members such as Maria and Alanna did not have a place where they felt a sense of belonging until they joined their respective groups. At the time of their interviews, they remained somewhat uneasy about how well they “fit in” but each agreed that it was much better than the social isolation she felt during high school. They were both active participants in the group and were frequently involved in activities promoting awareness to dispel stereotypes of the broader LGBT community.

A common thought that each woman seemed to express, was that high school graduation was a symbolic termination of peer group interaction, as well as conflict. With exception of Denise who said she would love to go back to high school, the women of this study each looked toward the future as a way of sustaining hope during emotionally difficult times while still in high school. Each said, in her own way, that she wanted to get to college so she could stop worrying about what anyone might be saying about her.

None of the lesbian and bisexual women had gay-straight alliances at their high schools and most fought their sexual desire for women until after high school graduation. For each, college is a space that has allowed her to embrace her feelings of desire and to act upon them as she deemed appropriate. No longer did these women worry about what rumors might be spread around the school and every lesbian or bisexual participant of the study was living as openly lesbian or bisexual. Coral, Laura, Dorcy, Alanna, Maria, Celeste each expressed that she felt a new sense of empowerment through her ability to be honest with her family and because she no

longer had to contend with the pressures of high school groups. Leaving their hometown created an opportunity to construct her own identity while selecting which friendships, if any, she would maintain from high school.

During high school, much of the students' focus was on group dynamics and membership. Some groups, such as any school's "popular" group, set a hierarchy of social strata which subsequently sets the tone for the ways in which other groups would be treated. While there was only one group identified as "the" popular one, other groups are often distributed within this hierarchy and position determined how much access members from other groups would have to join the "popular" group in select activities. Individual development was only encouraged if it conformed to the expectations of a given group. Nicole and her two friends operated on the fringe of the groups in the higher part of the hierarchy; this afforded them opportunities to attend parties. Nicole's distrust in people and in the criminal justice system eventually provided her with confident self-reliance. This is not to say that in order for young women to be self-reliant that they should be victimized, but it demonstrates that resilience is a key factor in the ways in which positive, safe spaces may be created.

Once outside of the lens of high school group influence, each of the young women of this study recognized that her focus had shifted from one of group membership to one of individual development. With this break from the past, each woman expressed some feeling of freedom to forge ahead with a process of learning who she is becoming, based upon her goals and desires. Each recognized that during high school, much of her energy was directed to participation in or active rejection of group interaction and expectation, regardless of actual group membership. This newfound freedom that these women are enjoying is not simply in terms of sexual identity,



but also based upon recognition by each that she can make individual decisions based upon her individual likes, dislikes, and priorities for her current educational situation.

Overall, a sense of belonging combined with a desire for affiliation provided these women opportunities to maintain, seek, or develop supportive communities. These social networks empower each woman to make decisions that she feels is in her best interest rather than in response to high school expectations or out of fear of being the next target of gossip. The high school atmosphere of clique membership creates a rigid expectation of conformity and reprisal for nonconformity. The new venue of colleges and universities opens exciting new doors of opportunity, in which a young woman can not only participate, but she can also grow and expand her horizons for membership within a global society. Developing membership within new communities, whether they are communities of learning, difference, faith, friendship, or political causes, can be a mechanism to promote the further empowerment of young women.

### **Conclusions and recommendations**

I began this study by wanting to come to an understanding of the ways in which girls create positive, safe space during high school, specifically in their senior year. Because of the statistics that illustrate the high rates of bullying, sexual harassment, and anti-gay violence, and inflammatory rhetoric, I wanted to examine the ways in which sexual identity played a role in the *ways* in which young women created positive, safe spaces during high school.

In what I theorized would be a study that ultimately highlighted that safe school initiatives were ineffective and geared toward boys' aggression, I have come to an understanding that girls' issues are entwined in the ways they learn to negotiate high school during their sexual identity development. Through my interviews with these young women, the following landmark lessons have emerged about them now and when they were girls in high school:

1. “Choice” is a term laden with positive and negative meanings. It indicates that one makes a choice from a wide variety of possibilities. When they are informed, girls are able to make purposeful choices in their lives, but only a range of all options is realistically available. Understanding and recognizing sexual desire can lead girls to make informed choices. Adults should develop ways in which they are able to be comfortable in speaking with girls about desire and acknowledgement of desire. Such information will assist girls in making informed, purposeful choices.
2. Adults’ inability or unwillingness to develop open lines of communication about the subject of sexual desire in a constructive way silences girls’ discussion. Even if adults were present and talking about sex and desire, these young women were not recognizing the discussions as open invitations to communicate. When girls are silenced, they will make choices in isolation from guidance and support from adults and will instead seek guidance from other girls. Silence does not equal *not* feeling, wanting, desiring, or acting.
3. Girls learn how to “work the system.” There are many “systems” that they can work. They recognize teachers who become enmeshed in the school student social hierarchy and will use the knowledge to their advantage via manipulation. They know what boys say about them and can use their reputation as a source of empowerment rather than victimization. LGB girls learn to work the heteronormative system and use it to their advantage by being silent or pretending to be straight and will listen and learn from what is said about others.
4. Girls have a strong sense of hope and resiliency whether they had good or bad experiences. Being future-oriented helped them get past difficult times because they saw

high school as a temporary place and the future holds promise for greater dreams and experiences.

This strong sense of hope and resiliency with hope for the future is a key that all the young women had in common. Most seemed to share an active recognition that they could create spaces at their school that would be positive safe, space where they could mature. Each moved on toward college with an acquired wisdom and savvy that, was not present when each began high school.

Positive, safe space is not always a literal place within the physical structure of the school. While the physical structure may provide protection from the elements of weather, these students demonstrate that it is often within the physical structure of schools where girls can be victimized by peers of both sexes. Metaphorically, positive, safe spaces are spaces created by girls within peer relationships. Most of the young women of this study relied on their friends for emotional support and for guidance. These young women and their friends may have had limited life experience, but they created trusting relationships with their close friends.

Membership in school clubs or participation in other school-based extra-curricular activities also served as a space where some of these young women were able to develop their self-confidence and experience successes either through the publication of a final product such as a yearbook or a newspaper or through their performance in theatre musicals. Three of the young women created positive, safe spaces in their place of employment. Several young women developed their agency to use their negative reputation to their advantage in creating positive, safe spaces. By taking terms that were used against them, such as “ho,” they use them as leverage to build personal relationships. This leverage often resulted in girls taking control of the terms and using them as a source of power and resilience.

Overall, these young women were triumphant in creating positive, safe spaces during high school by: trying out different personas; roles; and masks; cultivating tools in their cultural surroundings for their own ends; and by putting words or placing names and labels on things or events. Most of the LBQ girls “tried out” being straight during high school. They had boyfriends and engaged in sexual activities with them, only to later realize that they were feeling sexual desire for another girl. One of the straight girls created a persona that allowed her to be the clown of her group as a way of compensating for her poor skills as a cheerleader

Four of the young women used their cultural surroundings as a means to cultivate their reputations in ways that were useful to them. Two of the young women were called “slut” or “ho,” yet each was able to take back the term to her advantage. Each was able to use her reputation to relieve pressure to engage in sexual activities since it was assumed that she was already doing so by nature of her reputation. Many of the LBQ young women were able to find ways to name their feelings and to realize their feelings of desire. They described their intense feelings for another girl as being different from their feelings for a boy. They eventually came to be able to name their sexual identity as being different from heterosexuality.

The young women of this study demonstrated a resiliency to emerge from negative, unsafe spaces during high school in positive ways. They all graduated from high school and, at the time of the interview were enrolled as full-time students in colleges and universities. With high school now in the background, the young women had triumphantly emerged from high school and were focused on their adult futures.

As high school teachers, counselors and administrators, parents, and college counselors and student life personnel we must recognize that high school is often not a safe space for girls. It is a place where they must learn to negotiate the power structures of the school’s social

hierarchy. Girls are faced with choices to follow the lead of *the* popular group and act according to some set of rules as set forth by the popular group regardless of whether or not they are members of that group. They are faced with choices to recognize and acknowledge their sexual desire while having few opportunities to discuss sexual desire in meaningful ways. We must acknowledge that anti-bullying initiatives as they presently exist are not helpful to girls during high school because these initiatives fail to address all forms of aggressive behaviors, sexual harassment, and anti-gay violence.

## APPENDIX A

### THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE STUDY

	Pseudonym	Sexual Identity during high school	Sexual Identity at time of interview	College Context*
1.	Abby	Straight	Straight	CC
2.	Coral	Straight	Bisexual	PBU
3.	Karen	Straight	Straight	CC
4.	Alanna	Lesbian	Lesbian	PBU
5.	Denise	Straight	Straight	CC
6.	Dorcy	Straight	Bisexual	PBU
7.	Bonnie	Straight	Straight	CC
8.	Laura	Straight	Lesbian	PBU
9.	Lisa	Straight	Straight	CC
10.	Maria	Bisexual	Lesbian	PBU
11.	Kim	Straight	Straight	CC
12.	Stephanie	Straight	Straight	CC
13.	Alyesia	Unlabeled	Undefined	CC
14.	Nicole	Straight	Straight	PBU
15.	Celeste	Straight/Unlabeled	Bicurious	PRU
16.	Chrissie	Straight	Straight	CC
17.	Darla	Straight	Straight	CC

\* CC – Community College PBU – Public University PRU – Private University

My intent in this study was to stay away from labels of sexual identity however; I had to have language in order to speak to the differences that young women experienced.

Each young woman presented her sexual identity as she believed it had been during high school and as she identified at the time of the interview. These labels are frozen to the time of high school and to the time of the interview, but may not remain the same as each young woman progresses through the remainder of her life. Alyesia and Celeste made the claim that they did not want to name a specific and single sexual identity, regardless of any sexual desires or activities that they acknowledged to themselves.

## APPENDIX B

### BACKGROUND SURVEY

Please provide the following information:

1. Racial/Ethnic Identity: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Age: \_\_\_\_\_
3. City/town of residence during high school: \_\_\_\_\_
4. How would you classify this area? (Select one)  
\_\_\_\_\_ Urban \_\_\_\_\_ Rural \_\_\_\_\_ Suburban
5. Approximate size of former high school: (Check one)  
\_\_\_\_\_ Large (over 1500 children) \_\_\_\_\_ Moderate (1000-1499 children)  
\_\_\_\_\_ Small (less than 1000 children)
6. Approximate size of your high school graduating class: \_\_\_\_\_
7. How diverse would you consider the population of your former high school to be?  
\_\_\_\_\_ Very (many different racial, ethnic, socioeconomic class backgrounds)  
\_\_\_\_\_ Moderately diverse (some different racial, ethnic, socioeconomic class backgrounds)  
\_\_\_\_\_ Not diverse (very few differences in backgrounds)
8. How diverse would you consider the population of your former high school with respect to sexual orientation?  
\_\_\_\_\_ Very (there were many self-identified non-heterosexual students that I was aware of)  
\_\_\_\_\_ Moderately diverse (there were a few self-identified non-heterosexual students that I was aware of)  
\_\_\_\_\_ Not diverse (very few, if any, self-identified non-heterosexual students that I was aware of)

9. What types of extracurricular activities were available in your former high school?  
Please list. (Use the back of this sheet if you need more space)
- 10 Which, if any, extracurricular activities did you participate in?  
.
- 11 What is your present sexual orientation?  
.
- 12 What was your sexual orientation during high school?  
.
- 13 Were you sexually active during high school?  
.
- 14 If yes to Question 12, were your sexual activities congruent with your publicly  
stated/displayed sexual identity?  
.



## **APPENDIX C**

### **INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

1. How would you describe the place where your former school was located?
2. Would you classify your high school experience as having been positive? Why or why not?
3. Tell me about your high school experience. What was it like for you to attend your high school?
4. Describe the basic atmosphere for students at your former high school. In other words, were there in-groups? If yes, describe some of them and your impression of what it took to be a member.
5. What kinds of criteria existed for membership in other groups? Describe the group and your understanding of the required criteria?
6. Describe your own peer group, those who you spent your time with. Were you a member of an in-group?
7. What was it like to be a member of your group? What was required for admission into the group?
8. How would others in your school describe you? Your group?
9. Describe the overall atmosphere (attitude) as promoted by the students of your school regarding sexuality. Were you aware of the attitudes, beliefs of teachers and other school personnel?

10. Were there pressures to conform to any particular sexual standard? What was that standard? What kinds of pressure did you feel?
11. Why did you decide to become sexually active? How did you make that decision?
12. Do you think others were accurate in their assumptions/impressions/ideas of what your sexual identity was during high school? If inaccurate, did you ever tell them they were wrong?
13. What kinds of things did you do in order to make high school a positive space for you during your senior year? (Space being defined as confines of the school, e.g. the physical building, school grounds and space outside of the physical geography of school. These spaces may include involvement in community organizations, peer circles, neighborhood recreational facilities, etc.)
14. What kinds of things are you aware that your peers did to make high school a positive experience during their senior year?
15. If you were a member of any athletic teams, extracurricular groups, committees, etc., what role did these groups serve as support or non-support of you? Did participation in these activities contribute to your feeling you had a positive experience? In what ways?
16. Do you feel that you had strong emotional support to be yourself during high school? If yes, from where did this support come? If no, what strategies did you use to get through school to graduation?
17. What was it like to be you in your school?
18. What factors led you to your decision as to which colleges to apply?
19. What factors led to your decision to select the college where you currently attend?
20. Did your sexual identity or the sexual identity of others play any role in your selection of your present college and location?
21. Is there anything else you would like to add that you think might be relevant to this study?

## APPENDIX D

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PARENTS

Listed below are some recommendations for parents of girls if they wish to facilitate their development of a healthy sexual identity.

<b>PARENTS SHOULD:</b>
Learn to walk the fine line between being a support system and being a monitor. It is important to be present for girls when a “crisis” occurs; however, constant surveillance is often a contributing circumstance to the silencing of girls.
Overcome their issues that prevent them from feeling comfortable in speaking with girls about sex. If parents are uncomfortable with their own sexual identity and sexual desires, they will not be able to offer any useful discussion or guidance to their daughters.
Learn, recognize, and accept that sexual desire and intimacy are natural, active feelings experienced by girls and avoid constant warnings of pregnancy and/or disease as the primary, even likely, outcomes of sexual activities.
Teach girls that they are not “passive” recipients of boy’s and men’s sexual desires, but that girls and women also experience sexual desire and can choose what to do with it.
Recognize and accept that if girls are able to recognize and name “desire” that they are able to make informed choices about their response to it.
Recognize that for many girls, sex is secondary to intimacy and trust. Many girls are intimacy-seeking rather than sex-obsessed. It is up to adults to teach girls the difference.
Realize that “grounding” girls will not prevent them from experimenting with sex if they are not able to have honest, trusting discussions with adults. Ignorance of girls’ sexual desire will not make desire disappear.
Be alert to, become savvy about, and teach girls the ways in which technology can be useful to them. Discuss with adolescents that “useful” technology can also be used to victimize them by unscrupulous uses of items such as camera telephones and online journals. Personal web-pages that girls can develop through free internet sites designed to attract adolescent and young adult interaction and communication can be simultaneously helpful and problematic.

## APPENDIX E

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TEACHERS AND OTHER SCHOOL OFFICIALS

Listed below are some recommendations for teachers and school officials if they wish to facilitate safe school initiatives that will address the actual issues that girls encounter.

<b>TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS SHOULD:</b>
Pay attention to the students who keep to themselves and appear to be the social isolates of the class or school.
Be cognizant of the peer social hierarchy of the school and be careful not to encourage and enhance the “power” of “the” popular group. Do not privilege members of the popular group over students who are either members of lower status groups or who do not belong to any group.
Invite and encourage the girls who may be withdrawn to participate in extracurricular activities that will allow them to utilize their social, academic, and/or artistic strengths.
Learn to recognize instances and characteristics of indirect bullying and harassment as perpetrated by girls on girls in order to intervene.
Recognize that teachers cannot “do it all” and that security guards, principals, and other school personnel also have a stake in the education and protection of girls.
Advocate for the inclusion of comprehensive sexual education in the schools. Advocate for the inclusion of discussion of girls’ sexual desire, intimacy, and identity rather than the “disease model” of sexual education.
Accept that not all girls (or boys for that matter) will talk to their parents about their school peer relationships, experiences, and sexual activities. School guidance counselors, teachers, and all other personnel have opportunities to observe the girls at school and could be good resources from which girls can seek support and guidance.

## APPENDIX F

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COLLEGE STUDENT LIFE PERSONNEL

Listed below are some recommendations for student life personnel to more effectively facilitate student interaction, networking, and participation in student organizations.

<b>STUDENT LIFE PERSONNEL SHOULD:</b>
Student life personnel should develop relationships with other area colleges and universities and develop partnerships with smaller student organizations/clubs such as LBQ organizations/clubs. Such partnering for activities would provide students with opportunities to meet new friends and to transition into college from high school.
Be cognizant of the peer social hierarchy of the school and be careful not to encourage and enhance the “power” of “the” popular group. Do not privilege members of the popular group over students who are either members of lower status groups or who do not belong to any group.
Invite and encourage the girls who may be withdrawn to participate in extracurricular activities that will allow them to utilize their social, academic, and/or artistic strengths.
Survey new students prior to their arrival to gather data to develop student organizations and activities that meet the needs of these new students.

## APPENDIX G

### METHODOLOGICAL LESSONS OF RECRUITMENT FOR INTERVIEWS

The use of personal interviews was a wonderful method that allowed me the opportunity to meet participants from various backgrounds and who had varied experiences. In selecting this method of data collection, I learned the following:

CHALLENGE	EXPERIENCE	RESULT/SUGGESTIONS
I recognized that selecting participants for the study would be a challenge. I thought through what I <i>thought</i> were all of the possible scenarios from which to obtain participants and considered the difficulties I might encounter.	I received favorable responses from various student organizations, indicating that they would forward my information	When my requests were forwarded to organizational list-serves, I had only one willing response.
	Some organizations allowed me to attend their meetings to “sell” my study and gain participation.	Many student groups permitted me to speak and present my study, but in many cases, few students volunteered. It was important to get to the “leader” of the organization and speak with them so that they got to know me, understood my study, and were willing to strongly encourage participation.
	Locating and making contact with the LBQ student groups requires patience and tenacity.	These groups tend to be relatively small in number and do not always have a volunteer available in the campus office.
	I found myself spending time hanging around the offices of some of the organizations because many undergraduates operate on nocturnal schedules.	It is not easy at middle-age to inconspicuously hang around the closed door of an undergraduate student organization.

CHALLENGE	EXPERIENCE	RESULT/SUGGESTIONS
I needed to have several young women express an interest in participation in my study.	Most expressions of interest did not result in interviews. Scheduling time to meet was a particular challenge because of busy schedules.	For every one participant who actually interviewed, I had on average, three expressions of interest.  NEVER try to seek participants during the final four weeks of a semester. The young women may be willing, but their schedules will not permit.  Determine how much time you think you will need to recruit your participants, then double it.
I considered placing an advertisement in college, university, and in the local paper that is targeted toward college students.  I wanted to send email requests to a variety of groups in order to get young women from a variety of backgrounds.	I wrote several drafts of a possible advertisement, but in the end did not use this method.  I went through several drafts of the email in order to use wording that was not too dry and technical but that adequately represented what I wanted.	When seeking young women for a study in which sexual identity and activity are variables, <i>avoid</i> using words and phrases such as: <i>Recruiting, soliciting, in search of, seeking, desperate for</i> , or other synonyms for “recruiting.” women. There is no good way to word it!

## APPENDIX H

### METHODOLOGICAL LESSONS OF CONDUCTING AND TRANSCRIBING INTERVIEWS

I learned the following from my experiences of interviewing and transcribing during this study:

CHALLENGE	EXPERIENCE	RESULT/SUGGESTIONS
I began with a miniature tape recorder to capture the interviews.	Tapes can become cumbersome to work with. When the tape shuts off, the interview has to be paused until the tape can be turned and recorder restarted	After quickly accumulating a number of tapes, I switched to a digital recorder.
Be sure to have a digital recorder that has enough memory capacity to store your interviews.	Being new to the use of digital recorders, I did not consider memory capacity as an issue. I knew I could transfer the interviews to my computer, clearing the recorder for the next interview.	One particular day I had four interviews scheduled over the course of a six hour period. After the second interview, I realized that I did not have enough capacity to hold the next two scheduled interviews and had to walk to the local audio component store and purchase a recorder with a larger memory capacity.
Tapes can quickly become damaged.	I had completed my first six interviews on the tape recorder. Three of the tapes became damaged during the transcription process.	Transcription requires the playing and re-playing of the interview. Miniature tapes are not very durable. When they begin to go bad, the already slow transcription process becomes slower and the voices become distorted from the damaged tape.
Transcription takes time and patience.	Transcribing interviews is a slow process that requires the transcriptionist to listen to the interview several times.	Determine how much time you think you will need to transcribe your interviews, and then triple it. One hour of interview took approximately three hours to transcribe.



## APPENDIX I

### NUD\*IST TREE

QSR N6 Full version, revision 6.0.

Licensee: Donna Imhoff

PROJECT: Dissertation Safe Spaces, User Donna Imhoff, 10:56 pm, Apr 16, 2006.

REPORT ON NODES FROM Tree Nodes '~/

Depth: ALL

Restriction on coding data: NONE

- (1) /Demographics
- (1 1) /Demographics/current sex id
- (1 2) /Demographics/sex id high school
- (1 3) /Demographics/Education college type
- (1 3 1) /Demographics/Education college type/community college
- (1 3 2) /Demographics/Education college type/private university
- (1 3 3) /Demographics/Education college type/Level 1 university
- (1 3 4) /Demographics/Education college type/Religiously affiliated college
- (1 3 5) /Demographics/Education college type/state-funded college
- (1 4) /Demographics/Race/Ethnicity
- (1 4 1) /Demographics/Race/Ethnicity/white
- (1 4 2) /Demographics/Race/Ethnicity/black
- (1 4 3) /Demographics/Race/Ethnicity/Latina
- (1 4 4) /Demographics/Race/Ethnicity/Asian
- (1 5) /Demographics/sexually active
- (1 5 1) /Demographics/sexually active/during high school
- (1 5 2) /Demographics/sexually active/present
- (1 6) /Demographics/sexually inactive

(1 6 1) /Demographics/sexually inactive/during high school  
 (1 6 2) /Demographics/sexually inactive/present  
 (2) /Case data  
 (2 1) /Case data/Educational Context  
 (2 1 1) /Case data/Educational Context/Rural  
 (2 1 2) /Case data/Educational Context/Urban  
 (2 1 3) /Case data/Educational Context/Suburban  
 (2 1 4) /Case data/Educational Context/Diversity-racial  
 (2 2) /Case data/Size of hs  
 (2 2 1) /Case data/Size of hs/small  
 (2 2 2) /Case data/Size of hs/moderate  
 (2 2 3) /Case data/Size of hs/large  
 (2 3) /Case data/Size of graduating class  
 (2 3 1) /Case data/Size of graduating class/Small  
 (2 3 2) /Case data/Size of graduating class/Moderate  
 (2 3 3) /Case data/Size of graduating class/Large  
 (2 4) /Case data/Diversity-sexual identity  
 (2 4 1) /Case data/Diversity-sexual identity/very diverse  
 (2 4 2) /Case data/Diversity-sexual identity/moderately diverse  
 (2 4 3) /Case data/Diversity-sexual identity/not diverse  
 (2 5) /Case data/diversity - racial  
 (2 5 1) /Case data/diversity - racial/Very diverse  
 (2 5 2) /Case data/diversity - racial/moderately diverse  
 (2 5 3) /Case data/diversity - racial/not diverse  
 (2 6) /Case data/Attitude toward HS  
 (2 6 1) /Case data/Attitude toward HS/Liked it  
 (2 6 2) /Case data/Attitude toward HS/Loved it  
 (2 6 3) /Case data/Attitude toward HS/Hated it  
 (3) /Theoretical framework  
 (3 1) /Theoretical framework/school sanctioned activities  
 (3 1 1) /Theoretical framework/school sanctioned activities/athletics  
 (3 1 2) /Theoretical framework/school sanctioned activities/clubs  
 (3 1 3) /Theoretical framework/school sanctioned activities/organizations  
 (3 1 4) /Theoretical framework/school sanctioned activities/peer interactions  
 (3 1 4 1) /Theoretical framework/school sanctioned activities/peer interactions/in-group  
 (3 1 4 2) /Theoretical framework/school sanctioned activities/peer interactions/non-group

(3 1 4 3) /Theoretical framework/school sanctioned activities/peer interactions/cheerleaders/jocks

(3 1 4 4) /Theoretical framework/school sanctioned activities/peer interactions/loner

(3 1 4 5) /Theoretical framework/school sanctioned activities/peer interactions/neither in-group or out group

(3 1 4 6) /Theoretical framework/school sanctioned activities/peer interactions/developed group of leftovers

(3 2) /Theoretical framework/people who provided support

(3 2 1) /Theoretical framework/people who provided support/teachers

(3 2 1 1) /Theoretical framework/people who provided support/teachers/openly

(3 2 1 2) /Theoretical framework/people who provided support/teachers/secretly

(3 2 2) /Theoretical framework/people who provided support/school counselors

(3 2 3) /Theoretical framework/people who provided support/friends

(3 2 3 1) /Theoretical framework/people who provided support/friends/dorky kids

(3 2 3 2) /Theoretical framework/people who provided support/friends/popular group

(3 2 3 3) /Theoretical framework/people who provided support/friends/leftovers

(3 2 3 4) /Theoretical framework/people who provided support/friends/jocks

(3 2 3 5) /Theoretical framework/people who provided support/friends/smart kids

(3 2 3 6) /Theoretical framework/people who provided support/friends/skaters

(3 2 3 7) /Theoretical framework/people who provided support/friends/normal kids

(3 2 3 8) /Theoretical framework/people who provided support/friends/goths

(3 2 4) /Theoretical framework/people who provided support/coaches

(3 2 5) /Theoretical framework/people who provided support/coaches/advisors

(3 2 6) /Theoretical framework/people who provided support/family

(3 2 7) /Theoretical framework/people who provided support/nonfriends, nonfamily

(3 3) /Theoretical framework/ranking of school experience

(3 3 1) /Theoretical framework/ranking of school experience/positive

(3 3 2) /Theoretical framework/ranking of school experience/negative

(3 4) /Theoretical framework/Non-hs activities

(3 4 1) /Theoretical framework/Non-hs activities/friends

(3 4 2) /Theoretical framework/Non-hs activities/social activities not hs sanctioned

(3 4 3) /Theoretical framework/Non-hs activities/employment

(3 5) /Theoretical framework/Reflective perception by others

(3 5 1) /Theoretical framework/Reflective perception by others/does not respond

(3 5 2) /Theoretical framework/Reflective perception by others/fair person

(3 5 3) /Theoretical framework/Reflective perception by others/stuck up

(3 5 4) /Theoretical framework/Reflective perception by others/peers like participant

(3 5 5) /Theoretical framework/Reflective perception by others/unobserved outcast

(3 6) /Theoretical framework/School atmosphere toward sexuality

(3 6 1) /Theoretical framework/School atmosphere toward sexuality/open and supportive

(3 6 2) /Theoretical framework/School atmosphere toward sexuality/subtle

(3 6 3) /Theoretical framework/School atmosphere toward sexuality/felt pressured

(3 6 4) /Theoretical framework/School atmosphere toward sexuality/none

(3 6 5) /Theoretical framework/School atmosphere toward sexuality/openly encouraged dating

(3 6 6) /Theoretical framework/School atmosphere toward sexuality/definitely against homosexuality

(3 6 7) /Theoretical framework/School atmosphere toward sexuality/very strict

(3 7) /Theoretical framework/descrip of home com

(3 7 1) /Theoretical framework/descrip of home com/wealthy

(3 7 2) /Theoretical framework/descrip of home com/middle class

(3 7 3) /Theoretical framework/descrip of home com/stuck up

(3 7 4) /Theoretical framework/descrip of home com/low income

(3 8) /Theoretical framework/felt sexual feelings

(3 8 1) /Theoretical framework/felt sexual feelings/for boys

(3 8 2) /Theoretical framework/felt sexual feelings/for girls

(3 9) /Theoretical framework/was bullied by others

(3 10) /Theoretical framework/unwanted sexual experiences

(3 10 1) /Theoretical framework/unwanted sexual experiences/with boyfriend

(3 10 2) /Theoretical framework/unwanted sexual experiences/with strangers

(3 10 3) /Theoretical framework/unwanted sexual experiences/with boys in the schoool

(3 10 4) /Theoretical framework/unwanted sexual experiences/with girls

(3 10 5) /Theoretical framework/unwanted sexual experiences/with girlfriend

(3 11) /Theoretical framework/negative experiences

(3 11 1) /Theoretical framework/negative experiences/parents

(3 11 2) /Theoretical framework/negative experiences/peers

(3 11 3) /Theoretical framework/negative experiences/school employees

(3 11 4) /Theoretical framework/negative experiences/social groups

(3 11 4 1) /Theoretical framework/negative experiences/social groups/own peer group

(3 11 4 2) /Theoretical framework/negative experiences/social groups/other peer group

(3 11 4 3) /Theoretical framework/negative experiences/social groups/boys called names

(3 11 5) /Theoretical framework/negative experiences/technology

(3 11 5 1) /Theoretical framework/negative experiences/technology/used against her

(3 11 5 2) /Theoretical framework/negative experiences/technology/used against someone else

(3 12) /Theoretical framework/College transition

(3 12 1) /Theoretical framework/College transition/belongs to student org

(3 12 2) /Theoretical framework/College transition/employed

- (3 12 3) /Theoretical framework/College transition/lives at home
- (3 13) /Theoretical framework/sexual orientation perception
- (3 13 1) /Theoretical framework/sexual orientation perception/accurate
- (3 13 2) /Theoretical framework/sexual orientation perception/inaccurate

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