SEXUAL AD-LIB?: SEXUAL SCRIPTS AND THE NEGOTIATION OF

SEXUAL BOUNDARIES WHEN WOMEN

HAVE SEX WITH WOMEN

by

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this paper to the women that participated in this study with me. It is their

experiences with which we add to our collective understanding.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

ABSTRACT

Same-sex sexual behavior is often ambiguously understood and defined. This study examines the way in which women use sexual scripts (Simon and Gagnon 1984) to negotiate and establish sexual boundaries when they have sex with other women over the life course. This study utilized qualitative in-depth semi-structured interviews with 20 women from the central Texas area, who reported having a sexual encounter with at least one woman in their lifetime. Within these narratives, I found that, unlike heteronormative sexual encounters, lesbian ones required extra navigation and negotiation based on little-to-no pre-established sexual references. Therefore, women negotiate sexual boundaries with other women in a way that is reflective of heteronormative sexual scripts but would then engage in ad-libbing. This means that heteronormative sexual scripts are used but women will insert, add on, and manipulate that script to fit the non-heterosexual encounter. Women engaging in sexual behavior with other women will negotiate those boundaries based on their sexual experience, their partner's sexual experience, and their location in their life course. I also found that the definition of sex influenced the ways in which women engaged in sex with other women. The concept of what "real" sex is influenced how seriously sexual boundaries were taken or how legitimate those encounters were understood to be. This research provides implications for future research and for social and mental health services to better serve lesbian, bisexual, and queer women.

INTRODUCTION

Essentialists and social constructionists have long debated the formation of gender, sexuality, and sexual orientation. Essentialists relate gender and sexuality to brain chemistry, hormones, and chromosomes, asserting that these aspects of human behavior are predisposed and undeniable (Diamond 2008; Gagnon and Parker 1995). Conversely, social constructionism asserts that gender (and to a certain extent sexuality and sexual orientation) are culturally defined and taught (Gagnon and Parker 1995). From birth, men and women are socialized to behave differently in every aspect of daily life (Gagnon and Parker 1995). When it comes to sexual relationships, appropriate gendered behavior is dictated through culturally mandated "scripts" that consider both the nuances of individual lived experiences and historical patterns and norms (Simon and Gagnon 1984). These specified roles and sexual scripts inform how intimacy and sex are negotiated, achieved, and enacted.

Sexual experiences and the enactment of sexual scripts are rooted in the sociological discourse of social constructionism and symbolic interactionism (Simon and Gagnon 1984). These discourses are classics within the sociological discipline and are also part of a larger feminist discourse that debates the intersection of identity, experience, and embodiment (Butler 1993; Kitzinger 1987). Within these discourses, the study of lesbian sexual experiences has been neglected within the academic world. Feminist and sociological discourse locates lesbian identity within heterosexual and patriarchal structures, the culmination of which is heteronormativity (Caldwell, Letitia,

and Peplau 1984; Dunne 1997; Hillier 2001; Horowitz and Spicer 2013; Klinkenberg and Rose 1994; Levitt and Hiestand 2005). Researchers have studied the social construction of heterosexual sexual habits, sexual consent, and boundary negotiation, at great lengths (Bartoli and Clark 2006; Dean 2011; Hundhammer and Mussweiler 2012; Kalish and Kimmel 2011; Laws and Schwartz 1977; Morgan and Zurbiggen 2007; Murnen, Wright, and Kalunzy 2002; O'Sullivan and Byers 1992; Parker and Gagnon 1995; Pino and Johnson-Johns 2009; Poppen and Segal 1988). However, academic research is limited on the reality of these interactions: How do two women interact romantically and sexually? Because women are located within a social structure in which heterosexuality is the norm, it could be assumed that their romantic interaction would mirror that of heterosexuals. But, the existence of lesbian sexuality and sexual scripts is less understood in the academic discourse. Since sexual scripts are located within a heteronormative and gendered social structure, the negotiation of sexuality, sexual boundaries, and sexual consent between two women is not yet fully understood as its own unique structure of behavior.

The intersection of gender and sexuality influences lesbian sexual behavior, however, the enactment of lesbian sexual behavior simultaneously redefines heteronormative intersections of gender and behavior. Lesbian women inevitably will pull from heterosexual scripts owing to its cultural availability when it comes to enacting sexual desire (Gagnon and Simon [1973] 2005). Our culture is a heteronormative one, meaning that heterosexuality is the culturally acceptable and normal form of sexual expression. Therefore, as lesbian women are socialized in this culture, it is assumed that they will participate in lesbian desire in a heteronormative way. Yet, at the same time, by

2

participating in and acting upon same-sex desire, lesbian women are re-defining what heteronormativity can mean and what it can look like (Kitzinger 1987; Levitt, Gerrish, and Hiestand 2003). Gagnon and Simon ([1973] 2005) assert that even when sexuality is being learned, defined, re-defined, or created, systems of scripted action are still being used. So for a lesbian woman to re-define what it means to be a female and to be sexual in a heterosexual context by being either masculine and/or homosexual, she is still enacting some sexual script.

What sociologists know and understand about women's sexuality in general can also help inform the interactions between two women. Yet, lesbian women redefine and resist traditional notions of gender through non-traditional gender performances (Bolsø 2008; Kitzinger 1987). The research that is available on lesbian sexual scripts indicates that lesbian women follow cultural scripts that are similar to heterosexuals but with specificities unique to lesbian identity (Bolsø 2008; Hammers 2009a; 2009b; Hoagland 1988; Kitzinger 1987; Levitt, Gerrish, and Hiestand 2003; Rose and Zand 2000). This indicates that not only is sexual behavior contingent upon the culture in which it is located, but that lesbian culture and identity may hold its own set of sexual scripts. But the question remains, in what ways are these performances reframing heteronormativity? When desire and sexuality are embedded in a heteronormative society, how, then, do lesbian women enact sexual scripts and negotiate boundaries? This study will not set out to establish and/or describe lesbian sexual scripts outright, but rather it will explore the ways in which lesbian women establish and negotiate sexual boundaries while using the available cultural sexual scripts. By understanding the enactment of sexual scripts in same-sex female sexual encounters, we can not only better understand the ways gender

and sexuality are socially constructed but we can also understand how sexual scripts are dictated within a larger cultural framework. In looking at sexual scripts when women are intimate with other women, while taking into account the heteronormative and patriarchal influence on the availability of the social scripts the women are using, their interpretation of those scripts demonstrate how individual lived experience can inform and reframe normative structures. This has immeasurable implications when examining the negotiation of sexual boundaries for women in general.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social construction and symbolic interaction assert that meaning and value are assigned to things based on shared cultural meaning. The social construction of reality claims that our culture and our reality are negotiated every day through interactions of shared meanings, symbols, and language (Laws and Schwartz 1977; Parker and Gagnon 1995). As such, each individual is active in the construction and reification of meaning and values. Social systems and social stratifications happen through this exchange of shared meaning and value. Hence, men and women are gendered and valued differently based on cultural and social agreements on what those specified roles and values are (Laws and Schwartz 1977; Pateman 1988). Most importantly these differences are rooted in biological assumptions in which physical sex is used as a determinant (Parker and Gagnon 1995). So although physical sex is biologically determined, the meanings, values, and prescribed behavior assigned to and associated with sex are socially constructed. As such, male and female gender roles are taught and learned through socialization and interaction.

Social Construction Of Gender And Heteronormativity

Gender socialization is an active process. West and Zimmerman (1987) name the process of gender construction and reification "doing gender." According to West and Zimmerman (1987), "Doing gender involves a complex of socially guided perceptual interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine 'natures'" (p. 126). Not only is "doing gender" a social

interaction, but it is also political in that it creates a hierarchical structure that benefits one gender over the other (Atkinson and DePalma 2009; Pateman 1988). Gender dictates how men and women interact with each other. Yet, the interaction itself reinforces gender, as well. So when genders are valued differently, with masculinity more valued than femininity, social interaction simultaneously defines and reinforces the gender hierarchy. The enforcement of these structures is tantamount to the preservation of the power structure. Furthermore, rooting the feminine and masculine in essentialist notions of "nature" justifies and reinforces the unequally constructed differences even though the it is within interactions and culturally defined meanings that the differences exist (West and Zimmerman 1987).

Clearly, gender socialization and appropriate gender performance are heavily policed and maintained. Parents take great care to ensure that their children are appropriately heterosexual (Martin 2009; Solebello and Elliott 2011). Being exposed to gender "primes," or examples of appropriate behavior, also influences gender conformity (Hundhammer and Mussweiler 2012). Often, gender non-conformity is quickly corrected or discouraged. Dozier's (2005) research on the experiences of female to male transgenders (FTM) shows that one's perceived sex influences behavior and sexual interaction. For these FTM individuals, their behavior was more gender conspicuous when their sex (whether biological or not) was more ambiguous. Meaning, that gender performance and sexual behavior are reliant on perceived sex. Katz and Farrow (2000) report that individuals who are both gender non-conforming and heterosexual experience high levels of anxiety and decreased sexual drive. Sexual identity is validated when one's physical sex is assumed based on the congruency of one's gender performance.

Gender and sexuality are inextricably linked. Therefore, sexuality is culturally constructed as well. However, the meanings assigned to sexual behaviors are not universal. Heterosexuality, the coupling of male and female individuals together, is often assumed and is a taken for granted cultural identity (Carpenter 2005; Dean 2011; Diamond 2008; Dunne 1997; Hillier 2001; Kitzinger 1987; Laws and Schwartz 1977). The assumption of this dichotomous coupling as the cultural norm is called heteronormativity. Dean (2011) asserts that heterosexual identity is privileged, advantaged, and sits at the core of social life, so much so that school, work, family, and friendships are organized heterosexually. As the cultural norm, individuals socialized within this culture inevitably will pull from this framework when formulating appropriate sexual scripts (Kitzinger 1987; Rich 1982).

According to Dean (2011), identity is both an individual's sense of self and a sense of self according to the collective group(s) the individual identifies with. This interplay indicates that personal identity (be it sexual or otherwise) is both an interpersonal process and a social one. However, in order for groups to differentiate themselves, they must establish boundaries in opposition to other groups. Therefore, heterosexuality is bound by its opposition to homosexuality (Dean 2011; Johnson 2004). This border is much more rigid for men than it is for women based on how gender norms are constructed (Johnson 2004). Women's sexual boundaries are dynamic and fluid, allowing for women to be intimate with other women and heterosexual at the same time (Diamond 2008; Johnson 2004). This idea may influence the way that women engage in sex with other women.

Compulsory Heterosexuality And Lesbian Specificity

When considering the intersection of identity and the enactment of sexuality, it is important to understand the cultural context within which women with same-sex desire are confined. Within the classical literature, some theorists posit that lesbians should be different from heterosexuals and create different types of gender and power (Hoagland 1988, Kitzinger 1987; Laws and Schwartz 1997) whereas others assert that this separation is not possible (Butler 1991; Rich 1982). This assumes that women's experiences will always be located within a heteronormative context.

For example, many second wave feminist theorists discuss how, because women are situated in a hetero-patriarchal framework that inherently subverts women as the lesser, there is a call for lesbian separatism in order to reject hetero-patriarchal structures entirely (Hoagland 1988; Kitzinger 1987; Laws and Schwartz 1977; Pateman 1988). This notion suggests that women are inherently disenfranchised when they participate in heteronormative systems. Conversely, Rich (1982) challenges heterosexual women to consider their choice of sexual identity if the social structure was not patriarchal. Meaning, she wonders if more women would be homosexual if the cultural structure was structured in a way that was not male-centered. She also asserts that lesbian existence is constrained by compulsory heterosexuality. This notion assumes that, for women who are attracted to other women, their personal experience of lesbian desire is constrained by prescribed heterosexual scripts. Likewise, Butler (1991) asserts that lesbian identity is an imitation and performance of heterosexual identity but that heterosexual identity only convinces itself as the original through compulsory repetition. Individuals must choose between the two dichotomous sexes and genders if one is to be intelligible.

Socially constructed norms and scripts limit the experience of "real" identities for many individuals. But most feminist theorists agree that gender is restrictive and institutionalizes power differentials that disenfranchise women. The intersection of gender, sexuality, identity, and experience calls for a feminist understanding of socially constructed norms. By giving individual lived experiences consideration while considering the larger social contexts in which those experiences are lived, feminist theory offers a new understanding of gender and sexuality discourse.

A part of the new sexuality discourse, one congruent with more modern notions of sexuality, is the notion that lesbian women adhere to a specific *kind* of gender that is located outside of heteronormativity. Women's sexual socialization posits women to be more sexually restrictive and less often the sexual initiator (Carpenter 2005; Diamond 2008; Hammers 2009a; 2009b; Muehlenhard 1998; Murnen, Wright, and Kaluzny 2002; O'Sullivan and Byers 1992; Rose 2000). Older discourses go so far as to assert that a part of women's socialization posits them to be lust-less and without agency (Laws and Schwartz 1977; Pateman 1988; Rich 1988). If this were to still the case, and women's sexuality was denied in general, how are lesbians sexual at all? More specifically, when desire and sexuality are embedded in a heteronormative society, how, then, do lesbian women enact sexual scripts and negotiate boundaries? In her research with Norwegian women, Bolsø (2008) finds that lesbian sexuality is different from that of heterosexual women. She names this lesbian specificity as "a specific practice of desire, *integrated* in heterosexual fantasies […] as well as *integrative* of heterosexual fantasies" (Bolsø 2008:51). Lesbian desire and sexuality is embedded in a heterosexual framework of normative behavior yet lesbian desire is also specific in its ability to integrate

9

heteronormative scripts with individual desire. Her research investigates how lesbians uniquely negotiate and rework power issues in relationships. Bolsø (2008) finds that, for the women she interviewed, the erotic has power in the symbolic value of masculinity and the flexible power exchange between femininity and masculinity. She concludes that, lesbian women have sex for the sake of sex only, whereas heterosexual couples may engage in sex for the purposes of procreation (with the added bonus of pleasure). Symbolic masculinity, in this sense, is that lesbian women can be both the sexual object and the sexual subject and can do so outside of a romantic and/or emotional context (Bolsø 2008). In this sense, lesbians are reworking heterosexual normativity, since heterosexual normative behavior has often assumed that women have sex as an additional component to romance or emotions. Bolsø (2001) also found in an earlier study that lesbians rework the heterosexual masculine notion of "to take" to no longer mean the subordination of women to a man's orgasm but to mean to give an orgasm. Again, the notion of lesbian specificity suggests that lesbians' imitation and practice of heterosexual norms indicates different motivations and approaches to sex.

When cultural scripts are heteronormative, women's ability to interpret and enact sexual scripts in a same-sex context shows their ability to redefine normative sexual behavior. Research on lesbian sexuality in the context of a bathhouse reveals that lesbian desire is focused on the body and gender performance. Sexed spaces such as a lesbian bathhouse give lesbian women agency to take "sexual risks" but are still susceptible to sexual passivity (Hammers 2009a; 2009b). Women seem to feel more comfortable exploring their sexuality in these safe spaces.

There are ways lesbian specificity still mirrors heteronormativity and dichotomous juxtapositions of masculinity and femininity. Gender performance within lesbian sexuality often denotes a posturing of the feminine against the masculine, whether that be a sexual posturing of sexual roles or simply one of a masculine versus feminine appearance. Often this posturing is only done so in comparison to the woman a particular lesbian is partnered with Femme (feminine women) and butch (masculine women) women often report being attracted to the opposite "lesbian gender" and will even yield their own masculinity/femininity to oppose their partner's masculinity/femininity (Bullock 2004; Dunne 1997; Levitt, Gerrish, and Hiestand 2003; Levitt and Hiestand 2004; Levitt and Hiestand 2005). Although typical lesbian relationships mirror heteronormative dichotomies, the enactment of femininity or masculinity is of its own. Lesbian femininity and lesbian masculinity are different from heterosexual masculinity and femininity since the object of desire (other women) is not the same as for heterosexuals (Levitt, Gerrish, and Hiestand 2003; Levitt and Hiestand 2004; Levitt and Hiestand 2005). However, even within lesbian gender, masculinity and femininity are valued differently. Many researchers have found that butch women often see femme lesbians as less authentic or "real" compared to butch women (Levitt and Hiestand 2004; Morrison and Tallack 2005). Rosaria, Schrimshaw, Hunter, and Levy-Warren (2009) find that butch lesbian women are more secure in their lesbian identity than femme lesbians are. Similarly, butch women often speak about femme women in a derogatory manner as being less valuable (Morrison and Tallack 2005; Ochse 2011; Rust 1992). This shows that gender hierarchies may be present even for lesbian women.

11

Traditional Sexual Scripts

Sexual scripts are the culturally defined set of behavioral references used by individuals to perform gender normatively. Borrowing from Goffman's concept of dramaturgy, sexual scripts consider human sexuality in ways that acknowledge both historical norms and individual lived experiences (Simon and Gagnon 1984). Traditional sexual scripts, many of which are still used today, place men in the active sexual role and women in the passive and/or restrictive role. They are comprised of cultural, interpersonal, and intrapsychic references that solicit institutionalized norms, personal interpretation of those norms, and personal desire, respectively. Scripts can become significant by either collective life or through individual experience. Sexual scripts record and regulate the patterns with which individuals behave, not because of biological understanding of physicality, but rather their understanding of cultural meanings and personal experience (Laumman and Gagnon 1995). Furthermore, Laumman and Gagnon (1995) incorporate the notion of "master statuses" that include the "important dimensions of *who people are* and how these features shape what an individual believes is possible to say and do (and often think) and what other people think is appropriate for an individual who bears such social markings to say and do" (p. 191). This places the individual's conception of the self within the context of culturally accepted definitions of behavior and the individual's interpretations of those cultural definitions. Sexual script theory also acknowledges the changes in personal scripts in different life-stages and contexts. Rose and Zand (2000) discuss how, for the lesbian women in their study, they are less likely to adhere to lesbian gender norms as they age.

Examining the limits of what scripts are used in what locations adds to the generalizability and predictability of sexual behavior. Sexual script theory takes into account the heteronormative and patriarchal influence on the availability of social scripts, the interpretation of those scripts, and the application of those scripts in relation to individual lived experience. This has significant implications when examining the negotiation of sexual boundaries between two women.

Heterosexual Scripts

The study of heterosexual sexual scripts has been fairly thorough. The interaction of gendered sexual scripts and the performance of appropriate gendered actions can be seen in the study of dating rituals, sexual experiences, and sexual coercion (Bartoli and Clark 2006; Kalish and Kimmel 2011; Peterson and Muehlenhard 2007; Pino and Johnson-Johns 2009). The influence of gender identity is the strongest predictor of sexual behavior (Poppen and Segal 1988). Since social scripts are ascribed based on gender, one would conclude that gender can predict expected sexual behavior.

In Kalish and Kimmel's (2011) study of men and women engaging in casual sex, the authors argue that the gendered meaning of heterosexual desire in which women's sexuality and desire become increasingly to resemble a man's to be the "masculinization of sex." They term this phenomenon as such because the traditional understanding of male sexuality asserts that men are more capable of having sex outside of romance and emotions. As such, Kalish and Kimmel's (2011) gendered analysis of college sex culture asserts that women engaging in "hook-ups," or casual sex, are engaging in sex in a traditionally masculine way. This phenomenon indicates that women's desire and overt sexuality is not unlike that of men's sexuality. Kalish and Kimmel (2011) conclude that

men "hook up," or engage in casual sex, as a form of homosocial communication and to assert their masculinity whereas women hook up in order to establish relationships and enjoy their own sexuality. Kalish and Kimmel (2011) suggest that hooking up is the new courtship. Men and women are freer to explore their sexuality but are still constrained by cultural expectations of gendered sexual behavior.

Gendered sexual behavior is also influenced by other relationship factors such as sexual experience (Bartoli and Clark 2006; Humphreys 2007), education (Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras 2008; Pino and Johnson-Johns 2009), relationship status (O'Sullivan and Byers 1992), and exposure to gendered spaces and/or alcohol (Pino and Johnson-Johns 2009). Gender can also influence coercive behavior. Masculinity is strongly linked to the use of coercive strategies and violence against women is exacerbated by hyper masculinity and hostile masculinity (Murnen, Wright, and Kaluzny 2002; Poppen and Segal 1988). As such, gendered expectations and power differentials between men and women create an environment in which sexual signals may be misinterpreted or exploited.

Discourse of Ambivalence

What the current sociological discourse is missing is the conceptualization of the ambiguity of sexual meaning, definitions, and boundaries (Peterson and Muehlenhard 2007). The dichotomous study of heterosexuality reduces sexual experience into a survey scale in which experiences are limited by the options given by the researchers. In truth, however, sexual performances are not so easily quantified. Although Peterson and Muehlenhard (2007) use attitude and behavior scales, they suggest that consent is often ambivalent. The "wantedness" of sex and consent are two separate concepts. Ignoring the

ambiguous nature of the conflict between wanting sex and consenting to sex threatens women's agency of choice (Peterson and Muehlenhard 2007). Many unacknowledged rapes occur because individuals are confused by wanting of sexual activities to take place while simultaneously not consenting to sexual activity, or vice versa.

Culture undeniably influences an individual's identity and behavior. So, when we examine lesbian sexual behavior and the negotiation of sexual boundaries, the ways in which these women adapt heteronormative scripts to suit a non-heterosexual encounter can show how individual level interactions help re-define what is considered "normal" behavior. Women enacting heteronormative cultural scripts in a same-sex female setting challenges the normative societal framework. Yet, the same normative societal framework shapes how the same-sex sexual encounter is enacted.

Gendered sexual scripts and cultural ideologies influence the experience of sexual encounters (Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras 2008; Peterson and Muehlenhard 2007). Sexual encounters may not be clear-cut and may be even more ambiguous when the sexual actors are both women. The heteronormative and dichotomous pairing of masculinity and femininity informs lesbian women's sexual scripts. However, how might sexual boundaries be negotiated and sexual scripts play out when two females have a sexual encounter?

Lesbian Scripts

When the actual scripts of lesbian women are examined, there are many different patterns that emerge. The interplay of power dynamics, sexual roles, and identity creates a myriad of different lesbian constructs. A major question that feminists have pondered is the viability of female sexuality when detached from romance (Bolsø 2008). This

concern lies in the hetero-patriarchal understanding of female sexuality that has prevented female sexuality from becoming its own entity. But, it is clear that female sexuality, especially within the confines of a same-sex female relationship, can take on characteristics all its own.

When compared to young men with same-sex desire, young women will be less likely to act on their same-sex desire, more likely to identify as bisexual, and more likely to fall for their best female friend (Hillier 2001). Felmlee, Orzechowicz, and Fortes (2010) report that same-gender couples do not adhere to strict gender roles but rather seek out personality characteristics rather than physical characteristics. Sex and physical characteristics do not dominate same-gender partner pursuits.

As previously discussed research states, lesbian sexuality often resembles dichotomous heterosexual couplings. However, often the assumption about all lesbian women is that they will emulate heterosexual men. Sociological researchers have hypothesized in the past that, when looking at women's personal ads, butch lesbians would advertise in a manner reflective of heterosexual men and femme lesbians would reflect heterosexual women (Groom and Pennebaker 2005; Lever et al. 2008; Smith, Konik, and Tuve 2011). However, these data show that both butch and femme lesbian advertised most like heterosexual women.

Lesbian Cruising

When lesbian women "cruise" or actively look for an intimate encounter, women who are "role-defined" have an easier time in "the game" (Bullock 2004). Bullock (2004) explains that, "For example, a butch-identified woman is expected to make the approach, lead in dancing, or make proposals. A femme identified woman makes herself receptive

to approach and waits for the butch identified woman to initiate contact" (p. 10). Bullock (2004) observed that lesbian women use seven different types of cruising styles to pick up other women at lesbian bars and clubs. The cruising style used by each woman depends on her intent and investment. Investment refers to women's willingness to take risks in order to achieve their relationship goals (Bullock 2004). Bullock (2004) attributes this to women's socialization to place high value on relationships and women's inexperience to initiate interaction or deal with rejection. Since men are socialized to be the initiators, women are not as "well trained" for picking up women in public spaces. For example, for a woman who is highly invested in the desire for a lasting relationship along with the intent to find a long-term partner, will use the "sojourner" style that involves circulating through the club but will be unlikely to approach. Conversely, a woman whose investment is low with the intent on finding a partner (either for a long-term relationship or short-term) will employ the "game player" style that involves approaching other women through social activities such as a game of pool or darts (Bullock 2004). These types of cruising indicate that women's sexual pursuit will reflect typical female passivity or more overt, extroverted initiations. What Bullock (2004) does not examine, however, is if there is a relationship between self-identity and cruising style.

Dating Scripts

Dating scripts are social scripts that dictate the typical pattern of behavior when one is attempting to get to know someone and establish an intimate relationship with them. The dating scripts of lesbian women indicate that heteronormative scripts are used (where the male asks the female out on a date and pays for the meals, etc.) but that these scripts are also adapted in a way that indicates the unique specificity of lesbian

17

relationships (Klinkenberg and Rose 1994; Rose and Zand 2000). Rose and Zand (2000) assert that, "the lesbian romance script depicts emotional intimacy and sexual attraction as being intertwined in two women's attraction to each other. The relationship usually rapidly proceeds towards commitment" (p. 79). Women's socialization as women influences the way that they pursue and understand their relationships with other women. For the women in Rose and Zand's (2000) study, most of the women had a preference for the friendship dating script, which posits that women become friends, then fall in love, then commit to each other. Because the friendship script can often be ambiguous, lesbian women use sexual encounters as a relationship "marker." The women also reported using the sexually explicit script (hook up) often but not having a preference for it and rather preferring the romance script (typical dating scenario) or friendship script. The women who preferred the romance script said it was because they enjoy the seduction aspect of romantic courtship (Rose and Zand 2000). There was some disagreement among the women in regards to the definition of dating for lesbian women. This may be because of women's assumed sexual passivity or because lesbian women prefer intimacy to overt sexuality. Rose and Zand (2000) report that over half of the women said that lesbian dating did exist by the same definition that heterosexual dating exists, a quarter reported that lesbians "court" rather than date, preferring the term "court" because the goal is to establish a long-term relationship, and the remaining reported that dating did not exists among lesbians. Furthermore, relatively few lesbians reported directly asking a woman for a date. However, a majority did report using direct verbal declarations of romantic interest (Rose and Zand 2000).

Most women reported having egalitarian relationships in which roles were divided equally. However, for relationships that involved initiator and receiver roles, the initiator often also assumed more traditionally male roles when it came to dating, but these traditional gender roles did not apply to sexual contact (Rose and Zand 2000). It is important to note that the women who enacted stereotypical feminine roles as the receiver did not also play the restrictive role, sexually. Women that had more lesbian experience were more likely to be the initiator whereas women with more heterosexual experience tended to reject same-sex intimacy more often (Rose and Zand 2000). Age was found to be an important predictor of role performance. Older and midlife lesbians were more likely to initiate, more likely to use romance scripts and less likely to conform to butch-femme dichotomous relationships (Rose and Zand 2000). This study shows that lesbian dating scripts are influenced by both heteronormative performances and female typical performances. Lesbian women are more likely to need to negotiate dating or sexual scripts with their partners because of their socialization (Klinkenberg and Rose 1994). However, with same-sex female encounters, there seems to be a greater flexibility and ability to transgress gender typical and dichotomous norms. Even social science researchers may have difficulty examining non-heterosexual behavior from outside of a heterosexual framework. Despite the fact that the women studied above enact same-sex desire differently than heterosexuals do, their behavior is still grounded by heteronormativity (Rich 1985). It should be noted that the definitions placed on what lesbian behavior is and how lesbian behavior is performed is often through a heterosexual lens.

Lesbian Sexuality

The examination of lesbian relationships and sexuality reveals that the lesbian community often has its own value system. Bolsø (2008) discusses how desire and eroticism to lesbian women may lie in the symbolic value of masculinity and it's opposition to femininity. Furthermore, the erotic exchange is marked by the flexibility in the exchange of power. This supports the notion that lesbian couplings may show a dichotomous, heteronormative structure, but the power exchange, values, roles, and erotic desire may be fluid and interchangeable. McCauley and Ehrhardt (1980) find that lesbian identified women respond to sexual material that men also find sexually arousing. Hammers (2009a; 2009b) indicates that women use lesbian sexual spaces in which to explore their sexuality and take sexual risks such as having desire without shame. In this case, traditional social expectations of women's sexuality can deter individuals from being sexual. However, lesbian sexual spaces allow for sexual desire and exploration to happen in a place less influenced by traditional heteronormative sexual expectations. Women's sexual scripts and sexual behavior in a same-sex female coupling allows for women to "take" other women in a way that is uniquely female (Bolsø 2001). However, for lesbian women, "taking" means to give orgasm, unlike the patriarchal notion of "taking" which implies ownership. Unique here is that lesbian sex does not automatically include penetration the way heterosexual sex does. For lesbians, sexual exchanges are often one receiving orgasm and the other giving or they are mutually given and received. Even in displays of bondage and discipline, lesbian women negotiate boundaries and power mutually; it is not assumed of either partner (Bolsø 2001; Raj 2010).

Power and Coercion

When it does come to sexual coercion and abuse in lesbian relationships, it is important to understand how power is being negotiated in those environments. Beres, Herold, and Maitland (2004) found that lesbian women and gay men conform to heteronormative scripts of giving consent. When consent is given, it is often given through non-verbal cues rather than verbal. Often this consent is interpreted through women simply not doing or saying anything to stop sexual advances (Beres, Herold, and Maitland 2004). What is not known is the motivation behind not acting or being passive. Gender socialization may be influencing the way consent is given and interpreted in same-sex encounters. Interestingly, in survey analysis of gay and lesbian students, Waterman, Dawson, and Bologna (1989) indicate that lesbian women that were victims of forced sex did not indicate that perceptions of power differentials had any effect on victimization.

The study of lesbian sexual behavior as it pertains to sexual scripts and the negotiation of sexual boundaries must incorporate the understanding of how gender and sexuality are socialized. The privileging of male over female, masculinity over femininity, and heterosexuality over homosexuality, places homosexual women in a unique place. The unique gender of lesbians is defined within its own stigmatized culture (Bolsø 2006; 2008; Levitt, Gerrish, and Hiestand 2003; Levitt and Hiestand 2004; Levitt and Hiestand 2005). But given that lesbian culture is placed within hetero-patriarchal culture, heteronormative notions of sex and relationships are seen. Power hierarchies and essentialist assumptions influence even gender non-conforming individuals (Bolsø 2006; 2008; Rich 1985). The examination of the negotiation of sexual boundaries and the

enactment of sexual scripts within same-sex sexual encounters will help bring more understanding to the specificity of lesbian sexuality and gender as well as the understanding of pervasive heteronormativity and feminine gender socialization.

A Call For Research

Sexual script research and sexual boundary negotiation have been focused on heterosexual interactions or the comparison of homosexual to heterosexual interactions of men. Research has largely been focused on heterosexual white college students. College students are easily accessible to academic faculty, therefore it is understandable why this population makes up the majority of participants. However, sexology research in general has been largely examined from an essentialist, hetero-patriarchal perspective (Cohen, Byers, and Walsh 2008; Gagnon and Parker 1995; Heise 1995; Laumann and Gagnon 1995; Rose 2000). The understanding of female sexuality is through a lens that, until recently, has not given agency and validation of experience to women. Furthermore, the study of sexuality often fails to conceptualize social problems, experiences, or identities. Using preconceived categories to quantitatively examine human behavior such as sexuality risks reducing individuals' experiences to oversimplifications of biased categories (Faraday and Plummer 1979). It is demonstrated in much of the research on sexual scripts that the interactions, negotiations, and enactment of scripts has been reduced to quantitative simplifications. Qualitative research of sexual scripts and the negotiation of sexual boundaries will increase understanding of social structures, socialization, interaction, identity, and desire.

This research will contribute to the growing number of studies that studies the dynamics of same-sex sexual behavior. However, unique to this study will be the

examination of sexual scripts and the intersection of identity and heteronormativity. Past studies have examined lesbian dating scripts (Beres, Herold, and Maitland 2004; Bullock 2004; Klinkenberg and Rose 1994; Rose and Zand 2000), lesbian desire (Hammers 2009a; 2009b; Rust 1992), lesbian preferences (Felmlee, Orzechowicz, and Fortes 2010; Groom and Pennebaker 2005; Lever et al. 2008; Smith, Konik, and Tuve 2011), lesbian gender/identity (Levitt, Gerrish, and Hiestand 2003; Levitt and Hiestand 2004; Levitt and Hiestand 2005; Ochse 2011; Rosario et al. 20009), power within lesbian relationships (Bolsø 2001; 2008), and coercion in lesbian relationships (Scherzer 1998; Telesco 2003; Waterman, Dawson, and Bologna 1989). This is by no means an exhaustive review of the academic research literature. However, given the extent to which other aspects of lesbian behavior is researched, it is clear that sexual behavior, actions, and negotiations are largely understudied. This study will not be documenting sexual scripts outright, but will rather be looking at how sexual boundaries are negotiated within the cultural context of the available sexual scripts. In this context, those scripts are assumed to be heteronormative. These interactions are the focus of this study and not the scripts themselves.

Even still, the studies that do examine the intersection of lesbian identity and lesbian sexuality are often quantitative and rely on survey data. Often, survey data are analyzed in a way in which lesbian and gay men are discussed together. The experiences of gay men and lesbians differ because of the interaction of gender socialization. Although both gay men and women experience stigmatized identity and same-sex desire, gender and biological sex make their experiences too different to grasp a full understanding of lesbian or gay experience, respectively (Atkinson and DePalma 2009;

Bartoli and Clark 2006; Felmlee, Orzechowicz, and Fortes 2010). Examining the nuances

and specificities of sexual interactions, exchange, and negotiation requires in-depth

interviews with gay men and lesbian women individually. Furthermore, a majority of the

research is psychological and focuses on the individual psychology and intrapsychic

understandings of behavior. Sociological inquiry is warranted to understand the

interaction of larger cultural meanings on identity and sexual exchange.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This study looks at how women negotiate sexual boundaries when women have sex with other women. This study attempts to answer how women talk about sex with other women, how they negotiate sexual boundaries and consent, and whether or not they perform sexual scripts heteronormatively. Using in-depth interviews, this study looks at the emergent themes within women's narratives of their sexual experiences over their life course. Twenty women were interviewed using a semi-structured interview guide. The interviews were then transcribed and coded to determine how women negotiate sex with other women.

Selecting Participants

Determining the sample for this study was based on the desire to hear about experiences within a broad range of identities. Rather than limiting the research to lesbian identified women, this study included any woman who has had a sexual experience with any other woman on at least one occasion. Women only needed to have at least one sexual experience with a woman in order to communicate how that experience transpired regarding the negotiation of sexual boundaries. Determining the definition of "sexual experience" is difficult to define. Because sexual experiences are understood in heterosexual terms, what is the definition of sex for two women? Horowitz and Spicer (2013) explored exactly that question. They found that typically, lesbian identified individuals are more likely to include non-penetrative sex as more like sex than gay or heterosexual individuals. Because sex for two women might not include penetration,

"sexual experience" or to "have sex" will be qualified differently than heterosexual or gay male sex. Thus, the decision was made to broaden the definition of "sexual episode" to mean: a sexual encounter with one (or more) female in which oral sex, vaginal or anal stimulation or penetration (digitally or with an object) was given and/or received. Whereas heterosexual sex and gay sex is most often defined by penetration lesbian sex is not so (Bolsø 2001; 2008; Kitzinger 1987; Levitt and Hiestand 2005; Rich 1998). Therefore, the definition of sex will be up to the participants to define for themselves. Furthermore, this allows for individuals who do not consider their sexual behavior to be "lesbian sex" to conceptualize their experiences with same-sex sexual behavior.

Women for this study did not have to identify as lesbian. Bisexual women are valuable for this study since the intersection of gender and sexual identity was examined in regards to sexual scripts and sexual boundary negotiation. Women that did not identify as lesbian may have been more likely to use more heteronormative scripts than lesbian identified women. Furthermore, women of various multi-cultural/ethnic backgrounds were selectively recruited for this study. Transwomen (male to female transgender) and biological men were excluded because of their male gender identity and/or male socialization. Because this study looked at the interaction of identity and socialization, only women who were born female, socialized as women, and identify as female, were included. Therefore, gender queer, gender fluid, or other trans individuals were allowed to participate so long as they understood themselves to be female and were not born male. Since "trans" and "transgender" are very broad blanket terms, I have only excluded individuals who have at one time been biologically male or are living full time as males and/or identify as heterosexual.

Conducting Interviews

The participants were briefed on the subject matter of the study prior to their agreement to participate. Because this study included some very personal questions, participants were fully informed about what to expect from the interview. Participants were recruited via personal references, email, Facebook, and snowball sampling. I contacted a few acquaintances to see if they could put me in contact with women that have had sex with other women for me to interview. I attempted to only include women that I did not know prior to the study to interview to avoid any personal bias on my part. However, a few of the women I was acquainted with prior to the interview. Potential participants were emailed and asked to participate. The email and/or Facebook message included an introduction to the study, the purposes of the study, and an example of some questions they might be asked. Potential participants were invited to ask me any questions regarding the study before agreeing to participate. Once participants agreed to participate, an interview was scheduled for a block of two hours. The time and place of the interview was at the preference of the respondent such as the respondent's home, coffee shop, or restaurant. The participants were not compensated except for a cup of coffee or a meal if they chose to meet at a café or restaurant. One respondent was interviewed by phone because she did not live in the central Texas area. The consent form presented to the respondent and signed before the interview began and was signed and returned by the respondent before conducting the interview.

The interview itself was conducted in a manner congruent with feminist methodology. Feminist methodology asserts that the experiences of women are important and that these experiences must be included in designing and carrying out research

(Esterberg 2002). Feminist scholars have argued that objectivity and methodology rooted in the scientific method have crippled the understanding of women's experiences in a patriarchal social structure. In order to redefine research in a way that supports the exploration of intimate and personal life experiences, feminist methodology calls for the development of some personal relationship with the participants. As a sociologist, I maintain that this research project is very much a collaboration between myself and the participants. However, there is risk in performing qualitative research from this point of view. Dunne (1997) reflects on her conflicted feelings about emotionally bonding with her participants and the artificial situation of the interview with a "virtual stranger." Although I wished to prevent the interview process from being too exploitive to the respondent, I must also prevent response bias by being tactful about the details I share about my own life. In developing rapport, I disclosed my own sexuality in order to present an appearance of similarity (Esterberg 2002; Jones 2012). I attempted to cultivate a feeling of mutuality and collaboration with my participants in hopes of gaining their trust and bring a level of comfort and safety to the interview. Doing so prevented the participants from becoming research objects and created an environment in which the participants would feel most comfortable sharing intimate details about their sexual lives.

Interview Instrument

The purpose of this study is to analyze how sexual scripts are enacted and sexual boundaries negotiated when women have sex with women. Because the intricacies of experiences are so varied and complex, a qualitative semi-structured interview guide was utilized in conjunction with a modified life history approach in order to capture those experiences (see appendix A). This study will be semi-exploratory in that it will examine

the overall sexual experiences of women with other women and their negotiations of sexual boundaries (Faraday and Plummer 1979). The semi-structured interview guide was designed to allow for conversation to flow freely between the interviewer and respondent. As such, the adapted life histories method will be employed along with a thematic interview guide adapted from Dunne's (1997) interview guide about lesbian women's experiences over their life course with sexuality, work, and relationships. Using a structured interview guide or semi-structured schedule with specific questions would limit the flow of the interview and might risk leading the respondent to answer in a specific way (Dunne 1997; Faraday and Plummer 1979). Additionally, using the life history approach allowed for the changes and adaptions in sexual scripts or boundary negotiation to be better understood. Qualitative researchers have found that utilizing personal narratives and/or life histories allows participants to talk freely and openly about their experiences and increases the ability to explore individuals' experiences more deeply (Carpenter 2005; Diamond 2008; Dunne 1995; Faraday and Plummer 1979; Sosulski, Buchanan, and Donnell 2010).

Interview Themes

Socialization. The themes in the interview guide are designed to understand interactions, sexual scripts, the negotiation of sexual boundaries, identity formation and gender identity, "out-ness," and gender socialization. Starting with childhood and family life, my goal is to gain an understanding of the respondent's upbringing. Understanding family structure, hobbies and interests as a child, household dynamics, and their relationship with their parents will dictate how they have been socialized as children. Martin (2009) and Solebello and Elliott (2011) discuss how mothers and fathers talk to

their children about sexuality, respectively. These researchers report that parents take an active part in socializing their children to be "as heterosexual as possible" (Solebello and Elliott 2011:293). Furthermore, women who identify as lesbian or bisexual often link gender-nonconforming activities in childhood to their eventual identification as lesbian or bisexual (Dunne 1995; Jones 2012; Levitt and Hiestand 2004). The coming out process theme may be valuable to understand sexual scripts since age and length of time living "out" have been found to be important factors in determining lesbian dating scripts and identity (Diamond 2008; Dunne 1995; Hillier 2001; Rosario et al. 2009; Rose and Zand 2000; Rust 1992). Women who are raised in a more gender normative family with parents who emulate traditional gender roles or have been out for a shorter length of time may be more likely to identify as bisexual, femme, or take on traditionally passive feminine sexual roles.

Learning sexuality. The school environment is important to address for the purposes of this study. Much of an individuals' socialization comes from peers and teachers. Understanding the relationship with peers, teachers, and schoolyard crushes can shed light on gendered behavior, the formation of identity, and the learning of dating and sexual scripts (Kalish and Kimmel 2011). Furthermore, formal sex education (or lack thereof) can inform sexual scripts and heteronormative behavior (Fields 2008). Perceptions of virginity loss (Carpenter 2005) and what defines "having sex" (Carpenter 2005; Fields 2008) have been shown to differ based on sexual experience and sexual identity. Determining how these definitions were formulated and how they changed over the life course will be examined.

Sex and intimacy. At the heart of this study are the themes of relationships, sex

and intimacy, and differences between homosexual and heterosexual relationships. For women who have been intimate with both men and women, understanding their interpretations of the differences in those encounters will be important. Furthermore, courtship, gender roles performances, sexual initiation, and sexual boundary setting will be explored for each of the participants' intimate encounters. The performance of dating scripts and sexual scripts for lesbians has been linked to heteronormative performances in dichotomous couplings of butch/femme identities (Butler 1991; Dozier 2005; Dunne 1997; Farr and Degroult 2008; Jones 2012; Klinkenberg and Rose 1987; Levitt, Gerrish, and Hiestand 2003; Levitt and Hiestand 2004; Levitt and Hiestand 2005; Ochse 2011; Rose and Zand 2000; Rust 1992; Worth, Reid, and McMillan 2007). Questions regarding how roles were negotiated and performed during sexual episodes and how those roles have changed and differed between relationships will bring understanding to the intersection of gender, identity, sexuality, desire, and sexual script performance.

Demographics. In addition to the thematically guided interview schedule, demographic data were collected from each respondent. Age, race/ethnicity, religious affiliation, education, and occupation was collected and measured. These factors may have an influence on perceived gender identity and sex role performance (Bartoli and Clark 2006; Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras 2008; Bolsø 2008; Dozier 2005; Dunne 1995; Hundhammer and Mussweiler 2012; Laws and Schwartz 1977; McCauley and Ehrhardt 1980; Pino 2009; Rose and Zand 2000). The demographics are outlined in Table 1 below.

Participants in this study consisted of 20 women who had had at least one sexual experience with another woman at some point in their life. All of the participant's names have been changed to protect their privacy. Of these 20 women, most of them were white

(N=12), while others were Hispanic (N=3), Black (N=3), and Asian American (N=2).

The age of the participants ranged from 18 years old to 42 years old with an average age

of 28 years old. A majority of them identified as lesbian/gay (N=14), while others

Table 1. Demographics of Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Race/ Ethnicity	Religion	Occupation/ Field	Sexual Orientation	Sexual Orientation Scale	Gender Scale
Bridgett	25	White	Christian	Customer Service	Queer	5.5	4.5
Candace	30	Hispanic/White	Christian	Sales	Lesbian	10	4 or 5
Carmine	24	Hispanic/White	Christian	Sales	Lesbian	n/a	n/a
Codi	37	White	Pagan	Education	Lesbian	n/a	n/a
Erica	19	White	Christian	Medical	Lesbian	5	1
Erin	42	White/Middle Eastern	Christian	Software	Lesbian	6	3
Evelyn	24	White	Christian	Law	Lesbian	4.5	n/a
Hilary	20	White	Christian	Student	Lesbian	6	1
Kennedy	25	African American	Christian	Customer Service	Lesbian/ Queer	5	2
Kristen	38	White	Christian	Education	Lesbian	6	n/a
Lena	32	Indian American	Hindu	Education	Lesbian	6	3.5
Lisa	25	White	Christian	Medical	Unspecified	3	3.5
Maxeen	25	Hispanic/White	Christian	Social Work	Queer	2.5 or 3	5
Meg	26	White	Jewish	Engineering	Lesbian	6	4
Melanie	25	White	Christian	Medical	Lesbian	4	7
Norah	32	Caribbean American	Christian	Student	Lesbian	6	4 or 5
Quinn	30	African Am./ White	Buddhist	Food Service	Queer/ Trans	6	0
Stacey	30	White	Atheist	Education	Bisexual	4	4
Stephanie	23	White	Christian	Student	Lesbian	6	4 or 5
Valarie	21	White	None	Food Service	Lesbian	5	2

Note: Trans can be interpreted as gender fluid or gender queer (trans*)

identified as queer (N=3), Queer/Trans (or gender fluid) (N=1), bisexual (N=1), or unspecified (N=1). Most participants identified a religious affiliation, most of which was Christian of various denominations (N=14), Atheist/Agnostic (N=2), Hindu (N=1), Buddhist (N=1), Jewish (N=1), and Pagan (N=1). Most of the participants live in the greater Austin area with one being from Houston. Most of the women had parents who were still married or had been remarried for a long period of time. A majority of the participants grew up in average middle-class families with consistent schooling and family stability.

    Self-identity. Individual perceptions of the self differ. In alliance with sexual script theory, the interpretation and adaptation of cultural scripts is determined by personal experience and perception of the self (Gagnon and Parker 1995; Simon and Gagnon 2003). By allowing participants to self-describe and self-identify, nuances of gendered behavior can be examined over the life course. To that end, participants were asked how they self identify regarding their sexual orientation and how they perceive themselves regarding their gender identity. I also asked participants to quantify their identity and their sexual orientation using a Kinsey type scale (McCauley and Ehrhardt 1980) of zero to six, at that point in time. For instance, if when they had their first experience at 16 with a man, I will ask on a scale of zero to six, six being exclusively attracted to women and zero being exclusively attracted to men, where they fell at the time of that encounter. Likewise, In order to understand their gender identity, participants were asked how they would describe their "style" by asking how they would describe themselves. I asked how they gender identified zero being extremely masculine and six extremely feminine, where they fell at the time of that encounter.

Rust (1992) found that for lesbian identified women, the importance of behavior was to maintain their lesbian identity. For bisexual women, feelings and sexual attraction were most important. This indicates that gender identity and sexual identity might influence sexual behavior regardless of desire. Likewise, masculine lesbian women tend to be more comfortable with their sexuality and more exclusive in their sexual behavior and sex roles, but are less likely to identify with the term 'butch' because of the negative connotation it can carry (Rosario et al. 2009). Understanding gender identity and self understanding helped better understand the participant's motivations for their behavior.

Data Analysis

All of the interviews were audio recorded. I transcribed the interviews using transcription software. Once transcribed, the transcripts were examined using a method in which the data were analyzed for common or emergent themes. Because this analysis is exploratory in nature, thematic analysis allows for themes to be informed by both the social science research and the respondent's personal accounts of experience (Faraday and Plummer 1979). As I transcribed the interviews, I noted common themes or subjects that the participants were discussing. After all of the transcripts were printed, I used an open coding technique (Esterberg 2002) and highlighted and noted in the margins sentences, stories, and phrases that were of interest. I then sifted through the data to find common themes and experiences among the twenty women. I took note of each respondent's sexual orientation and sexual history, as well, to determine if there were commonalities among the different groups. I also specifically looked at how sex was defined for each participant, as this influenced the participant's boundary negotiation between messing around, or foreplay, and "actual sex". Once the themes were

determined, the transcripts were reanalyzed specifically for examples within the data that supported the themes (Esterberg 2002). This method allowed the data to speak for itself so that it was not manipulated to support preconceived themes. Simple frequencies were calculated on the demographic information to determine the median demographics. The scale values will be used to show sexual fluidity and give a reference of identity for each respondent.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

The twenty personal narratives revealed several themes that shed light on how women negotiate sexual boundaries with other women. The life history narratives provided context in which these negotiations were taking place. The sexual negotiations reported by the participants indicated that women negotiate sex with women differently depending on personal level of sexual experience, sexual role/identity, partner's experience, experiences of sexual trauma, and personal sexual desire. These factors contribute to how women negotiate and define sex throughout the life course. When evaluating these sexual negotiations within a heteronormative context, it is clear that sexual negotiations are clearly influenced by preconceived notions of sex and sexuality.

Lesbian Sex: An Ad-Lib?

Within a heteronormative society, sexual roles and sexual behavior are predefined and understood as encounters defined by male and female couplings. For many, first heterosexual experiences are fairly straightforward. From a very early age, children are socialized how to be heterosexual and are taught what to expect from a heterosexual relationship by parents, friends, and the media (Carpenter 2005; Dean 2011; Laws and Schwartz 1977; Martin 2009). We are socialized to know what heterosexual sex looks like. Sexual roles are already negotiated by heterosexual cultural scripts (Simon and Gagnon 1984). However, for women having sex with another woman, the availability of sexual scripts is very limited if not non-existent. Women with same-sex desire need to learn what it means to act on same-sex desire and how to establish and negotiate those

36

sexual boundaries in a space where there are no precedents. I term this a sexual ad-lib. Taken from improv theater, ad-lib is when additional or improvised lines are added to a pre-establish script in the moment. In the same way, women ad-lib within the available cultural sexual script. As we will see, this ad-lib changes as an individual gains more lesbian experience.

The First Time

The first time women are intimate with other women, the sexual negotiations and boundaries are often ambiguous. Specifically, when both women are being intimate for the first time there is often very little guidance. Several women reported their first experience as being new, surprising, and exciting. Lena (lesbian, 32) discusses her first sexual experience with her girlfriend who, at the time, had also never been with a girl before:

> …and I just stared kissing her and she started kissing me back. And I had my first kiss, first sex, first everything in one night. […] It was nuts but amazing. And I don't know […] how the hell I did all that, all the stuff that I did. But I did.

Similarly, Stephanie (lesbian, 23) discusses her first sexual experience with a girl, "..it's was really slow but then once everything got started it was, full force. You know, learning this with each other, figuring it out as best we could." First sexual experiences are often trial and error. As such, for women who had never had a sexual experience with another woman, and whose partners had never had an experience either, there were no expectations, which was beneficial for the experience. Carmine (lesbian, 24) discusses, "I think that was what was so nice was that there weren't any expectations. You were just doing what you felt. And it was so comfortable." However, the lack of experience coupled with heteronormative romantic or even sexual expectations may be detrimental

for women's first same-sex experiences. Candace (lesbian, 30) states:

> I think that I was still very naïve and didn't know what to expect […] but because I didn't have any preconceived notions or expectations I was like, 'uuuuh, that's not what I was expecting.' I think I was expecting it to be a lot more like those [romance] books I read.

Some women had preconceived notions of what sex would be like from the social sources that are available such as parents, television, movies, and romance novels. These available scripts affected the way that women experienced their first same-sex encounters. Their experiences were based on the available scripts, yet the script that they acted upon were ad-libbed in the sense that sexual intimacy was improvised in the moment within the cultural heterosexual framework.

Because same-sex sexual behavior is not the cultural norm, women who have sex with women need to learn how to have lesbian sex. Many of the women reported simply learning as they went, through trial and error. Other women actively sought out information in books or on the Internet to help them figure it out. Many women used blogs, library books, and pornography to learn how to have lesbian sex. For other women, their first time was not with other "first-timers." For these women, the first time was negotiated by their more experienced partner. These women reported letting their partner take the lead or show them what to do. Melanie (lesbian, 25) discusses how her partner helped guide her through sexual negotiations:

> She actually, like, she knew I was nervous. I told her it was my first experience and so she was helpful in guiding me. And to tell me now you do this, now you do that, but she did, once I was down tell me, 'Okay, do that more' or, you know 'now that's too much do this.' And so it was, we were very vocal and very communicative.

This instance shows that the level of experience of the partner greatly influences how first time sex is negotiated and "learned." Some women even had a platonic friend or mentor

who helped them learn. For example, Quinn (trans/queer, 30) discusses her learning experience after a failed first time with a her high school crush:

> I met two masculine identified women on the basketball team and they, like, I told them what happened and they walked through like, how to make it not happen again which increased my confidence level.

Quinn's friends, who were masculine, or butch, lesbian women and sexually experienced, helped her learn how to perform sexual acts. They helped Quinn learn how to have sex with women by walking her through what to expect and what to do in order to help her in her future sexual endeavors. Quinn's first sexual experience ended badly because of her inexperience and lack of sexual knowledge. However, for Quinn, her friends were "sexual tutors" and taught her how to better navigate sex with women. With experience, women's understanding of same-sex sex and how that space is negotiated changes. Just like for Melanie and Quinn, experience leads to women being more confident in navigating sexual space because lesbian sex is not longer a mystery to them. Specifically, these understandings are influenced by the amount of heterosexual experience a woman has had. Stacey (bisexual, 30) discusses how her heterosexual experiences influenced her ideas about same-sex sex:

> I think at first, in my head I was like, there has to be like this very specific way that things go down that only related to like my hetero understanding of sexuality, you know? So as I read and learned and experiences [*sic*] and all that, I feel that [my ideas about sex] definitely changed a lot.

Stacey's notion of what same-sex sex would be like was informed by her previous experiences with men. However, as she continued to experience things with women, and continued to ad-lib within the previously understood heterosexual scripts, her understanding of same-sex sexual interaction changed.

So, What IS *Lesbian Sex?*

An important part of the ability to negotiate sexual boundaries is to know and understand how sex is defined. For women who have sex with women, the definition of "sex" in a same-sex context is open to interpretation. For most women, behavior that indicated sex included penetration and oral sex. However, for some women, in order for an act to be considered "sex" both partners must be involved in receiving sexual contact. Although, for many of the women, this definition changed with experience. Bridgett (queer, 25) discusses her past experiences:

> …[in high school] it was like, well we're not having sex because neither of us has a penis so its not sex. And then with the other we didn't actually say we were having sex until we brought toys in […] [and now] sex was more about the connection that we were having, more than which action was happening.

Furthermore, because same-sex sex is ambiguous, many women stressed the importance of establishing boundaries because of these differing definitions. Definitions of what "normal" sex is between women varies. For Lisa (unspecified, 25), "normal" is "nothing out of the box. Like, strap-ons, vibrators, that's the extent." Whereas, Evelyn (lesbian, 24) states that, "you don't try anything out of the ordinary the first time you're having sex with somebody. […] Just stick to kissing, caressing […]." Clearly these are two very different definitions of "normal" sex. For women who have sex with women, it seems that there is a consciousness regarding the varied definitions of what sex is and what is considered normal. As such, women who have sex with women appear to be very conscious of the boundaries of their partners.

This consciousness can be understood to be beneficial for the health and safety of each individual. However, this may be seen as a hindrance to the progression of a sexual relationship if communication is absent. For instance, Carmine (lesbian, 24) and her

partner of over three years lack and understanding of each others' boundaries: "[…] but I think our problem now is that […] we're still doing the same thing. […]. I don't mind if we want to change some stuff. [But] I don't know what she's comfortable with. I don't know what she wants to change, I don't know what she was used to before." Carmine and her partner do not have an understanding of each other's boundaries. As a consequence, their sex life is plateaued because neither one of them wants to cross the other's boundaries. This may also be problematic when boundaries and consent are ambiguous as in the case of lesbian sex because it lies outside of heterosexuality. Evelyn (lesbian, 24) recounts her first same-sex encounter in high school with a friend after they had been drinking:

> And she reaches over and kisses me. […] I didn't really know what I was doing but I went ahead and kissed her back. Then from there I remember taking off her shirt and eventually I blacked out. But the last thing I remember is basically her being inside me […]. Next thing I woke up naked, face down. And she was naked. [My body] hurt so bad. And even though it hurt so bad and it had been my friend, her excuse was she was trying to make me orgasm because I didn't know about that. […] I liked it and I couldn't deny that.

In this case, because the boundary was ambiguous, consent to sexual activity was also ambiguous. Evelyn reports that she does not feel like she was violated in any way and discussed how she kissed her friend back and took off her friend's shirt prior to her blacking out. However, this situation is automatically a cause for concern *especially* if it had been in a heterosexual context. Heterosexual priming often makes women hyper-aware of their susceptibility to being victims of sexual assault (Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras 2008; Muehlenhard and Peterson 2005; 2007; Poppen and Segal 1988; Rich 1998). Her reporting that she does not feel violated indicates an assumption of self-responsibility and self-blame present in heterosexual scripts. But because the definition of what lesbian

sex is varies by individual and by context, the ambiguity of the situation may also have

contributed to Evelyn's understanding of the situation. Because she did not interpret the

instance to be a violation of her boundaries, or lack of boundaries, there was no space for

her to feel as if she had been taken advantage of. However, from an outsider's

perspective, this instance is indicative of sexual assault. Specifically, sexual contact with

someone who is unable to consent (in this case, blacked out) is rape (Pino and Johnson-

Johns 2009). Muehlenhard and Peterson (2005) call this particular scenario,

"nonconsensual wanted sex". In Evelyn's case, she reports wanting sexual contact but

was unable to consent. Heteronormativity coupled with the stereotype of what is

considered "real rape" have created a scenario in which her engaging in presumptive

sexual behavior (making out, removing clothing) assumes sexual consent or assumes that

sexual consent is not needed because it lies outside of a heterosexual context.

Student Becomes Teacher

Many of the women reported the importance of communicating sexual

expectations and boundaries with partners that have never been with women before.

Across the life course, as many of these women became more sexually experienced, they

were better able to navigate the boundary negotiations specifically with sexually

inexperienced partners. Sexual experience is a valuable trait for women who have sex

with women. Many lesbian and queer women sympathize with feelings of insecurity and

inexperience in others. Lisa (unspecified, 25) discusses her relationship with her partner

who had never dated a woman before:

> I made sure to really talk to [her] about it and just be like, 'okay, you know,
> there's all this stuff out there and what we're doing is just kind of, its normal. But
> my view of normal, but you have to realize other people's view of normal is
> different […] make sure to tell them whether you want it or not.'

For Lisa, it was important to her that she teaches women about navigating lesbian sex. She had a positive experience of being "taught" by a more experienced woman and wanted to pass that along. Similarly, Lena (lesbian, 32) used her own experiences to ensure that she could make a positive impact on others:

> I very consciously made a commitment in my head that any woman that I'm gonna be with, I'm going to actively try to make her feel comfortable with her body and make her, get her comfortable with her fantasies and comfortable with herself. […] We're not raised to be comfortable and I think it's bullshit.

Lena feels an obligation to other women to help them own their selves and sexuality. These women are concerned with the well being of first timers. Because their partners are new to lesbian sex, they're extra cautious not to cross any boundaries. They use verbal "check-ins" during sex. Meg (lesbian, 26) states, "I tend to chase a lot of straight girls or new girls. So I'm constantly asking, 'Are you okay with this? We can stop if you don't,' like, 'Let me know if this is too fast.'" Communication seems to be important to these women when they are engaging in lesbian sex, specifically with women who are inexperienced. However, the importance of communication does not indicate that it exists in every context as noted above.

Negotiating Sexual Roles and Boundaries

Within established relationships, or within sexual encounters in which both women are more sexually experienced, sexual boundaries and negotiations change as the their life course progresses. Because the sexual roles of lesbian women are open for negotiation, there is a lot of emphasis put on power dynamics and sexual role expectations and fluidity. I had assumed to see a strong emphasis of heteronormativity on role negotiations but I was surprised to find that roles were more fluid. To a certain

43

extent, sex roles were assumed based on gender identity. However, at the same time, sex roles were more likely to be negotiated based on character, experience, or age, rather than gender performance. Congruent with the findings of Eves (2004) and Levitt and Hiestand (2004; 2005), many of the lesbian women in this study indicated an adherence to a type of lesbian essentialism or an understanding of a truth at the core of every woman with same-sex desire in which she is predisposed to either butch or femme aesthetics and behavior. Many scholars have discussed the ways in which lesbian women feel that their sexual identity, gender performance, and sexual roles are intrinsic to themselves and to others that need to be accepted and discovered, I call this specificity, lesbian essentialism. On the other hand, same-sex desire also seems to "'counter act' the life-long socialization females endure" regarding sexuality (Hammers 2009b:770). As such, the women I spoke with subscribed to either an assumption of lesbian essentialism in which roles are more concrete based on an inner truth or that sex roles are fluid and are dependent on an individual's sense of self and understanding of the sexual situation.

Sexual Roles

There seems to be two different ways in which women engage in sex role negotiation. For some women, the sex role dichotomy stems from an essentialist view of gender and sexuality. For others, the dominant role is associated with masculinity specifically. This masculinity also tends to be attached to typical gender portrayal, or the lesbian essentialist notion of butch. Kennedy (lesbian/queer, 25), who describes herself as a "butch in combat boots" states:

> I have to be a top. […] In most relationships I end up being a top but I would like to be where I wasn't a top all the time. […] a lot of people assume that because you are assertive or like, more alpha I guess in a way? And in society or in public that's the same in the bedroom.

44

Likewise, Lena (lesbian, 32) states:

> I'm a switch. I mean I guess, the more comfortable with someone the more I'm, more I'm okay with being the bottom. But, my go-to place in the first side of me that I present to people is usually more top. I think for multiple reasons. I think that sort of expected of me in a way because I have short hair. And I'm androgynous.

Although these sex roles have the potential to be negotiated, there is an assumption based on one's gender performance as to the sexual roles they are to fulfill. Both Kennedy and Lena express wanting to be a "switch" (flexible in taking the dominant and passive sexual roles); however, societal expectations influence them to take the dominant role because they are perceived as more masculine.

Similarly, dominance is often associated with masculinity or taking the male role. Specifically, it is associated with, as Norah (lesbian, 32) puts it, "like the male" in sexual situations. This association shows a heteronormative view of lesbian sex. Valarie (lesbian, 21) expresses her frustration with women not being able to be truly dominant, "[l]ike the only reason I would ever consider being with a man sexually is because I think men are more capable of like, a dominance, like, having that control. Like very few women can pull that off." Valarie expresses her skepticism with women being able to truly be dominant; a trait that seems strongly linked to male-ness and masculinity. Hilary (lesbian, 20) talks about how sexual incompatibility can stem from incompatible sex roles, "I think the fact that we were both like, the masculine role was part of the problem. I was probably the dominant one in that situation, too." Other women also linked sexual dominance to masculinity. For Codi (lesbian, 37) when it comes to initiating sex, masculine quality is, "being on top. Holding the other person when you kiss them. […] it

would be the person that does not receive, the person that gives […]." There are clear gendered roles that are divided up either by behavior or appearance.

For other women, sex roles are fluid and constantly negotiated regardless of gender portrayal. In these cases, sex role preference is linked to a person's character or sense of self rather than one's appearance or social expectation. Lena (lesbian, 32), who previously stated feeling obligated to be a top because she is androgynous, she states, "Like I think my character, I'm pretty feminine. […] But I mean I'm a switch. I like, I like mixing it up. […] I like being flexible." Meg (lesbian, 26) expresses how she doesn't associate dominance and submissiveness to gender; "I don't think I can play the masculine/feminine roles because I date girls that are like me on the masculine/feminine role. Like, you know, can wear a dress but can also get dirty. It's not like I play the gender roles at all." This is not to say that preference or lack of preference for a sex role is absolutely tied to essentialism. However, this does indicate that heteronormative notions inform how many women understand sexual roles. Maxeen (queer, 25) discusses her preferences when she sleeps with women:

> I've been owning my own top-ness. And I, and it's to almost like a play thing where yeah, I'm a bottom but this bottom is going to fuck you. […] If they're not down and out tops then they're like, really big personalities.

Although Maxeen has a clear preference for being the more submissive partner, she also looks at dominance and submissiveness as a sex play rooted in negotiation rather than a gendered dichotomy. For these participants, sex roles are informed either by gendered understanding of sex roles or preference. Neither one of these are absolute nor consistent for each respondent. However, for these women, sexual role negotiations happen in a space that is either informed by heteronormative and gendered notions or by sexual play

dynamics. They are able to take the heteronormative dichotomy of masculine and feminine, dominant and submissive, and those sexual scripts that go along with them, and ad-lib their own interpretation, interjections, and negotiations.

It seems that these women negotiate sexual roles within the social context of a same-sex encounter. So whereas lesbian essentialist notions might inform assumptions regarding sexual roles, the negotiation of those roles is either by appearance or by their attitude. What this means is that the expectations of sexual roles and the realities of sexual roles differ based on each individual context. Women understand themselves and their place sexually based on their own attitudes, behavior, and appearance, as well as their partner's attitudes, behavior, and appearance. Again, like the essentialist notions of gender and their respective heteronormative sex roles, these scripts are ad-libbed within each individual sexual context.

Sexual Boundaries

Understanding their place in their life course, and their partners' place in their life course, and the ambiguity of sexual boundaries manifested itself in the way that many of the participants obtained sexual consent. Establishing sexual consent and pursuing sexual consent revealed several themes. The timing of boundary negotiation, boundary assumptions, sexual compatibility, and sexual intent influence how boundaries are negotiated. Furthermore, the nature of lesbian sex in a heteronormative world indicated that, in some cases, the understanding of what "real" sex is falls into question. Lastly, the experiences of women with sexual trauma greatly influence how boundaries are established and negotiated.

As discussed above, the way in which boundaries are negotiated is greatly

influenced by a number of factors such as personal sexual experiences and the experiences of the partner, as well as the definitions of sex. For these participants, boundaries are either negotiated before any sexual activity occurs, during sexual activity already initiated, or not at all. These experiences often changed throughout the life course and were contingent on the sexual partner at any time.

Sexual boundaries are often negotiated before sexual activity occurs if there is intent for a long term relationship or if one or both of the partners is a first-timer. Valarie (lesbian, 21) talks about the first time she and her new girlfriend had sex:

> We knew we wanted to do it right and so it was like no, we need to go on this many dates before, like, we can make it official, we need to make it official before we have sex. [And the sex was] really good. It was definitely, like, passionate. You could tell there was love and there was a difference when love was present.

Valarie's intent with her then girlfriend was for a long lasting intimate relationship in which case boundaries were established ahead of time. Similarly for Hilary (lesbian, 20) and her long term girlfriend, "We were pretty open as far as communicating what we were willing to try and what we weren't willing to try." Hilary and her then girlfriend were each other's first sexual relationship. As such, they discussed boundaries prior to sexual activity. Sexual boundaries may also be established ahead of time in order to determine sexual compatibility. Erin (lesbian, 42) states, "I'm gonna find out that I'm gonna get what I want out of this situation and not just, you know, please them. […] I'm usually the one, like, that brings up that topic because I want to make sure that we're on a compatible level because […] I don't have a type." For Erin, her desire for mutual sexual satisfaction is tantamount in establishing sexual boundaries beforehand.

The negotiation of sexual boundaries during sex often occurs when one or both partners are "first-timers" or in cases where sexual boundaries prior to sex were

ambiguous or unknown. Stephanie (lesbian, 23) explains her instance with her current

girlfriend:

> […] it was the middle of the day and she initiated it. And it just, it just happened from there. And she tried to go down on me but I stopped her and I say, 'No I want to wait.' And so she just, she didn't react negative or anything like that, she was just like, 'okay.' […] and she just was, 'okay. Whenever you're ready.' Kind of thing. And that was good because I was nervous to tell her obviously.

There were no pre-established boundaries for Stephanie and her girlfriend. And, because

the boundaries were not pre-established, boundaries needed to be stated once sexual

contact was made. Bridgett (queer, 25) describes the first time she and her partner had

sex:

> There wasn't a whole lot of negotiation that first time or talking about it. I just kind of happened. […] When we finally talked about it I realized that she had never been with anybody. Ever. Ever. Ever. Ever. […] I was completely devastated. I was like, 'how did she not tell me to stop?' and she was like, 'I was totally okay with it happening. I just didn't know what to do.' And so from that point on, our physical relationship was very discussion based.

In this instance boundaries were not negotiated prior to sex and was cause for concern for

Bridgett. Meg's (lesbian, 26) assumptions about the nature of relationships was also a

cause for concern the first time she initiated sex with her then girlfriend,

> I stared to go down on her and she was like, 'We should talk about this.' And I didn't think it was a big deal because we were dating, like, you know, 'I don't do this with a lot of people, this is a big deal', and I was like, 'Okay. Whatever. We can talk about it and take our time.' So it took a little while before we [had sex].

Again, sexual negotiation often happens in the moment when previous sexual boundaries

are not established ahead of time. For Meg, her assumption of what relationships mean

influenced how she engaged in sex.

Boundaries are sometimes not established at all when both partners are "first-

timers," the relationship is not intended to be long term, or sexual boundaries are pre-

established or assumed. During a one-night stand, Kennedy (queer/lesbian, 25) discusses the lack of sexual boundaries:

> I regret [not talking about boundaries] because not only did she break my bed but she destroyed my vagina. [It hurt a lot] and, you know, when you're trying to be nice about it and, maybe she's just getting into it, but no. It continued. I should have said something. […] I faked it and then I was like, 'I'm tired.' It's so bad.

This was a very negative experience for Kennedy. Instead of being assertive with her boundaries she preserved the other woman's feeling and endured painful and unwanted sex (not to mention a broken bed). For Carmine (lesbian, 24), since she and her girlfriend at the time were both having lesbian sex for the first time, "I didn't really expect anything. I still don't even think to look things up then and, I don't know why, I guess I just felt fine with what everything was." Since Carmine and her girlfriend were naïve to what same-sex sex is, there was no need to talk about boundaries. It can be argued that this is no different from heterosexual sexual encounters in which both partners are "first-timers" or are engaging in a one-night stand. However, even in those contexts, traditional cultural sexual script informs how a heterosexual couple might expect the encounter to go (Carpenter 2005; Gagnon and Simon 2005[1975]; Kalish and Kimmel 2011; Laumman and Gagnon 1995; Morgan and Zurbiggen 2007; O'Sullivan and Byers 1992; Peterson and Muehlenhard 2007). Specifically, traditional heteronormative scripts indicate the initiator and passive roles as gendered constructs, the man being the initiator and the woman being the passive or restrictor. But for women engaging in lesbian sex, gender does not provide a default for these roles and therefore must be negotiated.

"Real" Sex

For the instances in which sexual boundaries were not established or in which sexual consent is ambiguous, it may be a result of our culture's denial of lesbian women's

sexual agency and legitimacy (Rich 1998). Traditional notions of "real sex" are only

defined within heterosexual, penetrative context (Horowitz and Spicer 2013; Jenefsky

and Miller 1998; Rose 2000). Because heteronormative culture is so engrained, even

other lesbian women may internalize these messages of what "real sex" is. For example,

Norah (lesbian, 32) defines virginity loss as penetrative sex with a guy. However, her

first sexual experience was with a woman and yet she does not consider that sex.

Likewise, when both Bridgette (lesbian, 25) and Evelyn (lesbian, 24) were in high school,

they each reported having sexual encounters with girls in which the girls did not consider

their sexual activity "sex."

There also seems to be a good amount of instances among these participants in

which women were engaging in threesomes or making a show for the benefit of male

partners. Evelyn discusses her hook-up with a good friend of hers at the request of her

friend's fiancé:

> [He] ends up contacting me and he just happens to mention that he really loves
> lesbians and he's turned on by women with women. And he says he wants Rachel
> to be with a woman in front of him. So, I figured I could just volunteer to be this
> woman since I really have no problem with that. […] She doesn't know that this
> is the plan. She doesn't realize that this is all being set up. She had no idea. We all
> just start to get drunk in the room and then eventually […] and I already know
> that she kind of likes me anyway. So I just went for it. And I like, finally got to be
> with her. […] and he just sat on the side and masturbated.

This story is common for many of the women who participated with this study. Since

lesbian sex is not "real" because there is no penis involved, it is seen as erotic rather than

a meaningful interaction between two women. However, for women that are lesbian,

queer, or bisexually identified, this can cause some confusion regarding sexual

boundaries. On the one hand, women report wanting to be able to be intimate with other

women, but on the other hand, the context in which that intimacy occurs is sometimes

51

under strained heterosexual circumstances. Similarly, Kristen (lesbian, 38) discusses her threesomes with her lover and her now ex-husband, "[My lover said] 'I don't want you sleeping with him', [which would] definitely upset [my husband], or, 'I just think it would better if, you know, we had a threesome, I wouldn't have to worry so much. That would satisfy him and then you wouldn't have to [sleep with him].'" Again, women's sexuality is viewed as "safer" or "less legitimate" to the point that, even when Kristen and her lover were engaging in infidelity, because they involved Kristen's husband, it was not necessarily considered that way.

Women's sexuality is fluid. And as such, it is often interpreted as less serious than heterosexual sex (Diamond 2008; Laws and Schwartz 1977). Maxeen (queer, 25) discusses how sex with women was safer following a sexual trauma. Likewise, Melanie (lesbian, 25) also suffered a sexual trauma in which case she would, "drink and I would make out with women and in my head I thought it was safe […] I just did that so I wouldn't get raped kind of thing. Like, you know, a girl is safe, or was to me." Women can feel safer with each other without fear of being sexually assaulted by men, especially when they have preiviously experienced heterosexual sexual assault. In both Maxeen and Melanie's cases, women were a source of intimacy that also provided some comfort and healing.

Sexual Coercion and Sexual Ambivalence

Although women may be able to feel safer in a same-sex context than with men, this does not exempt women from being sexually coerced or sexually coercive. Several participants discussed experiences of sexual coercion and/or ambivalence with same-sex partners. Stephanie (lesbian, 23) recounts an instance with her then girlfriend:

52

> She was drunk and came over and was wanting to have sex with me. And I was just not wanting to do that. But she made it happen. So that I remember pretty clearly and we, we later talked about it. And she felt really bad about it. But she, she had a temper on her. For sure.

In this instance, Stephanie experienced blatant sexual coercion in which her partner ignored her sexual boundaries entirely. Similarly, Lena (lesbian, 32) discusses an incident with a friend of hers:

> She decides to just pull me on top of her and she starts kissing me and I'm trying to get off of her. […] and I'm like, okay, I'm uncomfortable, let me get off! You know, and I got off of her and I was like, 'what are you doing?' And uh, she's like, what? What do you think I'm doing? And I'm like, uh, I think there's a misunderstanding or something. […] And she flipped out. Threw her bottle […] and she said, you know, 'how dare you insult me like this!' […] and she stormed out.

For both Lena and Stephanie, their experiences show that sexual boundaries are often not respected or taken seriously by other women. Just as women with same-sex desire are not immune to sexual coercan, nor are they immune to sexual ambivalence. Candace (lesbian, 30), was naïve to her sexual boundaries and had a negative experience because of it:

> I was never really in a position to say yes or no other than what I thought was expected. And I, and because that dialogue that never existed, I was never in a position to say, like, I didn't like that. I would just check out. I would just be like, 'You may be doing whatever you're doing but I'm not home. I'm not here.' I'm just like, not home.

Candace's experience indicates that the ambiguous nature of lesbian sex, coupled with her inability to locate her sexual desire within that space, can cause confusion and dissatisfaction with same-sex sexual relationships.

For women engaging in lesbian sex, it seems that there are two effects that negative sexual experiences can have. The absence of sexual scripts indicates that the clearly defined initiator and passive role are not concrete and definitive sexual boundaries

are non-existent, Yet, congruent with research on heterosexual women, coerced sex or unwanted sex is often minimized by the participant taking responsibility for the events that transpired, denying the experience to be negative all together, or seeing it as a learning experience (Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras 2008). This suggests that women engage in same-sex sex as women socialized within a heteronormative culture and yet as women behaving outside of heteronormative sexual scripts. Women, regardless of sexual orientation, are still socialized as women, learning heterosexual scripts and being "primed to say 'yes'" to sex (Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras 2008:391). However, this may imply that women are also engaging in sexual behavior outside of heteronormative sexual scripts in a way that re-defines what it means to be a victim of sexual coercion or exploitation.

Avoiding Sexual Trauma

Since lesbian sex is considered safer and less threatening, the influence of sexual trauma on sexual negotiation is notable. As women, lesbian, bisexual, and queer women understand the threat and trauma of sexual assaults. Of the twenty participants, six (30%) reported being survivors of sexual assault or attempted sexual assault, mostly by male assailants with one participant reporting a female assailant, and ten (50%) reported being intimate with a female partner who had been the survivor of sexual assault or suspected to have been a survivor of sexual assault by a male assailant. As such, many of the women that I spoke with discussed the importance of open communications and establishing boundaries when they know (or suspect) their partners of being survivors of sexual assault. Lena (lesbian, 32) states:

> Seeing how men treat women and women are just abused, like, we always read about crap we have to do, that I've always been particularly careful with the way I

54

go about things. 'cause I'm like, I don't ever want to be like that. I don't ever want to be like some dude that's wanting to, like, you know, stick his dick in […] It, definitely played a part in my whole approach to sex.

Lena's experiences, as well as the experiences of friends, family, and lovers, influences the way that she goes about sex and establishing sexual boundaries. Her experiences, and many others', create an awareness of sexual boundaries when engaging in sex with other women. That empathy influences women's desire ensure that they do not cross any of their partners' boundaries. Lisa (unspecified, 25) also discusses a specific instance:

> […] I, like, had a conversation with someone and was like, okay. Like, 'What do we want to do? Where do we want to draw the line?' and she was a victim of rape so I made sure to like sit down and like, 'I want you to be completely comfortable. I want you to let me know, like, you tell me boundaries […].'

In this instance, Lisa knew that she needed to take extra precautions in order to ensure that her partner was comfortable and felt safe. Sexual trauma is a reality for many women. As a result, many women I interviewed were consciously aware of this reality and negotiated sexual boundaries accordingly. Again, we see that women engage in lesbian sex *as women*; women socialized in a heteronormative society where the sexual scripts dictate a gendered and unequal structure

Negotiating Pleasure

As previously established, since lesbian sex is fluid, negotiated, and subjective, lesbian women go about establishing sexual consent in several different ways. Furthermore, once consent is established (or assumed) women will negotiate their desires, wants, and needs, differently as well. This appears to be based on experience, comfort, and length of relationship.

Many women reported gaining consent, or at least determining a woman's sexual willingness or availability, largely through non-verbal communication such as body

language, eye contact, and space. Kennedy (lesbian/queer, 25) states, "I don't ask, ever. I read more body language and sounds, reactions, to what I'm doing." For Meg (lesbian, 26), "if they reciprocate with me then I figure its okay. But like, I finger a girl and she doesn't finger me back then I don't go any further." Meg's method is more action oriented. Most participants discussed their intuitiveness and ability to read people in order to determine consent. Many participants discussed watching body language for tensing muscles or resistance. Similarly, Beres, Herold, and Mailand (2004) also found that consent is given often non-verbally in both heterosexual and homosexual sexual situations.

Communicating sexual desire, wants, and needs differed for the women. However, a majority discussed being better able and comfortable expressing these desires over time. Specifically for women, it seems that long-term relationships provide the most sexual satisfaction. Codi (lesbian, 37) states that sex with her wife is that, "This is the first time I ever felt like it was okay to ask for and receive what I wanted. And it was the first time I ever felt like it was okay to do what I wanted and to talk about it […]. Everything is accepting." Likewise, Quinn (trans/queer, 30) discusses how she's learned about establishing boundaries over time:

> I learned a little bit about making requests of people and uh, establishing my needs and my values. And so now, at 30, I'm learning a little bit more about how to express myself, express the whys and, you know, give boundaries and that um, and that seems to be working for me pretty well […].

These women have learned, through continued practice and negotiation, how to establish their boundaries and express their wants and needs. Even still, much like heterosexual women, a majority of the women described themselves as "pleasers" in which they prefer to do what their partner wants to do, even if it may be at their own expense. For example,

Lena (lesbian, 32) states, "I'm a big pleaser, so if someone wants me to do something, and it will give them pleasure, like, okay, I'll do it. But at the same time and in my head I was just like, 'Whoa. What the hell?'" This demonstrates that although the sex is consensual for Lena, it may be undesired by her. Yet, for the pleasure of her partner and for the preservation of her partner's feelings, she would comply.

Ultimately, there seems to be an overarching fear of not knowing where boundaries lie with women in general. Many of the participants expressed feeling hesitant or passive when it came to approaching or talking with women. Whereas sexual scripts in a heterosexual context are a cultural given, the scripts for same-sex interaction are more ambiguous. As such, many women reported that interactions with men were "easy." For the women that had had sex with men, they discussed how there is no need for negotiation with men. As Norah (lesbian, 32) puts it, "'cause men, I'm like, oh yeah. They, they're probably ready all the damn time. Like, you know, its just a matter of you saying yes." Women however, are reportedly harder to woo. Participants reported that they feel less confident with women, are hesitant with women, or take a passive role in approaching women for fear of hitting on a straight girl by mistake. This seems to indicate that the overall culture of lesbian sex is shrouded in ambiguity with only heterosexual scripts with which to refer to. Regardless, lesbian sexual boundaries are negotiated by women with other women.

Since the lesbian sexual process is one that is seemingly more comfortable, yet ambiguous, than the often constrained heterosexual process (Peterson and Muehlenhard 2007), many participants that had had previous heterosexual experiences, many of which were long term relationships, reported feeling freer to play with power dynamics and

other newer kinds of sex play than when they were with male partners. Maxeen (queer, 25) recounts her sexual exploration with her then transgender boyfriend:

> [He] was involved in a lot of BDSM […] stuff, so he knew what it looked like to say, these are the things that I'm going to do, these are the things that I will never do […] and I think even now, [that was] one of the most healthy sexual relationships that I had because there was so much conversation around what you will and will not do. And then we just had, I mean, we just had sex. We had sex all the time We went to sex parties […]. It was a really awesome experience being young and doing all that stuff.

For Maxeen, the fact was not that her partner was involved in these communities in which explicit verbal consent was paramount to the sexual activity which made her feel more safe to explore these activities. Rather, it was the fact that the spaces in which they were engaging in these activities were women and queer only that she felt safe and secure to explore different kinds of sex. It was within the queer context that Maxeen reported feeling safe to play with power dynamics such as the dominance and submission play involved in queer BDSM. Similarly, Lena (lesbian, 30) and Quinn (queer/trans, 30) both discuss how learning lesbian sex inherently pushes boundaries. Lena discussed how, during the first time one of her female partners was about to ejaculate, there was:

> [An] in the moment, while [sex] is going on, a kind of dialogue, discussion of whether we should stop or not and I'm like, 'No, no! Just let it, just relax.' And they're like, 'Oh no! I don't know!' and I'm like, 'No just keep going' [and then after the female ejaculation happened they were] good, as in they felt good but freaked out. […] So I mean it was okay.

In Lena's case, the woman she was with was experiencing a new sensation that took her by surprise. In these cases, Lena discusses how there is often a need to push her partner's boundaries in order for her to experience new sensations like female ejaculation. Since female ejaculation often is confused for the sensation of having to urinate, Lena states that this partner in particular was scared at first that that what was happening but was

happy and satisfied once she was pushed to ejaculate. Similarly, Quinn discusses dating straight women:

> […] so every straight woman has pretty much been a complete boundary push. Like, a lot of convincing, a lot of discussing. Like you can't pull out too many toys. You can't go all the way. You kind of have to ease into [sex] and get 'em on the simple stuff. The body to body stuff.

Again, whether its their own boundaries being pushed, or needing to push their partner's boundaries, learning lesbian sex or experiencing new sexual sensations requires that boundaries be pushed. Here exists a fine line between pushing boundaries for the sake of new sexual experiences and coercion. But just as in any sexual context, the safety lies in a open communication and the establishment of trust. The available sexual scripts do not indicate how or what boundaries need to be established when women have sex with women. Yet, many women automatically establish boundaries against any sex that may not considered "normal" to them (Laws and Schwartz 1977). For heterosexual women this would include lesbian sex. For lesbians or bisexuals, this may be BDSM or female ejaculation. Either way, heteronormative notions of appropriate sexuality inform what is considered "normal."

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

These data indicate that lesbians negotiate sexual boundaries in a way that may mirror heteronormative society but is still influenced by the feminine experience and perspective. Bolsø (2008) postulated that lesbian behavior was specific to women with same-sex desire while still being embedded in and informed by heterosexual framework. This informs the findings of the research in that the way that women navigate and negotiate same-sex experiences is specific to lesbian experience while still reflective of the larger heterosexual culture and available sexual scripts (Bolsø 2008; Laumman and Gagnon 1995). Women, in general, approach sex and sexual negotiations from the standpoint of heterotypical gender. Women are more communicative with one another, sensitive to one another's needs, and emotional in their sexual encounters. Since lesbian women are still socialized and informed by the heteronormative culture, feminine cultural ideals are present even in lesbian encounters (Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras 2008; Peterson and Muehlenhard 2007).

The notion that lesbian women have a specific and yet normative view of what "real" sex is supports Peterson and Muehlenhard's (2007) discourse of ambivalence. Specifically, women's tendency to engage in undesired or unwanted sex for the sake of their partner indicates an ambivalence influenced by feminine notions of caretaking, giving, and sexual availability. Some of the vignettes above indicate what might be considered sexual assaults in a heterosexual context. Yet, because sex may be ambivalent, and female sexuality is conceptualized differently within a lesbian context,

60

these women may feel more able to define that dynamic differently. Their ability to ad-lib heteronormative scripts assists in the re-framing of the coercive situation. Perhaps it is telling that few women reported feeling victimized by other women in the same sense that women are victimized by men.

Although gender identity and performance had an influence on the negotiation of sexual boundaries for some, it was not something to be assumed. In fact, these data did not indicate that perceived gender at all determined sexual roles. Initial assumptions regarding sexual roles were reported, but given the fluid nature of lesbian sex, these roles were negotiable. Furthermore, sexual boundaries are viewed as less concrete than boundaries in a heterosexual context. Although these data show that this flexibility can be a source of contention and conflict for some, it also indicates that pushing boundaries in a lesbian context may not automatically be perceived as a negative thing. A part of the fluidity of negotiating sexual boundaries outside of a hetero-patriarchal framework provides a safe space for women to explore their sexuality, especially after experiencing a heterosexual sexual assault

The implications of these finding can provide insight into how sexual boundaries and consent are negotiated and established within a lesbian context. It also shows the ways in which sex is defined and how those definitions can differ that can affect the way that sexual boundaries are negotiated and understood. As such, these findings may prove to be useful in the social service, mental health, and sexual health fields to better serve the lesbian, bisexual, and queer community. These findings indicate that sexual transgressions within a lesbian context are a matter of differing definition. However, these findings also show that regardless of differing definitions of sex and sexual

boundaries, the presence of sexual coercion and sexual ambivalence is just as apparent. This also gives insight into the role that sexual trauma plays on women who have sex with women. Understanding these sexual dynamics sheds light on heterosexual negotiations and female sexuality as a whole.

This study is by no means exhaustive. The population of this study is not very diverse. Therefore, future research should expand on bisexual, trans, and queer women as well as women of color. Older women may be able to provide an additional insight as to how the lesbian culture has changed over time. Personal narratives can be expanded upon to prove more insight into the inner thoughts, feelings, and motivations of women's actions and sexual negotiations. Specifically, it will be beneficial to look at class differences among women to see if sexuality is expressed differently based on socio-economic status given that this information regarding lesbian women is lacking. Adding a quantitative survey component can strengthen this argument through the correlation of gender identity, experience, and age throughout the life course (Rose and Zand 2000). A comparison of bisexual to lesbian women specifically may also reveal more specific nuances in how women negotiate sexual boundaries with one another. Furthermore, an additional weakness of this study is the lack of geographical diversity. Women from different parts of the country and world can expand on what we know regarding how women negotiate sex.

Women negotiate sexual boundaries with other women in a way that is indicative of their socializations and experiences as women. These negotiations are in constant flux and are continuously informed by past and present experiences. Women's negotiations are both informed by and deviate from the normative heterosexual cultural scripts.

Women's ability to locate themselves within the cultural context and provide their

subjective interpretation of available sexual scripts (Simon and Gagnon 1984) indicates

that lesbian, bisexual, and queer women are both different and heteronormative.

APPENDIX SECTION

APPENDIX A

Interview Guide and Info Sheet

Demographic information

Pseudonym		Date of interview	
Age		Respondent #	
Race/Ethnicity		Time started	
Religious affiliation		Time ended	
Place grew up		Audio file #	
Education		Interview location	
Job description		Phone #	
Current city			
Sexual orientation[1]			
Self-Identity/style[2a,2b]			

1. How do you self identify (sexuality)?
   a. On a scale of 0 to 6, zero being exclusively heterosexual and six being exclusively homosexual, how would you rank yourself? How has that number changed over the years?
2. How would you describe your style of dress? (i.e. femme, butch, soft butch, lipstick, etc.)
   a. Have you always identified this way?
   b. On a scale of 0 to 6, zero being very feminine and six being very masculine, how would you rank yourself? How has that number changed over the years?

3. Are you currently in a relationship?
   a. If yes, how do you describe this relationship?
   b. If yes, how long have you been in this relationship?
   c. If yes, what is your partner like?
   d. If no, are you currently dating/looking?

Life History Narrative Themes
Life history narratives will be outlined chronologically. However, for each stage/relationship, probing questions (below) will be asked. The questions are divided into themes (adapted from Dunne 1997).

Childhood family and school life:
- What was life like at home?
  - What were the household dynamics?
  - What was the division of labor in the home?
  - How are your relationships with your parents and siblings?
  - How is your parents' relationship?
  - What expectations did your parents have of you?
  - What were your hobbies and activities as a child?
- How were your relationships with your friends?
  - What were your crushes like?
- Where/ how did you learn about love, sex, and relationships?
  - How was your formal sex education?
- What were your future goals, hopes, and dreams (career, family, marriage, etc.)?

Coming out process:
- When and how did your "coming-out" happen initially?
- What were your expectations of yourself and of your partners when you first "came out"?
  - What were your assumptions of same-sex relationships?
- How have your identity, expectations, and behavior changed since "coming out"?

Relationships:
- Who are/were you attracted to?
- How are people supposed to act in relationships in general? Where did you learn these ideas?
- What were your views on romance, sex, and virginity loss back then?
- What influence did peer pressure play?
- What was your self-identity during each relationship?
  - How has your identity/style of dress changed with each relationship?
  - How has the gender rank (Kinsey scale rank) and sexual orientation rank changed with each relationship?
- What was dating like?
  - How did romances and relationships play out?
  - What roles did you play during relationship negotiations?
  - How did you think you needed to behave your relationships?
- How do you handle relationship problems?
  - How do you communicate during troubled times?
- What are your future relationship plans (marriage, children)?

Sex and Intimacy:
- What does "virginity loss" mean to you and how has that meaning changed?
- What does "have sex" mean to you and how has it changed?
- How are roles supposed to be played in relationships in general?
- When/how did you become sexually active?
  - How did that play out?
  - What expectations did you have regarding sex and relationships?
  - What was your first sexual experience(s) like (hetero and/or homo)?
- How do your relationships play out?
  - How do you express yourself sexually (in each relationship)?
  - What roles did you play and how was intimacy negotiated in your relationships?

- o How do you initiate sex?
- o Who did what (sexually/romantically)?
- o Who takes control/calls the shots in the bedroom?
- o How do you communicate sexual boundaries and desire?
- o How have roles changed throughout each relationship?
- What was your self identity and partner's identity at that time?
  - o How has the gender rank and sexual orientation rank changed with each sexual encounter?
- Give an example of a time when there was an issue regarding a sexual issue with your partner- How was it handled?

Homo/Hetero differences:
- Do you behave differently with men?
- Are your expectations different with men?
- How satisfied are you in hetero relationships?
- How do dating and sex roles differ when you're in a homosexual relationship?
- How are sexual boundaries negotiated (in general)?

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