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.