WOMEN’S PERSPECTIVES AND EXPERIENCES IN PASSIONATE FRIENDSHIPS

A Dissertation in
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by
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ABSTRACT

As societal attitudes towards the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning community have become increasingly more accepting, individuals are likely to have more opportunities to explore and develop their sexual orientation. Theorists have argued that existing models of sexual orientation development are dated and do not fully capture contemporary women’s experiences. One possible way women may develop their sexual orientations is through the context of passionate friendships. This study used the qualitative research methodology of grounded theory to examine the experiences of 20 women in female passionate friendships. The goal of this research was to develop a substantive theory of how these women explored and developed their sexual orientation within the context of their female passionate friendships. Participants’ passionate friendships were found to be distinguished from their non-passionate friendships based on two common characteristics: emotional intensity and boundary crossings. The core category that emerged in this study was “challenging one’s perceptions of friendships.” The emotional intensity and boundary crossings of women’s passionate friendships led participants to challenge their subjective realities of how they had previously defined friendships and expected friends to interact. This resulted in a “ripple effect” of women simultaneously challenging their perceptions of their personal sexual orientation, broader understanding of sexual orientation, and how other salient identities intersected with their sexual orientation identity. This process resulted in three outcomes pertaining to sexual orientation development: increased awareness, opening, and restructuring. Participants who developed through increased awareness gained new knowledge and insights into sexual orientation through their experiences within the passionate friendship. Through opening, women
became open to new possibilities and/or accepted aspects of sexual orientation. Finally, by restructuring, participants constructed new conceptualizations and meanings of sexual orientation.

The findings of this study provide important additions to the existing research on women’s passionate friendships and sexual orientation development. In addition, a discussion of the implications of the findings for research, theory, and clinical practice is provided.
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Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1970s, various researchers have created models on how sexual identity is developed (e.g., Bradford, 2004; Cass, 1979; Klein, 1985; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Troiden, 1989). Although these models differ in how they theorized the developmental process, a common theme of the importance of exploration in sexual identity development emerged. These models identified how the environment may influence exploration of sexual identity, factors that may enable or inhibit the exploration process, and the salient role of interpersonal relationships in exploration. These sexual identity models contributed greatly to our understanding of individuals’ sexual identity development, such as contextual influences, importance of affirmation of sexual identity by self and community, potential for sexual fluidity and identity development as a lifelong process, and differences in development across individuals in the sexual minority community. At the same time, these models have limitations in their application to sexual identity development today. The limitations include assumptions that sexual identity follows a linear developmental path and that development ends with coming out; an assumption that the model applies to all individuals with shared identities; and the exclusion of certain members, particularly bisexual men and women. In addition, with the exception of the Klein model, these models focused exclusively on sexual minority individuals’ sexual identity development. More recently, attempts have been made (i.e., Dillon, Worthington, & Moradi, 2011) to conceptualize a model of sexual identity development that is not specific to a minority sexual identity group but instead examines commonalities in this process for individuals across sexual identities (including individuals who identify as heterosexual). Despite this recent
reconceptualization of sexual identity development, the limitations of existing models indicate the need for updated theories that accurately capture individuals’ experiences of sexual orientation development in the current society.

A new conceptualization of sexual orientation development appears to be particularly important for women. Early models of sexual orientation development proposed a “master narrative,” defined by beliefs of continuity in sexual attraction and consistency between early sexual behavior and later attractions (Diamond, 1998). This narrative was challenged in the theoretical literature, with researchers citing concerns about categorization, lack of empirical support, and failure to consider social context (e.g., Garnets & Peplau, 2001). As a result, a new paradigm of sexual orientation for women was proposed, one which incorporates the possibility of variations among sexual orientation identities, sexual fluidity, and multiple pathways to development (Garnets & Peplau). This new paradigm of sexual orientation development addresses limitations of previous theories and is more relevant for contemporary women.

Although changing societal influences and increased understandings of women’s experiences have shaped current theory for women’s sexual orientation development, exploration remains a key component of this developmental process. This may be particularly true for sexual minority women. For example, in a sample of college women, sexual minority women were found to engage in more exploration of their sexual identity than “exclusively straight” women (Thompson & Morgan, 2008). These women reported exploring their sexual identity through experimentation of same-sex attraction, desire, behaviors, and romantic relationships (Thompson & Morgan). Although less likely to explore, heterosexual college women have also been found to benefit from exploring their sexual identity (Muise, Preyde, Maitland, & Milhausen, 2010).
Through sexual identity exploration, these heterosexual women were able to thoughtfully examine and increase their personal understandings of their sexual identity, which was strongly related to sexual well-being. Research on women’s sexual orientation development is lacking, however, on how and in what contexts women may be exploring their sexual orientation, as well as the outcomes of such a process. Prior to examining social context and sexual orientation development, I first consider what contexts may facilitate women’s identity development more broadly, examining the role of women’s friendships.

A developmental task of adolescence and young adulthood is to develop one’s identity while simultaneously constructing intimate relationships with others (Adams & Marshall, 1996; Erikson, 1968; Paul & White, 1990). Friendships, in particular, play a salient role in women’s identity development, providing a context for young women to both navigate intimate interactions and establish healthy well-being (e.g., Knickmeyer, Sexton, & Nishimura, 2002; Sullivan, 1953). Friendships play a unique role in the identity development of sexual minority women, serving as a source of positive role models, support, and shared understandings without the challenge of power differences (Galupo, 2007b; Stanley, 1996; Westin, 1991). At the same time, the majority of sexual minority women’s friends are heterosexual (Galupo, 2007a). Both members of these cross-orientation friendships benefit, however, with heterosexual women gaining increased open-mindedness and sexual minority women experiencing acceptance for their sexual identities (Galupo & St. John, 2001). In addition to the importance of same-sex friendships in women’s overall identity development, there is reason to believe that close friendships with other women is an important social context for women to explore and develop personal meanings of their sexual orientation. By examining further how and when exploration
is likely to occur, we may increase our understandings of healthy sexual orientation development for women.

Historically, emotionally intense friendships between adolescent women are well documented (Diamond, 2000b), and recent research has illustrated that these relationships continue to exist among contemporary women. Diamond presents the most extensive contemporary research on these intimate friendships between young women, labeled “passionate friendships.” These friendships mimic the intimacy exhibited in romantic relationships, including behaviors of cuddling, hand holding, possessiveness, and separation distress (Diamond, 2000b, 2002). Passionate friendships are not disproportionately likely, however, to include sexual attraction or behavior, and when this was present, women often cited it occurred as a result of the emotional intimacy in the relationship. In addition, only some of these women eventually adopted a sexual identity label of lesbian or bisexual, indicating that these friendships are not necessarily a transitional experience before women adopt a sexual minority identity. Developmentally, same-sex close friendships provide a context for youth to navigate intimate relationships, (potentially) without the added complications of one or both friends experiencing sexual desire for the other friend (Sullivan, 1953). This further highlights how passionate friendships between women may be a safe, supportive relationship in which sexual orientation development may occur, as they provide the opportunity to navigate emotional intimacy outside of dating relationships. Much of the contemporary research on passionate friendships has focused on describing these relationships, however, so little is known on how women may explore their sexual orientation within these friendships.

There is one existing study that has both established the existence of intimate friendships
between women and examined how these friendships serve as an important context for sexual orientation identity development. This study focused on bisexual and bi-curious women’s sexual orientation identity development, with about half of the sample identifying a close friendship with another woman as an important and salient experience in their sexual orientation identity development (Morgan & Thompson, 2007). Within their discussions of their friendship experiences, these women identified four themes of how the friendship influenced their sexual orientation identity development. The themes were discovery of same-sex attraction and desire for their friend, a sense of closeness with their friend, feeling supported by their friend, and defining their sexual identity, which was further divided into a solidification of a bisexual identity or confusion about how to define one’s identity following a same-sex friendship experience. Thus, Morgan and Thompson identified that young adult women may undergo the process of exploration of their sexual orientation identity within friendships with other women when there is a presence of sexual attraction and desire and they feel close to and supported by their friend. As a result, women may then engage in creating personal meanings and understanding of their sexual orientation identity by evaluating their sexual experiences with their friend and either solidifying a sexual identity label as their own or believing they are unsure of how to identify and potentially continue to explore their sexual orientation identity. Although this study is innovative in examining how intimate friendships between women may influence women’s sexual orientation identity development, it is limited in its scope as it only focuses on bisexual and bi-curious women. Questions remain on how women across sexual identities may experience intimate female friendships as a place for them to explore and develop their sexual orientation; one way to examine this would be to consider the experiences of the other women in
these friendship pairs.

Diamond’s (2000b, 2002) and Morgan and Thompson’s research studies on women’s friendships described above failed to identify the sexual identity of participants’ friends. One existing study did this, explicitly examining “cross-orientation” friendships between heterosexual women and sexual minority (lesbian or bisexual) women (Galupo & St. John, 2001). Although this study does not focus on exploration of sexual orientation, some important information is gleaned from this study on a “cognitive reframe” that occurs in heterosexual women, which may precede and/or take place simultaneously with sexual orientation exploration. Galupo and St. John identified that by being in close friendships with sexual minority women, some heterosexual women experienced increased flexibility in thinking about their own sexual identity by actively reflecting on the process of sexual orientation identity development and increased willingness to think about their own sexual identity in fluid terms. For others, this cognitive process was enough for women to solidify their sexual identity; they found stability in their heterosexual identity as a result of their experiences in the friendship. Yet, this research did not examine how exploration may have played a role in heterosexual women’s conceptualization of their sexual identity following their friendship experiences, or how exploration may have later occurred after this cognitive process to further develop their sexual orientation. Specifically, further research may examine what happens in close friendships between women that allows for sexual orientation exploration to take place and, when it does occur, how women use this context to develop personal understandings of their sexual orientation.
Rationale

Although early models of sexual identity development have increased understandings of this developmental process, including the important role of exploration, they are limited in their focus on sexual identity group specific development and lack of consideration of the potentially fluid nature of this process for individuals in today’s society. More recently, new conceptualizations of sexual orientation development have been proposed that address these concerns, particularly for women, but little is known on how and in what contexts women may engage in exploration of their sexual orientation, as well as the outcomes of this process, limiting our understandings of healthy development for women. Same-sex friendships have long been identified as being critical for women’s overall identity development, and there is reason to believe that women’s friendships also promote development of sexual orientation, as suggested by the research on passionate friendships. Given the important role of exploration in sexual identity development, further research is needed on how women may explore their sexual orientation in the context of passionate friendships. Only one study thus far has examined this question, but focused specifically on bisexual and bi-curious women, so it is not clear if intimate friendships serve as a social context for women across sexual identities to develop their sexual orientation. Research on cross-orientation friendships has provided important information on how heterosexual women undergo a cognitive process of examining their sexual identity following friendship experiences with sexual minority women, but we do not know what role exploration may have played in this process. A next step in research on women’s friendships and sexual orientation development may examine what happens in passionate friendships between women that allows for sexual orientation exploration to take place and, when it does occur, how
women across sexual identities use this context to develop personal understandings of their sexual orientation.

**Current Study**

The current study will examine the experiences of women across sexual identities in passionate friendships. Specifically, this study aims to use grounded theory to develop a substantive theory of how the context of female passionate friendships may influence women’s exploration and development of their sexual orientation. By examining women’s passionate friendship experiences, we may increase our understandings of how sexual orientation may develop for women in today’s society, dispelling myths and misleading stereotypes, and allow for the promotion of healthy development among women.
Chapter Two

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Since the gay rights movement in the 1970s, American society has become progressively more open and accepting of sexual orientation identities outside of traditional, hetero-normative beliefs, allowing for increased visibility of individuals who not only do not identify as heterosexual, but fall somewhere in between (or outside of) the heterosexual and gay/lesbian binary. The changing cultural landscape suggests that how one may develop personal meanings of their sexual orientation may also be evolving. Young people of contemporary society may not only be pushing previous boundaries of the expression and labels they attribute to their sexual orientation, but also be more free to explore and develop their sexual orientation in ways that previously may have been inaccessible or stigmatized. This study aims to investigate what there is to know about this new cohort of young adults who grew up during a time when societal perspectives towards the sexual minority community were changing. Specifically, the purpose of this study is to build a theory on how the unique, social context of female passionate friendships may influence women’s development and understandings of their sexual orientation.

In the following review of the relevant literature, I first describe early models of sexual orientation development, identifying specifically the unifying theme of the importance of exploration in this developmental process, as well as the limitations of these models. I then review how traditional development models particularly fail to capture women’s experiences, and identify the importance of considering social contexts in women’s sexual orientation development. I discuss researchers’ proposal of a reconceptualization of women’s development as potentially being varied and inconsistent, fluid, and arising from multiple pathways. Even as
new theoretical models for women’s sexual orientation development have emerged, I highlight how exploration has remained a salient factor. Finally, I conclude with a review of the important role of women’s friendships in their identity development, and discuss how passionate friendships in particular may be a space for women to explore and develop their sexual orientation.

**Defining Sexual Orientation**

Today, sexual orientation is colloquially used interchangeably with sexual identity; when one identifies their sexual orientation, they typically provide sexual identity labels (e.g., bisexual, lesbian). In actuality, sexual orientation is a construct that captures multiple aspects of one’s sexuality. In Klein’s (1985) theory, he conceptualized sexual orientation as a multivariable construct, which is composed of three variables: sexual self (characterized by *Sexual Attraction*, *Sexual Fantasy*, and *Sexual Behavior*), composition of sexual orientation (expressed by *Emotional Preference*, *Social Preference*, and *Heterosexual/Gay-Lesbian Lifestyle*), and *Self-Identification* (i.e., sexual identity). More recently, the Sexual Minority Assessment Research Team (SMART) with the Williams Institute also identified sexual orientation as a multidimensional construct, proposing three dimensions: sexual identity, sexual attraction, and sexual behavior (Badgett, 2009). Although the Klein and SMART conceptualizations differ in their chosen variables of sexual orientation, both include sexual identity. Savin-Williams (1990) further defined sexual identity as a way for individuals to recognize the personal meanings of sexual orientation and sexual behavior in their lives in a consistent and enduring manner.

This study will define sexual orientation using the most recent definition in the literature, described by SMART. Throughout this review, I am purposeful in my use of “sexual
orientation” or “sexual identity,” referring to the multi-dimensional construct when I use the term “sexual orientation” and to the label individuals use to identify their sexual orientation when using the terms “sexual identity” or “sexual orientation identity.” When I review previous research, I maintain the language the researchers used in regards to these two constructs. In addition, this study will examine sexual orientation development rather than limiting the focus to sexual identity and thus I use “sexual orientation” when referring to the current study or discussing general ideas for where research is lacking and may be furthered.

**Historical Sexual Identity Models**

Beginning in the 1970s, theoretical models were formulated to describe the process of sexual identity development. The vast majority of these models focus on the experiences and development of sexual minority individuals, so the following review of theoretical models specially examines sexual minorities’ sexual identity development. Although the models vary in their stages and what they attribute to this developmental process, a central theme of sexual identity exploration emerges.

**Role of Exploration.** Across the history of sexual identity development models, exploration emerged throughout as an important task in developing one’s sexual identity. The models proposed how the environmental context may influence how the exploration process occurs. Given the continued discrimination against sexual minority individuals, these models discussed factors that may enable and inhibit this process. Finally, the developmental models identified interpersonal relationships as an important context in which exploration of sexual identity may occur.

Sexual identity development models identify how the environmental context may
influence exploration of one’s sexual identity. Cass (1979) and Troiden (1989) both believed that one’s sexual identity development is largely influenced by the environmental context. Cass saw the environment as a motivating force behind movement across stages, determined by level of dissonance between personal experience/self-definition and how they believe others perceive them. Troiden, on the other hand, believed that having a supportive sexual minority environment provides for opportunities for same-sex experiences.

A few factors were identified that may enable one’s exploration process. Cass (1979) and Troiden (1989) identified confusion about one’s sexual identity as a time in which individuals actively explore their sexuality and seek to understand their sexual identity. In both models, exploration of self and environment was seen as a way for individuals to alleviate one’s confusion. Troiden also recognized the importance of emotional connection to the LGBQ (i.e., lesbian, gay, bisexual, questioning/queer) community in one’s sexual identity development. In the Klein model of fluid identity (1985), a variety of behaviors were believed to allow for the maintenance and exploration of sexual orientation, including involvement in a long-term romantic relationship, identity affirmation, coming out, instillation of pride, and access to resources. McCarn and Fassinger (1996) saw exploration being motivated by internal processes, such as an awareness of difference from a heterosexual identity and recognition of sexual feelings. Finally, Bradford stated in the Stage Theory of Bisexuality that exploration of sexual identity is mediated by an individual’s ability to come to trust her/his own reality of sexual identity (2004). In sum, the factors that promote sexual identity exploration are: confusion about one’s sexual identity, level of emotional connection to sexual minorities, relationship status, stage and beliefs of one’s sexual identity (i.e., affirmation, pride), resource availability, and
introspective processes (i.e., feelings of differentness from heterosexuals).

At the same time, sexual identity models recognize that various factors may inhibit one’s ability to explore one’s sexual identity, particularly given the stigmatization against sexual minority individuals that has endured over the history of these models. Cass (1979) identified how unsupportive relationships may delay one’s sexual identity exploration process by having others associate sexual minority identities with mental illness. Lack of social support for sexual identity was also identified in Bradford’s model (2004) as a factor that may inhibit development, highlighting bisexual individuals’ need to transcend societal pressures to self-define as either heterosexual or homosexual and instead affirm their own reality of sexual identity.

Finally, a theme across models is the importance of interpersonal relationships in the exploration process. Cass (1979) noted that as one explores her/his sexual identity, there is an active comparison of self to others’ sexual identities in order to create personal meaning of identity. Cass also described how relationships may serve as a catalyst for sexual identity exploration by providing a supportive context in which to come out. Similarly, Troiden (1989) believed supportive relationships with sexual minority individuals created an environment for individuals to explore their own sexual identity, creating opportunities for same-sex experiences, allowing for lesbian and gay identities to be normalized, and providing positive role models. McCarn and Fassinger (1996) believed that sexual identity development contained two components (individual sexual identity and group membership identity), stressing that identity development does not just occur on a personal level, but also involves connection to the LGBQ community.
**Strengths.** These models provide several contributions to the understanding of sexual identity development. Although it was the first model of sexual minority identity development, Cass (1979) acknowledged the influence of the environmental context on sexual identity development and highlighted how through exploration, individuals may undergo an ongoing reevaluation of their sexual identity, which aligns with more modern theories of sexual orientation and identity development. Cass also recognized the salience of coming out in the solidification and affirmation of a sexual minority identity. Troiden (1989) furthered Cass’s model by acknowledging that exploration of one’s sexual identity can be a continuous process across the lifespan, rather than ending when one comes out. Klein was revolutionary in sexual orientation development models by proposing a fluid component of sexual orientation and recognizing bisexuality as its own identity, rather than a step along the way to a lesbian or gay identity (1985), as seen in the Cass and Troiden models. McCarn and Fassinger (1996) developed the first model to identify differences between men and women’s sexual identity development, proposing the need for separate models for men and women, and identified a separate pathway of exploring one’s place in the LGBQ community. Years later, a sexual identity model specific to the development of bisexual individuals was established, advocating for the existence of nondichotomous identities (Bradford, 2004).

**Limitations.** The sexual identity models presented above, however, are limited in their application to individuals today, given that there are certain considerations of identity development that are lacking or absent altogether. Cass focused on the importance of coming out and saw this as the end point of development (1979), which may not be the case for all sexual minority individuals today. Both the Cass and Troiden (1989) models were limited in their
failure to recognize that fluidity may exist in how individuals develop their sexual identity, instead assuming a linear path of development. Today, it is believed that individuals may take multiple paths to the formation of their sexual identity. Like Cass and Troiden, McCarn and Fassinger (1996) continued the pattern of excluding bisexual identity development from their model, instead solely focusing on lesbian women’s development. Finally, although suggestive of fluidity in identity, Troiden’s belief that individuals never fully synthesize a sexual identity and need ongoing analysis and exploration may be perceived as invalidating to how some identify their sexual orientation identity. In addition, these models are lacking in their empirical support, likely due to the difficulties in using quantitative data measurement to study sexual identity.

Empirical research has demonstrated that despite the typical stage-wise nature of sexual identity development models, individuals fluctuate in their sexual orientation. Specifically, Amestoy (2001) used Klein’s Sexual Orientation Grid (1985) to assess for fluidity in sexual orientation and found that only three out of 250 participants reported complete consistency over time and aspects of sexuality (e.g., behavior, identification). Another study further supported sexual orientation fluidity, suggesting sexual identity categories expand past traditional categories of heterosexual, bisexual, and gay/lesbian to the broader categories of “heterosexual, bi-heterosexual, bi-bisexual, bi-gay/lesbian, and gay/lesbian” (Weinrich & Klein, 2002). These findings are promising in highlighting the potential fluidity that may be experienced in one’s sexual orientation and its development, addressing one of the limitations of existing sexual identity development models.

This study aims to investigate sexuality and its development in all women, regardless of sexual identity, and a limitation of the sexual identity models described above is the main focus
on sexual minority individuals. One recent model of sexual identity development proposes that this is a developmental process that all individuals undergo (Dillon, Worthington, & Moradi, 2011). Both commonalities and differences may exist in sexual identity development between and within sexual identity subgroups. Further research is needed to examine how individuals more globally may develop and explore their sexual orientation, identifying if there are shared experiences across individuals.

In conclusion, throughout sexual minority identity development models, exploration is clearly identified as an important component of the development process. These models, however, are historical and less applicable to adolescents and young adults of the current generation for a variety of reasons, particularly given that the assumption of linear development in most models does not account for the possibility of fluidity in development and experience of sexual orientation. In the next section, I discuss how these previous conceptualizations of sexual orientation are especially problematic in their application to women’s sexuality.

Redefining Women’s Sexuality

Reconceptualizing sexual orientation appears to be particularly important for women. Research has found that traditional sexual orientation development models fail to capture women’s experiences (Diamond, 1998). As concerns were raised about theories of women’s sexual orientation development, there has been an evolution of assumptions held about women’s sexuality. Now, researchers recognize the importance of social context in women’s sexual orientation development, calling for a new paradigm of women’s sexuality.
The “Master Narrative”? Early psychological models of sexual orientation development proposed a “master narrative,” defined by continuity of same-sex attractions over time and consistency among early behavior and ideation (e.g., diverging from gender norms) and later attractions (Diamond, 1998). In other words, assumptions were made about sexual orientation, including that it forms in early childhood, must include sexual attraction, and is fixed and unchanging (Rothblum, 2000). Interviews with 89 sexual minority young women, however, challenged the master narrative of sexual orientation being a stable, early-appearing trait (Diamond, 1998). In this study, Diamond conceptualized the master narrative as having three central components: “childhood indicators of sexual orientation, same-sex attractions prior to the sexual identity questioning process, and stable sexual attractions over time” (p. 1086). Eighty percent of sexual minority women did not endorse all of these components of the master narrative in their sexual orientation development (Diamond, 1998). This indicates that the majority of sexual minority women would violate the master narrative in at least one way and further suggests that traditional development models are not able to fully capture women’s sexual orientation development. This empirical example provides evidence to question the early “master narrative” model of sexual orientation, and will be described in more detail later. Since the introduction of this model, other theoretical models and conceptualizations of sexual orientation have been described, and sequentially, issues with these later theoretical models on sexual orientation have also been identified.

Theoretical Limitations. Limitations in early sexual orientation development models in describing women’s sexuality have been a concern repeatedly raised in the field. By defining sexual orientation categorically (e.g., a woman is a lesbian and thus not heterosexual), one
assumes there is consistency across all dimensions of sexual orientation, including attraction, behavior, and identity (Rothblum, 2000). It is not clear then where the woman who only has had sex with men but has regular sexual fantasies about women fits in. In fact, a national survey has shown that same-sex behavior, desire, and identity are not highly correlated (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994). As discussed earlier, traditional stage models also presume a unified, stepwise developmental process of sexual identity development, but research has found that there are numerous ways women can come to identify their sexual identity (Morris, Ojerholm, Brooks, Osowiecki, & Rothblum, 1995).

Researchers have also challenged assumptions about women’s sexuality in the twentieth century. Three models of women’s sexual orientation have not been supported by empirical data: the “illness model,” the “inversion model,” and the “biological model” (Garnets & Peplau, 2001). From the perspective of the “illness model,” heterosexual individuals are viewed as healthy and adjusted, whereas gay individuals are seen as having mental health concerns (Gonsiorek, 1991). Today, homosexuality is no longer a psychological disorder listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (4th ed., text rev.; DSM-IV-TR; American Psychiatric Association, 2000) and an affirmative approach is increasingly the norm in therapeutic practice (see the Guidelines for Psychotherapy with Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Clients; American Psychological Association, 2000). The “inversion model” proposes that heterosexual women are feminine in their physical appearance, personal attributes, and sexual attractions, while lesbians are “sexual introverts” and thus masculinized in these characteristics (Peplau, 2001; Peplau, Spalding, Conley, & Veniegas, 1999). Empirical research does not support this model, however, illustrating that conformity (or lack thereof) to gender norms is not
always associated with women’s sexuality (Garnets & Peplau, 2001). Finally, the existence of “gay genes” is highly controversial in research and has not been supported (Veniegas & Conley, 2000). Biological factors appear to have at most an indirect and negligible role in women’s sexual orientation development (Garnets & Peplau, 2001). As these previous assumptions and models were being challenged, theorists have turned to examining what factors may influence women’s experiences of their sexual orientation and formation of sexual identities; one promising factor that has been identified is the unique social context in which each woman exists.

**Importance of Social Context.** In contrast to previous paradigms where sexual orientation was believed to be a core, personal attribute unaffected by social context, women’s recognition of and ability to act on sexual and romantic attractions are now recognized as being largely influenced by the zeitgeist of the time (Garnets & Peplau, 2001; Peplau & Garnets, 2000). One example is seen in the variety of social responses women receive on their same-sex attractions and relationships (Garnets & Peplau, 2001). Intimate friendships between women were commonplace and socially acceptable in the 18th century (e.g., Faderman, 1981), but now women are subject to sexual prejudice at both personal and societal levels (Garnets & Peplau, 2001). For example, sexual minority women of color face “double discrimination” at both societal levels and from within their own racial communities (e.g., Garnets & Kimmel, 1991).

Social context may also shape the nature of women’s romantic relationships. Based on a woman’s social and economic circumstances, her opportunities for same-sex relationships may be limited (Garnets & Peplau, 2001). For example, identification with a sexual minority identity has found to be predicted by level of education, with those with a college degree being 900%
more likely to identify as a sexual minority than women who do not attend college (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994). Moreover, current characteristics and beliefs within the LGBQ community may influence the specific dynamics of same-sex relationships (Garnets & Peplau, 2001). Relations between women have changed over time from rigid, presumed structures of “butch” and “femme” partners in the 1950s, feminism and focus on egalitarian romantic relationships in the 1970s, and the definition of bisexual identity as an attraction to the person rather than a specific gender in the late 1980s and 1990s (Garnets & Peplau, 2001).

Given the role of social context in women’s romantic relationships, there is reason to believe that conceptualizations of women’s sexual orientation development should consider the context in which women live.

**A New Paradigm.** Researchers have argued for the need for a new paradigm for women’s sexual orientation, which would highlight the importance of social context (Diamond, 1998; Garnets & Peplau, 2001; Peplau & Garnets, 2000). Garnets and Peplau propose three considerations for the reconceptualization of women’s sexual orientation: sexual orientation can be varied and inconsistent, women’s sexuality has the potential of being fluid, and there are multiple pathways in the development of sexual orientation (2001).

**Variation in Sexual Orientation.** Although some women report complete consistency between their sexual attraction, behavior, and identity, it is common for there to be inconsistency among these dimensions of sexual orientation (Garnets & Peplau, 2001). In the new paradigm of women’s sexual orientation, researchers discard the belief that sexual orientation is uniformly experienced across individuals. Instead, Savin-Williams defines sexual identity as “an individual’s enduring sense of self as a sexual being that fits a culturally created category and
accounts for one’s sexual fantasies, attractions, and behaviors” (1995, p. 166). This definition accounts for the fact that women may have diverse sexual experiences and that sexual identities are culturally constructed and have the potential of changing over time (Garnets & Peplau). Some women feel that labels cannot capture their unique sexuality and thus prefer to avoid labeling their sexual identity (Diamond, 1998).

Although sexual identity is traditionally associated with labels (i.e., bisexual, gay), theory argues that adolescents and young adults across sexual identities are increasingly less likely to see their sexuality fitting within labels. For example, how one identifies her/his sexual attraction, behaviors, and identity may have more to do with personal characteristics of the other person(s) or the relationship, rather than gender identity or sex (Peplau, 2001). In addition, the sexual experiences of LGBQ youth are believed to be markedly similar to their heterosexual peers, including a diverse range of sexual experiences with people of same- and cross-sex or gender identities (Savin-Williams, 2001), challenging assumptions about what it means to identify as heterosexual. These experiences may not be considered by the adolescents or young adults to imply anything permanent about their sexuality (Savin-Williams, 2005), indicating that sexual behaviors do not necessarily equate to sexual identity. For those who do not fall at the extreme ends of the Klein Sexual Orientation Grid (1985), completely same-sex or other-sex attracted, sexual identity labels may feel limiting and inaccurate. Thus, there are several complications of sexual identity labels, and this is another limitation of previous models of sexual identity development, in which the difficulties in assigning labels were not considered.

**Sexual Fluidity.** Both theory and empirical research has suggested that women’s sexual orientation tends to be fluid, flexible, and may develop over time (Baumeister, 2000). As
discussed above, previous theoretical models assumed that sexual orientation is established in early life and then maintains consistency across the lifespan. Empirical research has shown that women’s sexual orientation development may actually be a dynamic process and multiple changes in sexual orientation may occur over time (Diamond, 1998, 2003, 2005b, 2008). As mentioned previously, research operationalizing the Klein Sexual Orientation Grid (1985) found that only 3 out of 250 postgraduate students demonstrated complete consistency across time in the multiple dimensions of their sexual orientation (i.e., behavior, fantasy, preference, self-identification; Amestoy, 2001). In fact, one’s selection and identification with a specific sexual identity is believed to be “an ongoing process of attempting to maintain an accurate self-description of one’s sexuality in a world of sexual meanings that vary over time and across context” (Rust, 1996, p. 10). Although women may be capable of sexual fluidity, this does not suggest that all or even the majority of women will experience change in their sexual orientation over time (Garnets & Peplau, 2001).

**Multiple Pathways.** One single, predictive factor of women’s identification with a specific sexual identity does not exist. Empirical research supports that there are multiple paths of development that may lead to a common outcome of sexual identity (Diamond, 1998, 2000a; Savin-Williams, 1998; Diamond & Savin-Williams, 2000). In addition, theorists argue that knowing a woman’s current sexual identity label does not necessarily indicate what her sexual experiences, feelings, or attractions have been (Garnets & Peplau, 2001).

Theoretical research argued the important need for a reconceptualization of women’s sexuality. Limited empirical findings support this argument, however, with Diamond’s work (discussed further in a later section) offering the primary evidence for women’s sexual fluidity.
This raises a concern in the field, as these changing ideas are largely based empirically on a longitudinal study that consisted of 89 participants. Despite arguments for the need to reconceptualize women’s sexuality outside of the constraints of historical sexual orientation development models, research continues to support the important role of exploration in contemporary women’s sexual orientation development.

**Women’s Exploration of Sexual Orientation**

Regardless of self-identification, sexual minority college women have been shown empirically to have increased exploration of sexual identity in comparison to “exclusively straight” college women (Thompson & Morgan, 2008). In this study, exploration was defined as “being open to or actively experimenting with the same sex in the past, currently, or in the future” (Thompson & Morgan, p. 17). Women who identified as “mostly straight” indicated significantly more sexual identity exploration than women who identified as exclusively straight, but they explored at equal levels to bisexual and lesbian women (Thompson & Morgan). Mostly straight women described exploring their identity through “past and current experimentation with same-sex attraction, desire, and sexual behaviors; an increased interest in pursuing same-sex romantic relationships; and through openness to future same-sex experiences or relationships” (Thompson & Morgan, p. 19). These findings suggest that questioning and exploration of their sexual identity is a salient process at some point in their lives for women who identify in some way outside of a heterosexual identity (e.g., same-sex attractions, behaviors, fantasies, etc.).

Although exploration of sexual identity may be more common in women who are not exclusively heterosexual, heterosexual women have been found to benefit from the process of exploring and learning about their sexual identity. In an empirical study testing the relationship
between sexual well-being and sexual identity, sexual well-being was measured in heterosexual undergraduate women using measures on sexual self-esteem, sexual satisfaction, sexual awareness, and sexual assertiveness (Muise, Preyde, Maitland, & Milhausen, 2010). Sexual identity exploration and commitment to sexual identity had a strong, positive relationship to sexual well-being in heterosexual women (Muise et al., 2010). Specifically, these women’s examination and resulting increased personal understandings of their sexual identities were related to higher levels of sexual well-being (Muise et al., 2010).

It appears that when women explore their sexual identity, there are two outcomes of the exploration process. In their process of making meaning of their same-sex experiences, women who had difficulty in definitively labeling their feelings and interactions experienced uncertainty (defined as, “being uncertain or unclear about one’s sexual needs or desires,” p. 17) regarding their sexual identity (Thompson & Morgan, 2008). This uncertainty was often associated with mostly straight women’s simultaneous desire for and experiences with both men and women (Thompson & Morgan, 2008). On the other hand, other mostly straight women expressed commitment to their sexual identity following exploration, feeling clear or certain about their sexual desires, knowing and understanding their identity (which included being able to describe what they knew they were not), and/or claiming a sexual orientation label (Thompson & Morgan, 2008).

Based on the findings of these two studies, it appears that exploration of sexual identity plays an important role in the lives of contemporary women. Further investigation, however, is needed on how and in what contexts women may explore their sexual orientation, as well as the outcomes of the exploration process for women across sexual identities.
Women’s Identity Development and Same-Sex Friendships

Adolescence and young adulthood is a natural time for identity development in a variety of areas for both men and women. Erikson (1968) theorized that healthy development for adolescents and young adults entails formation of identity and intimacy. Paul and White (1990) argued that these two developmental processes occur simultaneously, where youth may learn more about themselves (identity) by examining how and who they move in and out of close contact (intimacy). In fact, as one is forming relationships with others, s/he may also be constructing personal identities concurrently (Adams & Marshall, 1996). Friendships likely provide a space for adolescents and young adults to develop both intra- and interpersonal understandings and development.

The friendship literature has illustrated how this type of relationship plays a critical role in women’s identity development. Developmentally across genders, same-sex close friendships provide a context for youth to navigate intimate relationships, (potentially) without the added complications of one or both friends experiencing sexual desire for the other friend (Sullivan, 1953). Friendships are the most common relational context for adolescents to discuss their burgeoning experiences of love, dating, and romance, and friends typically are the targets of romantic relationships (Connolly & Goldberg, 1999). For women, friendships have been shown to have positive impacts on overall well-being. Women who are socially connected experience mental, physical, and social health benefits; on the other hand, a lack of friendships is associated with greater likelihood of psychopathology (Knickmeyer, Sexton, & Nishimura, 2002). Women’s friendships have been found to have an important role in women’s physiological responses to stress; the formation of social networks aids in promoting safety and reducing
distress in women (Taylor et al., 2000). Friendships between women have also been found to serve a variety of psychosocial functions: development of differentiation and autonomy (Berzoff, 1989); development of intimacy and mutual support (Schultz, 1991); a complementary relationship to marriage in which one acts as a stable base and the other promotes active self-questioning (Paul, 1991); and increased self-esteem through validation and support during periods of stress (Bagwell et al., 2005; Collins & Madsen, 2006).

**Sexual Minority Women’s Friendships.** Friendships between sexual minority women appear to play a unique role in these women’s lives, given the stigmatized nature of their shared identities. These friendships may serve as an important relationship for confiding in personal life details, particularly for those who have not publicly disclosed their sexual identities, and as role models in a culture where sexual orientation continues to be an invisible identity (Stanley, 1996). Friendships play a unique role for sexual minority youth, as additional support may be particularly important given potential rejections youth may encounter after disclosing their sexual identity (Westin, 1991). Galupo (2007b) describes how women with shared sexual identities are able to form friendships characterized by shared understandings in the context of equality and lack of need to overcome identity and related power differences on the dimension of sexual identity. Despite the benefits, sexual minority women (particularly, bisexual women) are more likely to report friendships with heterosexual women than with other sexual minority women (Galupo, 2007a), and thus it is important to consider the influence of cross-orientation (e.g., heterosexual and bisexual) friendships on women’s identity development as well.
Cross-Sexual Orientation Friendships. Friendships between women of different sexual orientation identities offer unique benefits to women’s identity development. Heterosexual women reported increased open-mindedness, specifically through increased sensitivity to sexual minority perspectives and challenges to stereotypes (Galupo & St. John, 2001). Lesbian and bisexual women were able to recognize that acceptance is possible from those who identify as heterosexual, resulting in increased self-acceptance and self-esteem (Galupo & St. John, 2001). Following the disclosure of sexual orientation identity, both members of the cross-orientation friendships experienced increased closeness and trust within the relationship (Galupo & St. John, 2001). Finally, like all friendships, cross-orientation friendships serve as a source of support, acceptance, and comfort (Galupo, Sailer, & St. John, 2004; Galupo & St. John, 2001).

Friendships as a Social Context for Women’s Sexual Orientation Development

As aforementioned, social context is important in the development of women’s sexual orientation. It is less clear which social contexts are most influential. We have reason to believe that close friendships between women play a significant role in sexual orientation development.

History of Women’s Intimate Friendships. Across history, emotionally intense friendships between adolescent girls have long been documented, in which the intimacy characteristic of romantic relationships was observed, but the presence of sexual interest and/or sexual behaviors were absent (Diamond, 2000b). Varying cultures and time periods assigned different labels to these affectional relationships, including bond friendships (Evans-Pritchard, 1970), smashes (Sahli, 1979), romantic friendships (Faderman, 1981), mummy–baby friendships (Gay, 1985), or Tom-Dee relationships (Ng, 1996; Sinnott, 2009). A common theme across these historically documented friendships is the presence of emotional and behavioral features
characteristic of romantic relationships (Diamond, 2000b). In these cultural contexts, intimate friendships between girls were considered a part of the normative attachment bonds formed by unmarried youth, and were seen as safe contexts for youth to navigate intimacy outside of heterosexual romantic partnerships (Gay, 1985; Ng, 1996; Sinnott, 2009). It is important to explore how these intimate friendships between women may develop in contemporary contexts, given the added component of societal discrimination against same-sex relationships.

**Passionate Friendships.** Although a few researchers have focused on contemporary intimate friendships between young women, Diamond has written the most extensively on this subject. Her findings from various studies presented here are all informed by her longitudinal research on female sexual identity development. In this next section, an overview is provided describing the existence of passionate friendships between women during adolescence and young adulthood. The differences between conventional and passionate friendships are described. Some passionate friendships did involve a level of sexual contact; however, this did not appear to be related to whether the women eventually adopted a sexual minority identity label or not. Finally, age is identified as one variable that may be related to whether a friendship is categorized as conventional or passionate.

One of Diamond’s early studies identified intimate friendships between young women that are unique from conventional friendships (2000b). Sexual minority young adult women (self-identified as lesbian, bisexual, and “unlabeled”) in one study were asked to identify if they had “ever had a platonic friendship that was as emotionally intense as a romantic relationship” (Diamond, 2000b, p. 197). Women who had not experienced this type of friendship (13%) were asked to describe their closest friendship. The majority of women (80%) selected a female friend
for discussion (Diamond, 2000b). Women’s reports of intimate friendships with other women during adolescence resembled romantic relationships but did not necessarily involve sexual experiences (Diamond, 2000b, 2002). In comparison to conventional same-sex friendships, these “passionate friendships” more commonly contained features of separation distress, inseparability, secure base (i.e., feeling that the friend would “always be there for them, no matter what”), cuddling, hand holding, and gazing into each other’s eyes (Diamond, 2000b, 2002). In addition, the majority of these self-identified sexual minority women experienced fascination and preoccupation with their friend’s behavior and appearance and feelings of possessiveness over the friend’s time and attention (Diamond, 2002).

Despite featuring characteristics of romantic relationships, passionate friendships were not disproportionally likely to involve sexual attraction or sexual contact. Often, participants indicated that the physical affection in the relationship was not sexually motivated and felt that they were comfortable engaging in this level of affection because of the absence of sexual attraction (Diamond, 2002). A sexual component, however, was present in some passionate friendships, with 49% of women reporting at least fleeting sexual attractions and 18% reporting sexual involvement with their female friends (Diamond, 2000b). Some participants reported that their same-sex attractions to their friends were unexpected and unprecedented, which appeared to directly result from the emotional intensity of the friendship (Diamond, 2002). Furthermore, some women never again experienced same-sex attractions. Friendships that did contain some element of sexual attraction were no different in their levels of “physical affection, possessiveness, preoccupation, or other romantic feelings or behaviors” (Diamond, 2002, p. 10). Diamond (2002) suggests that the sexual attractions that developed in same-sex passionate
friendships may be representative of the intensity within these friendships, rather than indicators of a sexual minority identity. This hypothesis is further supported by the fact that only some of the participants in this longitudinal study eventually adopted a sexual identity of lesbian or bisexual, despite finding their same-sex experience in the passionate friendship both emotionally and physically satisfying. Although such friendships appear to occur more frequently between women, with 80% of participants in this study identifying a female friend, factors other than gender may contribute to whether they are classified as passionate or conventional friendships.

Age is one such factor that has been found to be related to women’s experiences of intimate same-sex friendships. Findings from Diamond’s study (2000b) showed that passionate friendships were more likely to be initiated at a younger age than conventional friendships. Regardless of whether the friendships were classified as conventional or passionate, those that contained sexual attraction were more likely to be initiated at older ages (Diamond, 2000b). This finding is further supported in a study of bisexual and bi-curious young women, where sexual experiences with same-sex friends were more likely to occur during adolescence (ages 12-20) than childhood, although both children and adolescents were equally likely to report these experiences involving sexual attraction or behavior (Morgan & Thompson, 2007). When women had already experienced same-sex sexual contact, they were more likely to report a presence of sexual contact in their passionate friendships (Diamond, 2000b). One possible explanation for the influence of age may be that women who have not reached puberty or have not had sexual experiences may be less likely to associate a link between emotional and sexual intimacy (Diamond, 2002), but it could also relate to women’s current developmental task. When the lines
between emotional and sexual intimacy are blurred within friendships, women may have a unique context in which they can safely explore their sexual orientation development.

The above research findings support the notion that friendships may serve as one vehicle for exploring and developing one’s sexual identity. As youth develop, they increase their skills of navigating intimate relationships, resulting in reciprocally deeper and closer friendships (Diamond, 2002). Although limited by hetero-normative assumptions, Sullivan argued that same-sex, best adolescent friendships function developmentally to allow youth the practice of intimate interactions, such as mutual confiding and validation, without the distractions and pressures of sexual interest (1953). Friendships that provide a safe, supportive context for sexual orientation development have been recorded across history between women.

**Friendships as a Context for Sexual Orientation Exploration.** There is one empirical study that directly examines how women explore and develop their sexual orientation identity within same-sex friendships. Specifically, sexual experiences with same-sex friends have been found to play a role in bisexual and bi-curious young women’s discovery and definition of their sexual identity (Morgan & Thompson, 2007). In this study on bisexual and bi-curious undergraduate women, half of participants identified one or more sexual experiences with female friends as either helping or being important to their sexual orientation identity development (Morgan & Thompson, 2007), highlighting the salient role of women’s friendships.

Bisexual and bi-curious young women’s same-sex friendship experiences influenced their sexual orientation identity development in several ways. Most common in these women’s narratives was that their female friendships were the context in which they discovered their feelings of same-sex sexual attraction and desire (Morgan & Thompson, 2007). These women
described this realization as being spurred by interactions with their same-sex friends. Women in these intimate same-sex friendships experienced a sense of closeness, both as a precursor to and as a result of the sexual experience with their friend (Morgan & Thompson, 2007). In these women’s discussions, closeness was often associated with feelings of comfort within the friendship or an ability to be comfortable with their friend (Morgan & Thompson, 2007). A few participants from this study indicated that support from their friends played a role in the formation of their sexual identity. For example, one woman described how having people around her who supported and understood her sexual identity of ‘fluid’ was important in developing her sexual orientation (Morgan & Thompson, 2007). Following these women’s experiences in their female friendships, they explored and examined how their interactions informed their personal understandings of their sexual identity.

Women created personal meaning from their sexual experiences with female friends by examining the effects these experiences had on their understandings of their sexual orientation identity (Morgan & Thompson, 2007). Pillemer (1992) defined meaning-making as “stepping back from an event to reflect on its implications for future behaviors, goals, values, and self-understanding” (as cited in Morgan & Thompson, 2007, p. 24). Thus, questioning one’s sexual orientation identity involves reorganizing the meaning that sexual orientation has had for the individual (Morgan & Thompson, 2007).

These bisexual and bi-curious women followed one of two paths in defining their identity: solidification of a bisexual identity or confusion about how to define one’s identity following a same-sex friend experience (Morgan & Thompson, 2007). For some women, the sexual experience with their female friends reinforced their identification with a heterosexual
identity and preference for being in a romantic relationship with a man, while also retaining their same-sex attractions and desires (Morgan & Thompson, 2007). This finding is consistent with previous research in which women experimented and enjoyed experiences of same-sex attractions, but maintained a heterosexual identity label by reporting their enjoyment to be specific to the person and situation (e.g., Diamond, 2005a). For a variety of reasons, women may question the authenticity of their same-sex attractions, rather than their sexual identity after a sexual experience with a woman (Diamond, 2000a). Such an erasure of the possibility of identifying as lesbian or bisexual and reinforcement of a heterosexual identity is likely related to the societally imposed dichotomy of sexual orientation, which does not permit inclusion of identities that may exist somewhere between lesbian and heterosexual, such as bisexual or bi-curious (Diamond, 2005a; Morgan & Thompson, 2007). Fears of stigmatization and desire to maintain heterosexual privilege are other possible reasons. On the other hand, other women found that the same-sex experiences led them to reevaluate their sexual identity, eventually resulting in them solidifying their sexual identity as bisexual (Morgan & Thompson, 2007).

**Strengths.** Morgan and Thompson (2007) provide the first study in which women describe how they explored their sexual orientation identity in the context of a close friendship with another woman. This study furthered Diamond’s work by providing additional empirical support that passionate friendships exist among women and women’s sexuality has the potential of being fluid, establishing that exploration within these friendships are important in shaping personal meanings of sexual identity, and including women who identify as bi-curious.
Limitations. Although the study has several strengths, Morgan and Thompson (2007) focused their research solely on women who identified as bisexual or bi-curious at the time of the study. In their research design, Morgan and Thompson used a descriptive, qualitative method, identifying themes of women’s sexual orientation identity development in close friendships. Although this research design is useful for initial research, it does not provide future researchers with a theoretical model for how sexual orientation exploration and development occurs in same-sex friendships between women. In addition, information was not provided on the sexual identity of the friends of participants. One study which did identify the sexual identities of members of the friendship pair, described below, provides some understandings of women’s exploration of their sexual orientation identity within female friendships.

Exploration in Cross-Orientation Friendships. In a qualitative study on young adult women, Galupo and St. John (2001) aimed to investigate the benefits of close friendships between sexual minority and heterosexual women. One of Galupo’s and St. John’s (2001) emergent themes is of particular relevance for the current study; heterosexual women in the friendship pairs reported increased flexibility in thinking about their personal sexual identity. Specifically, heterosexual women experienced increased flexibility in thinking about their own sexual identity by actively reflecting on the process of sexual orientation identity development, increased willingness to think about their own sexual identity in fluid terms, and finding stability in their sexual identity (Galupo & St. John, 2001). While the sexual identity exploration experiences were described for heterosexual women, how sexual minority women may have explored their sexual identities within the friendships was not included in the results of this study.
This study has strengths in that it provides the perspectives of the unique experiences of both heterosexual and sexual minority women in friendships with other-orientated women and further highlights heterosexual women’s potential for fluidity in understanding their sexual orientation identity after exploration in the context of same-sex friendships. On the other hand, the study has a number of drawbacks. The inclusion criteria of this study limits our understandings to that of friendship pairs that consist of one heterosexual-identified woman and one sexual minority woman. Thus, questions remain on how women of different friendship pairings (e.g., between a bisexual woman and a lesbian woman or between women who both identify as heterosexual) may explore their sexual orientation within the friendship. In addition, it inherently places the focus on a comparison of women in majority and minority sexual identity categories, rather than also allowing for within-in group comparisons. Furthermore, it only discusses sexual orientation identity exploration experiences for the heterosexual women. Finally, it does not acknowledge the potential for sexual flexibility in how women may have or will identify their sexual identities by recruiting women who already have specific identity labels (i.e., although a participant’s current chosen identity may be lesbian, this may not always have been true). In addition, Arseneau and Fassinger (2007) critique existing cross-orientation friendship research on its risk of assuming that sexual orientation is salient in the friendship or that differences exist between cross- and same-orientation friendships, as well as potentially having a biased focus on the difficulties in being in a cross-orientation friendship. Thus, the current study will not specifically examine cross-orientation friendship pairs because of the belief that any woman, regardless of current sexual identity label, may have had a passionate friendship which was influential on her personal understandings of her sexual orientation.
Current Study

In this proposed grounded theory qualitative study, I will explore the friendship experiences of young adult women (specifically, ages 25-35). Young adult women are chosen as the targeted population because previous research has identified adolescence and young adulthood as critical periods of sexual orientation development (Diamond, 1998, 2000b, 2002; Galupo & St. John, 2001; Morgan & Thompson, 2007; Muise, Preyde, Maitland, & Milhausen, 2010; Thompson & Morgan, 2008), and this research aims to gather women’s accounts of how they have made meaning of their passionate friendship experiences and integrated these understandings into their current beliefs of their sexual orientations. In addition, passionate friendships are chosen as the social context of sexual orientation development in this study based on previous findings supporting the importance of these relationships in exploration of sexual identity (Diamond, 1998, 2000b, 2002; Galupo & St. John, 2001; Morgan & Thompson, 2007).

The research questions I aim to answer with this study are: 1) what happens in passionate friendships between women that may allow for sexual orientation exploration to take place, and 2) when it does occur, how may women across sexual identities use this context to develop personal understandings of their sexual orientation? A theoretical model of women’s sexual orientation exploration and development within same-sex passionate friendships will be developed. It is my hope that the results of this and future studies will lead to improvement in the conceptualization of women’s sexuality and facilitate understanding of the contexts in which women explore and develop their sexual orientation.
Chapter Three

METHODS

Identifying the Sample

Thirty-three women were interviewed for this study. One of the first issues my research team and I encountered in our data analysis was whether the relationships women were discussing in the interviews were indeed passionate friendships. We quickly realized that using the cut score (≥ 54) for the total score on the Passionate Friendship Survey (PFS; see the Instruments section below) was ineffective in identifying this population (see Table 3.1 for a list of all interviewees, their friendship classification, and their PFS total score). Based on descriptions of passionate friendships in previous research (Diamond, 2000, 2002), we found that, despite being above the PFS cut score, some friendships did not appear to be passionate friendships. We realized we needed to identify the characteristics of a passionate friendship and undergo a comparative process across transcripts to determine what distinguishes passionate friendships from non-passionate friendships.

Passionate friendships were determined to be differentiated from non-passionate friendships based on the extent to which both emotional intensity and boundary crossings were present in the friendship (see the Description of Passionate Friendships section in the next chapter for further discussion). Although Diamond’s existing descriptions of passionate friendships were initially used as a guide to distinguish passionate from non-passionate friendships, the identification of emotional intensity and boundary crossings as the two distinguishing characteristics was discovered through the findings that emerged across participants’ narratives. We realized that some women were drawn to this study because they
were able to identify some ways their friendship had a higher level of emotionality than their other female friendships, but they lacked any meaningful boundary crossings in the friendship. Specifically, these women saw their friendship only as a “best friendship” and they did not discuss how the friendship was outside of the “friendship” category in some way. Thus, although emotional intensity was a necessary characteristic for a friendship to be passionate, it was not sufficient. The presence of emotional intensity and boundary crossing differentiated passionate from non-passionate friendships. As a result, 13 women were excluded from the study because their friendships, while incredibly emotional, meaningful, and significant, did not fit our definition of a “passionate friendship.” Although the overall mean of the PFS total scores for women with passionate friendships was higher than the mean for those with non-passionate friendships, Table 3.1 illustrates that there was no clear association between interviewees’ PFS total score and their friendship classification. In fact, if the cut score for the PFS total score had been used as a participant screener alone, two women with passionate friendships (Kat and Tess) would have never made it into the study because their total scores were below the cut score. For more information on participant screening and selection for the interview, see the Procedures section above. We had a final sample of 20 women.

Participants

A total of 20 women, primarily from the mid-Atlantic region, participated in this study. The sample size of this study was determined using sampling saturation (Morse, 1991). That is, when the data obtained is adequate (i.e., had no “thin areas”) and the resulting explanation of theory is complete. Specifically, sampling saturation was determined by the research team after no new components of the theory emerged following the review of multiple interview transcripts.
To achieve maximum variation, a minimum of approximately 20 women was attempted through recruitment for this study, based on recommendations from Patton (1990) that grounded theory studies include 12-20 participants, Creswell (1998)’s advising of 20-30 participants, and Stern (1985)’s claim that 20 participants would suffice for a doctoral dissertation.

Badgett (2009) defined sexual orientation as a multidimensional construct with three dimensions: sexual identity, sexual attraction, and sexual behavior. Participants self-reported their sexual identity as heterosexual \( (n = 10) \), mostly heterosexual \( (n = 1) \), bisexual \( (n = 3) \), lesbian \( (n = 3) \), open \( (n = 1) \), queer \( (n = 1) \), and unlabeled \( (n = 1) \). In relation to sexual attraction, participants identified currently being only attracted to men \( (n = 4) \), mostly attracted to men \( (n = 10) \), mostly attracted to women \( (n = 5) \), and only attracted to women \( (n = 1) \). Participants reported their sexual behavior as having had sexual experiences only with men \( (n = 6) \), mostly with men \( (n = 11) \), about the same number of men and women \( (n = 1) \), mostly with women \( (n = 1) \), and only with women \( (n = 1) \) since puberty.

Participants also provided information on other demographic variables. Participants self-reported their sex at birth as female \( (n = 20) \) and their current gender identity as woman \( (n = 20) \). At the time of the interview, the participants ranged in age from 25 to 34 years \( (M = 28.5, SD = 3.1) \). Participants identified their current level of education as high school diploma or GED \( (n = 1) \), some college education \( (n = 2) \), bachelor’s degree \( (n = 6) \), some graduate education \( (n = 1) \), master’s degree \( (n = 8) \), and doctoral degree \( (n = 2) \). Participants self-reported their race/ethnicity as African American/Black \( (n = 2) \), Asian/Asian American \( (n = 1) \), Multiracial \( (n = 1) \), and White \( (n = 16) \). None of the participants identified as Hispanic or Latina. For their religious/spiritual identities, participants considered themselves to be Agnostic \( (n = 4) \), Atheist \( (n =
= 3), Catholic (n = 3), Christian (n = 7), Jewish (n = 1), and no preference (n = 2).

For the passionate friendship that participants discussed during the interview, participants reported being a part of this friendship, excluding any significant lapses in the friendship, for 1.5 to 18 years (M = 7.4 years, SD = 5.5 years). Participants reported their age at the start of their passionate friendship as 11 to 27 years old (M = 17.7, SD = 4.3) and the age of their friend as 11 to 29 years old (M = 17.6, SD = 4.8). Each of the passionate friendships represented in this study was age-appropriate, as difference in age between participant and their friend ranged from 0 to 4 years. Participants reported the friendship ended in a negative way (e.g., fight; n = 9), in a neutral way (e.g., moved; n = 1), or they reported they still maintain this friendship (n = 10). On average, participants identified how often they saw their friend during the course of their relationship as many times in a day (n = 7), once a day (n = 10), or weekly (n = 3) (note: for those who reported two different frequencies due to changes in the friendship, the higher frequency was reported here). A summary overview of participants and their passionate friendship is provided in Table 3.2.

**Procedures**

Participants were considered for this study if they were between the ages of 25 to 35, identified their sex at birth as female and gender identity as woman, had a female passionate friendship, and agreed to be audiotaped during the interview. As a result of recruitment methods, 99 respondents completed the study informed consent, demographic questionnaire, and Passionate Friendship Survey (Glover, 2009; see Appendix D). Twenty-six of these respondents were excluded from selection for interviews based on either their survey data or information gathered from the brief phone screen due to age, invalid responses on the online survey,
identifying their gender identity other than woman, and/or not having a passionate friendship. Having greatest affiliation with the United States, relative to any other country, was also a criterion, for reasons explained shortly. Seventy-three potential participants were identified for this study. Of these potential participants, 18 women did not respond to contact from the principal investigator to schedule either a phone screen or an interview, 21 were placed on a wait list and ultimately not scheduled for an interview, 1 provided inaccurate contact information and could not be reached, and 33 completed an interview. Many participants who did complete the interview were later determined not to have had a passionate friendship ($n = 13$; see further discussion in the Identifying the Sample section above). The resulting final sample for this study was 20 participants.

**Determining sample demographics.** Due to the need of a homogenous sample to develop a substantive theory using grounded theory methods (Charmaz, 2006), restrictions were placed on some demographic variables. Specific demographic identities were selected for age (in efforts to limit cohort effects) and sex at birth (to reduce potential biological differences). In addition, this study only examined women due to differences across gender identity in sexual orientation development (e.g., McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). Young adult women in the 25 to 35 age range were specifically targeted because previous research indicated that the majority of women have passionate friendships during adolescence and early adulthood (e.g., Diamond, 2002; Glover, 2009). In addition, based on pilot study findings, it appeared important for women to have had some distance in time from their experiences in passionate friendships in order to have constructed personal meanings from these experiences. After completing the twelfth interview, the research team decided to no longer interview participants who affiliate more with a
country outside of the United States. This decision was made in efforts to maintain a homogenous sample and for the following reasons: a) possible language barriers during the interview, b) cultural differences in expression or characteristics in women’s friendships, as well as the role friendships may have in individuals’ lives, c) cultural differences in sexual orientation development, and d) differences in interpretation of having “friendships that were as emotionally intense as a romantic relationship.” Within these constraints, efforts were made to reflect variability on a range of other demographic variables (sexual identity, education level, race/ethnicity, religious/spiritual identity). We were relatively able to obtain variability across sexual identities (with an equal number of sexual minority and heteronormative-identified women) and religious/spiritual identities, but the sample is biased towards White, highly educated (bachelor’s degree and above) women.

**Recruitment methods.** Participants were recruited using a variety of recruitment methods from three main locations in Pennsylvania: a large college town that is home to a major university and two major metropolitan areas. A few participants were interviewed from across the country, due to word of mouth from study participants or personal contacts of the research team. Recruitment methods were selected to recruit a diversity of women, with attention to recruiting individuals across a range of sexual identities. The principal investigator posted flyers in places where a diversity of individuals may congregate in the community (large retail stores, food service, coffee shops, recreation centers, gas stations, veterinary hospital, library) or common areas of a large university (student union center, classroom buildings, recreation centers, libraries). To specifically target populations of women and/or LGBQ-identified individuals, the principal investigator contacted and posted email recruitment notices and/or
flyers at organizations that are either focused on or welcoming of LGBTQA-identified or women members in the community (places of worship, social clubs, non-profits, human service agencies) or on university campuses (women’s, LGBTQA, or graduate student associations). Flyers and email listservs were also used to recruit students, staff, and affiliates of women’s, LGBTQA, and adult education resource centers at large universities. Finally, participants were recruited by posting recruitment notices on university research websites, Yahoo! LGBT Research group, Craigslist volunteer sections of the three main geographical recruitment areas, and LGBTQA or women’s groups on social media.

**Study procedures.** During the recruitment process, potential participants were told that they would be asked to share their perspectives and experiences of a female friendship that was as emotionally intense as a romantic relationship. Recruitment materials directed potential participants to the study website on PsychData. After completing and electronically signing the informed consent form (see Appendix B), participants completed a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix C). They then completed items from the Passionate Friendship Survey (PFS; Glover, 2009; see Appendix D) to gather initial information about their friendship. After receiving potential participants’ data from the online forms (and, later, phone screen; see Determining Eligibility subsection below), I determined whether they were eligible to complete an interview. If they were not eligible, I contacted them to explain why and they were not asked to participate further in this study. If they were deemed eligible to participate, women were invited to participate in 1-1.5 hour individual interviews to further discuss their experiences within the friendship they thought about while completing the PFS and how the friendship influenced their understandings of themselves. Participants were notified that they would be
compensated $10 at the start of their individual interview. Participants were also given the option to directly contact the principal investigator and/or her research adviser by telephone or email to ask questions regarding the study.

**Determining eligibility.** In addition to meeting the demographic criteria specified earlier, potential participants’ eligibility to complete an interview was initially assessed by using the cut score for the PFS total score to determine if they had had a passionate friendship. After this method of screening was found to be ineffective (see Identifying the Sample section above) following the sixth interview, the principal investigator, in consultation with the research team, identified trends in the online data that appeared to indicate differences between non-passionate and passionate friendships. The combination of items and subscales that mostly likely appeared to differentiate interviewees with passionate friendships from those with non-passionate friendships include (responses that appeared to be associated with greater likelihood of having had a passionate friendship are included in parentheses): sexual identity (minority sexual identities), how long the friendship lasted (shorter length of friendship – ≤2 years), how the friendship ended (negative way), how often the participant saw their friend (many times in a day), and high scores on the affection/preoccupation and jealousy subscales on the PFS.

Following the fifteenth interview (about halfway through the final number of interviews and after continuing to interview women with non-passionate friendships, despite exceeding the cut-off score), a brief phone screen (see Appendix E) was added in addition to review of online data at the item and subscale level. The phone screen was used to qualitatively gather more information about potential participants’ friendship to assist with differentiating between non-passionate and passionate friendships. During the phone screen, I attended to whether women
discussed some of the common characteristics of passionate friendships that were identified during prior interviews (e.g., breaks in the friendship, emotional dependency, jealousy, possessiveness, physical intimacy, boundary crossings).

**Snowball method.** An effort was initially made to increase the range of sexual orientation identities and levels of “outness” by encouraging individuals who received the recruitment notice through an email listserv to forward it to personal contacts they felt may be interested in participating in this research study. Due to the difficulty of recruiting individuals who personally identify with the LGBQ community but who have not publicly come out, the primary data collection method to include these individuals in research samples relies upon these individuals learning of studies from close friends (i.e., using a snowball method; Morrow, 2005). This request was later removed from the email recruitment script (see Appendix A) after the principal investigator received feedback that the script was too long to be posted to email listservs. Fortunately, the incoming online data indicated about a 35% response rate from women who self-identified with minority sexual identities, indicating that the research team’s goal of interviewing approximately 50% heterosexual and sexual minority women was obtainable (see below). Thus, removal of the phrase did not meaningfully undermine my ability to obtain my sample.

**Purposive sampling.** After reviewing the transcript of our tenth participant, my research team and I decided to use selective criteria in future participant selection to increase the sample’s demographic variability. At this point, we had an equal number of participants who self-identified as heterosexual or a minority sexual identity, with no clear theoretical differences emerging yet across the two groups. We believed it would be valuable to continue to obtain an
equal number of heterosexual and sexual minority-identified women to further assess for differences in experiences with passionate friendships and to contribute to knowledge in the literature on heterosexual women’s passionate friendships (Diamond, 2000, 2002 studied only sexual minority or “unlabeled” women). The majority of our sample up until this point self-identified as White, had a bachelor’s or higher educational degree, and were between the ages of 25-29. We planned to recruit women of color and women whose level of education was below a bachelor’s degree to assess how greater cultural variability may impact the emerging theory. We also began focusing recruitment on women aged 30-35 (exclusively, after the seventeenth participant), as we predicted older women may be important informants to our theory due to developmental differences in meaning-making (Kegan, 1982, 1994). Finally, there were a few characteristics of passionate friendships that we hoped to further explore, but we knew would be difficult to determine for participant selection. Specifically, we hoped to recruit an equal number of women who had had their passionate friendship during either adolescence or young adulthood as well as an equal number who were either still involved in their passionate friendship or no longer involved in the friendship in a meaningful way. In addition, we hoped to recruit more sexual minority participants with a heterosexual friend and who had solidified their sexual orientation prior to the passionate friendship.

**Interview.** Grounded theory utilizes intensive interviewing, which may range in structure from a few topics to explore to semi-structured focused questions (Charmaz, 2006). As the interview proceeds, the interviewer uses follow-up questions and probes to deepen and clarify participants’ responses. In this study, one-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted over a 10-month period by the principal investigator. Interviews lasted an average of 50 minutes.
(range = 19-80 minutes). Each participant was asked a series of open-ended questions related to meaning-making of the passionate friendship (e.g., “How was this friendship different from other friendships in your life?”), broader impact of the passionate friendship on their understandings of themselves (e.g., “How has this friendship influenced whom you are today?”), and the influence of the friendship on participants’ development of their sexual orientation (e.g., “How have you explored or learned about your sexual orientation within the context of this friendship?”). The complete semi-structured interview protocol is provided in Appendix F. Participants were provided the option to participate in three potential follow-up contacts after completing the interviews: a) for clarification on their interview responses, b) to respond to potential additional interview questions, and c) to provide feedback on the near-final results of the study.

**Instruments**

**Demographic Questionnaire.** Participants provided information on the following demographic variables: age, level of education, race/ethnicity, religious/spiritual preference, sex at birth, gender identity, sexual identity, sexual attraction, and sexual behavior since puberty (see Appendix C).

**Passionate Friendship Survey.** The Passionate Friendship Survey (PFS; Glover, 2009) is a 57-item measure of women’s passionate friendship experiences. The PFS gathers nine items of demographic data about women’s past (during adolescence) and current most important friendship with another woman. The remaining 48 items of the PFS compose the four subscales: attachment/secure base, affection/preoccupation, intensity/exclusivity, and jealousy. The first set of items following the demographic items on the PFS (items #7-22, in this study) uses a Likert scale to assess participants’ beliefs about their female friendship from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 4
In the next set of items, (#23-30, in this study) participants report behaviors in their female friendship using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 4 (Always). Two total scores are each made up of four subscales and are calculated by the sum of participants’ item responses for their closest adolescent friendship and the sum of their current closest female friendship. The cutoff score of 54 is used to distinguish passionate friends (≥ 54) from non-passionate friends (< 54) and is used for both total scores of closest adolescent friend and current friend. Glover obtained a Cronbach’s alpha for the adolescent friendship total score of .85 and for the closest, current friendship total score of .90.

This study used a modified version of the PFS, instead measuring women’s experiences in their closest female friendship (across their lifetime) that was as emotionally intense as a romantic relationship (see Appendix D). The items on the original version of the PFS were halved, since only one friendship was assessed, rather than two friendships at separate developmental time periods. This resulted in one total score for each participant, comprised of four subscales. The total score used for this study included Glover’s original 24 items, measuring experiences in the closest female friendship across the participant’s lifetime. The Cronbach’s alpha for the total score of this sample is .67. One item was added to the demographic portion of the PFS (“During the period of time when I felt closest to my friend, I saw her...”).

Trustworthiness

Rather than using the positivist terms of validity and reliability, qualitative research uses trustworthiness to judge the merit of research methods (Miller-Day, 2004; Morrow, 2005). To ensure the scientific merit of this study, trustworthiness criteria was established, including
credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Respondent validation and a research team was used to verify credibility, or the accuracy of information obtained in this study. Specifically, a research team was involved in data analysis and participants were invited to review and confirm the accuracy of the resulting theory in capturing their lived experiences, with adjustments of interpretations being made accordingly. Transferability indicates the extent to which the findings may be transferrable to other settings. In order to promote transferability in this study, a homogenous sample of women was sought for this research (i.e., women age 25-35 who have experienced a female passionate friendship), a detailed description of their passionate friendships (e.g., of themes and categories that emerged from the data) is provided, and patterns within and across friendships are presented. Several efforts were used to ensure dependability, including using purposive sampling, using self-reflection of the researchers through identifying researcher lens prior to the study and keeping memos of reactions and biases that emerged during the data collection process, maintaining participant confidentiality, and keeping accurate records of the stages of the research process to create an audit trail. Finally, confirmability refers to the clear exposition of methods of data collection and analysis that allows for confirmation of results. This was achieved through meticulous data management and record keeping. Specifically, interviews were transcribed verbatim, accurate records were maintained after each interview, and research decisions were documented and organized chronographically in memos.

The Research Team

The principal investigator is an advanced doctoral student in counseling psychology (Maloch). At the start of data collection, other members on the research team included three
masters or doctoral students in counselor education (Benoist, Requarth, and Scarton) and one faculty member in counseling psychology with expertise in LGBQ issues (Bieschke). Benoist participated on the research team for the first 3 months of data collection and Scarton participated for the first 6 months (both left the research team for personal reasons unrelated to the research study). Maloch, Requarth, and Bieschke all remained on the research team for the duration of data collection and theory construction. In return for their membership, graduate student research team members were offered the opportunity to participate in a poster presentation on the study findings following study completion.

Research team members each identified demographic variables that they viewed as salient to their researcher lens. Specifically, they provided self-identifiers as heterosexual, woman, White, and Christian; bisexual, female, White, and no religious/spiritual preference; gay; heterosexual, female, White, and spiritual; and heterosexual, cisgender female, White, and Agnostic. The ages of the team members prior to data collection were 26, 31, 28, 27, and over 50 years old. All research team members either had prior experience and/or were trained in conducting qualitative research before the start of data collection and analysis.

The research team (Maloch, Benoist, Requarth, Scarton, and Bieschke) identified their researcher lens prior to data collection in response to the research question, *how have women explored or learned about their sexual orientation within the context of a female passionate friendship?* For the narratives of each research team members’ lens, see Appendix G.

**Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) in order to build a substantive theory reflective of participants’ subjective realities. After a hired
professional transcribed the participant interviews, the research team members independently identified meaning units (words, phrases, sentences, or paragraphs) that capture participants’ perspectives and experiences within passionate friendships. The meaning units were then assigned code names that most closely aligned with the language of the participants. The research team collaboratively grouped the codes into significant themes, identifying overarching core categories and then creating subcategories within the core categories. As additional data were gathered from participants, the categories were modified. Two of the 20 participants were available to check the accuracy of the research team’s representation of their experiences and perspectives. Additional participants were recruited and interviewed until no new components of the theory emerged within the data (i.e., sampling saturation; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As data are analyzed as they are collected, early analyses inform what participants may need to be selected for subsequent interviews (i.e., purposive sampling). From this theory-building approach, one overarching model was developed to illustrate how female passionate friendships influence young adult women’s development and understandings of their sexual orientation.
### Table 3.1

*Interviewees’ Friendship Classification and Passionate Friendship Survey (PFS) Total Score*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>PFS Total Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Non-Passionate Friendship</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amarna</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cindy</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domenica</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doreen</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eva</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holly</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juliana</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lily</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moxie</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rei</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tori</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Mean</em></td>
<td><em>57.69</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Passionate Friendship</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ash</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brittany</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clare</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denise</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hannah</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kat</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiki</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kitten</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maia</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marjorie</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penny</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Starr</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephanie</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tess</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Mean</em></td>
<td><em>58.90</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3.2

**Summary of Participants and their Passionate Friendships**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age at Start of Friendship</th>
<th>Current Age</th>
<th>Friendship Duration</th>
<th>How Friendship Ended</th>
<th>Who Ended the Friendship</th>
<th>Current Sexual Orientation Identity</th>
<th>PFS Total Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ash</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>Still maintain</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brittany</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>18 months</td>
<td>Negative way</td>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>Mostly heterosexual</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clare</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>3.5 years</td>
<td>Negative way</td>
<td>Friend</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denise</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>9 years</td>
<td>Still maintain</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hannah</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>Still maintain</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>Still maintain</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kat</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Negative way</td>
<td>Mutual</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiki</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>15 years</td>
<td>Negative way</td>
<td>Mutual</td>
<td>Unlabeled</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kitten</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>18 years</td>
<td>Still maintain</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>17 years</td>
<td>Still maintain</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maia</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>Still maintain*</td>
<td>Mutual**</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Negative way</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marjorie</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>1.5 years</td>
<td>Negative way</td>
<td>Friend</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>Still maintain*</td>
<td>Friend**</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penny</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>13 years</td>
<td>Still maintain</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>Negative way</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Open</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>16 years</td>
<td>Still maintain*</td>
<td>Mutual**</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Starr</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>8 years</td>
<td>Neutral way</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephanie</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>8 years</td>
<td>Negative way</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tess</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>4.5 years</td>
<td>Negative way</td>
<td>Friend</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Current Age, Friendship Duration, and Current Sexual Orientation Identity are based on participants’ report at the time of their interview.

*Not including a significant lapse of time in which the women were not friends

**Prior to the significant lapse of the friendship
Chapter Four

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to develop a substantive theory on how women develop their sexual orientations through their experiences within female passionate friendships. The data that emerged from this study indicated that passionate friendships influenced women’s sexual orientation development in both direct and indirect (i.e., due to changes in women’s broader understandings of sexual orientation and relationships) ways.

This chapter is divided into three sections, detailing the three parts of the theoretical model (see Figure 1). First, I describe passionate friendships, or the causal category, highlighting qualities and characteristics my participants identified within their friendships. I describe the passionate friendship continuum, provide an overview of qualities participants commonly described in their passionate friendships, and then specifically highlight the two distinguishing qualities of passionate friendships (emotional intensity and boundary crossing). Second, I discuss the core category, or how my participants made meaning of the emotional intensity and boundary crossings of the passionate friendship. Finally, I discuss the outcomes of this process, describing how my participants’ sexual orientations and their broader understandings of sexual orientation developed through their experiences within the passionate friendship. As I describe specific findings, I provide numerical descriptors to illustrate how many participants were represented by each finding, including “all” (i.e., all 20 participants), “most” or “many” (i.e., 12-19 participants), “some” (i.e., 5-11 participants), or “few” (i.e., 3 or 4 participants).
Causal Category: Description of Passionate Friendships

To provide a backdrop of understanding before discussing the emerging theory, I will first focus on describing what exactly a “passionate friendship” is. These friendships are unique from other relationships women may experience in their lives, and although passionate friendships have been described in previous research (Diamond, 2000, 2002; Glover, 2009), this study further contributed to our understanding of the characteristics of these friendships. It should be noted that not all of these characteristics were represented in every passionate friendship; each passionate friendship had its unique combination of characteristics, with common themes emerging across the friendships. The findings of this study contributed to the existing literature on passionate friendships by providing more details on what differentiates passionate from non-passionate friendships and illustrates how passionate friendships exist on a continuum.

Specifically, although findings of this study corroborated Diamond’s description of passionate friendships (i.e., characterized by “heightened [emotional] intensity and physical affection traditionally associated with romantic relationships;” p. 194, 2000), it also provided more details of the distinguishing characteristics and identified how both emotional intensity and boundary crossings must be present in order to distinguish them from non-passionate friendships. In addition, findings from this study introduced how passionate friendships exist on a continuum (see further information on how this study contributed to existing research on passionate friendships in the Discussion chapter). This section delineates the causal category of the theory, or what women were experiencing in their passionate friendships that served as one influencing factor to their exploration and development of their sexual orientations.

I begin by describing the “passionate friendship continuum” to show how passionate
friendships appear to exist on a continuum. Next, I describe the commonalities women identified within their passionate friendships. Last, I describe two characteristics that set passionate friendships apart from non-passionate friendships. Quotes are included in each section to provide examples of how the themes played out in participants’ passionate friendships.

Passionate friendship continuum. Passionate friendships were found to exist on a continuum, moving farther away from non-passionate friendships as the level of emotional intensity and boundary crossing within the friendship increased. Penny alluded to the passionate friendship continuum as she worked to make sense of what type of relationship her passionate friendship is in her life:

I knew it wasn’t a romantic relationship. I knew it wasn’t just a friendship. I knew it wasn’t just an acquaintance. Then I had to find a new place to put it on my gradient in terms of friendship and how that applied... I think if you put romantic relationship on one end and acquaintance on the other, I feel like - and friendship’s in the middle there - it kind of falls closer [to] the romantic relationship and that’s because of that intensity... I think because I didn’t know where to put this one, that’s why I started looking for “Do other people do this? Have this? Where does it go?” That’s when I started, “Well, what do other people’s relationships...” I don’t know why, I guess I always just had the idea that friends were friends and romantic-You could be friends with your romantic relationships, obviously, but it’s a different category.

Based on participants’ reports, there are two main ways that passionate friendships differ from non-passionate female friendships that are important to understand when considering the passionate friendship continuum. First, women described experiencing a higher level of emotionality in the passionate friendship than they had previously experienced in their other female friendships. Second, passionate friendships crossed participants’ “friendship boundaries,” or how they had previously defined friendships.

There are notable differences in how women talked about the presence of emotional
intensity and boundary crossings in their friendship, depending on where their friendship fell on the passionate friendship continuum. High levels of closeness, connection, and emotional intimacy were present in all passionate friendships across the continuum. For those on the lower end of the continuum (i.e., closer to non-passionate friendships), however, these comprised a dominant theme for how participants differentiated passionate from non-passionate friendships.

For example, Lucy observed:

I think there was a very strong connection really from the beginning…It was sort of a joke that she was my hetero-life partner. Because we were very compatible…It was certainly very loving…Probably the- 90% of the components of a romantic relationship.

As the “passion” increased and the friendship fell farther along the continuum and away from non-passionate friendships, participants were more likely to describe the friendship as “tumultuous,” due to experiencing a wider range of emotional intensity, including positive and negative aspects. Stephanie provided a good example of what the emotional intensity and boundary crossing looked like for those higher on the passionate friendship continuum:

I compare it to ‘relationship-like’ because of the level of emotional intensity at some points. It was very ... I wouldn’t compare it to a good relationship. I would compare it more to what you might stereotypically see as a tumultuous kind of relationship. It was either very intensely, like, we would talk to each other about, “you’re my soul mate, and nobody understands me the way you do,” and we just were so connected. And, “I feel like I can say anything in front of you and just be anyone in front of you.” And then other times when we get kind of- mostly her get a little disregulated, or intensely upset or sad. It was kind of, like, my whole world was falling apart a little. And she’s upset with me, and I don’t know what I did, and I’m trying to make her feel better, and it was those moments of really feeling heartbroken and intensely crying, or feeling almost out of control angry, like, “why would she accuse me of this or that? You know, I love her, I would never do that to her.”

Although all participants in some way identified their passionate friendship as meaningful and important, some women also described how their experiences of the negative aspects of
emotional intensity (e.g., emotional dependency, jealousy; see Emotional Intensity subsection below for more details) within the friendship indicated unhealthy attributes of their relationship. Reasons for why some of the passionate friendships in this sample were viewed as unhealthy appears to be related to participants’ developmental stage (i.e., initiation of these friendships during adolescence or young adulthood), the passionate friendship serving as participants’ first relationship with high level of emotionality, and friends’ personality attributes or styles of relating.

In the next two subsections, I provide more detail about the descriptive qualities of passionate friendships, beginning with an overview of common characteristics that participants identified within their friendships. Then, I specifically focus on the two qualities that emerged as being essential in differentiating passionate from non-passionate friendships – emotional intensity and boundary crossing.

**Common characteristics of passionate friendships.** Several characteristics emerged across women’s narratives as they described their passionate friendships, including emotional intimacy, the friendship being unique, supporting and caring for each other, and the importance of the friendship. Two common characteristics, emotional intensity and boundary crossing, are described more in depth, due to their importance in differentiating passionate from non-passionate friendships. Language participants used themselves are indicated throughout this next section using quotations.

**Emotional intimacy.** All women in the sample described being emotionally intimate with their passionate friend. Participants were “very close” to their passionate friend and most identified feeling they could be “open” with their friend. Many women expressed feeling
“comfortable,” “safe,” and secure in the friendship and with the friend. Often, they described a sense of familiarity with the friend. Many shared that they could “trust” their friend, be “honest” with each other, and/or be their authentic self with their friend. Some women described their friend being unconditionally accepting of them. Most participants reported they were able to be “vulnerable” with their friends, at times sharing emotionally intimate things about themselves that they had never discussed with anyone else. Some women explained it was their friend’s level of self-disclosure about intimate and difficult aspects of her life that allowed participants to reciprocate this level of sharing. For example, Denise described how she was able to open up about herself after her passionate friend did so:

I didn’t really have a ton of friends that were girls in high school and didn’t really have a close family either, so I didn’t really tell people a lot of things about myself, like the stereotypical sharing things that people would do. I didn’t really talk to a lot of people about stuff, so when [my passionate friend] started sharing things with me… I felt more comfortable to share things with [her], and that was kind of a new experience for me.

A few participants stated they felt “protective” of the relationship and their friend. Many women described experiencing “love” for their friends. It was common for a few participants to express verbally their love for each other. For a few women, after the passionate friendship ended, their primary source for emotional intimacy transitioned to a dating relationship.

**Unique.** All women described having a “unique” relationship with their passionate friend. A few women described their friend as being “the same person” as them and felt their friend and they were different from peers in their shared uniqueness. For example, Kiki described how others saw her and her passionate friend as “the same person:”

I’d say when we’re together, it’s almost like we’re the same. People who have hung out with us- My husband’s friend got a chance to spend time alone with [my passionate friend], and he had made a comment about how we’re almost the same. Like our humor
is the exact same. The way we talk, the way we act.

A few women identified the friendship as being irreplaceable; the friendship was so important in their lives that they could not bear to lose it. Some felt their friend “understood” them in ways unlike others, at times due to their shared similarities (e.g., personalities, values, identities, and interests).

**Supportive.** Some participants reported mutually “supporting” and “caring” for each other. A few women highlighted the “respect” the friends held for one another. Some participants described caring about and being involved in each other’s families, at times as if they were a family member themselves. Many women highlighted how they and their friend fulfilled a steady presence in one another’s lives; they were available and “always there” for each other. Michelle provided a good example of support in her passionate friendship:

> That trust and that care, and so we genuinely really cared about one another…I think when you are attached to someone and you support them even if you don’t understand their interests, that is a very different level of friendship…I think we cared about each other’s families. I think that’s important. It’s not just about me and you. It’s also about what are the parts of your life that make you, you.

**Committed.** For some participants, the passionate friendship was identified as a central relationship in their lives. Some participants detailed how they planned to maintain the friendship as a significant part of their lives in the future. “Marriage,” or a long-term partnership, was at times discussed as a possibility for the friends, in order to maintain a future together. Some participants described how the friendship was prioritized over other relationships, including other friendships, dating relationships, or family relationships. For example, Hannah saw her friendship as equally as significant in her life as her boyfriend, stating, “…my [passionate] friend takes just as high precedence as he does.” She also prioritized this
friendship over other friends in her life:

Even the friends I was making here knew –”I really like you but you’re nothing like [my passionate friend]. You’re a really good friend now,” I start to make those kinds of friends here but I got [my passionate friend],”and I got to talk to her right now even though we may be together.” I may be at another friend’s house but, “Oh wait, [my passionate friend] is calling. I just needed to talk to her real quick. I’ll come right back.”

For a few women, the passionate friendship was identified as the primary relationship in their lives.

**Characteristics that differentiated passionate friendships.** In this subsection, I describe the two characteristics that distinctly set passionate friendships apart from non-passionate friendships: emotional intensity and boundary crossing. These qualities were commonly identified when women spoke of how their passionate friendship was different from their other female friendships. In addition, where women’s passionate friendships fell on the passionate friendship continuum was indicated by the degree that these two characteristics were present. In this subsection, I discuss emotional intensity and boundary crossing separately to help with clarity of understanding; however, women in my study experienced them as overlapping characteristics of their passionate friendship. That is, boundary crossings were experienced as a byproduct of the emotional intensity present in women’s passionate friendships. Both characteristics needed to be present in order to differentiate the friendship from a non-passionate friendship.

**Emotional Intensity.** As their placement on the passionate friendship continuum progressed further from a non-passionate friendship, participants reported an increasing level of emotionality that was “intense” and charged. The friendship characteristics housed under the broader theme of “emotional intensity” highlight the passion women experienced in their
passionate friendships. These characteristics included rapid deepening, break-ups, inseparability, preoccupation and exclusivity, and jealousy.

**Rapid deepening.** Some participants reported becoming very close rapidly. Rather than gradually getting to know each other and deepening the closeness and intimacy of the friendship, women described experiencing an “instantaneous” closeness within the friendship. For example, Marie shared how her friendship quickly deepened:

> We ended up being very good friends very quickly. Rather than slowly starting to spend a lot more time together, we were just really good friends really fast.

Some participants attributed this level of closeness to the “chemistry” or “attraction” they experienced to their friend’s personality.

**Break-ups.** Many women identified confusion and frustration about the emotional intensity and resulting relational patterns of the friendship. The intensity of the friendships was at times difficult to sustain, leading to breaks in the friendship. Many women described having “friend break-ups” due to a pattern of conflict in the passionate friendships. Other times, women explained that breaks in the friendship would occur after another friend was introduced or one of the friends entered a dating relationship. Sometimes, women stated they were able to repair their friendship following the breaks. Clare described the ending of her passionate friendship in terms of a “break-up:”

> Basically, my first semester at college, she abruptly decided that we couldn’t be friends anymore. I have never had a boyfriend up ‘til then, but I imagined at that time that it was what it felt like. It felt like I had been dumped. I remember being in my dorm room and crying hysterically and like calling my mom and just like bawling. I was so distraught about it.

> Nine of the 20 participants, regardless of whether or not they had “break-ups” that were
able to be repaired throughout the duration of the passionate friendship, reported their friendship ended in a “negative way.” These women attributed the negative ending of their passionate friendship to the high level of emotional intensity within the relationship (a couple specifically described it as “unhealthy”), one of the friends becoming involved with a dating partner, and/or the stigma of being (or having others perceive them as) romantically involved with a woman. Because discussion of how the friendship ended was not a part of the structured interview questionnaire, information on who ended the friendship is not known for all of these women. For the six women that did speak to this, three stated their friend ended the relationship, two shared it was a mutual ending of the relationship, and one woman spoke to how she ended the relationship. It is notable that most of these nine women’s friendships fell on the higher end of the passionate friendship continuum, reflecting the higher level of emotional intensity in this subgroup of passionate friendships.

Inseparability. Almost all of the women described being “inseparable” from their friend, sometimes being seen as a “unit” to others. For example, Rachel described how she and her passionate friend were always together:

I think it was also different because the attachment and the time spent together was so extreme. They say ‘attached at the hip,’ but literally, you probably could’ve put a string between us and it was rare during the day that it would be longer than a couple feet…We did everything together…We spent all our time together.

Some women reported being in “constant communication” with their friend, spending time with or speaking with their friend multiple times throughout the day. Some women described how their inseparability with their passionate friend made them feel “wanted.” Some participants discussed the importance of maintaining a certain level of involvement in each other’s lives in
order to continue their level of closeness. A few women described experiencing separation distress when they were not able to spend time with their friend.

**Preoccupation and exclusivity.** Many participants indicated feelings of preoccupation and “obsession” towards their friend. Some women described being possessive of their friend and identified how the friendship was at times exclusive to others. For example, Kitten shared how her passionate friend was possessive of her:

She would get upset like, it was almost like I was the only friend- She was the only friend that she wanted me to hang out with. She wanted all of my attention…We definitely had an emotional connection, but I felt like she was almost possessive of me.

For some participants, their dating status appeared to contribute to the level of emotional intensity that was able to occur in the friendship. For example, a few women described how the fact that they did not date during the course of the friendship contributed to the emotional intensity, as they imagined such a bond would have been sought out with their significant other instead. Many women described getting to a point where they, their friend, or both felt emotionally “dependent” within the friendship.

**Jealousy.** “Jealousy” was a characteristic of many participants’ passionate friendships. Some women reported becoming jealous if their friend became close friends with another person. For example, women described experiencing jealousy due to the possible threat that another person could have access to the intimate information she had shared with her friend or if they feared being replaced by another friend. Tess described this type of jealousy in her passionate friendship:

I don’t think that jealousy was always of a romantic nature because neither one of us had really recognized any romantic feelings for each other, but it was also just because we were both the only person that we had that intensity of relationship with and so I think it’s
easy to feel threatened if you only have, you’ve kind of entrusted all of your thoughts and secrets with one person. It’s easier to feel threatened by somebody else getting close to them.

For other women, jealousy was identified as being present in the friendship when one of the friends dated.

*Boundary Crossing.* All women saw their passionate friendships crossing “friendship boundaries” because of the level of emotional intimacy and intensity present in the relationship. Specifically, they felt that the way they related to or were with their friend was different from how they had previously experienced friendships. For example, this could translate into feeling more deeply connected to their passionate friend than to others or to intensely felt emotions (e.g., possessiveness, jealousy, emotional dependency) within the friendship. Women described different types of boundary crossings in their friendships, including difficulty categorizing the friendship, nonsexual physical intimacy, and/or sexual tension and attraction.

*Categorization of the friendship.* Many women described difficulty categorizing the passionate friendship, seeing it as either somewhere in between a platonic friendship and a dating relationship or in its own separate category. As a result, most women shared how this friendship “blurred the lines” of how they had previously separated friendships from dating relationships. For example, Kat noted how her passionate friendship blurred the dividing line between friend and romantic crush:

> I hesitate to say that it was a crush… I think the line is much more blurred here because at the same time, I think I did have romantic feelings, but it was mostly just like “I really like you as a friend” and feeling possessive and not knowing how to deal with those feelings and emotions than full-out romantic crush.

Many women compared their friendship to a dating relationship and a few times women shared
that others made this comparison for their friendship. Although women described their passionate friendship as being “like a romantic relationship,” they were not categorizing the friendship in this way (for those whose passionate friendship did evolve into a dating relationship, this refers to when the women were friends). Many of these women explained the passionate friendship as being different from a dating relationship because the friendship was nonsexual. For the women that did experience sexual tension and/or attraction to their friend, it was explained as being different from a dating relationship because they were not having sex. Only one woman both experienced sexual attraction and had sexual experiences with her friend, but she maintained that the passionate friendship was still a friendship and not a dating relationship because she did not want to create a future with the friend. A few women felt that the passionate friendship filled the role or needs that they would receive from being in a dating relationship. As they spoke of their friendships, some women used language that is typically used when describing a dating relationship, such as “break-up” and “friendship anniversary.”

**Nonsexual physical intimacy.** Due to the emotional intensity, most participants described engaging in nonsexual, “physical intimacy” with their friend, such as sleeping side by side in bed, cuddling, hand holding, scratching their backs, or running their fingers through their friend’s hair. For example, Marjorie shared how physical intimacy was a component of her passionate friendship:

> We were really physically intimate. We never even kissed, we never had sex, we never did anything like that. But we slept together a lot- I mean, not sexually. We held hands all the time. She would constantly- I remember she would always come over to my house, or to my apartment, and we would watch “The L Word.” She would lay in my bed and put her head in my lap and make me scratch her back. That was what we always did.

Although the physical intimacy was just an indicator of the closeness in the friendship, many of
these women identified the physical intimacy as crossing the boundaries of their other female friendships.

**Sexual tension and attraction.** For some participants, their feelings of “sexual tension” and “attraction” in their friendship was an indicator of boundary crossing. Some women reported engaging in “sexual experimentation” and intimacy with their friend. A few women saw the passionate friendship as a safe relationship for them to explore sexually. A few women discussed how their passionate friendships transitioned into a dating relationship. For these women, it appeared that their dating relationship was a natural progression in the friendship based on how close they already were emotionally. For example, Brittany attributed her physical attractions (and thus, transition into a dating relationship) to her emotional intimacy with her passionate friend:

> We kissed one evening and from that point on, for the next couple months we had a romantic and more physically involved relationship….for me, emotional intimacy and physical intimacy seem to go together so easily that I don’t really know which one came first…would I have been physically attracted to her at all if we weren’t emotionally attracted? Or emotionally intimate?

Now that I have described the unique relational context of passionate friendships in my participants’ lives, in the next section of this chapter, I describe the second part of the theory – the “core category,” or the process of how women made meaning of the emotional intensity and boundary crossing of the passionate friendship.

**Core Category: Challenging One’s Perceptions of Friendships**

In this section, I discuss the “core category” of the theory that emerged from women’s narratives on their experiences within passionate friendships. Within grounded theory methodology, the core category is representative of the central, psychological process
participants undergo during change and meaning making (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). For this study, the core category captures the process of how women made meaning of the emotional intensity and boundary crossing of the passionate friendship. I begin by first providing an overview of what the core category is.

**Challenging one’s perceptions of friendships.** The core category of how women made meaning of the unique relational context of female passionate friendships in their lives is “challenging one’s perceptions of friendships.” All women in some way described the friendship as challenging their perceptions of reality of what a friendship is and/or how friends should interact with each other in reaction to the unique qualities of passionate friendships described above (i.e., level of emotionality and boundary crossings). The passionate friendship did not fit or make sense with their subjective reality of how they had previously experienced friendships. All women described this friendship as “different.” Many women further expressed how they felt the passionate friendship was “unusual,” “odd,” “abnormal,” “strange,” “weird,” and/or “unhealthy.” Most women shared that this friendship was unlike any other friendship they have had, before or after the passionate friendship (a few reported multiple experiences of passionate friendships).

I next discuss the core category within a social, emotional, and cognitive frame. Although participants’ social, emotional, and cognitive experiences of the core category are not mutually exclusive, I present each in separate subsections to highlight their unique aspects.

**Social.** In this subsection, I describe participants’ or others’ reactions to the relational dynamics within the passionate friendship. All women described how the relational patterns and dynamic of their passionate friendship were “different” from their previous experiences in
friendships. Their passionate friendship challenged how they had expected friends to relate to one another. Some expressed how they were confused by and did not understand the dynamics in the passionate friendship. A few women only attributed these different friendship dynamics to how the emotional intensity (see the subsection directly below) was expressed in the friendship. The remainder of the sample also spoke of how the boundary crossings, surprising reactions, and/or others’ confusion about the passionate friendship contributed to challenging their perceptions of friendships.

Participants spoke of the boundary crossings of their passionate friendship in relation to how the dynamics of their friendship were different. Most shared how they felt surprised or confused about the boundary crossings. Ash provided a good example of the confusion women experienced over the boundary crossings of their passionate friendship:

It was, like, I guess like a regular friendship, but just more, I don’t know, it just felt deeper. I don’t really know how to describe it. It was really intense, for me, I had never been that close to somebody like that... I just, like, always think that relationships are black and white, and so whenever I think back on that friendship, I’m like, I don’t know, it’s sort of like we crossed some type of boundaries. Just like made, it was kind of, like, making me think about what relationships are, and who makes relationships up, and I was, I don’t know where I read this from, I was reading this blog and it was just talking about different types of friendships, like, what was it, the only word I can really think about was platonic, romantic, and emotional relationships, how they’re just kind of, I guess when I think about that, I just, I guess I think maybe we have relationships that aren’t always clear... It never got sexual, it never was, but just like the way we talked to-it just seemed like the stuff you would say to a partner.

One woman described questioning and trying to determine what defines and where the boundaries are between a friendship and a dating relationship. Some women questioned the definition of a “romantic” relationship, as they acknowledged having romantic feelings towards their friend, but had not categorized their friendship as a dating relationship. A few women
expressed uncertainty over how to categorize or label this friendship. Other women reported that it was not until sexual intimacy was initiated in the friendship that their reality of how they had defined friendships was challenged.

A few women explained how the relational dynamics in their friendship were different due to the surprising ways either they or their friend reacted within the friendship. A few women provided examples of how they reacted in a way to their friend that was not how they normally expected themselves to act. Specifically, they shared how they do not act this way with other people or do not normally act “this weird.” A few participants reported experiences in which their friend had a stronger reaction than they thought was warranted for the situation or interpersonal exchange. For example, Tess shared her confusion over her friend’s reactions:

I don’t even know exactly why that we would have these ins and outs like in a relationship, like a romantic relationship…It was usually her, she would get upset over something or she wouldn’t want to see me for a while and so we would go through this hiatus and then we would come back and then we would hiatus. I just remember that happening a few times. I didn’t always understand it, but it was frustrating…It seems like that should be from some big fight or something, but it wasn’t really…I didn’t really always understand what the problems were when she didn’t want to see me or when she would react very irrationally to what I didn’t think was a big situation.

Some women shared that other friends or family members did not know how to make sense of the passionate friendship. Women described how others noticed that “something” was going on in the friendship, saw the friendship as “weird,” or questioned if the friendship was turning into a dating relationship. For the few women who had others question their dating status or sexual identities, most experienced this from family members. Of these women, most expressed shock and surprise due to hearing this from their family. For example, Stephanie shared her shock after her father questioned her dating status with her friend:
…My dad sat me down at the kitchen table, and it was, like, “I’m going to ask you something, and I want you to know that I’ll love you no matter what, and that’s okay. But are you and [your passionate friend] lesbian partners?” And that was such a shock to me that he would ask that, because I thought up until that point that this is a pretty normal-looking friendship, and you know, everything’s fine. And it’s, like, “What? No! No, of course not.”

One woman described laughing off this questioning from her family at the time, but in hindsight shared how she could see how the friendship had components of a dating relationship.

**Emotional.** In this subsection, I discuss the emotional experience of participants in reaction to the different relational dynamics. For all participants, the different relational patterns they experienced in this friendship were at least partly captured by the fact that the friendship was more emotionally intense than expected. They described them or their friend expressing or feeling something more emotionally intense than what they thought a friend would express or feel towards another friend. For example, Ash expressed confusion over her passionate friend’s verbal expression of emotional intimacy:

The way that we talked to each other. It never got sexual, it never was, but just like the way we talked to, it just seemed like the stuff you would say to a partner. I mean, I guess you would tell your friends that you loved them, but just the way you say it with such conviction, and you really mean it…like, ‘I’ll always have a place in my heart,’ stuff like that. Do friends talk like that?

For many women, they perceived their feelings towards their friend as “unusual,” “weird,” and/or “abnormal.” Some questioned or expressed confusion over why they felt this way towards their friend. Specifically for a few women, part of their confusion was related to not being able to understand the tumultuous nature of the emotional intensity, switching from feeling intensely positive to negative emotions within the friendship. One woman shared that she did not understand why she felt confused about her emotions in the friendship. For a few other
women, the fact that they felt their emotions in the friendship were unusual was attributed to them experiencing sexual attraction to a woman (their passionate friend) for the first time. Finally, most women expressed how the emotional intensity of the friendship offered them something at a deeper level than they had previously experienced or expected from a friendship – they felt wanted, important, intimately connected, or profoundly understood by the friend. For example, Starr shared about her different experience with her passionate friend:

It was different. It was like she really cared and she really wanted to be with me. Everything was generally about me…it was a whole lot different from the way other people treated me. Whatever sex they’ve been. It made me feel wanted. It made me feel comfortable.

For many women, their feelings towards having a “different” kind of friendship went beyond feeling confused or surprised to experiencing uneasiness in reaction to the friendship. A few women questioned if the friendship’s emotional intensity and relational patterns were unhealthy. A few women shared how the friendship dynamics were frustrating and/or made them uncomfortable. Others stated how they were “freaked out” by the friendship, saw the relationship as “complicated,” felt “distressed” by the relational dynamics, or were “terrified” by how the friendship appeared to be turning romantic. Jane illustrated how the relational dynamics in her passionate friendship caused her to feel distressed:

I think it just caused me, initially, it caused me just so much distress, because I was like, ‘why do I feel this way?’ I’m like, ‘what does this mean?’ I think I’m very much someone who is very attentive to my emotional experience and this did not feel like blasé for me, like I felt really distressed by it for a long time.

**Cognitive.** In this subsection, I illustrate participants’ cognitive building of awareness and meaning-making of the passionate friendship. Women indicated varying levels of awareness at the time of the passionate friendship of how their experiences were different from others’
friendships. A few women wondered if their emotions or relational experiences were “normal” or if other people experienced this with their friends. For example, Marjorie questioned whether her emotions were normal in her passionate friendship:

And maybe that’s a normal emotion for friends, but maybe not. I don’t know. It’s just hard to ... you know, you only know what relationships you’ve had, so you don’t really know if that’s a normal thing for other people to experience.

One woman described questioning her sense of reality, asking herself if she was “making this up.” Another woman (Rose) asked herself, “Am I the only one that finds this a little weird?” In contrast, a few women shared that they were unaware at the time of the friendship of how unusual their experiences were from other people’s friendships. For example, one woman shared that she thought her relationship with her friend was just this intense because of their developmental stage. Another woman described how she was unaware that others did not have friendships like this until her parents questioned if she and her friend were dating.

Many women specifically discussed details of how they underwent a process of making meaning of their passionate friendship. Some women expressed feeling a sense of urgency to make sense of and look for some explanation of their passionate friendship. For example, Rachel described needing to be able to understand what her passionate friendship meant:

I tend to be a very decisive and direct person and so I think not understanding it was in direct conflict with a lot of things that I value, and so that motivated me even more because it’s like, ‘But I have to understand this. I have to be able to say that it’s this.’

For a few participants, this urgency was sparked by the need to alleviate the disconnect between others’ perceptions of the friendship and their own awareness of the friendship dynamics. Some described not being able to make sense of their feelings and/or experiences within the friendship until some time after the friendship. Some women reported undergoing an active questioning
process – mostly about what this friendship meant for their sexual identity – but a few women also described questioning their views of themselves and with whom they wanted to be partnered. A few women shared that they and their friend engaged in conversations together about the nature of their friendship and how they were going to navigate their relational dynamics. Some women reported turning towards external resources, such as their education, professional trainings, or others’ relationships, to make sense of their friendship experiences. One woman described using the fact that she was saying things she would not normally say to a friend to figure out what was happening in the friendship. A few women shared that they either still have not fully figured out the relational dynamics of the friendship or are continuing to make sense of what this friendship meant for them. Finally, although they could have continued their meaning-making process, a few women decided that they needed to stop questioning what the friendship meant for them and settle on some concluding meaning.

**Gradients of the Core Category.** Although all women engaged in the process of challenging their perceptions of friendships, the degree to which they experienced this process appears to be at least partly related to where they landed on the passionate friendship continuum. In general, the more intense the passionate friendship was, the more women experienced their perceptions being challenged, but this was not a one-to-one correspondence. For example, a few women’s (Kiki and Kitten) experiences within their passionate friendship appeared to be less challenging of their perceptions of how they defined friendships or expected friends to interact. This appears to be related to either fewer boundary crossings in the friendship or some level of awareness of same-sex attractions prior to the friendship. These women instead used the comfort, trust, and closeness of their friendship as a safe place for them to challenge and develop
their perceptions of sexual orientation. There was a notable difference for how women across the passionate friendship continuum experienced the core category. Specifically, only women whose friendship was at the higher end of the continuum reported feelings of uneasiness in reaction to the passionate friendship’s different relational dynamics and described a sense of urgency to make meaning of the friendship. Possible reasons for the difference in degree that the core category was experienced are discussed further in the next chapter.

**“Ripple Effects” of the Core Category.** As they underwent the process of challenging their perceptions of friendships, women experienced a resulting “ripple effect” in which their subjective realities in other areas were simultaneously challenged. Just as they experienced confusion, questioning, and/or the need to create new understandings of friendships, women underwent similar experiences for their personal sexual orientation, broader conceptualization of sexual orientation, and other identities intersecting with sexual orientation. For example, Rose questioned her sexual attractions after her passionate friend’s family expressed confusion over how to categorize the friendship:

I remember thinking about what her family had said and being like, ‘Well could I like her?’…I remember sitting there thinking…I took a second to be like, ‘Could I like this person?’

In the last section of this chapter, I describe the outcomes related to sexual orientation development that followed the challenging of women’s perceptions of friendships and other resulting areas.

**Outcomes: Women’s Sexual Orientation Development**

The purpose of this study was to investigate how passionate friendships may serve as a unique social context for women to explore and develop their sexual orientation. As I illustrated
above in the first two sections of this chapter, the “triggering event” (i.e., the causal category) of women’s experiences in passionate friendships led to women challenging their perceptions of friendships as a way to make meaning of the passionate friendship (i.e., the core category). Although women’s exploration of their personal sexual orientation was a primary outcome of this process, there were other important related outcomes. Women developed in how they understood sexual orientation more broadly, and – as a result of developing their personal sexual orientation or general understandings of sexual orientation – how they understood their other intersecting identities (religious or gender).

It is notable that while the vast majority of participants believed they developed their sexual orientation through their experiences in their passionate friendship, one out of the 20 women who had a passionate friendship in my sample did not (Marie). Although her passionate friendship had shared characteristics to others in this sample, Marie explained that she did not develop in her sexual orientation as a result of her passionate friendship experiences because she had already solidified this part of her identity prior to the initiation of the friendship (at age 22). This suggests that the act of engaging in a passionate friendship alone does not always lead to women’s sexual orientation development. Possible reasons for why women may or may not develop in their sexual orientations through their experiences in passionate friendships are addressed in the next chapter. As I discuss the outcomes in this section, I focus on the experiences of the women who did develop in their sexual orientations based on their experiences within their passionate friendship.
Women’s developmental outcomes. Following the challenge of their perceptions of friendships, women underwent three avenues of sexual orientation development: increased awareness, opening, and restructuring. Most women experienced increased awareness around their or others’ sexual orientations, learning more about this part of their identity or increasing their broader understandings of sexual orientation. For the women who developed through “opening,” they became more open to and/or accepted new possibilities within their own sexual orientation or how they understood sexual orientation in general. Finally, some women restructured how they had previously made meaning of their or others’ sexual orientations or how they understood other identities intersecting with sexual orientation. First, I discuss the ways women developed in their sexual orientation that are more clearly captured by just one of these three outcomes. Then, I describe women’s development that are best represented by an overlap of two or all three outcomes.

Increased awareness. In this subsection, I describe women’s development through increased awareness, or their gaining of new knowledge and insights through their experiences within the passionate friendship. Most women increased their awareness of their personal sexual orientation. These women learned more about their attractions to others and their expression of their sexual orientation, as well as other aspects of their sexual orientation. In addition, some women increased their awareness of sexual orientation more broadly, outside of their own orientation.

Attractions. Some learned about their attractions to others. Some women discovered they are attracted to women; for a few women, their attractions were towards their passionate friend only and not generalized to other women. A few women learned which gender identity (man or
woman) they are most attracted to. One woman confirmed to herself that she is not attracted to women, after others posed this question to her in reaction to her passionate friendship. Some women increased their awareness of what qualities attract or draw them to others. A few women specifically discussed gaining a greater understanding of the different aspects that play into their attractions. For example, one woman described attraction as a “holistic concept,” as she reflected on the many different things that made her attracted to her passionate friend vs. her current partner. Jane shared how she learned about the different roles emotional and physical or sexual attraction play into her attractions to men or women.

It’s hard for me to pinpoint when exactly I started thinking a lot more about the role of emotional attraction versus just sexual attraction… I think growing up, and even in very basic learning in school about sexual orientation, it was much more focused around who are you sexually attracted to, who do you have sexual relationships with, and I think the emotional part gets neglected a lot. Really for me, I think, in working through this [passionate friendship] I realized that I’m much more emotionally attracted to women; most men I’m just kind of…[my husband] is an exception. Most men I just…don’t have that and with so many women I just find it so much easier to connect. Yeah, so I think sex is only like one aspect of things. I think earlier on I’d be like, ‘I’m not really that physically attracted to women, I’m just like it’s not really,’ but as I’ve gotten more emotionally attracted to women, or particular women, then I’m like, ‘okay, I can find them physically attractive.’

One woman learned how to recognize her attractions. A few learned what gender identity of their partner they are most emotionally attracted and compatible with.

Sexual orientation expression. A few women increased their awareness of how they would like to express their sexual orientation. For example, Kiki learned of her capacity and preference to love multiple partners:

I think in an ideal world, [my passionate friend] would be my girlfriend and I would have a boyfriend, or husband or whatever, and my relationship with [my passionate friend] would be acceptable, but separate.
For another woman, she increased her awareness by learning the role of how her expression of intimacy and boundary setting could impact the progression of a friendship into a dating relationship. One woman described how, despite discovering her attractions to women through her experiences in the passionate friendship, she prefers her expression of her sexual orientation to be “heterosexual,” rather than openly identifying as bisexual (i.e., due to fears of societal and familial stigmatization).

**Other aspects of personal sexual orientation.** There were various other ways women increased their awareness of their personal sexual orientation. A few women learned what it might be like for them to date a woman, as modeled by their passionate friendship. In contrast to how they had anticipated or previously experienced relationships with women, a few participants described learning that they could feel comfortable and natural engaging in emotional and/or sexual intimacy with a woman (their passionate friend). One woman shared how both the depth of her connection with her passionate friend and the complexity of the friendship showed her that she could get many of her relational needs met within a friendship, rather than a dating relationship. Another woman increased her awareness of how to determine what her sexual orientation identity is.

**General understandings of sexual orientation.** Some women increased their awareness of sexual orientation more broadly. Some increased or strengthened their awareness of sexual minority relationships and challenges faced by individuals within the LGBTQ community. One woman described how she learned the importance of individuals allowing themselves to explore their sexuality in order to fully understand and authentically express it.
**Opening.** In this subsection, I describe how women developed in their sexual orientation by *opening*. Specifically, women became open to new possibilities and/or accepted aspects of their sexual orientation.

*New possibilities.* Most women described “opening” to new possibilities or understandings of their sexual orientation through their passionate friendship. Many of these women “opened” through having their first experience in a “relationship-like” friendship or a dating relationship with a woman (their passionate friend). From this experience, many opened to the possibility of being attracted to and/or dating women. For example, Lucy described how her passionate friendship opened up her potential to date a woman:

> I guess it was a really deep connection and I think that I could find such a deep connection with another woman made me understand that- maybe that there was that potential for me to find a sexual relationship with another woman, you know that could potentially happen. And I think I never would have opened the door to that, or even had that thought really, until that friendship happened.

One woman shared how her friendship showed her that she has the potential of having a fulfilling life with a female partner. A few participants began considering the possibility of being attracted to and dating women after their passionate friend either encouraged them to consider this as an option or disclosed her own attractions to women. For example, Denise described how after her friend disclosed her same-sex attractions, she then was able to consider having such attractions herself:

> When [my passionate friend] did share about- and I feel like this did kind of click for me a little bit when she did share about being interested in women, because I don’t know if maybe once the opportunity was presented, maybe I gave it more thought. That’s possible. Or, if I was kind of thinking of it a little bit before but I assumed that there was no possibility. But once she told me that, we had a lot more conversations about dating and sexual orientation and things like that…Once that information was kind of on the table, it suddenly kind of opened up this idea that I think maybe I had been thinking about
before, but had kind of put it in the back of my mind. Despite maintaining their heterosexual identity after their experiences in their passionate friendship and their religious backgrounds discouraging same-sex relationships, a few women shared that they remained open to the future possibility of dating a woman. A few women opened to their potential of having chemistry or emotional intimacy and intensity within a female friendship, not a dating relationship (female or male).

Acceptance. Some women “opened” through their passionate friendship experiences by accepting aspects of their sexual orientation that either emerged during the friendship or had existed prior. Some women accepted their same-sex attractions. For example, one woman described becoming more open and honest within herself about her attractions to women. A few women shared how they were able to become accepting of their sexual experiences with their passionate friend that fell outside of their heterosexual identity, despite identifying with a religious faith that is non-accepting of same-sex attractions/behavior. One woman became accepting of the fluidity of her sexual orientation. A few women described becoming more comfortable with their sexual orientation as they further explored or accepted their same-sex attractions. For example, Kitten described how she became comfortable with her bisexual identity after accepting her same-sex attractions:

Well, it took years for me to actually, to really be comfortable with it and accept that was who I was and it was okay. With my [passionate] friend, it kind of just opened the door, and I realized that it wasn’t really bad. It was okay. It took me a few years before I actually accepted that completely.
Restructuring. I discuss in this subsection how women developed through restructuring, or constructing new conceptualizations and meanings, as a result of challenging their perceptions of friendships. Restructuring typically occurred in combination with increased awareness and opening but there is one way women in this sample developed that can be primarily represented by this outcome – restructuring of their other identities intersecting with sexual orientation. Other ways that women restructured are discussed in later subsections.

Some women further developed their other identities intersecting with their sexual orientation identity. In response to the conflict they experienced between their religious and newly adopted understandings of their sexual orientation, a few women described prioritizing their religious identity over the expression of their same-sex attractions. For example, Brittany shared that despite her same-sex attractions, she chooses to express her sexual orientation as heterosexual, due to fear of criticism and rejection from religious family members:

I, not so much feel for myself [dating women] was wrong, but not feeling like I could stand up to the questions and the criticism and the rejection I would get from my family and my parents’ friends. Also, I just- and I even still to this day feel this way. I don’t know if I’m a strong enough person to say, ‘This is what I do,’ and in a really confident way… I think at the time I perceived that it would be kind of difficult to have open relationships with women, and that I wasn’t strong enough to deal with the criticism and rejection I might get from my family. Yeah. I kind of still recognize that within myself.

Others restructured or rejected their previous religious identity due to its conflict with their new understandings of their sexual orientation. For a few women, their experiences in their passionate friendship led to a restructuring of how they believed they may express their gender identity as a woman, allowing for or becoming accepting of their expression of masculine traits. For example, Rachel described how her experiences in her passionate friendship contributed to
her acceptance of the masculine traits within her gender identity:

I think what the relationship with [my passionate friend] taught me in some ways was that, and then the second [dating] relationship that I had in college, was that that was an aspect of who I was. That I have more traditionally masculine tendencies in some ways and that I was okay with that. That was okay. People, women and men, could love me for those traits and that I didn’t have to conform or be one certain type of woman. That being a woman has many different meanings and can mean many different things and you can express that in many different ways…maybe I have multiple sides to that expression. Maybe I’m proud of that, that that’s something that defines who I am and that I can do whatever I want.

Although women did not specifically discuss shifts to their understandings of other intersecting identities (e.g., social class, racial or ethnic identity) or only described shifts for one identity (i.e., religious or gender identity) in relation to sexual orientation identity, it is understood that women’s development in individual identities cannot occur in isolation from their other identities (Bowleg, 2008). Finally, a few other women described restructuring and further developing their advocacy identity for LGBT-identified individuals.

**Overlap of two outcomes.** Some of the ways that women developed in their sexual orientation are represented by two outcomes. A few women both increased their awareness and restructured. One woman described differentiating how she experienced “romantic” or “sexual” attractions in her passionate friendship and romantic relationship. A few women identified ways that they found their passionate friend more attractive and desirable than their current romantic partner. Others sought external resources to make meaning of their sexual orientation as it related to their passionate friendship, evaluating information they obtained in comparison to themselves and/or their experiences within the passionate friendship.

A few women experienced both opening and restructuring. Of these women, some challenged how they had previously seen the intersection of religious identity with sexual
orientation in general. For example, one woman, based on her witnessing her passionate friend’s religious family question her sexual orientation (due to observations of the passionate friendship) in a positive manner, described restructuring her assumptions on the types of views one from a conservative religious background may hold towards minority sexual identities. Another woman (Hannah) illustrated how she experienced opening and restructuring in her description of experiencing a “strength in feeling” with her passionate friend, marveling over the fact that platonic and romantic relationships could “bear such a strong feeling resemblance.”

**Overlap of all outcomes.** In the sample of women interviewed for this study, there were four ways women developed in their sexual orientation that captured all three outcomes of increased awareness, opening, and restructuring. First, most women developed in their sexual identity as a result of their experiences within their passionate friendship. Specifically, they solidified, adjusted, or discovered new sexual identity labels for themselves. For example, Starr shared how her passionate friendship helped her realize her attractions to women, discovering her sexual identity:

I’ve always considered myself to just be straight but clearly I’ve been saying that I’ve been bisexual…It was like I opened up a can of worms I wasn’t really ready for. I had to dissect this, “where are you? You can’t ride the fence. You’re either here or you’re there.” I guess that she opened up the light for me in my eyes on that one, because I know where I’m at… I picked straight side, but I know that deep in my heart, I am bisexual. I know that. No getting around that.

For some women, they maintained their heterosexual identity, despite sexual attractions and/or experiences with their passionate friend. They explained this by either stating that their attractions/experiences were only towards their friend and not generalized to other women or describing these experiences as a variant of their heterosexuality (while identifying that their
primary attractions are to men). For example, Penny explained why she maintained her heterosexual identity, despite having had sexual experiences with her passionate friend:

Some people would say that because I ever had relations with a female then I can’t be heterosexual, where for me it’s, ‘No, that’s my preference. That’s the way I go.’…I think the best way that I described it is that I don’t find myself attracted to females as a whole, but I found myself attracted to her. I haven’t found another female that I am attracted to that the same emotions and feelings are brought up. So, that’s why I don’t change the label.

Second, challenging their perceptions of friendships led most participants to learn the potential for fluidity in sexual orientation (i.e., attraction, identity, connection). For some women, they learned that attraction could be based on the person or their personality, the relationship one forms with another, or level of closeness to a person, rather than their gender identity. Michelle provided a good example of how she learned that sexual orientation can be fluid:

I think that if you look at the Kinsey scale, sexuality is on a continuum. In my life, it really feels like it’s on a continuum where it’s not just one place that you’re in and you dig your little hole and you’re like, ‘This is my space. I am not moving,’ but it’s really- I think it depends on the person that you’re attracted to and the relationship that you build, where you fall in that continuum.

Women described learning that sexual orientation sometimes cannot be categorized, does not fit into “neat little boxes,” and that individuals are not necessarily exclusively same- or other-sex attracted, even if they identify as gay/lesbian or heterosexual. Finally, a few women described how they learned that sexual orientation can change over time. For example, Brittany learned about sexual fluidity through observing how her own sexual orientation changed over time through her passionate friendship:

I think it’s just, I think it changes. I don’t think it was like I was secretly attracted to her and that I just didn’t realize it. Until I realized it. I think I wasn’t until I was. I think that
who I’m attracted to isn’t— it’s less about male or female than it is about closeness. It’s when I like someone and enjoy them I start to be attracted to them. That’s more important than their gender or their sexuality.

Third, many women discussed how, based on their experiences within their passionate friendship, they came to see that relationships and their labels can be fluid. For example, Maia described how her passionate friendship illustrated how relationships can be fluid:

I think that it’s definitely challenged me to think about the way that I define relationships... it’s really shaped a lot of my understanding of how we all one on one relate to each other and how there’s not really always a textbook definition of what your relationship is to somebody.

A few women described how the separation between a friendship and dating relationship is not always so clear. Specifically, they shared how relationship categories can be “fuzzy,” there are various ways that people can connect, regardless of the relationship label, and friendships can have “romantic” components and “deep feelings.” One woman discussed how she saw friendships existing on a spectrum with variants of gray, rather than being “black and white” (i.e., romantic or nonromantic). Another woman expressed how it is sometimes easier to have relationships be unlabeled, rather than trying to make sense of what her and the other person’s feelings mean.

Finally, many women adopted a broader conceptualization of sexual orientation. Some increased their understandings of how sexual orientation could be defined or experienced by others. Women began to see that sexuality exists on a continuum and that there are areas of “gray,” rather than distinct “black and white” separations. For example, Stephanie shared how her passionate friendship helped her to see that there is not such a distinct separation between heterosexual and gay/lesbian identities:
I keep going back to just knowledge, and having more knowledge and experience that being heterosexual doesn’t mean you only are ever attracted to men, and you basically don’t notice women, and homosexual means you are only ever attracted to either men or females or women, depending- And don’t notice the other sex. And you have particular stereotypical qualities- And that’s it. And having these experiences and more book learning, that the world doesn’t come to an end if you deviate from that just a little bit, and that that isn’t always the experience of every single person, that it is exactly, this is what heterosexual looks like, and this is what homosexual looks like, something like that...Kind of seeing that that’s more what it’s like, it’s not what I’ve just described, not that black and white social system that- The gray looks like being uncertain sometimes. And it looks like that it, I don’t know. I’m not sure what it looks like, but it doesn’t look like separate silos of, this is homosexuality and this is heterosexuality.

A few women discussed developing understandings of the individual differences within sexual orientation: its meaning can vary depending on individual factors, multiple perspectives of how to define sexual orientation exist, and there are individual variations within a shared sexual orientation identity. A few women realized that there are different aspects of attraction (e.g., emotional attraction) within sexual orientation, rather than just sexual attraction. A few women broadened their knowledge on the different sexual orientations and identity labels that people can have. Another woman described increasing her sensitivity to those who find it difficult to label their sexual orientation.

**Other Outcomes.** There were two other areas of development that I did not address in the above section because they are only indirectly related to sexual orientation. These outcomes were beyond the scope of this study and thus not investigated in depth. First, women described developing in how they navigated future friendships and dating relationships. Second, women developed preferences for their future dating relationships, based on their experiences in their passionate friendship.

Most women discussed ways that their passionate friendship influenced how they later
navigated future relationships. As a result of their passionate friendship, women spoke of their different ways of being in relationships, including their level of interpersonal vulnerability (i.e., openness, emotional closeness), genuineness and authenticity, advocacy and prioritization of their needs in relationships, and considering their personal impact on others. They also described changes in how they negotiated interpersonal dynamics including boundary setting, maintaining independence through having separate relationships and opinions from their friend/partner, and learning how to compromise and work through conflict with others. For example, Clare described how her passionate friendship influenced her willingness to open up to others and the role of boundaries in her relationships.

I think after experiencing [my passionate friendship,] I learned a lot. One, that there’s a part of me that’s like, ‘Okay, I’m never going to open up to anyone ever again because it’s only going to hurt me.’ Then the other part of me is like, ‘Okay, now you know the importance of balance and setting boundaries.’

For some participants, due to the specialness of their friendship, they reported using the passionate friendship as a basis of comparison for desirable traits sought out in later dating partners. For example, Kat shared how her passionate friendship set a baseline for the level of emotional intimacy she desired in future relationships:

I think that my expectation of intimacy is a little higher. I could be making this up, but it was really intense, and I feel like we kind of went to a place that most, two people don’t usually go, and so it was kind of- I think for intimacy, my expectations of that were higher because it’s like, ‘Well, if I was able to do that as kid…’ It’s almost like everything kind of gets measured off of that baseline.

In contrast, a few women shared that the passionate friendship highlighted qualities that they do not want present in their future dating relationships. They described seeking partnerships that were more “even keeled” – lower levels of emotional intensity, equal levels of support,
avoidance of emotional dependency, and healthy amounts of interpersonal distance and independence.
Causal Category: **Passionate Friendship**
- Crossed previously defined friendship boundaries
- Higher level of emotionality in female friendship than previously experienced

Core Category: **Challenging One’s Perceptions of Friendships**

*Figure 4.1.* Theoretical model. This figure illustrates how passionate friendships may influence women’s development and understandings of their sexual orientation.
Chapter Five

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

In this chapter, I summarize the findings of this study and contextualize them in the existing literature. Next, I review the limitations of this study. Finally, I provide implications of this study for theory, research, and clinical practice.

Summary of Findings

This study examined the experiences of 20 women, ages 25-34 in female passionate friendships. Using grounded theory methodology, the goal of this research was to create a substantive theory of how women explored and developed their sexual orientations through their experiences within female passionate friendships. The final theoretical model is divided into three sections: causal category, core category, and developmental outcomes (see Figure 1).

Causal Category. The causal category represents the characteristics women identified within their passionate friendship. Common characteristics of passionate friendships of women in this sample included emotional intimacy, the friendship being perceived as unique, mutual support, and commitment to the friendship. Participants commonly identified two characteristics they perceived as delineating between passionate and non-passionate friendships: emotional intensity and boundary crossings. Emotional intensity was further subdivided into themes of rapid deepening, friendship “break-ups,” inseparability, preoccupation and exclusivity, and jealousy. Women experienced different types of boundary crossings in their passionate friendship, including nonsexual physical intimacy, sexual tension and attraction, and difficulty categorizing the passionate friendship due to it being “different” from their other friendship experiences. Passionate friendships were found to exist on a continuum, moving farther away
from non-passionate friendships based on the level of emotional intensity and boundary crossings present in the friendship.

**Core Category.** The core category, or the process of how women made meaning of the emotional intensity and boundary crossings in their passionate friendship, was “challenging one’s perceptions of friendships.” For the women in this sample, their passionate friendship challenged how they had previously experienced friendships. The passionate friendship was seen as “different” and their experiences did not align with how they had defined friendships or expected friends to interact.

There were social, emotional, and cognitive aspects of how participants experienced the core category. In regards to the social aspects, participants had reactions to the “different” relational dynamics of the passionate friendship, expressing confusion or needing to make sense of how they and their friend were relating to one another, the boundary crossings, or the surprising ways they or their friend were reacting within the friendship. For some, family members or other friends did not know how to make sense of the friendship. The emotional aspects of the core category were captured by participants’ descriptions of attributing the relational dynamics to the emotional intensity of the friendship, perceiving their feelings towards their friend as unusual, and feeling uneasiness in reaction to the friendship. Finally, the cognitive aspects of the core category are illustrated by women’s varying levels of awareness of how their passionate friendship was different from others’ friendships and various ways of engaging in meaning-making as a result (e.g., active questioning process, seeking external information).

Participants varied in how much they engaged in the process of challenging their perceptions of friendship, which appears to be at least partly related to where they fell on the
passionate friendship continuum. Specifically, women’s passionate friendships seemed to have a greater impact on challenging their perceptions of friendship the more emotional intensity and boundary crossings were present. In this sample, those who engaged less with the core category were more likely to just describe their passionate friendship as “different,” rather than also using terms such as “unusual,” “weird,” or “unhealthy.” This may be partly related to the amount of “positive” versus “negative” emotional intensity present in women’s passionate friendships. One likely does not expect characteristics of negative emotional intensity (e.g., jealousy, emotional dependence) to be present in a platonic friendship, so when they are, women expressed alarm and confusion. The level of attachment between the friends may also factor into how much of women’s perceptions of friendships were challenged. Compared to participants whose passionate friendships were characterized by some negative emotional intensity, women who described the friendship as being “different” primarily due to the deep level of emotional intimacy and connection may have a stronger secure attachment to their friend and have less of a reason to make meaning of the passionate friendship or create new understandings of friendships in general. Thus, the less their passionate friendship strayed from a non-passionate friendship, the less women then needed to engage in a process of meaning making of the passionate friendship.

As women underwent the process of challenging their perceptions of friendships, they experienced a “ripple effect” in which their subjective realities in other areas were simultaneously challenged. Specifically, most participants challenged their understandings of their personal sexual orientation, broader conceptualization of sexual orientation, and other identities intersecting with sexual orientation.
**Developmental Outcomes.** This study found that there were three outcomes of the core category that influenced the development of participants’ sexual orientation: *increased awareness, opening, and restructuring.* Women who developed through *increased awareness* described gaining new knowledge and insights into their own or others’ sexual orientation from their experiences within the passionate friendship. By *opening*, women explained how their passionate friendship opened them to new possibilities and acceptance of their sexual orientation. As a result of challenging their perceptions of friendships, women developed through *restructuring*, or constructing new conceptualizations and meanings about their sexual orientation, broader conceptualization of sexual orientation, and/or intersecting identities with sexual orientation. Women’s development was best represented by one outcome (e.g., increasing one’s awareness of their sexual attractions), an overlap of two outcomes (e.g., challenging views of intersection of religious identity and sexual orientation), or an overlap of all three outcomes (e.g., learning the potential for sexual fluidity). Finally, there were two ways women developed that were only indirectly related to sexual orientation: 1) how they chose to interpersonally navigate future friendships and dating relationships and 2) establishing preferences for future dating relationships based on their passionate friendship experiences.

One out of the 20 women in this sample denied that her passionate friendship influencing her sexual orientation development, due to her beliefs that she had already solidified this identity prior to the initiation of the friendship. This suggests that not all women who engage in passionate friendships then explore and develop their sexual orientations. This may be at least partly related to women’s sexual orientation development prior to their passionate friendship. For example, women who had never been presented with the impetus to explore their
sexual orientation prior to the passionate friendship are likely to do so when faced with the emotional intensity and boundary crossings of a passionate friendship due to how these characteristics challenged women’s definitions and separation of friendships from dating relationships. In addition, the sexual orientation of one’s friend may also play a role in the extent to which women explore their sexual orientation within the passionate friendship. For example, one woman in this study, Hannah, described the limitations her friend who identified as heterosexual placed on how physically intimate they could be within the friendship due to her friend’s fears that her female friends would consider her same-sex attracted. Similarly, where women’s sexual orientation fell on the Heterosexual-Homosexual Rating Scale (i.e., “Kinsey Scale;” Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948) prior to the passionate friendship may also have been a contributing factor. For example, in comparison to a woman who identified as heterosexual, a woman who had already identified same-sex attractions prior to the passionate friendship may have been more likely to see the friendship as a budding dating partnership, rather than a passionate friendship. Finally, age may be another contributing factor to why some women do not develop in their sexual orientations based on their passionate friendship experiences. For example, participants of one study who had passionate friendships during early adolescence reported greater levels of intensity in the friendship than participants whose friendships occurred during late adolescence (Diamond, 2002).

Although this one participant did not develop in her sexual orientation, her development in other areas (i.e., way of being and preference for future relationships) followed the same trajectory outlined in this theoretical model (i.e., passionate friendship experiences → challenging her perceptions of friendships → increased awareness/opening/restructuring). This
suggests that this theory can be generalized to other areas of development. That is, when women are in a position of having their subjective realities challenged, they may be likely to develop through increased awareness, opening, and/or restructuring.

**Contextualization in the Literature**

The findings of this study contributed to the passionate friendship literature. Due to the scarcity of the contemporary literature on passionate friendships, most have focused on describing passionate friendships (e.g., Diamond, 2000, 2002). Although not the central focus of this study, the findings illustrated how passionate friendships exist on a continuum and contributed to increased understanding of characteristics that differentiate passionate from non-passionate friendships. There is one existing study in which passionate friendships were attempted to be quantified, resulting in the creation the Passionate Friendship Survey (PFS; Glover, 2009). The PFS did not hold up as a reliable measure of the differentiation between passionate and non-passionate friendships in this study. Specifically, although some women’s PFS scores indicated they had had a passionate friendship, this was not supported by their interview data. It is possible that more qualitative data on passionate friendships was needed before such a measure could be derived.

This research also contributed to the existing literature on women’s sexual orientation development. This was the first study to examine how passionate friendships may serve as a context for women to explore and develop their sexual orientations. It not only affirmed that passionate friendships are one outlet that women may develop their sexual orientations, but it illustrated what the trajectory and outcomes of this developmental process may look like for women. The findings of this study also aligned with research on women’s sexual fluidity (e.g.,
Although only one outcome that emerged regarding women’s sexual orientation development within passionate friendships, an overarching theme for many participants’ developmental outcomes was that their sexual orientation could change over time.

Two other existing models of development provide important contextualization for this study. First, Kegan’s (1982, 1994) theory of constructive development poses that an individual’s meaning-making changes in structure and complexity over the course of the lifespan. One of the hypotheses my research team and I discussed over the course of data collection and analysis was the possibility that older women may be able to engage in more sophisticated meaning-making of their passionate friendship and its influence on their development. As a result, part-way through data collection, we targeted potential participants aged 30-35 so that the final sample would have an approximately equal number of women aged 25-29 and 30-35. Based on the results from this sample of women, it is not apparent whether age had a significant role in the complexity of meaning-making women were able to have in regards to their passionate friendship experiences. In this sample, level of education and separation in time from the passionate friendship appeared to have a greater role in women’s ability to make meaning of their friendship and this merits more scrutiny in future studies. Differences in meaning-making abilities based on level of education are likely related to the influence of education on individuals’ development of cognitive processing, including metacognition and other functions of the frontal lobe.

Second, relational models of women’s development (e.g., Gilligan, 1982; Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991; Miller, 1976) argue the importance of relationships in women’s lives. The findings of this study support these models; underlying participants’
narratives of their sexual orientation development was the role their passionate friendship played. Women varied in how much they attributed their development to their friendship, ranging from acknowledging their passionate friendship as one of several experiences that contributed to their development to holding the belief that their passionate friendship experiences were primary to their developmental outcomes.

**Limitations of this Study**

This study was limited in its sample diversity. Most of the participants identified as White (16/20) or were highly educated (bachelor’s degree or above; 17/20). In addition, the final sample had more women between the ages of 25-29 than 30-35. Although this study provided limited data indicating no clear differences in this developmental model across cultural identities, this needs to be explored further. Specifically, this research was not able to thoroughly address how women’s sexual orientation development through their passionate friendships was influenced by varying racial/ethnic identities or socioeconomic status.

Similarly, there was limited diversity among the final research team for this study. Of the three research team members who participated in data analysis and theory construction through the duration of the study, all members identified as highly educated, White women. It is possible that due to the researchers’ cultural biases and lens, important aspects of the developmental process were overlooked for our participants who identified as people of color and/or had membership in varying social groups.
Implications

Theory and Research. The findings of this study hold implications for theory and research on sexual orientation development models and the role of passionate friendship in women’s sexual orientation development. The findings of this study highlight one way contemporary women may develop their sexual orientations through the safe, relational context of their passionate friendship.

Many of the existing models of sexual orientation development have limited applicability to those of contemporary society, as they are dated in their assumptions that women’s development occur in a linear pathway, end with the coming out process or solidification of a sexual identity label, and can be generalized to all members of a specific sexual identity (e.g., Cass, 1979; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Troiden, 1989). By examining women’s passionate friendship experiences, this research has contributed to the knowledge of one way sexual orientation may develop for women in today’s society, challenging previous theoretical assumptions. Specifically, the findings of this study demonstrate how sexual orientation development for women across sexual identities (including heterosexual) can follow similar patterns (in line with a more recent developmental model, Dillon, Worthington, & Moradi, 2011, which poses there are universal commonalities in sexual identity development across identities), may change over time based on relational factors (i.e., potential for sexual fluidity), and may not be fully captured by existing stage models. For example, one of the aims of this study was to understand the unique and overlapping aspects of this developmental process for young adult women across sexual identities. At the start of this study, my research team and I were uncertain if separate theoretical models would emerge for heterosexual and sexual minority
women. Based on this sample, however, no clear pattern of differences was found within the theoretical model for women across or within sexual identities. This finding challenges existing developmental models of sexual orientation that pose separate trajectories for sexual minority and heterosexual individuals and merits further investigation.

The findings of the present study not only challenged sexual orientation developmental models’ assumptions, but also explain and give voice to a normative, developmental process for women. Given the changing societal views of same-sex relationships and increasing openness and expression of sexual fluidity, I hypothesized that women of contemporary society may be more likely to engage in passionate friendships and use them as a context to explore and develop their sexual orientations. Indeed, some of the women in this study described their passionate friendship as a safe relational context to explore same-sexuality, protected from societal stigma and homophobia.

Clinical Practice. Implications of this research for clinical practice are found in areas of understanding women’s development through an intersectionality model, deepening practitioners’ general knowledge of the impact passionate friendships may have on women’s lives, and contributing to understandings of development that may result from passionate friendship experiences. Specifically, the findings of this study may help guide practitioners in their assessment of women’s developmental history, normalization of passionate friendship experiences, and assistance of women’s meaning-making and development as a result of their friendship experiences.

It is important for practitioners to attend to women’s other intersecting identities, not just sexual identity, when gathering information about women’s developmental history. In this
study, participants’ experiences and meaning-making of their passionate friendship was seen through the lens of their intersecting cultural identities (Bowleg, 2008). Specifically, women’s development of their sexual orientation did not occur in isolation of their other intersecting identities. For example, some participants had to choose the expression of their religious identity over their (newly adopted) sexual identity, in order to avoid criticism from their cultural community. Thus, women with potentially conflicting identities (as found between religion and sexual identity in this study) may have a different developmental process.

Given that many women in this study experienced distress over how to categorize and/or make meaning of this friendship in their life and in relation to their identities, practitioners may be able to play a role in normalizing this type of relationship for women. Although there were numerous positive aspects of passionate friendships, many women in this study also experienced distress in reaction to their friendship experiences. Despite the fact that passionate friendships appear to be common for adolescent and young adult women (Glover, 2009), the limited literature available on these types of relationships may result in practitioners being uninformed when a client presents with concerns due to a passionate friendship. My hope is that the findings of this study contribute and deepen the general knowledge practitioners hold of passionate friendships, increasing their competency in understanding women’s experiences and responding to potential distress created by the friendship.

Practitioners hold an important role in assisting clients through their development. Participants’ development in response to their passionate friendship experiences varied, not just by outcome but also in the process they underwent. For example, some women’s meaning-making occurred during a brief period, while others spent years or are still continuing to make
meaning of the passionate friendship in their lives. By being aware of the different
developmental outcomes (increased awareness, opening, and restructuring), practitioners may be
able to better guide clients in creating their own meanings and understandings of their passionate
friendship.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this research was to develop a substantive theory on how women may
explore and develop their sexual orientations through their experiences within passionate
friendships. This study found that due to the level of emotional intensity and presence of
boundary crossings in women’s passionate friendships, participants challenged their perceptions
of friendships. Concurrently, women challenged and sought to make meaning of what their
friendship experiences meant for their sexual orientation, broader understandings of sexual
orientation, and how they saw other identities intersecting with their sexual orientation. As a
result of this process, women developed in their sexual orientations through increasing their
awareness, opening, and restructuring.

The findings of this study contribute to the existing literature on both passionate
friendships and sexual orientation development. This research illustrates how passionate
friendships exist on a continuum and further expanded on the knowledge of how these
friendships differ from non-passionate friendships. In regards to sexual orientation, this research
demonstrate show passionate friendships may serve as a context for women to develop their
sexual orientations and supported existing theory on women’s potential for sexual fluidity.

This research has implications in areas of research, theory, and clinical practice. In
particular, the findings challenge assumptions held by existing models of sexual orientation
development, provide a voice for a normal developmental experience of women, and may assist practitioners in supporting women who have had passionate friendships through healthy development of their sexual orientations. This study faced limitations in the range of cultural diversity across participants and research team members. Further research is warranted on how this theoretical model holds across cultural identities, particularly as it relates to racial/ethnic and socioeconomic identities.
REFERENCES


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10.1007/978-1-4419-7988-9_27


Appendix A

Recruitment Documents
Hello, my name is Janelle Maloch and I am a doctoral candidate in counseling psychology at the Pennsylvania State University working with Dr. Kathy Bieschke. I am interested in recruiting women for my research study who are involved in close, female friendships. For the research study, women will complete two, brief online surveys on their demographic information and about their experiences of their closest, female friendships. At the end of the online survey, participants will have the opportunity to enter a random drawing for a $50 Amazon.com gift card. For those who are interested and qualify for this study, I will be inviting women to also participate in follow-up, individual interviews, which will last no more than 1.5 hours. Compensation for participation in the individual interview will be $10. During the interviews, I hope to further discuss women’s experiences in their closest, female friendships and how women see their closest female friendships influencing their understanding of themselves.

Dr. Bieschke will be conducting the study with me, however, only I will be interviewing participants. The interviews will be in person or over the telephone and will be audio-recorded, but the information received will be kept confidential. I will be recruiting from a variety of campuses and community locations, which will aid in concealment of your identity.

Volunteers must be between ages of 25 to 35. If you are interested in participating and would like to find out more about the research study, please email me at jks215@psu.edu. If you know of anyone else who may qualify and be interested in participating in this research study, please forward this email to them. To avoid email spamming, please forward this email to no more than five friends. Please note that forwarding this email to friends will in no way identify them to the researchers – your friends will need to contact the researchers if they are interested in participating.

We appreciate your interest and hope to hear from you soon!

Janelle Maloch, M.S.Ed.
Principal Investigator
jks215@psu.edu

Kathy Bieschke, Ph.D.
Advisor & Co-Investigator
kbieschke@psu.edu
Recruiting 25-35 year old women for friendship study

Women are being recruited who have had a female friendship that was as emotionally intense as a romantic relationship. Women have described these friendships as being somewhere in between (or outside of) the categories of a typical platonic friendship and a romantic relationship. (Note: If the friendship later evolved into a romantic relationship, this does not exclude it from qualifying for this study).

For this research study, women will complete two, brief online surveys on their demographic information and about their experiences of this female friendship. A brief phone screen may also be used to determine eligibility. If qualified, women will be invited to also participate in individual interviews over the phone, which will last no more than 1.5 hours (compensation of $10). During the interviews, we will further discuss women’s experiences in emotionally intense, female friendships and how women see these friendships influencing their understanding of themselves. Penn State IRB Approval Number 44671.

https://www.psychdata.com/s.asp?SID=160884
Are you a woman aged 25-35?
Have you ever had a female friendship that was as emotionally intense as a romantic relationship?
Would you categorize it between or outside of a platonic friendship and a romantic relationship?
Would you like to share your perspectives and experiences of this friendship?

Consider participating in the Friendship Study!

Participants will complete 2 brief online surveys and a 1-1.5hr interview ($10 compensation).

For more information, contact
Principal Investigator: Janelle Maloch, M.S.Ed. at jks215@psu.edu or 814-863-8115

Department of Educational Psychology, Counseling, and Special Education
Penn State University
Note: This study is being conducted for research purposes. IRB # 44671
Appendix B

Informed Consent
Informed Consent Form for Social Science Research
The Pennsylvania State University

Title of Project: Women’s Perspectives and Experiences of Passionate Friendships

Principal Investigator: Janelle K. Maloch, M.S.Ed, Graduate Student
301 CEDAR Building
University Park, PA 16802
(814) 863-8115; jks215@psu.edu

Advisor: Dr. Kathleen J. Bieschke
125 CEDAR Building
University Park, PA 16802
(814) 865-3296; kbieschke@psu.edu

1. Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this research study is to explore women’s experiences in female friendships that were as emotionally intense as a romantic relationship. Women have described these friendships as being somewhere in between (or outside of) the categories of a typical platonic friendship and a romantic relationship. More specifically, the purpose is to examine how women may develop understandings of themselves within the context of these friendships. Participants will be compensated $10.00 for their participation in the interview.

2. Procedures to be followed: Agreeing to the terms in this consent form constitutes your implied consent to participate in this study. You must be between the ages of 25 to 35 and identify your gender identity as woman and sex at birth as female to participate in this study. At the end of this consent form, you will be given the choice to opt out of the study if you do not agree to the terms outlined herein (you would then be directed away from the study website). If you do agree, you will be directed to the next screen, including a brief demographic questionnaire and a survey on your experiences in a female friendship that was as emotionally intense as a romantic relationship. You are invited to respond to any or all of the questions. You do not have to answer any question that you do not want.

After I receive notification that you have completed the consent and online forms, I will determine whether you are eligible for the study. If you are not eligible, I will contact you to explain why and you will not be asked to participate further. If you are eligible for the study, I will contact you to set up a time for a 1-1.5 hour qualitative interview conducted either in person in a private location or over the telephone. In the interview, you will be asked further questions related to your experiences in a female friendship that was as emotionally intense as a romantic relationship and how you developed understandings of yourself within this friendship. During the interview, you will be welcome to discuss any interview question at length. The interview
will be audio-recorded, and the confidentiality of all interview materials will be strictly safeguarded.

After we complete the interview, I will ask you if you would be willing to be contacted by the principal investigator for clarification of a response given during the interview. Additionally, I will ask if you are willing to participate in one to two follow-up contacts in which you would provide responses or your feedback on (1) additional questions, (2) a written summary of your interview, and (3) the near-final results of the study. The follow-up contacts would take no longer than 1 hour of your time. You would be able to provide your feedback by mail, email, or over the phone, whichever is most convenient. You are free to participate in the interview phase of the study only. Your $10.00 compensation is not contingent on your participation in any of the follow-up contacts. You may terminate your participation in the study at any time.

3. Duration: It will take approximately 10-20 minutes to complete the demographic questionnaire and the survey on your friendship experiences. It will take approximately 1-1.5 hours to participate in the interview. If you choose to participate in the follow-up contacts in addition to the interview, the maximum total amount of time involved (for both the interview and follow-up contact) will be 2.5 hours.

4. Statement of Confidentiality: Your participation in this research is confidential. The data will be stored and secured in a locked office, in a locked file cabinet. Interviews will be audio taped. The tapes will be stored in a locked filing cabinet. Recordings will be destroyed no more than 3 years following the close of the research. Janelle Maloch, principal investigator, will have access to the audio tapes. Any audio recorded data stored on a computer will be password protected and removed no more than 3 years after the close of the research. In the event of a publication or presentation resulting from the research, no personally identifiable information will be shared. All computerized information will be password protected; however, the confidentiality of the computerized information you provide will be kept to the degree permitted by the technology used. No guarantees can be made regarding the interception of data sent via the Internet by any third parties.

In addition to myself, my advisor and two research team members will have limited access to the data after your identifying information has been removed; they will see only code numbers and pseudonyms and will not be able to connect you to the information you provide. The Pennsylvania State University’s Office for Research Protections, the Institutional Review Board and the Office for Human Research Protections in the Department of Health and Human Services may review records related to this research study.

5. Discomforts or risk: There are minimal foreseeable risks or ill effects as a result of participating in this study. Discussing experiences of one’s personal development may cause slight emotional discomfort, but this is not the intent or goal of this study. Should you experience any discomfort after completion of the survey or interview and feel that you require additional help, you are encouraged to contact your local county emergency crisis counseling service.
6. Benefits: You may learn more about yourself from participation in this interview. The researchers also anticipate benefits to society, such as the improvement of understandings of women’s close, female friendships and how women may develop their identities or learn more about themselves in these friendships. You will also benefit from the $10.00 compensation offered to each participant.

7. Right to ask questions: Please contact Janelle Maloch, M.S.Ed. at (814) 863-8115 or Dr. Kathleen Bieschke at (814) 865-3296 with questions, complaints or concerns about this research. You can also call these numbers if you feel this study has harmed you. If you have any questions, concerns, or problems about your rights as a research participant or would like to offer input, please contact The Pennsylvania State University’s Office for Research Protections (ORP) at (814) 865-1775. The ORP cannot answer questions about research procedures. Questions about research procedures can only be answered by the research team.

8. Voluntary Participation: Your decision to be in this research is voluntary. You can stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. Refusal to take part in or withdrawing from this study will involve no penalty or loss of benefits you would receive otherwise. You must be between 25-35 years of age and identify your gender identity as woman and sex at birth as female to take part in this research study at the Pennsylvania State University.

If you agree to take part in this study, and you agree to the information detailed above, please acknowledge your consent and click “Continue” below. You will be directed to the online forms. If you do not wish to participate, please indicate that you do not provide consent below and click “Continue.” You will then be directed away from the study website. Completion and submission of this consent form and the online forms (as well as participation in the interview) are considered your implied consent to participate in this study. Please print this form for your records before clicking “Continue” below and going on to the next screen.
Appendix C

Demographic Questionnaire
Demographic Questionnaire

1. What is your age? ________________

2. What is your current level of education?
   a. Some high school
   b. High school diploma/GED
   c. Technical school degree
   d. Some college education
   e. Associate’s degree
   f. Bachelor’s degree
   g. Some graduate education
   h. Master’s degree
   i. Doctoral degree
   j. Other professional degree

3. What is your current field of study or employment? ________________

4. What is your race/ethnicity?
   a. African American /Black
   b. American Indian or Alaskan Native
   c. Asian American /Asian
   d. Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
   e. Multiracial
   f. White
   g. Self-identify ________________

5. Do you identify as Hispanic or Latino/a?
   a. Yes
   b. No

6. If you answered “Yes” to question #5, please self-identify the nationality of the origin of your Hispanic or Latino/a ethnicity: ________________

7. What is your country of origin? (Note: If you were born in one country but spent most of your life or affiliate more strongly with another country, please identify the later.) ________________
8. What is your religious/spiritual preference?
   a. Agnostic
   b. Atheist
   c. Buddhist
   d. Catholic
   e. Christian
   f. Hindu
   g. Jewish
   h. Muslim
   i. Spiritual
   j. Wiccan/Pagan
   k. No preference
   l. Self-identify ____________________

9. What was your sex at birth?
   a. Female
   b. Male
   c. Intersex
   d. Self-identify ____________________

10. What is your gender identity?
    a. Woman
    b. Man
    c. Transgender
    d. Self-identify ____________________

11. Do you consider yourself to be:
    a. Heterosexual
    b. Bisexual
    c. Lesbian
    d. Questioning your sexual identity
    e. Unlabeled
    f. Self-identify ____________________

12. People are different in their sexual attraction to other people. Which best describes your current feelings? Are you:
    a. Only attracted to men
    b. Mostly attracted to men
    c. Equally attracted to men and women
    d. Mostly attracted to women
    e. Only attracted to women
    f. Not sure
13. Since puberty, with whom have you had sexual experience(s)?
   a. Only with men
   b. Mostly with men
   c. About the same number of men and women
   d. Mostly with women
   e. Only with women
   f. I have not had sexual experiences
Appendix D

Passionate Friendship Survey Items

(Glover, 2009)
Below is a list of questions about friendship. Please identify your closest, female friendship that was as emotionally intense as a romantic relationship and use this friendship to answer the following questions. For each question, please type your answer or select the statement that best describes your experience. Please use the same friendship for all of the following questions.

1. How old were you when this friendship began? _________

2. How old was your friend? _______

3. How long did this friendship last (i.e. number of years, months, ongoing)? _______

4. The following describes how this friendship ended:
   ___ It ended in a negative way (e.g., fight)
   ___ It ended in a neutral way (e.g., moved)
   ___ I still maintain this friendship

5. On average during our friendship I saw her
   ___ Many times in a day
   ___ Once a Day
   ___ Weekly
   ___ Monthly
   ___ Other (please specify) ____________________________

6. During the period of time when I felt closest to my friend, I saw her:
   ___ Many times in a day
   ___ Once a Day
   ___ Weekly
   ___ Monthly
   ___ Other (please specify) ____________________________
Please use the scale below to respond to the following statements.

1 = Strongly disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Agree 4 = Strongly agree

7. This was the most important relationship at this time
8. I enjoyed being with this friend more than others
9. I felt lonely when I was apart from this friend
10. I always turned to this friend when I had a problem
11. I was inseparable from this friend
12. This friend was always there for me
13. Sometimes I was jealous when she dated other people
14. Sometimes I was jealous when she was with other friends
15. My friend meets my needs
16. I was satisfied with this friendship
17. Our friendship was better than most other people’s friendships
18. At times I wished we weren’t friends
19. This friend meets my expectations
20. I cared more for this friend than she did for me
21. My friend cared more for me than I did for her
22. My friend and I cared for each other equally
Please use the scale below to respond to the following statements.

1 = Never  2 = Occasionally  3 = Often  4 = Always

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Scale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>During the course of this friendship, I dated</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>During the course of this friendship, I was in a romantic relationship</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>with another person</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>I cuddled side by side with this friend</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>I thought about this friend or wondered where she was when we weren’t</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>together.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>I was fascinated with details about this friend’s behavior and/or</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>appearance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>I held hands with this friend</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>I was possessive of this friend’s time or attention</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>I looked into this friend’s eyes without speaking</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix E

Phone Screen Script
Thanks for your interest in our study and the responses you provided on our online survey. If you are still interested in potentially participating in an interview, I would like to chat over the phone for 10-15 minutes. We are looking to interview women about a specific type of friendship and I will be asking a few questions to determine if you qualify for our study.

1. What made you decide to participate in this study? Why did you think you would be a good fit for this study?

2. Briefly describe for me some characteristics of the friendship in a few sentences.

3. We are looking for women who have had friendships that fall somewhere in between or outside the categories of platonic friendships and romantic relationships. Does this fit your friendship? Why?
Appendix F

Semi-Structured Interview
Semi-Structured Interview Format*

1. Tell me about yourself.

2. Tell me the story of the friendship that you thought about while completing the online survey.

3. How was/is this friendship different from your other friendships?

4. How was/is this friendship different from a romantic relationship? Why was it not categorized in this way?**

5. How has this friendship influenced your way of being in other relationships?
   a. Other friendships
   b. Romantic relationships

6. How has this friendship influenced who you are today?
   a. Development of your identities (gender, racial/ethnic, sexual, religious/spiritual, etc.)**
   b. Understandings of sexual orientation broadly
   c. Exploration of your sexual orientation (affection, behavior, identity, emotional preferences) within the context of this friendship
   d. Understandings of personal sexual orientation at the current time

7. What else haven’t I asked about that you would like me to know about your friendship?

*Note: This is the list of main questions/topics. Probes were developed as the data emerged from the interview.

**Note: These interview questions were added as data collection progressed.
Appendix G

Research Team Members’ Lens
In response to the research question, *how have women explored or learned about their sexual orientation within the context of a passionate female friendship?*, each research team member provided their researcher lens prior to data collection:

Maloch shared her lens, based on her review of the relevant literature, pilot study findings, and personal experiences and views:

I believe most passionate friendships will have formed during adolescence. During this developmental period, Erikson proposed that individuals are in the “Identity vs. Role Confusion” stage of psychosocial development (1968). I believe adolescents are not only forming various parts of their identity, but they are also transitioning their most important relationships from family to friendships and undergoing puberty, which brings further development of sexual identity. I believe women will describe a deepening of the friendship over time, characterized by increased emotional intimacy. Some will also describe increased physical intimacy as a natural outcome of the progression of emotional intimacy.

Passionate friendships will differ from other female friendships based on the amount of time the friendship pair spends together (women may mention a heightened level of inseparability), possessiveness over their friend’s time, protectiveness of the friend and anything/anyone that may threaten the level of intimacy in the relationship, and jealousy of the friend entering romantic relationships or forming other close friendships. I believe all passionate friendships will be characterized by high levels of sharing emotionally and each woman will engage in affectional behaviors with their friend. The presence of these affectional behaviors is what I believe will differentiate a “best friendship” from a “passionate friendship.”

I believe passionate friendships will provide women with a safe place to practice sharing with another their emotional reactions and women will learn how to navigate intimacy within these friendships. Thus, I believe passionate friendships will influence women’s way of being in other friendships and romantic relationships by allowing them to be more willing to be vulnerable and share emotional experiences with close others. I think women will have an increased awareness of what level of personal boundaries feels comfortable for them in relationships and women will have greater self-awareness. This will influence following relationships by their self-expression, confidence, and assertiveness of needs.

I believe women who have had passionate friendships will be more comfortable in expressing their vulnerability and emotions with others and will use social support during stressful or challenging periods of time. Women may also be more aware of the types of relationships they tend to or are capable of forming with other women.

I believe all women who have had a passionate friendship will be able to connect their
experiences to their development of sexual orientation in some way, even if they had not thought about this connection prior to the interview. On a broader level, I think that women will become more aware or open to the possibility of there being a spectrum of how sexual orientation may be expressed and realize the potential for sexual fluidity. Heterosexual women who had a passionate friendship with a sexual minority woman may become more aware of the unique experiences faced by sexual minority women in the current society. Women’s exploration of sexual identity will be dependent on their stage of sexual orientation development, but women will likely either solidify their sexual orientation or question their sexual identity label. Women may experience their first sexual attraction or behaviors for women within this friendship and then need to make meaning of what these experiences mean for their sexual identity and romantic preferences. In regards to their understandings of their personal sexual orientation, women may be more open to seeing their sexual orientation having the potential to change and be fluid over time based on their relational experiences. Women may choose a sexual identity label to account for their experiences within the passionate friendship. Other women may feel that their intimate experiences within the friendship were unique to the friend and may not generalize it to their sexual orientation more broadly.

Benoist shared:

I believe my experiences with passionate friendships (all women) informed my sexual identity development; I reflected on this in my coming out process. I believe passionate friendships will inform participant sexual orientation development, regardless of identity label. I have a tendency to not fix people into a specific identity label and I do not believe people are truly heterosexual or lesbian.

Requarth shared:

Based on my experiences seeing women struggle with the coming out process, I believe if there is romantic behavior in a friendship, the person is a lesbian – whether she expresses it or not, for some social reason.

Scarton shared:

I believe if one experiences a passionate friendship, they are further along on [the Kinsey] spectrum [towards the end of] bisexual/lesbian. I believe passionate friendships will help individuals develop their sexual identity, regardless of the identity label.

Bieschke shared:

I believe sexual orientation is distributed on a bell curve and that the vast majority of
people occupy the vast middle. I think there are a few people on the tail ends of the continuum who are exclusively attracted to either the same or the opposite sex. While I think everyone can learn about intimacy in relationships from a passionate friendship, the women who will be more influenced are a) those in the vast middle and b) those who are more towards the end of the lesbian continuum. For these women, passionate friendships will challenge their assumption that they are heterosexual. Those who are most consistent with societal expectations will likely not see the passionate friendship as influential on their sexual orientation. Those who assumed they were heterosexual will be influenced.
VITA

Janelle K. Maloch

EDUCATION

The Pennsylvania State University 8/2016
College of Education, University Park, PA
Ph.D., Counseling Psychology, APA-Accredited
APA-Accredited Pre-Doctoral Internship at Texas Woman’s University Counseling Center

University of Pennsylvania 8/2010
Graduate School of Education, Philadelphia, PA
M.S.Ed., Counseling and Psychological Services

The Pennsylvania State University 5/2009
College of the Liberal Arts, University Park, PA
B.S. Psychology with concentration in Neuroscience with Honors Psychology from the Schreyer Honors
College and minors in Biology and English

PUBLICATIONS & MANUSCRIPTS


SELECTED RESEARCH PRESENTATIONS

Effrig, J. C., Sheridan, J. K., McAleavey, A. A., Locke, B. D., & Bieschke, K. J. (June, 2012). Change in depressive symptoms for treatment-seeking sexual minority clients. Paper presentation at the American Psychological Association Convention, Virginia Beach, VA.
