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A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY OF THE  
EXPERIENCE OF GRIEF IN THE LIVES OF LESBIANS  
AGE 60 AND OLDER: IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE  
AND SOCIETAL CHANGE

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A Dissertation

Presented to

the Faculty of the Graduate School of Social Work

University of Denver

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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by

Ginger C. Meyette

August 2009

Advisor: Dr. Enid Cox

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Author: Ginger C. Meyette  
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Advisor: Dr. Enid Cox  
Degree Date: August 2009

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to understand the lived experiences of self-identified lesbians age 60 and older concerning grief related to various life experiences and to develop a grounded theory related to the findings. The purpose goes beyond describing the phenomenon of grief focusing on grief related exclusively to death loss. The purpose includes eliciting comments about grief related to overt or covert discrimination due to ageism, sexism, and/or homophobia as well as the connection between the personal and the political in terms of what needs to change to bring about social justice.

The issue of grief in the lives of older lesbians can be defined as being increasingly significant due to the fact that the many factors affecting the older lesbian population cause distress to individuals, families, and the community at large. This phenomenon can be defined socially, politically, and economically; and many aspects of the problem cross the boundaries of these areas of definition.

The methodology of the present study followed grounded theory methodology as developed by Glaser and Strauss (1999). Sampling consisted of snowball sampling followed by theoretical sampling. A total of 27 women participated in this study. Data collection was conducted through 3 focus groups, 22 individual interviews, and 1 interview with an interracial lesbian couple. Data analysis took place throughout the

study. Constant comparative analysis was used, and data analysis was assisted by use of the HyperResearch program through [www.researchware.com](http://www.researchware.com).

The grounded theory that emerged from this study showed that these older lesbians experience an underlying global, contextual grief in almost every aspect of their daily lives due to the lack of acceptance, celebration, and support of their primary relationships as well as their lesbian identity. This grief is experienced as personal and interpersonal grief and grief due to the political climate. Grief for many women is mitigated by positive coping strategies, support systems, and their vision for social action and change.

Implications for clinical and community social work practice, social policy, and social work education are discussed. Implications for future research are also identified, and conclusions expressing hope for the future are suggested.

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I want to thank my partner, Lynda, and our children and grandchildren for their complete support and patience as I worked on this project. Their unconditional support was a great comfort to me.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Grieving, aging, and identifying as lesbian in our present cultural climate can all be considered subversive activities. At first glance, this statement may appear to be radical and without justification. However, closer examination of this statement reveals that it is laden with a deep sense of truth. Grieving people, aging people, and lesbians have all been rendered, to some degree, invisible by the dominant culture in the United States (Butler, 2007; Butler, 2004; Claes and Moore, 2000). Clunis, Fredriksen-Goldsen, Freeman, and Nystrom (2005) state emphatically, “The lives of elder lesbians have simply been overlooked. As women, as lesbians, and as elders, they have been stigmatized and marginalized by U.S. society” (p. 1).

People in these categories have all made efforts to speak out on their own behalf at various times in history, sometimes only to have their voices silenced again as they are unceremoniously (and sometimes violently) driven back into their grieving, aging, and/or lesbian “closets”. Indeed, it is in some ways a miracle that those whose identity encompasses all three of these categories, not to mention additional categories of race, class, disability, and others, have experienced their voices as being heard at all, that groups and individuals in these categories continue to speak out regarding their condition and their needs and continue to fight for recognition and social justice.

### *Background of the Problem*

Grief and loss will touch us all at various times in our lives. Grief has been described as “a profoundly emotional experience universal to the human condition” (Anderson, 2000, p. 121). These experiences know no boundaries of race or creed, gender or sexuality. The same could be said of aging and identity formation. In many ways, these are universal conditions that we all experience; yet, in other ways, our experiences of them are totally unique. Understanding the history and life experiences of our lesbian elders will help us to determine what the future may hold (Clunis, Fredriksen-Goldsen, Freeman, and Nystrom, 2005).

Ehrenberg (1996) states, “Many gays and lesbians feel that their needs as they age are no different from the needs of everyone else and that posing the question as to what mental health issues they face is heterosexist” (p. 189). It is true that older lesbians face many of the same issues encountered by older people in general, women of any age, lesbians of any age, and other grieving people. Still, older lesbians also experience issues uniquely their own, such as discrimination by health care systems due to their lesbian identity, or lack of services to address their grief in specific ways (Butler, 2007).

In an initial literature search regarding this issue, this researcher found works on grief theory (Kubler-Ross, 1969; Worden, 2002; Rando, 1984), women and aging (Fullmer, Shenk, and Eastland, 1999), lesbians and aging (Ehrenberg, 1996; Klitzman and Greenberg, 2002; Slusher, Mayer, and Dunkle, 1996; Friend, 1991; Kimmel and Martin (Eds.), 2001), and an extensive body of lesbian, feminist, and queer theory (Butler, 1999; Butler, 2004; Goodloe, 1994; Ortner, 1996) which could be applied to the

focus of this study; but very few articles and/or studies were found which included grief and loss issues specifically in relation to the population of older lesbians (Thompson, 1996; Jones, 1986). Even in terms of aging issues, Grossman, D'Augelli, and O'Connell (2001) state, "Most people have opinions about aging, and many people have thoughts about homosexuality. But few individuals have considered them simultaneously. In fact, many scholars, advocates for older adults, and other individuals consider the terms *gay* and *aging* to be incompatible" (p. 24). Thus, a qualitative study in this area will be a vital contribution to the current body of knowledge, guiding social workers and others to better serve this population.

#### *Statement of the Problem*

The issue of grief in the lives of older lesbians can be defined as being increasingly significant due to the fact that the many factors affecting the older lesbian population cause distress to individuals, families, and the community at large, including the families and friends of these women. This phenomenon can be defined socially, politically, and economically; and many aspects of the problem cross the boundaries of these areas of definition. Until fairly recently, the voices of lesbians were seldom heard in any sector of society describing their experiences or expressing their needs (Allen, Blieszner, and Roberto, 2000; Fullmer, Shenk, and Eastland, 1999; Butler, 2004). Thankfully, that has changed in recent times (Claassen, 2005; Whipple, 2006); but, in many ways, the three topics addressed in this study – grief, aging, and lesbians – are still taboo subjects. Rigorous and purposeful social work research has the potential to bring

these issues “out of the closet” so to speak, giving voice to those whose voices have too long been silent.

Baby boomers are aging, and large numbers of people will need access to services created for older people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). The Census Bureau reports that, while the U.S population has tripled, the number of persons age 65 and older has increased 11 fold. Orel (2004) states, “Due to dramatic increases in life expectancy, the number of individuals age 65 and older in the United States has grown tremendously” (p. 58). Among this group will be many gay and lesbian elders (Claes and Moore, 2000; Orel, 2004), many of whom may have led essentially invisible lives. Even today, reliable estimates of numbers are hard to obtain, partially because a specific question regarding sexual orientation has not appeared in the Census materials (Orel, 2004; Butler, 2004). As a result of being rendered invisible by society at large, and even by the gay and lesbian community, older lesbians may find that services are not available to meet their needs. Though the awareness of the needs and strengths of older lesbians in this country seems to be growing, much more needs to be done by social workers and others in terms of educating ourselves regarding the needs of this population, developing theories which enable us to provide compassionate care to this group, doing research to substantiate the identified needs, and developing programs and services to assist these women as they enter the ranks of the aged. In addition, it is necessary for social work scholars to contribute to the development of theories and to add to the body of writing, scholarly or otherwise, to contribute both to the scholarly conversation and the practice narrative, and to stimulate one another’s theoretical thinking regarding this population.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2000), there are an estimated 78.2 million Baby Boomers in the United States, which means (as stated by Frost, 1998) that “there is a large number of gays and lesbians 60 and over” (p. 17). Frost (1998) advocates that we develop better research into such areas as “normative gay aging, intervention strategies, housing and financial suggestions and options, cooperative and creative living arrangements, preferences for blended or dedicated nursing homes for gays and lesbians, and the particular concerns of the aged” (p. 18). Thus, researchers, therapists, and other practitioners are becoming aware of some of the impending needs of this population. It is also vital for theorists and scholars to continue to contemplate issues facing this population. This study contributes a grounded theory through the lens of a social work researcher along with the participants (co-researchers) regarding grief in the lives of older lesbians.

#### *Purpose of the Study*

Some researchers speak of the absolute importance of researchers being clear about the purpose of their studies (Newman, Ridenour, Newman, Mario, and Demarco, 2003). These researchers, in fact, present a typology to aid other researchers in that endeavor. These authors state, “Researchers strengthen the validity (e.g. legitimacy, trustworthiness, applicability) when they can show the consistency among the research purposes, the questions, and the methods they use” (p. 167).

The purpose of this study is to understand the lived experiences of self-identified lesbians age 60 and older concerning grief related to various life experiences and to develop a grounded theory related to the findings. The purpose goes beyond simply

describing the phenomenon of grief from the perspective of older lesbians, and it goes beyond focusing on grief related exclusively to death loss. The purpose includes eliciting comments and opinions about grief related to overt or covert discrimination due to ageism, sexism, and/or homophobia as well as exploring the connection between the personal and the political in terms of what needs to change to bring about more of a sense of social justice related to their grief experiences. As a qualitative grounded theory study, the purpose includes exploring and generating themes related to grief that emerge during the study.

#### *Research Question and Rationale*

The primary research question for this study is: What is the experience of grief as perceived by lesbians age 60 and older? This question was derived from the statement of the research area of interest and the literature review by focusing on where the gaps are in the current body of literature related to this problem. This question is sufficiently open ended to facilitate thick description, open narrative, and storytelling for the purposes of the study. Interview guides are included as appendices.

#### *Importance of the Study*

This issue is particularly important and significant for social work, because our Code of Ethics demands that we advocate for the worth and dignity of all human beings as well as for social justice for all people (NASW Code of Ethics, 1996). According to Butler (2004), the social work profession is committed to understanding the issues faced by LGBT people as they live within the dominant culture. In our teaching, in our marching in the streets, and even in research, we as social workers must embrace the

radical paradigm that all issues (including grief, aging, and the treatment of lesbians) are social work issues that must be studied, encountered, and dealt with in every aspect of our personal and professional lives. The knowledge gained by the present study has the potential to inform social work practice in clinical as well as community and policy areas, thus benefiting older lesbian clients as well as their families and society as a whole.

This study makes a contribution toward filling in gaps that exist in both research and conceptual literature regarding grief in the lives of lesbians age 60 and older and contributes to both clinical and community practice knowledge, specifically in the social work field. The sections that follow will provide a discussion of the scope of the study, a description of the conceptual framework, definitions of terms, and a description of the present study.

#### *Scope of the Study*

Respondents for the present study were recruited from the population of self-identified lesbians age 60 and older in one Western state. The study intentionally did not include gay men or other members of the LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) community, though inclusion of these members of the community could certainly be an emphasis in future research based on information gleaned in this study. The scope of the study was guided by a review of the literature, the statement of purpose, and the research question. A total of 27 women were interviewed for this study, including 3 focus groups, 22 individual interviews, and an interview with an interracial lesbian couple. A complete description of the methodology can be found in a later chapter.

### *Conceptual Framework*

As a framework for the design of the present study, this researcher joins other researchers in claiming the advocacy/participatory approach in terms of knowledge claims. According to Creswell (2003), writers in this area have drawn on the writings of Marx, Adorno, Marcuse, Habermas and Freire among others. Creswell (2003) states that "...these inquirers felt that the constructivist stance did not go far enough in advocating for an action agenda to help marginalized peoples. These researchers believe that inquiry needs to be intertwined with politics and a political agenda. Thus, the research should contain an action agenda for reform that may change the lives of the participants, the institutions in which individuals work or live, and the researcher's life" (p. 9 – 10).

In terms of an overarching paradigm, this researcher joins philosophically with Mertens (2003) and her concept of the "transformative-emancipatory" paradigm. Mertens (2003) states, "In society at large, trends in demographics and increased social pluralism increase the importance of recognizing cultural differences and injustice based on those cultural differences" (p. 135). She goes on to describe how feminist scholars' views on research are all "premised on the knowledge of women's oppression and the vision of social justice for women through research as one of a range of strategies" (p. 137). The population for the proposed study consists of lesbians age 60 and older, and the feminist use of this research paradigm seems to apply to them as well. This group is multiply oppressed in a variety of ways depending on such other factors as race, class, and disability; therefore, research that seeks to transform and emancipate is needed to help to liberate these women and the older lesbians who come after them.



Epistemologically, Mertens (2003) states, “In transformative terms, objectivity is valued in the sense of providing a balanced complete view of the program processes and effects such that bias is not interjected because of a lack of understanding of key viewpoints. However, to obtain this depth of understanding, it is necessary for the researcher to be involved in the communities affected by the service, program, or policy to a significant degree. This epistemological assumption underscores the importance of an interactive link between the researcher and the participants” (p. 141). This epistemological stance reflects this researcher’s sense of the importance of the interaction between the researcher and the participants as “co-researchers.”

#### *Definition of Terms*

Though grief is often thought of as a very personal issue, often in connection with the death of a loved one, grief for the purposes of this study has been defined as deep sadness or sorrow that is caused, not only by death or other personal losses, but by the very political and economic climate within which many people live their daily lives. Thus, through this study, the hope was not only to elucidate people’s experiences and feelings about their personal grief, but to go beyond those experiences to people’s experiences and feelings of grief regarding daily perceived or actual discrimination due to ageism, sexism, homophobia, and even the prejudice and discrimination grieving people feel just because they are grieving.

Stein (1997) completed a study in which she “decided to interview only women who assumed the label ‘lesbian’ (a much smaller grouping than the universe of women who have homosexual desires or who engage in homosexual activity)” (p. 6). In the

present study, this delineation of the term “lesbian” was adopted, focusing on women who identify openly as lesbian. Lesbian theorists have often raised the question of what it means to self-identify as a lesbian (Tyson, 2001; Stein, 1997). Stein (1997), for example, describes a time in feminism when some feminists went so far as to suggest that any woman was a potential lesbian – she simply had to declare herself one and go through the process of ‘coming out’” (p. 5). In addition, many older lesbians have difficulty using that term to describe themselves (Clunis, Fredriksen-Goldsen, Freeman, Nystrom, 2005; Claasen, 2005). Thus, the definition of “lesbian” is certainly not fixed, even among scholars in the lesbian feminist and queer theory communities. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, accepting the self-identification of lesbian women seemed to fit well into the goals of qualitative research.

In terms of the definition of “older”, that term has also had a varied history in research. Jacobson (1995) states that “a review of six studies on older lesbians reported a range in bottom ages from 40 to 60 years” (p. 45). In this study, women were interviewed who self-identify as lesbian and who are age 60 and older. Choosing a starting age is a somewhat arbitrary task, and there is no “right” way to go about it; but it sets some parameters around a nebulous term such as “older”, and it clarifies for the researcher, the participants, and the future readers of the research study the boundaries of this particular study.

For the purposes of this study and as commonly used in the LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) community, the term “out” will be used to indicate women who self-identify as lesbian, an awareness of identity that is usually spoken of both publicly

and privately, though the terms used to describe their identity may vary. Claassen (2005) stated, “Sixteen women expressed a strong dislike for the word ‘lesbian.’” (p. 228).

Thus, even the term “out” was open to various interpretations by the respondents in this study. As used by the participants in this study, the term “coming out” was sometimes used to indicate an awareness by the participant of her own lesbian identity; but she may not have come out publicly in other settings, even to family or close friends.

The term “closet” is commonly used as a term meaning that a person is *not* out, in some cases even to themselves. (Of course, those in this category obviously did not participate in the study.) For the purposes of this study, the term will generally mean a metaphorical image of where a person might have been *before* coming out to even close friends and family, and where they might still occasionally retreat when being “out” (for instance, at a job or in a health care situation) may seem threatening in some way. Additional knowledge regarding the use of these terms did emerge from the data in the present study, allowing for surprising and fresh nuances of definition to inform future research.

### *Preview of the Dissertation*

In the following sections, a review of the literature will be provided, indicating the state of current theory and knowledge related to the issues that are the target of the present study. This will be followed by a detailed discussion of the qualitative paradigm as well as the qualitative grounded theory methods used (including sampling, data collection, and data analysis). Issues of credibility and trustworthiness will be discussed as well as ethical considerations. Research findings will be described in detail, and the

grounded theory and the connections that tie it together will be presented. The report will conclude with a discussion of the findings, implications for practice, and suggestions for future research.

## Chapter 2: Review of Supporting Literature

In a grounded theory study (Glaser and Strauss, 1999; Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Creswell, 2003), it is not necessary to put forth a definite theory at the beginning of the study. Rather, the theory emerges from the data and is compared with extant theories and literature at the end of the study. Nevertheless, it is important to be aware of applicable theories and literature to know where the gaps exist which could be addressed by the present study. The following literature review will address the current state of knowledge and research in this area, and gaps in the literature will be discussed.

### *Theoretical Literature*

In studying this issue, it is necessary to draw from a variety of theoretical areas, simply because of the diversity of the subject. Aging theory is one area to be taken into consideration. Donahue and McDonald (2005) have contributed to the knowledge base in this area in their comprehensive article, “Gay and Lesbian Aging: Current Perspectives and Future Directions for Social Work Practice and Research”. They provide a critique of the current social work stance when they state that “...clinical social work is more involved in the treatment of symptoms as opposed to addressing the root causes of the issues currently being faced by many older gays and lesbians” (p. 360). They go on to state, following Berger (1977), that social workers must adopt the “advocate model of intervention” (p. 360) with LGBT people. These authors present a convincing and forceful argument that we, as social workers, must be at the forefront of

advocating for the rights of older LGBT people, even as we address their clinical needs. This is precisely the point of qualitative social work research with the older LGBT population, including this particular study – to hear their stories, to give voice to their concerns, and to translate theory and knowledge into practice, both at the clinical and community advocacy levels.

In another recent article, Schope (2005) addresses how gay men and lesbians perceive the process of aging. In his study, he found that gay men in general had a more negative view of how gay society perceives aging than did the lesbian respondents. Schope (2005) states, “Further research examining the extent of social support among homosexuals perhaps would help explain if the fear of growing older is tied to an early loss of family and the inability to form or maintain new friendship networks” (p. 35). In fact, every available article and study included strong suggestions for further research into the LGBT community. For so many years, the community was so “fugitive” that studies were almost impossible to carry out. Since the Stonewall Riots of 1969, more LGBT people are willing to be “out” (openly self-identify). However, many LGBT people in their 70s, 80s, and 90s still find it difficult to talk openly about their lives (Claassen, 2005). Thus, since the present study is able to bring to light the stories of some older lesbians as they describe their experiences of grief and aging in relation to their sexual identity, it will be an invaluable addition to the knowledge base, and it could be the jumping off point for future studies into the lives of these women as well as for creating concrete interventions directed toward meeting their service needs.

Kolb (2004) examined a number of theories of aging to see if there are actually such theories that show sensitivity to diversity and can, therefore, inform social work practice in this regard. Kolb (2004) looked at Atchley's (1999) Continuity Theory, which was developed to add an organizing framework for gerontology. This theory suggests that continuity and change exist at the same time for people, and changes tend to be consistent with a person's past life experiences.

Kolb (2004) also looked at the work of Fisher (1993) who developed a framework to describe developmental changes that occur in older adulthood in terms of five age-independent periods. Kolb (2004) states that this theory is particularly appropriate to apply to diverse groups of older adults because it helps people to become aware of the variations in the length and sequence of developmental periods in people's lives.

In addition to these theories of aging, Kolb (2004) analyzed work by Stoller and Gibson (2000) who introduced a life course perspective to study aging while considering gender, race, ethnicity and class. These researchers emphasized the importance of examining the strengths as well as the deficits experienced by people who are aging while experiencing "multiple jeopardy" in terms of possible sources of discrimination. Finally, Kolb (2004) looked at Friend's (1991) work on a theory of successful aging by lesbians and gay men. This theory emphasizes the fact that older gay and lesbian people have the common experience of developing a non-heterosexual identity at some point in their lives, and that they grew up in a particular historical period. The diversity within the gay and lesbian community is brought out. An important aspect of Friend's (1991) theory is the proposition that, because gay and lesbian people have struggled to build a positive

gay or lesbian identity, they may have developed positive skills and attitudes that enable them to adjust to aging in a different way. Taken together, all these theories assist us in understanding aging in general and specifically provide frameworks for thinking about aging when looking at people who are part of marginalized groups.

Grief theory must also be taken into account, since many of the issues confronting older lesbians involve some aspect of grief and loss – hence, the need for the present study. The work of Kubler-Ross (1969) is still considered a classic in this area. She presented five stages experienced by dying and grieving people: (1) Denial and isolation; (2) Anger; (3) Bargaining; (4) Depression; and (5) Acceptance. Later in her life, Kubler-Ross expressed regret at using the term “stages”, because people tended to take the concept too literally and expected people to go through the stages in some neat order and in a linear fashion (Worden, 2002).

Worden (2002) is another grief theorist who, believing that the terms “phases” and “stages” were too passive, developed his own four tasks of mourning: (1) To accept the reality of the loss; (2) To work through to the pain of grief; (3) To adjust to an environment in which the deceased is missing; and (4) To emotionally relocate the deceased and move on with life. These tasks have become core concepts for bereavement workers in the past decade.

Rando (1984) has also done significant work in terms of grief theory, especially in relating grief theory to suggestions for practical clinical interventions. Though these works have made major contributions to grief theory, the major piece that is missing is applying these theories specifically to LGBT clients and, in particular, to older



lesbians. Some contemporary researchers are seeking to close this gap (Thompson, 1996; Donahue and McDonald, 2005; Schope, 2005). Also, many of the grief theorists have been psychologists, psychiatrists, or physicians. There is a need for more social workers to do research and theoretical thinking in these areas, because social workers bring a unique way of looking at theory and practice that can greatly contribute to the scholarly conversation as well as add variety to the established practice base. In addition, many books, studies, scales, and articles about grief tend to focus solely on grief due to some kind of a death loss. (A notable exception is Anderson's [2000] work on grief due to abandonment.) Part of the purpose of the present study is to expand the definition of grief to include grief due to a wide variety of events and life circumstances.

Thompson (1996) presents a clinical model for assisting lesbians who are grieving, specifically during the coming out process. She begins with a general description of the concept of loss in our society, quoting Rando (1984) among other grief theorists, and specifically listing Worden's (1991) four tasks of mourning (as listed above).

After laying this groundwork in grief theory, Thompson (1996) refers to the many articles that have described the coming out process. She then states, "What each of these models has in common is an attempt to put into understandable linear form the complicated non-linear process of identifying as lesbian and acting on that awareness" (p. 212 – 213). Thompson (1996) states, "By choosing to identify as lesbians, we are not entitled to marry lesbian partners, divorce, carry joint health insurance with our partners, or publish pictures in the newspaper to signify intentions to legalize our relationships.

Public display of affection brings the risk of public censure and/or possible loss of job. Finally, coming out to families and friends brings the risk of being rejected or even disowned” (p. 213). Due to all these issues as well as others, Thompson (1996) posits that lesbians grieve the loss of the heterosexual identity and the rites (as well as rights) and privileges associated with that identity.

Thompson (1996) then presents a five-stage model: “(1) To accept the reality of the loss of heterosexual identity and its privileges; (2) Acknowledge specifics of the loss and look for ways to ‘fit in’; (3) To feel the pain of the loss and to grieve; (4) To adjust to life as a lesbian; and (5) To integrate lesbian life into the lesbian community” (p. 214 – 217). These stages are consistent with other stage models of grief as well as Worden’s (2002) four tasks of mourning. The major drawback to these kinds of models is that people often think that the stages move in a linear fashion, and that they are not grieving in the “right” way if they skip a stage or experience the stages in a different order. In truth, people generally move in and out of these stages in no particular order, and definitely not in linear fashion. This model could be useful in dealing with older lesbians if the fluid nature of the stages is explained by a compassionate social worker or other therapist, and consistent support is given as needed.

Thompson (1996), in delineating the role of the therapist, addresses the fact that this model might look different when dealing with lesbians who have previously been married and might be grieving the end of their marriage, their roles as wife and mother, and perhaps even fighting for the custody of their children. She also discusses how the model might be different when working with older lesbians of color and Jewish lesbians.

In addition, Thompson (1996) addresses the issue of not passing judgment on lesbians with different political views than the therapist. She states, “It is too easy for those of us who believe in being out to not respect the safety of passing for lesbians who are still not sure they like being lesbian, or to subtly imply that lesbians need to be political” (p. 219). Thus, social workers working with older lesbian clients need to be as nonjudgmental regarding these issues as possible.

In her conclusion, Thompson (1996) describes clients who have expressed a sense of relief at being able to openly grieve the losses experienced during the coming-out process, even stating that they felt less anger at their families after grieving. Thompson (1996) concludes, “Experiencing the loss allows women the opportunity to experience the full joy and celebration of being lesbian” (p. 220). Thompson’s (1996) article, though acknowledging reservations about her stage model, is a needed contribution to the literature on older lesbians, specifically as they face the coming-out process at whatever age in their lifetime.

Ehrenberg (1996) uses psychoanalytic theory to discuss various mental health issues facing the older lesbian community. She begins by discussing developmental needs for people over 60 in general. She then provides a thorough review of the literature related to findings on gay men and findings on older lesbians. She describes the hostility and discrimination older gay and lesbian people often face when they find the need to utilize public resources. Ehrenberg (1996) states, “Homophobia is rampant in many institutional settings: not only is there general disregard and contempt for older persons

at large, but this is apt to be intensified in the case of gays and lesbians who may, therefore, suffer from lack of attention and friendly input, if not outright neglect” (p. 197). Ehrenberg (1996) also describes the isolation experienced by older lesbians in “rural areas or in fundamentalist heartland territory” (p. 197) as well as the discrimination that older lesbians encounter in the gay community itself, especially in bars or other organizations which may cater to a younger crowd.

Feminist theory, especially lesbian feminist theory, is another theory base from which to view the issues confronting older lesbians, even in terms of their experience of grief. Lesbians have sometimes viewed feminist theory with suspicion, believing that it was mostly focused on heterosexual women, and they have also been skeptical of what has been termed “queer theory”, believing that it had been co-opted by gay men. In her book, *Cross-Purposes: Lesbians, Feminists, and the Limits of Alliance*, Heller (1997) states, “I believe that feminists, lesbians, and queers need one another’s energies, theories, histories, communities, and politics as we continue to rethink and remake the coalitions that remain necessary for our survival” (p. 14). It will be interesting to see how and if these theoretical perspectives can “begin questioning alliances in the interests of reforming and strengthening them” (p. 14) in the years to come.

Fullmer, Shenk, and Eastland (1999) use a postmodern and feminist approach to examine the social visibility of older lesbians and the relationship between women’s sexuality, aging, and lesbians. The authors describe what they term “postmodern constructions of identity and negating the older lesbian” (p. 133). They state that “...issues of identity are at the core of the current cultural war involving the rights of

homosexual persons... Within the discourse of North American culture, one of the most important aspects of lesbian identity is the sexual behavior of such women, which is regarded as abnormal or, within the context of the male gaze, regarded as titillating. That lesbianism (as well as homosexuality) is a *behavior* as well as an *identity* is clearly a primary argument of the numerous conservative anti-homosexual political campaigns currently raging in this culture” (p. 135). This is a strong statement of the intense conservative backlash directed against gay and lesbian people at this moment in time. Referring to issues of identity as a “cultural war” is an apt description and adds a layer to the experience of older lesbians that older women in the dominant culture do not have to face.

The authors go on to describe what they call “multiple hierarchical identities: aging, women, sexuality, and lesbians” (p. 136). They discuss the paradox that “older women are perceived as asexual while older lesbians are defined in terms of their ‘unusual’ sexuality” (p. 137). They also talk about women who have never “come out” publicly, and the stereotype that lesbians do not have children and have never had sexual experiences with men. These types of stereotypes contribute to the invisibility of older lesbians. The authors also mention the youth-oriented nature of lesbians portrayed in films and books, thus further contributing to erasing older lesbians from visibility.

These authors highlight the fact that “lesbians and gay men represent two distinct communities” (p. 139), a fact not generally recognized by the dominant heterosexual community. In discussing feminist gerontological approaches, the authors state, “The issues and concerns of feminist gerontology are exacerbated for older lesbians who are

both older women and members of the disenfranchised group of lesbians” (p. 146). This is an important issue to be considered by feminist gerontologists. The authors conclude by encouraging “education, empowerment, and advocacy” (p. 146) to assist older lesbians to improve the quality of their lives.

Butler (1999), blending feminist and queer theory, writes of a variety of issues related to gender identity in *Gender Trouble*. At one point, she describes some of Freud’s concepts concerning grief and loss: “In *The Ego and the Id* (1923), he elaborates on the structure of mourning as the incipient structure of ego formation, a thesis whose traces can be found in the 1917 essay ‘Mourning and Melancholia’. In the experience of losing another human being whom one has loved, Freud argues, the ego is said to incorporate that other into the very structure of the ego, taking on attributes of the other and ‘sustaining’ the other through magical acts of imitation. The loss of the other whom one desires and loves is overcome through a specific act of identification that seeks to harbor that other within the very structure of the self: ‘So by taking flight into the ego, love escapes annihilation’” (178). Thus, Freud, through Butler’s feminist lens, enters the theoretical and knowledge base of this study, adding depth and richness to the theoretical and epistemological underpinnings.

In her book *Undoing Gender*, Butler (2004) speaks eloquently of the intersection of sexuality and grief. She states, “Many people think that grief is privatizing, that it returns us to a solitary situation, but I think it exposes the constitutive sociality of the self, a basis for thinking a political community of a complex order...This relation to the Other does not precisely ruin my story or reduce me to speechlessness, but it does, invariably,

clutter my speech with signs of its undoing” (p. 19). Through Butler’s (2004) theorizing about grief and our reactions to it as gay and lesbian people, we can gain a broader concept of the essence of grief, not just as a clinical issue to be dealt with in a therapist’s office, but as a profound human experience that binds us as a community. This theoretical basis can further our knowledge and understanding of the experience of grief in the lives of older lesbians and serve as a foundation upon which the stories shared by the participants in this study can build.

### *Research Literature*

In recent years as well as in the past, numerous studies have been done on the individual concepts of grief, aging, and even various aspects of the LGBT population. The gap is obvious in that few studies have combined these three areas. In looking through the indexes of fairly comprehensive and well-researched books about grief written specifically for practitioners, it has been disappointing to discover that the words “lesbian” or “gay” are not even included in the index. If the word “lesbian” is included, there is sometimes a cross reference which says, “See gay and lesbian.” One would never look up the term “women” in an index and expect it to say, “See men and women.”

In two recent studies on grief, a study by Ringdal, Jordbay, Ringdal, and Kaasa (2001) dealing with grief in caregivers of someone who died of cancer, and a study by Sanders and Corley (2003) of grief in caregivers of persons with Alzheimer’s Disease, this researcher’s question was, “Were any of these dying people or caregivers gay or lesbian?” The subject was not addressed. Many of the relationships were referred to as “husband” and “wife” which, since LGBT marriage is not yet legal in this country, seems

to carry a presumption of heterosexuality. This researcher is certainly not advocating that every single study needs to include LGBT people. (The proposed study will not be including heterosexual people or even men.) However, certainly more needs to be done to purposefully collect data showing whether gay or lesbian people were involved in studies targeting general grief or aging issues rather than simply giving in to what has been called the “assumption of heterosexuality” in research studies.

In terms of studies combining aging and lesbians, much has been done in recent years. Claassen’s (2005) study mentioned earlier entitled *Whistling Women* was a study stretching over four years that included in-depth interviews with forty-four women over 59 years of age. Topics covered included identity, families, economics, and others. Claassen (2005) found that it did not seem to be important to divide her respondents into two age cohorts as she had originally thought, though she did find some significant differences between the age cohorts in terms of funding retirement (p. 270).

Embedded within some of the topics were discussions about death; but grief, even related to these death losses, was not discussed in any depth. Claassen (2005) briefly mentioned one woman who had a son who was gay and died of AIDS (p. 58), two women who lost their husbands to death (p. 73), a woman who lost her partner of 28 years to death (p. 193), women who died or lost partners while being cared for by members of a lesbian community (p. 218), women who lost parents (throughout the book), and women who speculated about an afterlife related to their own death in the future (p. 206 and 209); but she did not describe the grief reactions of these women. Also, the larger grief due to discrimination by society was not addressed.



Comerford, Henson-Stroud, Sionoinn, and Wheeler (2004) in their qualitative study with 15 lesbian elders in a rural environment marvelously entitled, *Crone Songs* found that three broad themes emerged from the data as having an impact on these aging lesbian women – “self-reliance mediated by interdependence, the state as context, and social supports” (p. 418). This study moves from the personal to the political in identifying the strengths and needs of these women; but it does not include “grief” as one of the identifying key words, and grief did not seem to be an important factor in the study.

Besides the studies already mentioned by Donahue and McDonald (2005) and Schope (2005), other studies combining the topics of aging and lesbians deserve mention. In a grounded theory study of lesbians’ midlife development, Howell and Beth (2004) compared the experiences of midlife of twelve lesbians, ages 41 – 54, to descriptions in two previous studies in which the respondents were almost all heterosexual women. Their findings indicated that, though the lesbians in their study experienced many of the same situations described by heterosexual women in midlife, they experienced the events differently. They describe the lesbian women as experiencing “less turmoil” (p. 133) in midlife, and they also found that the lesbian women expressed “unique concerns” (p. 133) regarding old age. These researchers state, “...they experienced grief with the pragmatism of individuals who had already been through many difficult experiences” (p. 143). They strongly encourage ongoing research into the gerontological needs of lesbians and the availability of resources to meet the needs of these women.

Anetzberger, Ishler, Mostade, and Blair (2004) report on a series of community dialogues held in Cleveland, Ohio on issues and concerns of older gay and lesbians called *Gray and Gay*. These authors found that the dialogues accomplished their three objectives – to increase understanding in the community regarding older gay and lesbian persons, to identify issues that were important to consider in working with older gays and lesbians, and to develop strategies to improve service delivery, employment, programming, and volunteer opportunities for older gays and lesbians (p. 36 – 37). Participants in the dialogues identified 24 issues regarding serving the older gay and lesbian community, and they recommended 99 specific action strategies. The authors conclude by offering suggestions regarding how such dialogues can be structured and implemented in other areas of the United States.

Another important qualitative study cited earlier was conducted by Clunis, Fredriksen-Goldsen, Freeman, and Nystrom (2005) and was titled *Lives of Lesbian Elders: Looking Back, Looking Forward*. These researchers interviewed 62 lesbians ages 55 to 95 regarding various aspects of their lives, including coming out, identity, family, work, aging, adversity, and resiliency. In their conclusion, these researchers stated, “Despite the strength and capabilities of the women we interviewed, they remain a largely invisible population in large part due to the historical conditions under which they came of age” (p. 165). They found that one of the greatest sources of strength for these women came from within themselves as well as one of the greatest dangers, what they describe as “the gay and lesbian conservative movement, which advocates assimilation”

(p. 190). These discoveries certainly point the way toward the need for additional research for the future.

McFarland and Sanders (2003) conducted a pilot study with gay and lesbian elders regarding what plans they have made to prepare for their old age, what kinds of information they thought social workers and other service providers need to know to care for them, and their perceptions of aging. These researchers found that almost 75% of the respondents had started making plans for their old age. In addition, they found that the respondents believed that social workers needed to have a solid knowledge of gay and lesbian people and the importance of their partners in their lives. An additional finding was that, as these gay and lesbian people grew older, their views of aging became more positive. The studies and articles mentioned above contribute immensely to the literature on older lesbians; but, again, the concept of grief was not specifically the target of their studies.

A qualitative study by Whipple (2006) entitled *Lesbian Widows* makes an excellent contribution to the literature on grief in lesbians who have lost specifically a life partner. She found that, over time, most of the women arrived at a place where life became meaningful once again. She concludes by listing some of the “gifts” these “widows” described that came to them as a result of living through the grief process, such as the ability to live in the present moment, finding inner strength, learning to plan ahead, and learning to honor one’s own life. The stories in this study are powerful; but many of her respondents are younger, and issues of aging, other kinds of grief besides death of a partner, and the wider political implications are not covered in any depth.

The intention of this literature review is to provide a foundational description of the current state of theory and knowledge about the problems of grief, aging, and lesbians. As stated at the beginning, it is obvious that a glaring gap in the literature to this point is the lack of a substantial body of studies combining all three of these areas and the lack of a coherent theory to guide social workers and others in working with older lesbians around grief issues. The present study is needed as a contribution toward filling this gap in the knowledge base so that we as social workers can more adequately serve this population in terms of clinical as well as community practice.

## Chapter 3: Research Methods

### *The Qualitative Paradigm*

Creswell (2003) mentions a number of criteria for the researcher to consider in selecting an approach. One important thing to consider is whether there is a match between the problem and the approach. Creswell (2003) indicates that a grounded theory qualitative design can be useful to “generate or discover a theory” (p. 56) related to a particular phenomenon or situation.

Personal experiences should also be considered according to Creswell (2003). He specifically states, “For advocacy/participatory writers, there is undoubtedly a strong personal stimulus to pursue topics that are of personal interest – issues that relate to marginalized people and an interest in creating a better society for them and for everyone” (p. 23). This paradigm was a guiding force in the present study.

At the beginning of the second chapter of his book on qualitative research, Creswell (1998) states, “I think metaphorically of qualitative research as an intricate fabric composed of minute threads, many colors, different textures, and various blends of material...Like the loom on which fabric is woven, general frameworks hold qualitative research together” (p. 13). This imagery expresses this researcher’s view of the basic nature of qualitative research, including grounded theory. Qualitative research is not advocated *instead of* quantitative research; rather, each of these methods of study can

contribute to the body of knowledge in many fields, both separately and together, as in “mixed methodology”(Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998).

For this particular study, a qualitative method, specifically grounded theory, has been chosen due to the exploratory nature of the study and the importance of discovering a theory regarding grief in the lives of older lesbians. The qualitative method is vital in terms of contributing to the knowledge base in this area. Patton (2002) states, “Qualitative methods facilitate study of issues in depth and detail” (p. 14). Patton (2002) goes on to say that “...qualitative methods typically produce a wealth of detailed information about a much smaller number of people and cases...In qualitative inquiry, **the researcher is the instrument**” (p. 14). All of these statements fit this researcher’s purposes in conducting the present study. Since, based on the literature review, very little research has been done combining the three areas of aging, grief, and lesbians, in-depth stories rich in detail are essential for beginning to learn through the voices of older lesbians themselves what issues are even important to them and relevant to their lives. The idea of “researcher as instrument” brings to mind the image of a midwife, as if the researcher is assisting older lesbians in “giving birth” to their stories. In fact, Patton (2002) uses similar imagery later on in his book: “I sometimes think about the time after the interview as a period for postpartum reflection, a time to consider what has been revealed or what has been birthed” (p. 384). This researcher embraces this imagery as a metaphor for the concept of the intense layers of meaning that can be uncovered and “given birth” in the course of qualitative inquiry.

May (2002) states, “We can now observe that data are produced, not collected, and it is the process of production that is fundamentally related to the product...The knower (as researcher) is now implicated in the construction of the known (the dynamics and content of society and social relations)” (p. 1 – 2). This statement captures some of the essence of qualitative research, including the idea of the “researcher as instrument” and the idea of data being “produced” by the researcher and the participants in concert with one another, not simply “collected” by the researcher with the “participant” as more of a passive object of research. This is not to say that quantitative data is not important, or that quantitative methods are “wrong”. It simply implies that there is another alternative which might be appropriate in certain situations, and that its structure (and there is one) is more fluid in some ways rather than fixed.

According to Newman and Benz (1998), “Virtually all qualitative researchers, regardless of their theoretical differences, reflect some sort of individual phenomenological perspective” (p. 2). Due to the exploratory nature of the present study, this “phenomenological perspective” guides the research as this researcher seeks to elicit descriptions of a phenomenon that has not been described thoroughly in the past with this particular population. Giorgi (1985) makes the point that “...this emphasis on description does not necessarily rule out quantification (a form of description) but simply that there is no pressure to quantify unless the demand arises intrinsically from the situation” (p. 69).

There are other reasons for choosing a qualitative method for the present study. One of these reasons is simply the nature of the research question. According to Creswell (1998), “In a qualitative study, the research question often starts with a *how* or *what*” (p. 17) rather than a *why* type of question. The purpose of the research question in the proposed study is to elicit the opinions and experiences of participants in their own words; and this fits with the qualitative method, specifically grounded theory. As Moustakas (1994) states, “The aim is to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it” (p. 13). Giorgi (1985) states that “...the purpose of the method being developed and exemplified here is to do justice to the lived aspects of human phenomena; and to do so, one first has to know how someone actually experienced what has been lived” (p. 1).

Another reason for choosing a qualitative method, as alluded to earlier, is that this topic needs to be *explored*. Again, to use Creswell’s (1998) words, a researcher might choose a qualitative study if “variables cannot be easily identified, theories are not available to explain behavior of participants or their population of study, and theories need to be developed” (p. 17).

According to Creswell (1998), a third reason to employ the qualitative method would be “because of the need to present a *detailed* view of the topic” (p. 17). In the present study, since so little has been done in this area in the past, this researcher wanted participants to be able to tell in detail about their views and experiences. Individuals were also studied in their *natural setting*. Creswell (1998) states, “This involves going



out to the setting or field of study, gaining access, and gathering material” (p. 17). This is where the researcher as “instrument” and “active learner” (p. 18) comes into play. As a “midlife lesbian” herself (self-identified lesbian over 55), this researcher studied an issue that is vitally important to the researcher due to being part of the “Baby Boomer” generation that is rapidly joining the ranks of the aged. Also, since this researcher identifies as a “midlife lesbian”, access to this population was not much of a problem. Many of this researcher’s acquaintances are part of the category of older lesbians and were willing to be key informants, leading this researcher to other lesbians age 60 and older who participated in the interviews in their homes or other settings of their choice and referred other friends and acquaintances for the study

The qualitative design also fits this researcher’s worldview, which allows the researcher to be open to multiple realities and multiple perspectives. Creswell (1998) states that a researcher doing qualitative research must be prepared to “write long passages, because the evidence must substantiate claims and the writer needs to show multiple perspectives” (p. 17). Creswell (1998) also suggests that the researcher needs to incorporate quotes from the participants, which give their perspectives in their own words. These concepts all seem to fit well with the present study.

### *Grounded Theory*

Glaser and Strauss (1999) define grounded theory as “the discovery of theory from data” (p. 1). They describe a major strategy for furthering this aim as a “general method of comparative analysis” (p. 1). These researchers state strongly that “the adequacy of a theory...cannot be divorced from the process by which it is generated”

(p. 5). Thus, in the current study, grounded theory philosophy and techniques as well as the overarching philosophies and techniques of qualitative inquiry in general, informed and guided the entire research process from sampling to the analysis of data. The rationale for choosing this particular type of qualitative research is that the research question, the purpose for the study, and the nature of the population to be studied all indicate the need for the *generation* of a comprehensive theory rather than the *validation* of already existing theories regarding this topic.

Glaser and Strauss (1999) state, “An effective strategy is, at first, literally to ignore the literature of theory and fact on the area under study, in order to assure that the emergence of categories will not be contaminated by concepts more suited to different areas” (p. 37). Following this strategy, as stated earlier, this researcher used the literature review initially simply as a way of discovering and verifying gaps in the current literature, but allowed the theory to emerge from the data as the participants in the current study shared their lived experiences regarding this phenomenon of grief. Data collection, coding, and analysis occurred together throughout the study (p. 43) rather than as separate activities occurring in discreet time frames.

As described below and suggested by Glaser and Strauss (1999), theoretical sampling was utilized (p. 45) as the study progressed until a point of theoretical saturation (p. 61) was reached, a point at which no new information was being generated. This researcher was seeking what Glaser and Strauss (1999) refer to as “slices of data” (p. 65) through both individual interviews and focus groups (described in more detail below) so that constant comparisons could be made of the data generated.

## *Methodology*

### *Sampling*

As mentioned earlier, the population for this study consists of women age 60 and older who self-identify as lesbian and have experienced grief. Stein (1997) states, “Having lived in the San Francisco Bay Area for over ten years, I found most of my interviewees by using a snowball method of sampling; I began with a series of personal contacts, using them to branch out to networks previously unfamiliar to me” (p. 6). Stein (1997) goes on to say, “I would not claim that my sample is representative of lesbians, or even of lesbians of a particular age cohort. Representative samples of stigmatized groups are impossible to obtain; this is perhaps doubly true for groups such as lesbians whose statistical contours are unclear and who do not agree among themselves on the criteria for membership” (p. 6). Though these problems with sampling and data collection are very real, some of the effects of these difficulties can be counteracted through intentional, purposeful, theoretical sampling.

Creswell (1998) states, “An important step in the process is to find people or places to study and to gain access and establish rapport so that participants will provide good data. A closely interrelated step in the process involves determining a strategy for the purposeful sampling of individuals or sites” (p. 110). Later on, Creswell (1998) provides a “Typology of Sampling Strategies in Qualitative Inquiry” (p. 119). This is very helpful, because it lists 16 different strategies for purposeful sampling and explains the purpose for each one. For the present study, the “Snowball” type of sampling was useful at the beginning, because key informants could be identified in various settings

who could direct the researcher to other settings or individuals that had not been known of or considered before.

Following the initial sampling, theoretical sampling was pursued based on themes, categories, and properties that emerged through data collection and analysis. Glaser and Strauss (1999) state, “Theoretical sampling is the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyzes his [or her] data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his [or her] theory as it emerges. This process of data collection is *controlled* by the emerging theory” (p. 45). This researcher interviewed respondents until a point of “saturation” was reached when no new information seemed to be coming to the surface.

The “Maximum variation” type of sampling was also attempted. This sampling strategy allowed the researcher to document different variations and identify important common patterns (Creswell, 1998, p. 119). This researcher attempted to deliberately seek out older lesbians from rural and urban areas, lesbians with different agency or group affiliations, and lesbians of color to maximize the variation of the sample as much as possible. Jacobson (1995) states that “...despite researchers’ efforts to recruit women of various ethnic/racial minorities, the samples in the majority of studies of older lesbians have included only white respondents” (p. 45). She also states, “Another issue in the area of sample representativeness is the focus of attention on urban areas that offer lesbian organizations, publications, and services geared to meet the age-specific needs of older lesbians” (p. 46). Resources such as the *Colorado Pride Guide*, the *Mountain Pride Connections*, and the *Denver Gay and Lesbian Yellow Pages* assisted in this process so

that the sample could potentially include a wider variety of respondents than have surfaced in other studies. This researcher also attempted to maximize variation by advertising the study in areas where lesbians of many racial and socioeconomic groups may congregate so that the women could respond confidentially. In addition, recruitment included sending E-mail invitations through a variety of existing social groups that cater specifically to older lesbians.

According to Patton (1987), maximum variation sampling "...aims at capturing and describing the central themes or principle outcomes that cut across a great deal of participant or program variation...How does one maximize variation in a small sample? One begins by selecting diverse characteristics for constructing the sample" (p. 53). Thus, by deliberately seeking out older lesbians with a wide variety of characteristics in terms of race, ethnicity, religious affiliation, socioeconomic status, and educational level, this researcher hoped to be able to maximize the variation of the sample and, therefore, perhaps yield findings that would be applicable to a wider range of people and situations. It was anticipated that the sample would start out as a homogeneous sample and diversify according to information gathered as the data collection and analysis progressed. In spite of all these efforts, the sample consisted of mostly White participants, though there was some variation in terms of such factors as income and living location.

The following represents a summary of the demographic data collected at the beginning of this study. In some categories, if the numbers do not add up to the total number of participants in the study, it is because not all women responded to every demographic category.

Participants in this study ranged in age from ages 60 – 79 1/2. Twelve of the women were in their 60s, and 5 were in their 70s.

In terms of ethnicity, 26 women identified themselves as Caucasian, White, or European American. One woman identified herself as Hispanic/Mexican.

Income categories broke down as follows: \$0 - \$9,999, 1 woman; \$10,000 - \$19,999, 4 women; \$20,000 - \$29,999, 6 women; \$30,000 - \$39,999, 2 women; \$40,000 - \$49,999, 3 women; \$50,000 - \$59,999, 3 women; \$60,000 +, 7 women. One woman stated that her income when she was working was in the \$30,000 - \$39,999 category; but it is now in the \$10,000 - \$19,999 category due to the fact that she had to go on disability – a grief experience in itself.

In terms of education level, no participants reported having less than a high school education. Four participants reported having a high school education, and one of these reported having had some college education. Three participants had an Associate's degree, 4 had a Bachelor's degree, 9 had a Master's degree, and 6 had a PhD. One woman described herself as ABD (All But Dissertation), and another woman stated that she had "2 Master's + 40 additional endorsements."

In reporting geographical location, 9 women described themselves as living in an urban area, 13 lived in a suburban area, and 5 lived in a rural area. Women in the mountains chose one of these classifications based on their perception of their own community location.

Participants ran the gamut in terms of spirituality. Some women just wrote such responses as, "Yes" and, "Sure" on the line. One woman identified as Christian, and

several women described themselves as Protestant. Some women identified specifically with certain Christian denominations. These included Episcopalian, Quaker/Unitarian, and United Church of Christ. Three of the women identified as Jewish. Several women stated that they identify with the Church of Religious Science, another identified as “Goddess, Pagan, Wiccan”, and another identified as “Pantheist”. Several women identified as Atheist or “none”, and other women identified themselves as practicing Native American spirituality or other forms of spirituality.

In terms of occupation, 14 of the women said that they were retired. Two of these were retired college professors, one was a retired vocational rehabilitation counselor, one was a retired librarian, and several were retired social workers or nurses. Of the women who were still working, one works as a nurse, one works as a lawyer, one owns her own flooring business, one described herself as an artist, and one was a real estate broker.

In describing partner status, 13 participants identified as single. One of these described herself as, “Single forever”. One woman stated, “None at present. Lesbian.” One woman wrote, “Deceased” on this line; and another wrote, “Partner died”, indicating the difficulty many grieving people have writing “Single” on any line when they are not single by choice. Nine of the women described themselves as being with a partner. One wrote, “With same partner 5 years”; and another wrote, “Together 20 years”, indicating these women’s pride in the longevity of their relationships. One woman described her relatively new partner relationship as “Forming”.

Twelve of the participants in this study stated that they had no children. One woman wrote on this line, “Never”. Of the women who reported having children, 4

reported having 1 child, 5 had 2 children, 3 had 3 children, 1 had 4 children, and 1 had 6 children. One woman reported having 3 grandchildren. Another reported having 4 grandchildren and 1 “great grandbaby”. These statistics are evidence against the common stereotype that LGBT people do not have children or families. Some women have no children; but that is also true in the straight community, whether women have no children by choice or because they are unable to have children for whatever reason.

Seven of these women reported having no pets, and 19 women reported having pets. One woman reported having 9 cats. Altogether, these women had 26 cats, 14 dogs, and 5 horses. One woman described her pet as her “lovely dog”. Another woman wrote on the line, “Sob! I just had to give my cat away!” Loss of pets was a huge grief experience for many of these women.

The above demographics indicate aspects of diversity within this group of study participants, even though there was not much ethnic diversity. It is this researcher’s hope that future studies will be able to show even more diversity in the sample of study participants.

### *Data Collection*

Instruments of data collection for this study included the interview guides, an audio recorder, field notes, and the researcher as instrument. According to Patton (1980), “Qualitative measures are longer, more detailed, and variable in content; analysis is difficult because responses are neither systematic nor standardized” (p. 28). The qualitative questions are open-ended so that in-depth responses can be gathered from the individual interviews as well as the focus groups.



Data collection for this study began with a focus group of 5 women in a mountain location who discussed the topic of grief in the lives of lesbians age 60 and older in general terms. The purpose of this focus group was to establish the topics that these co-researchers considered to be important and confirm the issues that were essential to the topic of this study. This focus group was followed by 17 individual interviews. The individual interviews were conducted by this researcher in one-to-one situations in settings that were comfortable and convenient for the participants. Most participants chose to meet in their homes. Two participants chose to meet in a private room in a public library, and one participant chose to meet in a local coffee shop. Consent forms were provided for both the focus groups and the individual interviews (See Appendices), not only for the study in general, explaining that a participant's answers would be confidential, but also regarding use of the audio recorder so that participants were aware every step of the way of the purposes and uses for which the information was being gathered.

Following the 17 individual interviews, a second focus group was conducted with 5 different women in an urban location to, again, confirm the topics and issues of significance for the study. After this focus group, 5 more individual interviews and 1 interview with an interracial couple were conducted. At this point, it was clear that data collection was reaching a point of theoretical saturation. The final data collection consisted of a third focus group of the same 5 women who were in the initial focus group in the mountains. These women examined the preliminary themes that were emerging

from the data and provided input as to whether these themes seemed to resonate with their experiences of grief as lesbians age 60 and older.

In describing the interview, Moustakas (1994) states that it “involves an informal, interactive process and utilizes open-ended comments and questions” (p. 114). In qualitative research, the interview guide may grow and change as data from the participants takes the study in unexpected directions. The interview guides were used as guides only, but participants were allowed to take the data in whatever directions seemed appropriate to them related to the topic. Before beginning the interview, participants were informed that some of the questions and/or topics of discussion might bring up strong feelings; and they were reminded that they could refuse to answer any question, and they could terminate the interview at any time. By conducting the interviews in a natural setting for the participants, and by using the researcher as instrument with this researcher’s experience as a hospice bereavement social worker, a compassionate, safe environment could be created in which these kinds of feelings could be shared openly. If any participants had needed a break from the interview, the recorder could have been turned off to allow them to regroup. However, none of the participants expressed a need for this to happen. The researcher also had a list of counselors who specialize in grief counseling located in the mountain areas, rural areas, suburban areas, and urban areas in case they were needed. Only two participants asked for a copy of this list “just in case” they might need it in the future for themselves or for friends or family members.

Specifically in terms of focus group interviews, the researcher drew from the expertise of Morgan (1997) as well as Krueger and Casey (2000). Morgan (1997) defines

focus groups as “a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher” (p. 6). He goes on to state, “In essence, it is the researcher’s interest that provides the focus, whereas the data themselves come from the group interaction” (p. 6). Krueger and Casey (2000) state, “The intent of the focus group is to promote self-disclosure among participants” (p. 7).

Morgan (1997) states, “The comparative advantage of focus groups as an interview technique lies in their ability to observe interaction on a topic” (p. 10). He goes on to make a strong case for the use of focus groups in collecting data from marginalized groups, stating that “one of their strengths is certainly the fact that they can ‘give voice’ to groups that would not otherwise be heard” (p. 20). For multiple reasons stated earlier, this provides a strong basis for using focus groups in a study regarding grief in the lives of older lesbians.

Krueger and Casey (2000) state, “The decision of whom to involve must be related to the purpose of the study” (p. 28). Based on recommendations by both Morgan (1997) and Krueger and Casey (2000), this researcher initially planned for the focus groups to consist of 6 – 8 participants and for the focus group interviews to last about 2 hours. As stated earlier, the focus groups actually consisted of 5 women in each group, and the groups lasted from 2 – 3 hours. The first focus group was the longest group in terms of time, partially due to the personalities of the participants, and partially due to the fact that, in this initial group, participants were grappling with the task of setting the initial agenda for the rest of the study. Participants took this task very seriously.

Adjustments were made to the interview based on information collected in the first group and the first set of individual interviews.

This researcher has done similar interviews in other settings; and it is this researcher's experience that, rather than feeling overwhelmed and unwilling to share feelings about such issues, participants have felt overwhelmed with gratitude at the chance to share feelings that they may never have shared in quite the same way before, and they have been eager to contribute to something which may lead to life being better in some ways for all of us somewhere down the road. This was certainly this researcher's experience in this present study. A list of presuppositions and personal observations were included in the field notes. Each person and situation was unique, and it was important to intentionally be aware of subtle signs that a participant might give as to how the interview was going.

This researcher actively listened during the interviews, doing some brief "jottings" as needed and asking for clarification; but this researcher deliberately let the audio recorder do the work of capturing the interview (after, of course, checking to be sure it was working properly). This researcher was consciously present to the participants through eye contact and total presence during the interview due to the potentially emotional nature of the subject matter. As soon after the interview as possible, this researcher wrote expanded field notes/transcripts while the memory of the interview was still fresh in the researcher's mind. The transcripts are verbatim records of the interviews, which were printed as hard copies for further analysis. Field notes took the form of observational notes, methodological notes, theoretical notes, and personal

notes for each focus group and each individual interview. In addition, research memos included memos related to contacts, method, and analysis. As mentioned earlier, the data collection phase of this study ended when the researcher was not encountering any new information; and the researcher actively sought out participants who seemed to disagree with the general patterns that were emerging. The researcher continued to use reflexivity during the entire process of the study. As Patton (2002) states, “That’s how, over the years, I’ve gotten better and come to value reflexivity, not just as an intellectual concept but as a personal and professional commitment to learning and engaging people with respect” (p. 417).

#### *Data Analysis*

In qualitative research, including grounded theory research, data analysis is going on all the time from the beginning of the study. This researcher analyzed data not only at the end of the study, but as data was encountered all during the collection process so that patterns and emerging themes could begin to be seen. The researcher also recorded personal reflections which helped with the credibility of the study (Smyth, 2006, p. 7), developed relational code maps to continually monitor the confirmability and dependability of the study, and created a clear audit trail (Smyth, 2006, p. 9). This researcher transcribed one focus group interview and 11 of the individual interviews to immerse herself in the data an additional time. Due to time constraints, the remaining two focus groups, 11 individual interviews, and the interview with the couple were transcribed by a professional transcriptionist.

In the data analysis for the present study, the researcher used the constant comparative analysis method described by Glaser and Strauss (1999). These researchers state, “The purpose of the constant comparative method of joint coding and analysis is to generate theory more systematically...*by using explicit coding and analytic procedures*” (p. 102). Following a thorough overall reading of each transcript, the researcher sorted responses into categories, trying to reduce the data as much as possible, and constantly comparing the emerging incidents which were applicable to each category. The researcher followed a process similar to that suggested by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995). The process included an initial open coding, selecting themes, writing memos, fine tuning the themes by focused coding, writing integrative memos, and distilling the data into a small number of very broad organizing concepts with subthemes adding depth to the analysis. In coding an incident, the researcher was constantly “*comparing it with the previous incidents in the same and different groups coded in the same category*” (Glaser and Strauss, 1999, p. 106). The researcher was assisted in the transcribing and coding processes by the computer programs HyperTranscribe and HyperResearch co-developed by Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber, PhD and available at [www.researchware.com](http://www.researchware.com).

As the theoretical properties of the categories began to emerge, the researcher began to incorporate the delimiting features of the constant comparative method as described by Glaser and Strauss (1999). Delimiting occurs as the theory solidifies and as categories are reduced. As the categories became “*theoretically saturated*” (Glaser and Strauss, 1999, p. 111) through the process of constant comparison and generation of memos, the grounded theory emerged from the data and became clear. From this

analysis, the researcher used “thick description” to report on the findings, drawing on quotes from the actual participants, the co-researchers.

### *Presuppositions*

The researcher went into this study with a number of presuppositions. These are listed below, and techniques for dealing with these presuppositions will be described in the following section. The presuppositions that have been identified are as follows:

1. Grief is a much broader concept than that embraced by grief theorists focusing solely on grief due to death loss.
2. Lesbians age 60 and older experience grief due to factors related to aging, gender, and sexual orientation as well as in reaction to various life experiences.
3. Lesbians age 60 and older have developed coping strategies over the course of their lifetimes for dealing with grief.
4. Though some supports are in place, much more needs to be done in terms of social justice work, development of supportive agencies, and development of policies at all levels of society to bolster the supportive safety net for this particular population.

### *Credibility and Trustworthiness*

One technique for increasing the credibility and trustworthiness of a qualitative study is Epoche, or bracketing. Moustakas (1994) states that the term Epoche is a Greek word which means to set aside judgment, to stay clear of everyday, ordinary ways of

perceiving things (p. 33). Creswell (1998) states that the researcher “brackets” his or her preconceptions so that questions and personal experiences are not injected into the study (p. 33). Patton (2002) describes the researcher as looking inside in order to become aware of any personal bias and to gain clarity about preconceptions (p. 485).

In this study, this researcher intentionally used the technique of Epoche to “bracket” preconceptions about the phenomenon under study and let the information emerge freely from the data that was being collected from the respondents. Patton (2002) describes Epoche as an “ongoing analytical process” (p. 485). Thus, the “bracketing” took place throughout the collection and analysis of the data rather than at one specific point in time.

In addition, this researcher used triangulation to increase the credibility and trustworthiness of the proposed study. Creswell (1998) states, “In *triangulation*, researchers make use of multiple and different sources, methods, investigators, and theories to provide corroborating evidence. Typically, this process involves corroborating evidence from different sources to shed light on a theme or perspective” (p. 202). By interviewing older lesbians in focus groups as well as in individual interviews and in the interview with the couple, the researcher was able to continually monitor and corroborate evidence from a variety of sources.

For this particular study, this researcher also used member checks and peer review to increase the credibility of the study. Member checks occurred over the phone or in person with respondents who indicated a willingness to be contacted a second time as well as at the time of the interview. These interactions happened after the interview had



been transcribed and themes were beginning to emerge. The researcher used these member checks with the co-researchers (respondents, participants) to confirm that the themes the researcher was discovering that seemed to bolster the emerging theory resonated with those who had generated the data. Peer review also occurred as an ongoing process while the data was still fresh and the themes were emerging.

#### *Protection of Human Subjects and Ethical Considerations*

Risks to subjects were considered to be moderate to low for this study. The main potential risk was that discussion of these subjects would bring up strong feelings. This was addressed openly as this researcher discusses the Informed Consent form (See Appendix) with each participant; and every effort was made to ensure a safe, compassionate environment. The researcher checked with participants regarding their own available support systems before beginning the study. If participants would have had strong or extreme reactions to issues that came up in the course of the interviews, the situation would have been assessed more specifically, and a referral for counseling would have been provided if needed.

Ethical considerations were taken into account all during the study. These had already been taken into account as the research problem statement, purpose statement, and research questions were developed as encouraged by Creswell (2003, p. 63). Before collecting data, the researcher made certain that the participant understood the informed consent form, including the statement that she could withdraw from the study at any time with no repercussions. In collecting data, the participants were treated as co-researchers to encourage them to feel a *part* of the process, not simply as objects to be studied.

In the data analysis stage, this researcher made certain that all confidential files and audio information were kept in a locked filing cabinet, and that code numbers were kept in a separate location from the master file containing the identifying names and other information. Finally, in writing and disseminating the research, the researcher has, again, honored the confidentiality of the participants (Creswell, 2003, p. 66-67). Ethical considerations are absolutely vital in protecting our participants in social research.

### *Strengths and Limitations*

There are a number of important strengths of this study. First, since the areas of grief, aging, and lesbians have seldom been brought together in any coherent way in studies of the past, this study adds greatly to our understanding of grief issues facing older lesbians in their daily lives as well as allowing the discovery of a grounded theory to aid social workers and others in working with this population in both clinical and community practice. By gaining greater understanding of this issue, social workers and others will be able to devise theories and additional studies as well as programs and services and even local and national policy changes which might improve the quality of life for this sometimes invisible population.

Another strength of the study is the care with which the design has been crafted. As this researcher has grown as a researcher, a much clearer grasp of the steps needed to protect participants' confidentiality, to develop a meaningful interview instrument, and to improve the credibility of the study has been developed. Though the procedures needed for this type of study might seem daunting and overwhelming in some ways, it is exciting to spend time in the field with older lesbians as they help to refine the interview

instrument and as they share their lives. The rewards of this kind of research far outweigh the long hours of work involved.

Finally, another strength this researcher brings to this study is self as instrument. As a midlife lesbian woman (especially since this researcher's own recent grief experiences in the midst of completing this study of the end of an 11-year relationship with a partner and the death of the researcher's mother) and as a social worker with almost two decades of experience as a bereavement counselor, this researcher was able to give the gift of presence to these women who were the participants in the study, and these women gave the gift of presence to this researcher. In a lifetime of teaching and doing social work, this researcher knows that the interactions that take place in these kinds of situations are a two-way street. Thus, using self as instrument in this qualitative grounded theory study fits well with who this researcher is as a person. This researcher's general cultural participation as a member of this community for the past 2 decades facilitated access to individual participants, and this researcher was able to provide a safe and comfortable atmosphere to facilitate collection of valuable data.

There are also some limitations to the study. One limitation is that, despite this researcher's best efforts, the data still came predominantly from white, well-educated women from relatively high socioeconomic classes. Even though this researcher did everything in her power to try to prevent this from happening by intentional sampling procedures, this was still the outcome. In future studies, this researcher will definitely seek to refine procedures to reach out to women whose voices were not heard in this study.

Another limitation is that the only women who were interviewed for this study due to accessibility were “out” lesbians. Due to discrimination and the hostile climate in the United States toward gay and lesbian people at the present time, researchers must continually wonder about the uncounted numbers of lesbians in rural communities, or even in urban areas, who choose not to “come out”, sometimes even to themselves, due to fear for their very lives. This state of affairs means that the views of this group are seldom included in studies of any kind, and their silence speaks in an ominous way to the urgent need to end at least institutionalized discrimination so that their voices may finally be heard. This researcher attempted to mitigate this limitation by advertising the study in rural areas and on bulletin boards in areas where lesbians of many racial and socioeconomic groups would congregate so that the women could respond confidentially. Some women who did become participants in this study expressed feeling grateful and relieved to tell their stories to a researcher, even if they were not “out” in their private or public lives.

## Chapter 4: Findings

The co-researchers in this study shared their lives openly and thoughtfully. Thus, it is this researcher's belief that the findings presented in this chapter add greatly to the body of knowledge regarding grief in the lives of lesbians age 60 and older. The following pages represent a rich and thick description of the phenomenon of grief as experienced by these women in a variety of different contexts. The findings indicate that some of the grief experiences are the same as those experienced by human beings in general, aging people in general, and younger lesbians. However, even though the actual grief events may be the same, they are often experienced differently by older lesbians. Therefore, some experiences are perceived by the participants in this study as unique due to the intersection of grief, aging, and lesbian identity, as well as due to the milieu in which these women live their lives.

In what follows, the grief experiences of the participants in this study will be described within the categories of personal grief, interpersonal grief, and grief related to the current political climate, though even these categories intersect and proved to be relatively fluid. Grief experiences perceived by these participants as being unique to older lesbians will be described as well as their experiences of dealing with end-of-life issues (such as preparing living wills, power of attorney, and other documents) for themselves and/or others and their perception of the importance of this type of documentation for the older lesbian community. In addition, coping strategies and

supports used by these women will be described as well as the participants' visions for social action and change to make life better for grieving older lesbians in the future.

### *Experiences of Grief*

As stated above, grief experienced by these women can be divided into the categories of personal, interpersonal, and political. However, these categories are not mutually exclusive, and there is much fluidity and influence between the categories. Even common grief experienced by all human beings was experienced by these women through a lens influenced by their age as well as their lesbian identity in many cases. As the women speak in their own words, connections between these categories will emerge and become evident.

#### *Personal Grief*

*Death losses.* During the course of these women's lives, deaths of parents were often a significant event. For one participant, her mother's death was the catalyst for the participant finally being able to come out and live her lesbian identity:

My mother died when I was 49, and that's when I came out after that. So that was interesting that I didn't feel like I could probably, that I buried it until then. So, you know, it's uh, so I had those episodes of grief.

For another participant, her mother had actually been a great support to her regarding her lesbian identity, and the grief over the death of her mother was the catalyst for allowing her to grieve over many other things:

And I think that for me, it was the death of my mother that accentuated a lot of grieving about a lot of things in my life, and just to kind of know, to learn that grieving doesn't just stop after a certain period of time [after working with a gay male therapist]. People allow you a certain period of time or whatever. And then it was such a big, I was so attached to her, that it really accentuated, or at least it got me into a lot of experience of grief about other things, as well. It did. It touched

off just a huge amount of things. When my mother died, my family, my siblings, we kind of fell apart. She had been such a focus. I think her acceptance of me as a lesbian was really important to me, and I didn't have that anymore. She had been, I think, a real part of my coming out, and not in any way other than that she was OK with this, and I could bring my partners home. Yeah, that kind of thing.

For one participant, the experience of grief over the death of her father was all tied up with her lesbian identity as well as her experiences of childhood abuse:

Well, my father had retired to [Place], which was his most favorite place in the world. And he died. I went back there in November, and I came out to him. I also confronted him about the abuse, sexual abuse when I was little, and I mean therapy, years of therapy to help me do this. And he died nine months later of a massive heart attack, and I never saw him again. And that was a loss, not that I cared to ever see him again; but I wanted, having stood up to him, and confronted him around the sexual abuse, the drinking - he was a socially acceptable alcoholic. But then, as a lesbian, I so looked forward, maybe a year later - 'cause [Partner] and I would go back to [Place] in the fall - of being able to have a relationship with him that was real and honest, and I would not ever take any more of his crap again. And so I never had that chance to come back to him and say, "No, you can't say things like that," or, "You can't do that to me," or whatever.

One participant, a Latina woman, experienced the joy of a loving side of her mother right before her death after years of a very difficult relationship:

And from the hospital, because of her lungs, they put her into a nursing home. They wanted to do physical therapy and stuff before she went home. Finally in the nursing home I was told that she had two weeks left. She just started deteriorating rapidly, and the lung disease just took over. It shocked even the experts. I mean, it went from two to five years to six months to you have two weeks left. It was really dramatic. And I was with her every day from breakfast to dinner - put her to bed, took her to the bathroom - I did everything for her, you know. And finally, they let her go home. We took her home to die. She got hospice. And then my mommy was there. Not my mommy, but the pure, the person. All the anger, all the bad feelings, everything fell off. Things that were important to her were no longer important, you know. Nobody was looking at her funny, you know. She really saw each of us and related to each of us in a real way, for the first time. When we're born, and we look at our mother, we fall in love with her. And that's who she was.

Another participant experienced the rejection of her father due to her lesbian identity right up to the moment of his death:

But then, um, when I came to [City] and I got with [Partner], I went back, and that's when my father confronted me and told me that I would either come back and act like a "normal" person, or I would be disowned. And my answer to him was, um, you know, "There's one good thing about this." And he said, "And what is that?" And I said, "I feel very strongly that what is yours is yours, and you should leave it to whomever you want to. And it does not matter to me at all. But I will live my own life." And I did! And I never saw him alive again. Um, and, I guess, probably the most hurtful part of that was when he was really sick, and my daughter was very close to them and took care of them, even though I had a brother livin' in that town. They were the ones that - my parents - she was the one that, they wanted her to - wanted to be with and all that kinda stuff. And, uh, so my daughter called me one evening and said, "Please call Granddaddy. Please, because I'm afraid he's gonna die." So I have to absolutely say that I had to think about it? And I knew that I was opening myself up for, you know - I just didn't know what would happen; and, uh, but I thought, I really feel strongly that I have to do it for her. She's taking care of them. I might have had to go back there whether they wanted me to or not, you know? And, um, and she was very happy to do it. So I called - he was in the hospital - and, um, so I asked to speak to him, and he got on the phone, and he found out it was me, and I said, "I wanted to call and tell you that I love you." And he handed the phone back. So that was hurtful.

Participants described a number of other personal death losses in their lives, which were very significant to them. The women talked about the deaths of grandparents, aunts, uncles, stepparents, godparents, siblings, children, and grandchildren, as well as friends and pets. Their experience of many of these losses seemed very similar to the experiences anyone might have who is grieving a similar loss. One woman described her concern for her son due to a generational pattern of loss:

One of the things that I got really afraid of - my father lost two brothers in their twenties, to TB. My mother lost her only brother in his twenties. He drowned in [State] during WWII. I lost my brother in his twenties. When my son got to his twenties, I was terrified. You know, I was like, I didn't want to talk about it, I didn't want to think about it; but of course it was there, 'cause I looked at it and thought, "Oh, my gosh! Everybody has lost brothers in their twenties." And so it



was, O.K., so my daughter could lose her brother, you know, and I could lose my son. And so when he got to be thirty years old, I was so happy.

Another participant expressed concern due to a generational pattern of people in her family dying at a certain age, which affected her view of her own aging process:

My mother was 60, my cousin was 60, my grandmother was 60, which is another reason I freaked out when I turned 60 and decided to get healthier.

For others, the death loss of these people was very tied into the discrimination they felt due to their lesbian identity as well as to alcohol issues and other issues in the family. One woman described her relationship with her brother and what happened at the time of his death:

Well, I come from a family of 5 children. I'm the baby. My brother and I were very close. He called me [Nickname]. We were VERY close, always. He had a drinking problem in high school. I always looked after him. Put him to bed before Mother and Daddy ever got home, saying, "Oh," you know, "he's got the flu again." You know, the usual, typical lies that enablers say about drinkers. And then, he married and continued to drink, and - I don't know how it happened - his wife left him. He ended up in [State]. [Clock chimes] And then, suddenly, he had this grand spiritual experience, and realized what a dufus he was [Laughter] and stopped drinking. And, as my dad used to say about certain people in the church, he got saved and sanctified and had a deeper determination to press onward! [Laughter] So anyway, in the 1980s, I had cancer. And he called and told me that God would heal me if I just renounced the evil lifestyle that I embraced. And this was, I mean, we were so tight, because the other 3 kids were much older than we were, so we were a family in ourselves. That just killed me. In fact, it almost DID kill me! So then he called me again. I was living here in [State], [Partner] and I were, and he wanted to see me, and I thought, "Well, maybe, you know..." No, that wasn't what he wanted. He wanted to tell me again, if I would just straighten up and fly right, I'd be O.K., and he could talk to me. But he told me then, he said, "You know, I can't really have anything to do with you, because God forbids it." And I said, "Really! That's a different God than I know." So he died a couple, 3 years ago now, and I went to [State] for his funeral. His wife had called and told me. And she said, "You know, he really loved you." And I said, "Yeah?" So I said, "O.K. I'll be up there." So I went, and his son and daughter-in-law picked me up at the airport. They stopped at [Name] Inn and said, "You know, you'll be more comfortable here." And, so, I

didn't stay at the house. So, I thought, "Gee, Lord, how many kicks in the teeth do I need to GET it?" [Laughter]

Several women described the sorrow of dealing with multiple death losses in their lives, sometimes in combination with relationship breakups and other losses. These losses impacted their grief on multiple levels. One woman describes her death losses:

Um, I lost a daughter to cancer when she was 28. I lost a brother to cancer. I lost a partner to cancer. Um, it just seems like cancer's the thing that scares me.

Another woman adds her voice, with the death losses of family members intertwined with a major breakup with her partner of 16 years as well as deaths of her boss and a beloved pet, all during the time of the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers in New York City:

O.K. We'll start in the year 2000. In 11 days, I lost 3 people. One was - my partner at the time - her father, and I'd been with her for 16 years. That was on the 12th of [Month]. My older sister died on the 14th, and my mother died on the 23<sup>rd</sup>. So, in actuality, they were blessings [due to the suffering from illnesses]; but the IMPACT was enormous. Enormous. And my partner asked me to leave. And we had raised a child together. It was her child. And I had known - I mean, I was at the hospital with her when she HAD the baby. And then, in [Month], my boss was diagnosed with cancer and never came back to work. Yeah! It was bing, bing, bing. And, of course, 2001 was New York [9/11]. My [relative] works in Manhattan, and, you know, all of THAT was an issue. In [Month] of 2002, my older sister's son died at age 30. Two weeks later, my boss died. And I'm out of town, you know. And then - and this was the little thing that broke the camel's back - my dog died. I mean, we had to put her to sleep, because she had cancer; and that was [Month] of 2003. I quit working [Month] of 2003. That's 5 years ago. But I was not capable of doing what I was doing any longer. I was putting the office in jeopardy, because I wasn't complete - and I'd been in the [name] business for 35 years, and it was just overwhelming to me. Just overwhelming.

Still another participant described feeling very alone since almost all her family members had died:

Well, um, all of my family is deceased, so I've buried all of my family so to speak; so I have no living relatives who are elder to me or my age. The closest

living relative I have is a cousin, a first cousin. So I don't like being in that situation. You know, I really don't. I was always close to all my family. I was an only child. Not a good thing either. All of 'em. Aunts, uncles, grandparents, of course; but the worst was my mother. I lost my father very early, [1950s], but my mother remarried; and I was close to two stepfathers that she had. But they both died; so by the time the second stepfather died, my mother was dead. And he had no children, so I had to go back to [State] and settle the estate - sell off all the stuff, get rid of everything - and I was by myself. I didn't have anyone really to help me, which was a terrible experience. I was a WRECK after that experience of going back there and having yard sales and getting rid of things, particularly my mother's clothes. I remember her friends came in, and I couldn't touch 'em [the possessions, especially such personal possessions as her mother's purse], I was in such a state of grief. So I think I have kind of been out here, so to speak, on my own ever since. And um, it's scary to think about, because everyone I know who lives here at this senior residence, they all have children, and grandchildren, and some have great-grandchildren; and, of course, some do have brothers and sisters - of course, no parents. But I don't know anyone in my boat.

One focus group participant, though she did not go into great detail, mentioned losing her entire family in the Holocaust as a loss that has led to grieving for her:

Loss of family units. Like, my pictures on the wall of my family who perished in the Holocaust. Loss of an entire family, a family unit.

Deaths of friends and contemporaries were other deaths experienced by these women in a way that seemed similar to how they might have been experienced by anyone since the shock of someone our own age dying seems to cross the boundaries of identity.

One of the women who had experienced multiple death losses described it this way:

Now, I had some friends who, uh, owned a business. They hired me, O.K.? Just so I could keep my health insurance. But then, they moved down to [State] in '05 - maybe - close to '06, I can't remember exactly - she being one of my dearest friends, the mother of the young lady that lives upstairs, you know; and they're off to [State], and she got cancer. And she just died [Month] 1st. So it's just - the peer group now is just - so, anyway, those are issues!

Another woman described the death of a high school friend:

Also in high school, there was my - and I think probably the origins of my wanting to get into the medical field, before my brother died - a friend died in high school of leukemia; and it was like, people our age don't die, you know?

Yet another woman put it this way:

And losing a contemporary to death is very hard. When your mother or father die, your grandma, you know, that's nature. But when you lose a contemporary, that's your age group. That's hard to accept.

Pets were very important to most of these women, and their descriptions of dealing with the deaths of pets were poignant and indicated what many people across many boundaries of identity seem to feel with pets, that they were best friends and sources of unconditional love. One woman described her loss of pets in her life, losses tied up with discrimination due to racism by a neighbor, and ultimately, with her own sense of responsibility for one of the deaths:

Oh, yeah. My father gave me some chickies for Easter, and the neighbor next to us - he's the one who called us dirty Mexicans all the time - he poisoned the chickens. Then they got me a rabbit, and he poisoned the rabbit. And there was a sandbox that my father made for my brother, but it was my graveyard. I had all my pets. I had lizards. I loved my animals. And then, uh, he gave me a duck. And I was determined that nothing was going to happen to that duck. So I had it with me all the time, and I even took it to bed with me. And one morning when I got up, I realized that I had rolled over on the duck, and I killed it. But yeah, I felt really responsible for that. I was trying to save him, and I killed it, you know.

Another woman described the importance of a dog in her life:

Oh, and loss of my dog. I'm still cryin' about it. And she and I had gotten that dog for my daughter when she was young. And then my daughter discovered boys, so now the dog was mine, you know what I mean. I mean, it was always hers while she was living there, but I always took him camping with me. He was my best friend. Anyway, it was such a spiritual thing. I still have his ashes up on my thing, and I have it in my will that we're going to be scattered together on the mountain; and not anybody else, just my dog.

Another major personal loss in the lives of these women was the death loss of a partner. Several women described the death loss as being absolutely like losing a spouse, though often they did not receive the same level of support as they believe straight people receive after losing a spouse to death. Other women received a great deal of support, especially from the lesbian community. A mitigating factor seemed to be whether the couple was out publicly, whether it was to extended family, in-laws, or the wider community.

One focus group participant described some of the anguish she felt due to comments she received after losing her partner to death:

Well, your mind, now you might grieve over that! [She would rather grieve over that than grieve over losing her sex drive.] [Laughter] I think my situation is, of course, I went through the grieving period when I lost my partner. Yeah, I was really rude one time when my partner died. Someone called up and said, "I'm so sorry that you lost [Partner]." [We were together] fourteen years. I said, "Lost her? Hell, I didn't lose her! She died! I woulda never lost her! I held on to her all the time!" But I had such a wonderful loving relationship with her. And, believe me, not that we didn't ever argue or get mad at each other, 'cause anybody that ever tells me they never argue, they're lying, or either they don't have a relationship. They're just living in the same house. But that's what I'm still looking for.

This same participant also described losing a previous partner to death:

So, anyway, I went back and I got enrolled in school, and everything was going beautifully; and um, we had the baby, and [Partner] got sick and died. She had a brain tumor. And we did everything under the sun and got every kind of experimental thing, everything. And I had said to everyone, "If you just do whatever you can - just save her. I promise you, I'll get through school, and I'll pay every penny that we owe." And I did. And that's why I never did anything with my education; because I went back to [Town], and I got a job with an oil well servicing company, because they paid me more money than anybody else, and I was trying to support a child and pay off these debts, which I finally got done.

Another participant talked about the nuances of secondary losses that came with losing her partner to death:

Well, I just wanted to say that, as an adjunct to the loss of a partner, one of the things that I didn't expect, that, who would have thought about it, is the loss of a common language. You have learned jokes, family stories, common interests, you know, things that nobody else would give a damn about; and you want to say, "Oh, you know, there's this new..." And that person isn't there to tell that to. And shortcuts in talking. It's as if you were the last two speakers of an indigenous language; and then one is gone, and there's no one to speak to. So, that was a powerful thing. [We were together for] twenty years, this last time; but we had also been together much earlier, many years before, for a year. And then, we'd known each other through the years. So we've probably known each other for 35 years. And we knew each other's families. I mean, we were involved with each other's families. Oh, and I also lost her family. You know, I forgot about that. They're still there; but, you know, they've sort of gradually fallen away. And I'm still in touch with one of the sisters, but even that's much more infrequent.

For one participant, the trauma of the death of her partner was exacerbated by discrimination due to perceived homophobia coming from her partner's brother and sons. This participant and her partner were not actually out to her partner's family due to fear of homophobia; but the result was that, when her partner died, the participant was not treated at all like family. Thus, it was difficult to tell whether the family's reactions were based on homophobia since they supposedly didn't "know" the exact nature of the relationship; but this lesbian couple chose not to come out to them due to their perceptions of the rejection that would occur if they did come out. The following is a part of this participant's story in her own words:

So the major grief experience I've had was when my lover died; and she had a terminal illness, and she eventually died. It will be 5 years in [Month]. There were some pretty significant experiences that were difficult. I guess I probably should give you a little bit of history. My lover's name was [Name], and we met through work. And she had been married, was married at the time and had 3 sons

who were pretty close to adults. Anyhow, so, um, we got involved; and, as I said, she had 3 sons, and she became ill with [Illness] within a couple of months of our buying a house together. And she was never out to her family or to her sons. Our relationship was not one that was outside of the confines of the home FOR HER. It was for me, but anyhow - so when she died, at the time that she died, she was in hospice care. She came home from the hospital on Wednesday, and she died on Saturday. But it was long enough that her family, her brother and her sons were able to be here. Anyhow, when she died, her brother who was the executor of the estate had her sons take my key from me, and that was extremely traumatic. But what had happened, Ginger, was that, in our house, we had kind of - she kind of lived upstairs, and I kinda lived downstairs, but we had merged....But, there was stuff - I mean, we LIVED together! So I was extremely traumatized by that. That was - and the son that they sent in to get the key from me who was the middle son to whom I am still close, was the guy I was the closest to. And I remember I threw it, I was so UPSET! I mean, I had just washed her body! I mean, they had just removed her body. You know, already her nephew and I had been sent to a back bedroom while the "family" did whatever they were doing; and then [Son] comes back and says, I need your key. And, it was so - you wanta know what trauma was? And, of course, I had no defense; because I couldn't say, "But we were lovers! But we were married! But we," you know, "We had sworn," you know, "a relationship to each other." None of that could ever be discussed. SO - that was the most traumatic thing. And there were a number of my belongings - not a huge number - but there were some significant belongings which I never recovered, because then, her sons came in and just cleared the house out, you know, and virtually everything that was there was gone. [Tears] So - so that was the MOST traumatic. I mean, I'm sure that - what I know about grief is, I'm sure it was heightened considerably by the grief; although I think I would have probably, if it still were to happen today, I think my reaction would be pretty much the same, because I was enraged. You know, I was hurt, and - I was very hurt by that. It was a total denial of our relationship. And, because of it being a lesbian relationship rather than a traditional married relationship, I couldn't SAY, "But, we're married! But we've exchanged rings! But we've had," you know, "a ceremony! We considered each other spouses." I couldn't say any of that stuff and never will.

When asked whether her partner's sons ever did know that the participant and her partner were actually in a relationship, the participant stated:

NO! No. See, that - they knew that we lived together, certainly. They knew that we were very fond of each other. They knew that I loved their mother, um, to different degrees, you know. And [Son] and I, as I say, have gone on to have a very good relationship now. We're very close. And he talks often, you know,

about how much I took care of his mom and, you know, how close I was to her - but that we were partners, that we were sexually involved, no.

This kind of treatment continued for this participant during the time of the memorial service and putting up the headstone:

Yeah! Well, it's definitely - oh, absolutely, because your relationship isn't acknowledged. Now, at the memorial service that they did, you know, they did have me come up and asked me to say a few words, and they acknowledged me as someone who had taken care of [Partner] through her illnesses. That was my role, you know. And, um - but, then, later on - see, she was - they decided to have her cremated, which was fine; and I think she had made some provisions or whatever. OH, on the anniv - I guess it was on the first anniversary of her death - they decided to put the headstone up. And I said I wanted to come to Denver, and they told me I couldn't come. They said they wanted it just to be family. So there were, yeah! There were those kinds of... Yeah! Just family, because I wasn't family.

This participant went on to describe her view regarding her partner's son "knowing" and "not knowing" about the true nature of their relationship:

Yeah! He knows at the level that he's willing to acknowledge it, and I think that's where most people are with relationships? Um, unless you verbalize the words and let people KNOW, I think, at some level, people KNOW; but they only know what they're comfortable knowing. Um, and if they don't want a KNOW something, then they don't acknowledge it to themselves. So...well, at this point, it's O.K. At that point, it wasn't? But, it was out of respect for [Partner] that I never would have done anything that she would not have wanted were she still alive; and she did not want to be a public lesbian. Would I have wanted to have our relationship more openly acknowledged? Sure! I would have loved it if she were more comfortable with that, but I wouldn't do in death what she wouldn't do in life.

As the above example illustrates, the categories of personal, interpersonal, and political grief can be inextricably intertwined in certain situations. This researcher has placed this incident under personal grief due to the importance to the participant of the death of her partner. However, interpersonal grief is also at play due to the interactions between the participant and her partner's family; and grief due to the very political



climate in which we all exist is also evident, the political climate that contributed to the partner's fear of coming out to her family, which led to this older lesbian couple's perception of the need to hide their true identity in the first place.

*Aging.* Another area of personal grief described by these women was grief due to the aging process itself. Their grief about aging had to do with loss of physical abilities, mental abilities, and support systems. Some women described feeling isolated and/or invisible due to their aging process, their grieving process, and/or their lesbian identity. Again, the categories are fluid; and the women's experiences connect them with other aging/grieving/lesbian people in many ways.

One participant described her reactions to the aging process in this way, obviously using humor as part of her coping strategy to deal with this kind of grief:

...the brain says, "We gotta get up on that roof and clean the wood stove chimney." And the body goes, "HA, HA, HA! You're gonna do WHAT?" Kinda thing. I'm really finding it difficult to realize that I'm in the process of making changes in how I live my life, how I accomplish the day to day tasks, O.K.? Um - "Oh, yeah - the ceiling needs painted! Well, hey! We'll just get out the 8-foot ladder, and climb up that sucker, and..." "No. No, no, no, no, no, no. No, we don't do that anymore." I have, um, Venetian blinds, O.K.? And - government housing - government subsidized housing - these things are about 5 inches longer than the window - you know, it drives me nuts! And I'm thinking, you know, "O.K., I'll tell the maintenance guys, and I'm gonna borrow their ladder, and I'm gonna get up there and see if I can't unclip those and zippy..." - you know," take them down someplace and get them cut." And the body's going, "You're gonna do what? You're gonna get up on a ladder, huh? Uh huh! And you're gonna reach up with both hands to undo the clip to get this thing down. Uh huh! Right!" And, my knee - I'm making adjustments for my knee, because I did my online research. I'm not happy with the knee replacement surgery that they HAVE now? It has to be done basically 10 years thereafter, and it's not that, that good. So the grief with me is, the brain says, "Let's do this," and the body is going, "No." So it's like I have this WAR going on! And then you say to yourself, "We're gonna override the body, and we're gonna do this." And then, as you're doing it, you're going, "You know, if I screw this up, I could really - I could wind up with a broken HIP." So, that's a GRIEF! "I used to be able to do

this! Damn it, why can't I do it now?" We were invincible! In high school? "Yeah! The world's ours!" [Laughter] So that's a major grief for me, because I have always been, um, relatively strong and able to do what I wanted to do; and now, I'm making adjustments. And that's hard! That really is! Uh huh!

One participant described her grief due to aging, also expressing hope that the Baby Boomer generation may handle aging in a different way:

Yeah, and sometimes, I guess, I think about myself - I mean, being 62, you know, I've had some back surgery. That's why I have these lovely white socks on. I've had surgery on my left foot. So, just not being able to do the things that I did 40 years ago. [Laughter] That IS a grief! And just, sometimes, you see some of the physical changes, and, I mean, intellectually, I know, and when you see commercials and whatever on TV - it's like - well, you know, it's too bad that the youth world is still being - seems to run the commercial end of America, let's put it that way. [Laughter] You know, there's a lot of, you know - Baby Boomers, obviously, are gonna be an old cohort of people, and nobody knows what we're gonna do. [Laughter]

Still another participant described her grief due to her changing body, including loss of physical abilities, this way:

Well, my body. I'm grieving for my body. My body is not the same body that I had. I hurt all the time. I'm not agile anymore, and I'm uncomfortable. But I can't do anything about that, either. I can't sit and get depressed over it, 'cause that's kind of fruitless, useless. That's all. It's just like everything else - my eyesight's not the same, my hearing's not the same. And you just learn to deal with it. It's either that or die. What other alternative do you have? And I'm not a depressing kind of person. I'm not depressed; so I just - O.K., well, this is how it is. You just kind of have to deal with it.

This same participant, in a focus group, shared a poignant story regarding the changes in her physical body:

I have a ten-year-old grandson, and he was spending the night - a ten-year-old and a seven-year-old; and we drew a hopscotch on the sidewalk. And you know, I can't do hopscotch anymore. I cannot hop on one foot. I lost my balance. I was so upset. I hadn't tried hopscotch in probably fifty years. So you know, I just threw the thing down, and I started to go, and I couldn't do it. That was very embarrassing in front of my little grandsons. But I could not do hopscotch.

For some of the participants, grief due to aging had to do with things not done in life. One participant, who had been adopted at birth, had connected with her birth family about 12 years ago. She describes her grief due to things not done in her life, which she now may never do as a result of aging and financial issues, as well as plans for one last trip to another state to visit her biological family before focusing her energy on some Elder Hostel trips:

And some of these are, to anybody else, would not seem important. But to the individual involved, they are important, O.K.? So I think that there is a grief for those things which we realize that we should have done or could have done, but now cannot do for whatever reasons - financial or health or, you know, whatever kinda thing. So that can be a major grief, O.K.? Uh, when I go home to [State], I'm gonna have a great time, going to do the last stuff that I wanta do, because this'll probably be my last trip home, only by virtue of the fact that, hey, Elder Hostel. Oh, they have some wonderful trips, and I'm chomping at the bit, you know? [Laughter]

*Lesbian Identity.* For a couple of participants, grief over things not done in life had to do with their lesbian identity, and some even grieved over coming out as a lesbian. One woman described passing up an opportunity to get her PhD, which she attributes to lack of confidence in herself due to struggling for years with aspects of her lesbian identity:

I knew I had the ability, and I had the skills; but I didn't have the confidence, probably, would be how that would translate for me - to know how to just bowl in and take over, because I didn't have these other - these were like, almost like you have a missing limb, like you're not quite whole. And I suppose that has to do with the type of work that I have done, you know, working with disabled. [There's a sadness] and that you don't get a full expression of all your capacity. [Tears] There was one - and, again, it was a woman - when I was in my Master's program, who encouraged me to go into, to get my PhD in administration; and back then, I mean, I was late 30s, early 40s, and I - that's the only one. And I think she thought of it more, probably, as a woman, not as a lesbian; but I think the lesbian part - in my mind, I made it, or I let it hold me back by not being confident, whereas in situations where I could be more free or more myself, my

real capacities were showing. [Tears] I remember how much energy that took. I was always on guard. A lotta psychic energy. Constantly. And then, the other part was also - before I really expressed myself, you know, I had my first relationship, you know, my coming out or whatever you wanta say [Laughter] - was just how much I had to hold myself in with the energy of suppressing that as well. So they're kinda, they're for different reasons; but, you know, I put the lid on myself, [Tears] and, um - in order to be socially acceptable, I guess -so I wouldn't be ostracized, you know.

Another participant talked about grieving specifically due to coming out as a lesbian:

Actually, grieving about coming out as a lesbian, too. I would, at the time - I was very upset. I'm a recovering alcoholic. So I had to grieve about that. I was 40 when I got sober; and so feeling like, I'm not normal. I'm not part of the normal population as a recovering alcoholic. I mean, that 10% that's abnormal. Then, when I self discovered that I was a lesbian, I'd think, "Well, there I am, abnormal again! Now I'm 20% abnormal!" [Laughter] So that took some getting used to.

One woman talked about being uncomfortable with her lesbian identity:

So, I'm not - [long pause] - not comfortable being gay, for many reasons, and it is not a driving force in my life. In fact my best friends and my closest friends, the people that I would really depend on, are all straight, because I'm not out, you know. It makes me very uncomfortable. I really admire [Name] and [Name] and their activism and everything. Because to come out is, as most people do, is to find out it's dangerous, you know, because there are nuts out there, and you never know; so, uh, I probably, under currently, subjectively, have grieved all my life because I was; and certainly, in terms of many of us, and me along with them, dying to get out of it. And what people don't understand in their fear that they have, and everything, is that it's not by choice. It's not, you know. Someone touches you, you know, your heart in the same way that happens with a couple.

A lesbian couple expressed joy in their coming out process:

And as I was coming out, my life transformed on every level. [I was] 38. And she is three years older than me. But for most of her adult life, she had practiced lesbianism.

Partner: Yeah, I was perfect by the time she came along. [Laughter]

Coming out, as was the case with grief or lack of grief due to other life events, was often influenced by interpersonal interactions as well as grief due to the current political climate. More coming out issues will be explored in the following sections of this document. We will now turn to an examination of these participants' experiences of grief that involved interpersonal interactions.

### *Interpersonal Grief*

Under the category of interpersonal grief, participants shared their stories of their direct experience of discrimination due to homophobia, sexism, racism, and a number of other isms in our society. These experiences of grief had to do with interactions with their families of origin, adult children, in-laws, and partner relationship breakups as well as other situations.

As with personal grief experiences, some of these experiences can be shared with all human persons, all grieving people, all aging people, and/or all lesbians. What makes some of the experiences unique (to be discussed in more detail later in this document) is the way the events are experienced by each particular woman as well as the way they are experienced due to the generation in which each woman grew up, age at coming out, and other factors.

*Family of origin.* One of the primary groups that most of us experience from birth is our family of origin. (For some women, their first family was their adoptive family; and this experience carried with it grief issues all its own.) For some of these women, that relationship led to various types of grief experiences. One participant described her

relationship with her family of origin, which was always colored by a background of alcohol use as well as her belief that she could not be open regarding her lesbian identity:

Yeah. And so, and grieving the fact probably after my mother died that we never would be able to reconcile our differences that we'd had since I was a kid. I didn't particularly like her. I didn't think much of her. My parents were alcoholic. She didn't drink very much after my father died, and she never UNDERSTOOD about my drinking, about the fact that I couldn't drink. She thought after - and my ex-husband, too - he thought that after I'd been sober a couple years, you know, I could go back to drinking any time. And then the fact that I never could - WOULD have been able to share with her that I was a lesbian, at least I didn't feel like when I first came out that I ever would have been able to, because I would get censored so highly from her negatively. Though, I don't really know. Toward the end of her life before she died, our relationship got a whole lot better. But I think there's always unresolved issues of, well, how come I couldn't ever - she couldn't be who I wanted her to be, and she probably would not have supported me as a lesbian or supported my partners; and I don't really know that, you know! But her attitude all her life, I really don't think she would have. [Laughter]

For another participant, dealing with her family of origin meant being accepted for her lesbian identity. However, near the end of her mother's life, the participant heard something that made her think her mother had been a lesbian all her life, though she stayed married to the participant's father:

Yeah, we were free spirits. My father was an artist, but he also had a job to support us; and my mother worked, but she was a free spirit. And I just found out not too long ago - it dawned on me. I called and told her something - and she knew I was a lesbian. She met [Partner], and she didn't say, "Oh, what's it like?" or anything. She brought out those stupid lesbian books. I saw that and said, "Oh, Mother, I read that book." We didn't say, "Oh, we're lesbians," you know; but because we were living together, she knew. Years later - in fact I was here in [State] - or maybe I was still in [State], I can't remember - I told her I was just like Daddy, because he was kind of a free spirit; and she said, "No, [Name], you're just like me, only you're doing what you want to do." So, I think my mother was a lesbian; but in those days, they didn't have that word for that. We're talking way back in the 20s, 'cause I was born in '35.

The participants in this study were all in their 60s and 70s, but the above passage points to women who had same-sex relationships or attractions in the generations before. They may not have been acted on, and they may not have had words to describe their relationships or feelings; but they were there.

One of the oldest participants in the study described her grief due to never feeling loved by her mother. This grief was not due to the participant's lesbian identity, but rather seemingly due to the fact of the participant's very existence. This sense of abandonment by those who are supposed to love us is one grief experience that binds this participant to any other child in this situation, crossing identity boundaries:

Maybe that's how I got, you know - but I have always been so self-reliant. I was an only child; and my mother, in particular, should never have had kids. They were young. They were too young. And I grew up, obviously, in the depression; and they had a lot of stuff, you know - and they were crazy about each other, and they were a long way from home. They both were from [Eastern City], and they went out to [Southwestern City] on their honeymoon, 'cause my dad had a stepsister out there that was old enough to be his mother. And, uh, I guess she had talked about the clean air and, you know, the openness and everything compared to [Eastern City]; and so they went out there and turned out to like it well enough to stay. And uh, Mother was pregnant right away; and, uh, I was just - you know, I was just another thing to have to contend with and what have you, a problem along the way. And so the upside of that, I've always had abandonment issues around that.

When asked if there was some grief connected with that, this participant stated:

Well, yeah, you always, you know - I spent my whole life trying to particularly get my mother's attention.

One participant described grief due to alcoholism in her family of origin, another situation that ties this older lesbian to anyone else in a similar situation:

And, then the next - and I don't know what order this came in - but a thing that happened was, my dad drank. Well, then, my mom started drinkin', 'cause she couldn't always deal with him. And I remember - probably I was 10 years old or

something, so I was probably a little bit younger - I got mad at her, and I yelled at her one time. And she was going upstairs, you know, because I was so MAD at her, you know, 'cause she was doing the same thing HE did. And my dad and my other brother were just standing there laughing, because I was yelling at my mom, you know. And I looked at them, and I thought, "My heck, you don't understand. This is my best friend." And I cut ties right at that moment, and that's how I've done things the rest of my life. Well, I consider it a grief, because I lost my best friend, because I lost trust in her; and that's kind of been the rest of my life. If somebody does something, it's like, "I'm outa here." Yeah, I just cut people right out, you know.

Another participant described grief in her family of origin as she struggled to come to grips with her lesbian identity, including trying to find words to put to what she was feeling:

It wasn't - you know, and even trying to go through the motion of, you know, going to dances or dating; and my mom - bless my mother's heart - she tried to send me to manners school! [Laughter] We were at the age when you always had to wear a dress to school, church - it didn't matter - everywhere, you know. And I would be the one that would tear home the fastest to tear out of that and get into my shorts or jeans or whatever. And I know now, I have very good friends FROM that period of time; and, uh, there were lesbians around me. We just didn't know it. We couldn't SAY that, you know. And that was dangerous business. I mean, you just knew instinctively you'd be ridiculed or - well, then, it wasn't so much ridicule. It was something evil, beyond that. I think the most telling thing for me was, I liked to - I started becoming a reader when I was about in fifth grade; and I would read - the [City Newspaper] back then was an evening paper - and I read about some jail, or something that happened in a jail, like a federal prison. There was a riot of the inmates, and they had to separate people; and they said something about separating the homosexuals, 'cause they were jailed. And I didn't know what that word meant. So, I remember going into the kitchen and taking the newspaper - and my oldest sister's about 7 years older than I am, so she was probably high school, first year of college - to my mother and her, and I said, "What's this word, homosexual?" Oh, you could've just about [Laughter] - they didn't fall on the floor, but it was about that - very close! Dead silence. I mean, that's a giveaway in my family - like, oh, this is so dangerous, you can't even open your mouth. [Laughter] Can't say that word. And I don't remember - I don't know if I looked it up - I don't remember. But - so just those social responses, I guess, is what - I got the message EARLY that this ain't, uh - dangerous stuff. And - to identify yourself - and yet, at the same time, there was such a strong competition for WANTING to express myself sexually.



One participant found unexpected support from her father as well as a guilt reaction from her mother after being discovered with a lesbian lover in her childhood home. This experience points out the layers of hiding and secrecy related to lesbian identity that is an added dimension that lesbian teenagers, especially those who grew up in this age cohort, had to face, adding another quality to teenage angst over dating that made their experience different than it would have been for teens who identified as straight:

So anyway, but then in that year, that school year, then I fell in love with the person that would be my first real live-in lesbian lover; and her name was [Name], and she played sports. So she graduated in '66, and that was just, you know, '66, '67; and we fell pretty hard and, you know, were pretty physical. And it's then - we were home from school at my house, and we were lying on my parents' bed. We weren't making love. We were just kind of kissing and snuggling. We were fully clothed, and my father came home. And so, he said - he just came to the door and said, "Are you having fun?" And then, I got really scared. And then, he said, um, "You need to take [Name] home, and then come back." That's all he said, and then he walked out. And so, I had had another friend at school who was a lesbian; and her parents had thrown her into a psych hospital. So, I was really scared. However, I was brazen enough to leave a note, because he just left. And then, before I went to take [Name] home, I left a note that said, "I'll be back. Please don't drink." So, that was, I mean - yeah, I was scared to death. But, when I came back home, he was sitting in the den - this is the most powerful experience of my life, this next few minutes - and he just said [Tears] - this is gonna make me cry - he just said, "Honey, there is no way in the world that I can sit here right now and tell you that anything you're feeling or anything you're doing is wrong." He said, "Love is an absolutely amazing, magical thing." Yeah. And he said, um [Tears], "I just have to tell you that I am really fearful for you. I'm afraid for you and what this might mean." Yeah. The most nonjudgmental person ever in my life. Well, anyway - AND he said - so here's the thing for me - so then, he said, "I will not tell your mother about this." So, already, at my young, analytical state before I EVEN got my psych Master's, I mentally went to this place that said, "Oh, my God! This is gonna wreck their life! My dad's gonna have this secret from my mother, and what is that gonna do to their relationship?" So, that very night at the dinner table, I told my mother. He just went...[Gesture] [Laughter], 'cause he knew my mom, of course, better than I did. All of the major grief around this for me is with my mom, around my mom. So she, who was raised very religiously, I mean, she was a First Brethren,

which is like, you know - this is the group of kids who couldn't dance, couldn't play cards, you know, could only do things with kids from the church. She believed that you could get pregnant from kissing, you know; I mean, she was very thwarted sexually herself - which, later in therapy, my therapist said, "You know, you just couldn't win for losing with your mother because of her own insecurity around the issue," which I really learned more about, you know, later on. But anyhow, so she, you know, thought it was her fault, you know, thought I was going to Hell. She didn't say that in so many words at that time, but she got really worried; and she was a worrier anyway - Type A, my mother, Type A, smoked from when she was 13, and it killed her at 60. So she - it was bad. It was bad for her. BUT, she never - she was never not nice to [Girlfriend]. She never forbid me to bring her to the house. I mean, we didn't - I didn't do that a lot, you know, because it was just too uncomfortable for everybody; but, um, you know, it was really hard. And I was still involved in the church; and so now, because of my mother's reaction, now I began to take on the guilt of this lifestyle. Plus we were hiding.

*Partner relationship breakup.* Another major interpersonal event that caused grief for these older lesbians was the breakup of a partner relationship. Some of the participants in this study had one or more long-term relationships. Others experienced the breakup of multiple relationships, which brought a different quality to their grief. The impact of the breakup was huge in itself; but it was often linked with grief over the feelings of children involved, betrayal in the course of the breakup, and lack of support from the wider society.

For one participant, part of the grief had to do with finally leaving a heterosexual relationship after her mother had died, trying to live out her lesbian identity, and finding that her relationships did not last:

Well, at the time, it seemed pretty intense. I had two - I was married for 23 years, and my other relationships have not lasted. One was 3 and a half years, one was 4 and a half years. That's the longest since I've come out that I've HAD a relationship. The breakups were very, very difficult, particularly this last one, which was 3 years ago; but it really wasn't completely resolved financially until a year and a half ago, and we had moved in together after 4 years - and six months later, she decided she wanted to be with somebody else, and it left me in a real

financial bind, because we had bought this place together. I couldn't afford it by myself. I was really devastated on a bunch of different levels - the betrayal, all those kinds of things. It was very, very hard.

Another participant also described her grief about the fact that her lesbian relationships had not lasted:

Well, I think that mine must be in relationships. My relationships since I've come out have been full of loss, and um - yeah, they have. I know some lesbians keep track of their ex-partners. I don't know anyone like that, except I've met a few people; but they're not in my immediate circle. To me, it seems very traumatic; and so, that's pretty hard. It's very hard.

Some participants either were asked to leave the house they had shared with their partner after the breakup, or they asked their partner to leave. There was some speculation about whether those sorts of things would have happened if they had been involved in a legal marriage:

That was, that was so unsettling to me, because we had lived in her house. Then, I couldn't ask my tenants to leave in 2 weeks. So I moved into an apartment; and, you know, it was just - then, come to find out that she'd been seeing someone for several months. That relationship is over and done with and has been for years. And I knew that would happen, because you just can't make that kind of a decision after those kinds of losses. You can't. Well, you get hit with somebody who has - I mean, you're living there, maybe things have slowed down a little bit, but you're still as supportive as you EVER were; um, and then, you're asked to leave. Now, if you were in a marriage, straight marriage, I don't think there'd be any way you could get out of it if there were 2 weeks in which to do it. I mean, I think there would be more conversation about it, not just, "You have to go now, because I think I want to go with somebody else." I don't think it HAPPENS that way. Well, and just time, too. I think if you're a married couple, um, and one of you wants to move on to something else, you'd have a little bit more conversation about it, rather than coming in one night and saying, "I've been seeing somebody, and I want you to move." And that's basically what it boiled down to.

Another participant experienced a couple of significant partnership breakups and described demanding that her second partner leave the house:

...well, the first relationship I had out here was with an alcoholic, and that was a real tumultuous thing; and I was able to sort of step away from that and let go of that one. I mean, there was grief during that period because of all the pain of the alcohol behavior and whatever. Then, the next relationship was the love of my life, and we were together for 11 years. And my children don't have good memories of that time; and I think part of it was, she was going through a lot of stuff, because her kids weren't with her full time. So she kind of resented my kids being there full time - even though, for me, that was my best relationship, my most intense relationship, and I still love her. But when I started graduate school, I had to make the choice. I felt like I had to make the choice. I don't think I really would have. I mean, if we'd have been married, I wouldn't have said, "You have to get out because I can't do this." I would have probably done something else. I would have probably said, "Let's get into counseling, or something," whatever. But instead, I just said, after the first quarter of graduate school, I just said, "I can't do this." And graduate school was really important to me. "So I'm going to have to make the choice, and it's going to have to be graduate school over you." But now, if I wasn't a lesbian, I probably wouldn't have felt like it was an either/or situation. Do you think? Because if you're married, you can't just kick somebody out. You have to go through a divorce. It's a much bigger deal. But instead - I mean, it was my home - so I just said, "Get out."

One participant described her feelings regarding the suddenness of the breakup:

Uh, I did have a breakup with my very first partner; and she was - I didn't know it at the time - bisexual. But she decided she'd go back to men; and I just came home one day, and there all my clothes were in suitcases and boxes. Yeah, and that was hard to get over. We had both moved to [State] and opened our business; and that one, that was a hard one. [We had been together] close to 10 years. Here she was having an affair with a man, a married man, who I had no idea about, because I'm trusting, and I don't look for things like that; and my friends say, if I had noticed, I would have noticed it; but I don't think like that.

Another participant described the many secondary losses that went along with a relationship breakup:

But the terrible part about it was that she didn't wish to have any contact whatsoever. We had a house in [Town], and she was sort of in charge of the finances. I was on medical disability by that time; but we had a house, and it was supposed to be, of course, our house. We had bought it with money from a townhouse that we had sold, that we owned together. But she didn't tell me she let it go into foreclosure; and when she left, I lost my relationship, I lost my house, I lost everything. I was just sort of out in orbit, like I said - like I felt like I

would be because of not having family. So I moved in with friends and stayed for quite a while; and then I moved into an apartment, and then I moved here, to [Independent Living Facility], and this has been the first stable, steady place that I feel like I've landed.

One participant described not being able to talk to anyone at work about the breakup due to her lesbian identity, though she did receive support from the lesbian community:

It wasn't as isolating being a lesbian because there was a huge lesbian community out there; and so I could interact with them, you know. I could be that person at other times of my life. But, yeah, you know, it - when I would have, let's say, a breakup with one of my partners and, you know, no one in the department knew; and so that was all hidden. And you know, that was a grief, you know, because I couldn't show it. I couldn't share it with anybody except within the community. Not within the profession, I couldn't. So, you know, there was - being in the [Name] area probably wasn't as hard, because I had a support group out, elsewhere.

For another participant, the grief over the actual breakup of the partnership paled in comparison with the grief due to the reactions of her children:

But, probably, the most affected, the most affected I ever was, and probably the absolutely worst time of my life as far as grief - and I don't think there's any grief like your children, something with your children - I had a partner. She and I moved out here in [1980s], and we had two children together; and she was the biological mom, and we planned it and everything. Well, we had the two children; and to make a long story short, we were together for 14 years. And she was [job position] in the hospital, and I was a [job position]; and once [Name] was born, the first child, we worked different shifts. I worked three a week, she worked three a week. They were opposite shifts. We had one day a week together, and we just grew apart. You know, the time we had together, which was little, there were a lot of things, household things we had to do. We just didn't have a lot - it was like, one person was taking care of the kids. If you weren't taking care of the kids, you were working. So we didn't have much time together. And we worked twelve-hour shifts, so we weren't home till 8 o'clock at night. So, after 14 years, we split up; and the boys were 10 and 7. And the night I told them [Tears] - and I can't even think about it without - because the effect, what I saw in their faces, was, like, "Well, you said you'd always be together! You said..." It literally broke my heart. And they would be with me on days that I was off, and they'd be with her on days that she was off. So it was never like I was never with

them or didn't have them; but, just how devastating that was for them is what broke my heart. To see them hurt is what killed me. So, that was the worst time I ever had.

*Discrimination.* Other examples of interpersonal grief experiences had to do with experiences of discrimination due to sexism, ageism, homophobia, or other identity factors. In terms of sexism, one woman stated:

Yeah, the sexism particularly - I think anybody over 60, any woman over 60, has really experienced sexism at some time during their life, particularly as a younger person.

Another woman turned her feelings of grief about discrimination due to sexism into a battle to make life better for women, no matter their sexual identity, who would come after her at a particular place of work:

Well, yes, um, I had a job at the [Name] County Sheriff's Department that I was hired for in the 1970s. But I was hired out of about forty applicants, and I worked there for about three years and ultimately filed a class action lawsuit against the sheriff's department for discrimination against women and minorities. And, um, it took us three years to get it through the courts, but we finally won on the retaliation issue; because after I filed the lawsuit, the sheriff transferred me from working with the news media and doing press releases and all that - he transferred me to the jail to work, and I was really in danger sometimes. So when we went to court, all of that was brought out - the fact, you know, that the sheriff could have transferred me anywhere, but he put me on the night shift in the jail, the worst possible job, where I would be in the most danger. And so, we won in a lawsuit, which set precedent in the law, case law; because anyone now who files a lawsuit for sex discrimination, if the person who hired them or whoever's in charge retaliates, then there's case law now because of what we did that says you can't retaliate against someone who's exercising those rights. I felt very strongly about that and, uh, felt like I was on my white horse, on the charger, going out for the cause. Yeah, they wouldn't hire women for any of the jobs that they had, and they wouldn't really hire any minorities, either; but they would have openings. So, I've put it all on the line. I've been to the mat for other women and minorities in that respect, 'cause it took three years to get that through the courts. It was all men who sided with me and went to court. But after that lawsuit happened, then all of a sudden you see women in law enforcement everywhere. And I don't think they realize who made that possible. There's an invisible group, myself included, who made that possible for them, whether they know it or not.

Another participant felt a great deal of grief and isolation in her job due to being the only woman that she knew of in her field at the time; but she channeled these feelings into starting a professional organization for other women scientists, partially so that her female students would have role models in their field:

I professionally am a woman [scientist], and I entered the field before there were women in [science]. And so I started out not knowing any other woman scientist, professional; and the isolation and not knowing how to be in that professional world - I mean, talk about discrimination. I experienced it. Um, I, as a result, started an organization of women scientists in the 1970s; because, as I said, I was a college professor, and there weren't other role models for my other students, women students. I was the only one that they saw; so I wanted them, once I started meeting other professional women, to also have that opportunity. And so I started an organization called the Association for Women [Scientists]. And, it is now international. And we just had our thirtieth anniversary. So, I certainly, professionally, had a wide range of experience with discrimination. And eventually, acceptance. You know, you fight many battles, some - I was successful in winning a lot of them.

For another woman in the study, the discrimination due to sexism came from within her own family of origin:

And I was a junior or a senior. My mother sat me down and said, "There's really no money to go to college." And my brother had to go, because he would support a family; and me and my sister would get married, and some guy would take care of us. She meant well. There was no hope after that. The only option was to be a secretary, which I kind of am anyway; but at least my real heart is an artist. And there was no way out of it. There was no hope. There was nothing to look forward to after high school. And I never did learn how to say no anyway, because I learned fear more than I learned anything else as a girl. So I found myself pregnant. And that was another crisis of grief. But that was my baby, and I had to take care of him. There was never a question. And there were no options there, either. I did go see a priest who tried to ask me, "Well, is this what you want to do? Do you want to marry the young man?" "No, but there are no options." I was going to break up with him, actually. So, um, I just made it work for 30 years.

Another woman at first did not really identify any sexism in her work setting; but as she thought about it, she did recognize that sexism did exist in her career:

I, uh – sexism - well, when you're in a career that's 97% women [Laughter], again, you know, it's probably more the other direction? You know, that, I think nurses discriminate against male nurses? Um, and I've seen that; but I don't know that doctors - well, yeah, when I was in training, certainly, you know, the doctors discriminated against the nurses; but then everybody discriminated against women in the '60s, you know.

One participant faced a situation that involved discrimination related to both sexism and homophobia, which led to the grief that she would not be able to stay in her chosen career:

...the grief issue that I couldn't stay in law enforcement, O.K.? Because it was really - I KNEW that I was on a very fine line - a VERY, very fine line. And we were not - that was when [Partner] and I were still together, and I was working for [City] PD, you know, in dispatch. And we were not necessarily RICH. And, so, um - anyway, Christmas was coming around. [Son] had outgrown his bicycle. And, I don't know, I mentioned this to one of the cops, you know; and, "Oh, well, I take in OLD bicycles and refurbish 'em and paint 'em up and everything," you know. And I'm, "Well, hey, great!" Kinda thing. So, after work - I had worked, um, swing shift that night - and after work, this officer met me and took me down to his car, and here was this bicycle kinda thing. And I said, "O.K., you said it was gonna be about," I don't know, "\$35," whatever kinda thing; and he says, "Oh, it doesn't HAVE to be \$35." And I said, "Excuse me?" You know, and he said, "I really like you, and why don't you come over to my apartment?" kinda thing, right? And, I said, "Probably I don't want to because I'm gay. And you're very nice and a good looking young man, and, but I have no interest whatsoever." And the REPLY was - typical cop, O.K.? – "All you need is the right man, and you'll be..." - you know. Um hm! And, I'm going, "Give me a break." I will always remember that damn bicycle. [Laughter] "What your mother had to get..." you know. Anyway, and, you know, and thankfully, he was not to the point where he was, was REALLY pushy, O.K.? Uh, because that could have been an exceedingly bad situation. But, you know, I figured, why can't you work any job in the whole world, whether you wanta be a pipe fitter or if you wanta be the President of the United States, and be who you are, O.K.? And so, that was, again, more anger than grief. But still, um, it made me - it made me GRIEVE for the fact that I knew at that point that I was gonna have to make some changes in my work situation; because, uh, I was just, you know, duckin' in the sight kinda thing. Um hm.



A number of women experienced discrimination due to ageism, either more than the other isms or in conjunction with them. The concept of invisibility as we get older was brought up by several participants. One woman stated:

And, as far as ageism, I read a wonderful book that I would have to look up if you want the reference - a lesbian wrote it - about growing older, and - stop it! [Directed at the cat]- about women in particular that, it didn't matter if you were lesbian or straight, that we become invisible as we get older, as we have gray hair. And I notice that's true of younger people whether they're straight or gay, that they just don't even SEE us, don't SEE me. I AM invisible. I've noticed that in a store. A man - I was there first, and a man waited on a couple behind me, looked right past me; and I ripped him up one side and down the other! [Laughter]

Another woman experienced this sense of invisibility in a church she had been attending:

I sometimes, I have felt that business about my age at the [Name] Church, because they, generally speaking, they are 20s and 30s and 40s; and so I'm really a relic over there. And you know how people look at you, but they look right through you, or they look just PAST you? They do not wanta make that connection. And yet, the majority of my friends, Ginger, are 50-year-olds! [Laughter]

The oldest woman in the study (almost 80) described feeling age discrimination in a career, believing that she had been pushed out of a job before she was ready due to her age:

I have probably, because I have lived so long, noticed the age issue more than the other [homophobia], [Chuckles] primarily because I am so naive and ignorant of the fact that, who cares, you know? Like I said, most of my really close, long-time, significant people in my life are straight and have families and stuff; and so to have that, you know, be a description of me has probably...well, I'm sure that I was forced out of my last teaching position, gently pushed over a period of about three years, because of age; but it was all, you know, very subtle. And so there was nothing to fight about. It just sort of happened. After I passed 75, you know, I just got to teach fewer classes, you know.

Several of the women in this study stated that they did not experience discrimination due to ageism. One woman stated that she had not experienced this kind of discrimination, and that the grief related to aging was due to things she couldn't do anymore, as reported earlier by other women in the study:

Oh, by age. How have I been discriminated...well, I haven't. Not yet. Not at all. I haven't felt that. There's a loss, of things I can't do, because of age and/or physical condition. I mean, being the athlete that I was, and the skier and the hiker - and my kids all ski, my grandkids, all of them do, because [Daughter] gets it all free because of her work. Do I want to go and ski with these kids? I mean, I was learning how to ski when I was three, back in [Northeastern Area]. [Granddaughter]'s been playing soccer for five years now. I would give anything to go practice with her, or coach. They are always looking for parents, and - see, loss. I couldn't get out there, because of my knees, age, my eyesight's not like it used to be...

Another woman stated:

Hmmm - well, ageism - not particularly, because I'm blessed to be in a career [nursing] where, you know, the older you are, in some ways, the more valued you are for your knowledge as long as you're not, you know, havin' ta dig ditches and whatever - um, not particularly.

Most of the women in this study experienced grief over discrimination due to homophobia, though many of the women were also pleasantly surprised when they were not discriminated against in settings like hospitals and hospices. During the second focus group of the study, the women had a conversation regarding discrimination due to homophobia. One of the major concerns expressed by the study participants was what would happen to them in their old age if they had to enter a nursing home. The fear around this can be daunting to an older person; but for these women, the fear centered around homophobia. One woman who worked as a health care professional described visiting nursing homes and asking questions about such things:

Well, I can think of one experience, but it wasn't a personal experience. I was doing some research on nursing facilities and how many lesbians were in nursing facilities. I was doing this through the Gay and Lesbian Community Center, and I contacted, you know, administrators of all the nursing homes that I could in the [City] area and the suburbs and asked them if they had any lesbian women or gay men, and could I come out if they did and do some interviewing. And they all said no. Every single one said no. And you know damn well that they had them, and you know that they probably knew or had an idea.

P: So the necessity to go back into the closet.

P: That issue is starting to rise.

Another professional woman in this focus group provided yet another example of this kind of a situation in health care settings:

Yeah, I did a year of nursing home rounds with the family practice folks at the University; and there were people practically every place that we went that I found were lesbian or gay, but it was never acknowledged. I would try to kind of escape and go in there by myself, but you never know when the nursing assistant or somebody is going to come in. And one of them, I remember - it was so poignant - but somehow she had been separated from her partner when she went. I don't know if she was sicker or what happened; but, oh, she was so angry.

P: So her partner was also in there.

P: Her partner wasn't in there, but she was. And they didn't recognize her partner as her partner and didn't treat her as they would a husband; and, you know, and I just let her open up, and I'm sure that happens thousands of times every day.

These vignettes were discussed in this focus group to indicate that the grief and anger about discrimination due to homophobia goes beyond simply the personal experiences of the women in the study. Many of the study participants expressed concern about women who were not in the study, or who lived in isolated areas; and they wondered what their experiences might be.

Several women did describe their personal experiences of grief related to homophobia during the individual interviews. One woman stated:

Um, I guess when I was coming out, you know, at 49, 50, um, it was shocking to me to think that there would be people who hated me who didn't know me. It really, really just floored me. I thought, "Why would they hate me? They don't even KNOW me," you know? And why would people feel that way, particularly people who profess to be big Christians, love everybody kinda deal?

Another woman described a very hurtful situation at the time of the death of her partner's father:

Yeah. Absolutely. I mean, I did not sit in the pew, the front row pew, with her when her dad died. SHE sat with ME. And although her MOTHER was there, and her sister, she was my family! You know, and as far as I knew, we were STILL a family. [Laughter] So those are the kinds of things that make a difference - how far out you ARE as a lesbian would really make the difference in how things like deaths, moving, and all of that impact you, I think.

This same participant faced discrimination due to homophobia even when she attempted to be part of a general grief group after experiencing a number of death losses in her life:

I - the first group that I was in - there was a gentleman in there who didn't wanta hear anything I had to say. And I don't know exactly WHAT it was. I think a lot of it had to do with the fact that I'm a lesbian. [Dogs barking outside] And he just couldn't hear it! I mean, a "so what" kind of an attitude. This was a grief group. And he had his grief, and he didn't want - I think he just didn't wanta listen to anybody else, because I - he would SAY other things to people that were in a sarcastic tone. And, you know, I mentioned that a couple a times to the facilitator, and she said, "Yeah, you know, and I don't know what to do about it at this POINT." So, that was rough.

One participant felt discrimination due to homophobia while dealing with her terminally ill partner in a hospital. This partner had actually been this participant's first husband who came back and became her most recent partner (as a male-to-female transgendered person) nine months before this partner's death:

Like when [Male name] was dying of pneumonia, we went to the little hospital in [Town]. We didn't go to [City] where the cancer center was. And that was the first time that I had just totally ignored - I mean, it was totally unconscious - ignored any thoughts of, you know, how are the other folks gonna SEE this propriety. You know, like I went in the shower with [Female name], 'cause she couldn't stand up. And I actually wasn't IN the shower. I was in the room. But I was IN the shower enclosure that they have in the hospitals, you know. They have a door on them. I called her my partner. I don't think that was in the charts; but, you know, people would say, [Whisper]. And I would tell them about the problems and that it was gonna leave a big hole in my life. And there were people that were obviously upset that I was a lesbian.

Another woman expressed grief due to homophobia from living in an independent living facility, which was operated by a Christian denomination that she perceived as homophobic. She expressed her eagerness to get out of there as soon as possible, and she also described her need to hide her identity there for now:

[I've lived here] four years. But, you know, as I said, I don't know any older lesbians, and certainly not any older eligible or single, what you would call available lesbians. And it would really be nice to have some older lesbian friends, especially in this community, if we could have some sort of support group; but I don't see how it would happen, because I really feel like the - this place is owned by the [Name] Christian Church. And I feel like they - there's an influence from the top against lesbianism, let's say; so it would never be encouraged or condoned, I don't think, if you had anything open. So, living here is kind of in a permanent state of grief of my identity. And that's the way I see it. And I don't want to have this be the end zone for me. I want it to be forward looking to where I can go forward. And what I plan to do is to - this is not my computer. It was loaned to me by a friend's family. Um, but I want to get a computer that will enable me to do a lot of things with the things I've written and the pictures and the videos, and I want to try to write and to get myself out of here, money-wise, that way.

One participant, a professional woman and retired university professor, described her grief due to homophobia in that, though she was surrounded by other lesbians in her department, they all (as well as the gay men in the department) remained closeted unless they were together with each other at private parties:

But then, coming out as a lesbian - I was totally closeted. I was in the beginning of my career working in an all male department. And eventually, we did hire two women; but in those early days, when I was still relating to men, you know, they knew that I had relationships with men. But then, in the middle of that, I came out as a lesbian - not to the department, but everything had to be closeted then. But that was, you know, that was very difficult. In fact, uh, the university where I taught, there were a lot of lesbians - faculty- but nobody was out except that one woman I mentioned to you who wrote a book, and she was in the Department of Human - can't remember the name of it - anyway, it was kind of in the Sociology department. And she wrote a book, and she was the only one who was out. We used to all get together. There was this little underground group; and once every two months, all the lesbians on the faculty would get together. We'd have a party, and then we'd all go back and be closeted. Yeah. Even though this was in the [City] area, you know, this was at [Name] University at [Town], which is a fairly - you know, it was a more conservative atmosphere. And the men who we knew who were gay were also closeted. Nobody was out. And, uh, that lasted until I retired.

Another professional woman who was a college professor in a social work department described her intense grief and depression due to homophobia when she tried to get promoted to full professor status:

Well, I was the only PHD to be hired at [Name] State when I was hired; and gradually, of course, you go through the tenure. I was tenured. I was promoted to an associate professor right away, because he had had to hire me as an assistant professor. And I need to go up to full professor. I didn't ever get full professor at [Name] State. I tried twice; and each time, there was a different administrator. The first time, my dean said no. The department said yes, but the dean said no. Then the second time, which was, I think, two years later, I tried again; and the second time, the dean said yes, but the academic vice provost said no. Now these were people whom I knew, we knew each other; and I could not believe, I could not believe that it was anything but discrimination [due to homophobia], more so than sexism. And it was right during that time, too, when there was a big lawsuit against [Name] State on the part of the faculty, and it was a time of a lot of ferment; but lesbians and GLBT people at that point were still not viewed as a group that had any validity in terms of discrimination. So, you know, I fought really hard and worked on getting a GLBT director of student services. I was very, very active in anti-discrimination issues. So, I believe - and my discrimination suits went nowhere, because it was just me doing them; whereas our sexism lawsuits did - a couple of those did actually get some changes made. Some changes were made at [Name] about department chairs and that kind of thing. There were no women chairs, etc. So finally, I think it was in about 199\_

or so, which is the last time I tried, I got really depressed; and that's the only time I got really depressed. I thought this is ridiculous. It's awful. It's horrible. I'm worthless - you know, that whole bit that goes with depression.

One participant lost her first teaching job due to homophobia:

Um, I lost a job because I was a lesbian, and that was a painful experience. It was a long time ago, 196\_, so that was a long time ago. That was an interesting thing in that I went to college in the 1960s, but I had this lesbian lover; and it was an older woman, who I'm still in contact with, by the way. And in fact, just this week I sent her a book. So, I was with that partner, and I was grieving over that, because I agreed to move to where this guy was after we graduated; but not to move in with him, because I wanted to get settled in, you know what I mean, to my new job, which was teaching at a high school at [State]. And I really loved this new job, and I was all settled in; but I really missed - I guess I was grieving about leaving my lover back in [State], you know, and there was the strain of starting a new job and all that. So, there was this woman I worked with who was also a high school teacher who was always moaning and groaning about her husband and her divorce and all that; and I thought, "Lady, if you only knew how I felt," you know. And so, um, one night - you're old enough to remember those mimeograph papers and how tests used to be done on those - so I was out of those and I needed some; so I called her up, and did she have any, and yes, she did and could I come over and get it, and yes I would. So I went over there to get it, and I don't know, it's kind of, she started talking about this stuff; and I'm like, well, I have a problem, too, that's on my mind. And so I shared with her that I was engaged to be married to this really nice guy, and yet I had left this woman in [State] whom I was just missing, missing, missing, you know. And she said, "Well, you'll just have to work that out." Well the next morning she helped me work that out. I was called out of my classroom, which I really loved; and you know, I loved that teaching job. And I was called out of my classroom, and came into the principal's office. And there she was, and she accused me of being, you know, a lesbian and all that; and, of course, I hadn't done anything in [State]. But basically, they were either going to fire me or insist that I resign, so I resigned. Well, it was over about a 3-day period. And it didn't make any difference to them if I got married or anything. You wouldn't think that. The world's changed a bit. Oh, and I went to a lawyer to see if they really could, you know. It didn't feel right, especially since I hadn't done anything wrong in the state of [State]. Well, and really hadn't done anything wrong in the state of [State]. We know that. But uh, this lawyer, I'll never forget. So I tell him the story and all of that, and he kind of made inquiries about my sex life with her, you know. I'm sure he got off on that. And I remember him going over to his law books and pulling out this law book and opening it up and saying, "Well, you could get 20 years for that in the state of [State]."

For another participant, grief around discrimination due to homophobia was manifested when this woman and her partner went to her ex-husband's wedding as he married his new wife. The grief was due to basically being shunned by her ex-husband's family:

So, um, the layers of loss and grieving and letting go, go on and on sometimes, depending on what happens in your life. But [Ex-husband] and [New wife] invited my partner and I to their wedding, knowing all the hassles that were coming. But our girls were gonna be there. This was an exciting - I was so happy for him. Oh, so happy. And we liked [New wife]. And the girls liked her - our daughters. And it was a happy thing. It was beautiful; and we just had to focus on, this is about them. And a couple of brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law, when we showed up, you'd think they'd never known me. Brother number one, no way. They stood way on the other side of the yard, and they would not give me the time of day. And yet we had been so close, we had kids the same age from the time they were babies. It was hard.

Another participant experienced the grief of legal adoption of her sons not going through after this woman and her partner broke up:

You know, we went through the legal guardianship. We tried to do the adoption thing, and it didn't go through. In [City], some went through, and then they just stopped it. We paid a couple thousand dollars to a lawyer, and then they weren't doing it anymore; and, I don't know. But uh, you know, they're my life. No question. And [Son] and I go biking together. We go mountain biking together. We play basketball. We go to the rec. center and do weights and shoot baskets. He's just like my buddy.

This same participant described the grief of growing up in a southern state and losing a best friend soon after this woman came out as lesbian:

When I was in college, my best friend, who was a physical education major also - I mean, there was my lover, but then this other woman was just my best friend; and we were like this all the way through school. And I'd go to her house, and, you know, we were just best friends. We lived in the dorm together. And when we graduated, she flunked a class and didn't graduate with the rest of us, so didn't go through the graduation. She didn't live that far away. Well, I guess after that summer, she went to summer school, and we kept in touch. Well, I heard later - and she never contacted me - it was like, bingo - it was like the relationship was



cut off. She found out somehow that I was gay, and I think it was - somebody told me that somebody saw me coming out of one of the bars that was up there. 'Course, at that time, when you went to the bar in [Southern State], you had to be afraid of the police coming in and raiding the place, you know. It never happened while I was there, but I heard of people's stories, you know, "Oh my God, don't be seen going in there." That's how it was. And that, the fact that she would have just ended that relationship that we had had for four years, just best friends, because of that - I never talked to her after that. Now, whether she was hurt because she thought that I couldn't tell her, I have no idea. I have no idea. Or was that offended by that, and thought, "Oh, my God, I thought I knew this person, and I hate that..." Who knows? 'Cause we never talked about it. Nobody ever mentioned it in any way. It was never, it just never was talked about, I don't think. So that was, in a sense, a grief, because I lost that friendship, and I'm assuming that that was why.

This participant still worries about friends who are living in that southern state due to the fact that even long-time lesbian couples still feel the need to hide for their own safety:

Growing up in the South and working in the south - I taught respiratory therapy back there for a while and taught school, and - you can very easily call this grief - the fact that I could never be who I was. I always had to pretend to be something different, to be dating somebody, or have to be explaining this or that. And it was sad, that I had to keep all that inside and had to lie. I never thought of it as that; but now, when I talk to my friends back there who - one is a teacher who is retired, and her partner - that is so ingrained in them. She's been living with this woman for 20 years now, and she's still afraid to answer the phone because she's afraid someone will call and wonder what she's doing there. Now that's how bad that is. And I feel a lot of grief for them. I feel very - I think, "God, how can you live like that? Why would you live like that," you know? And I feel terrible. I feel very sad for them.

One woman described her painful coming out process within her marriage of many years and the homophobia she experienced from her church and a very dear friend:

I knew that my so-called girlfriends were so much more important than my boyfriends, although I dated. And I decided, then, the thing to do, if I can't get rid of this crazy notion in my head, is get married. And I did so. And 6 kids later... [Laughter] But I don't regret that at all. That was a wonderful time of my life. My children were so important to me - still are, of course. And my husband was a very kind, loving man, and I hated hurting him. But the moment I laid eyes on

[Partner], I knew my life was changing. It was an instantaneous thing, a revelation. And, so anyway, we were - at the time I left my husband, I was very active in this church in [State]. [Laughter] Oh, boy! So when I left that church, I had been very active, because that was my solution, being really busy; and then you don't have time to think about this. And I had a lot of wonderful friends, close friends; but nobody I had ever felt that I loved any differently than any other friend. They were just friends. One woman was a VERY close - we went on vacations, our families went on vacations together. We just were VERY close, and she had 2 little girls; and I thought of those children like my own. Well, when I took off with a woman, you can imagine my name was mud in that church with a capital M.

When this researcher asked about grief connected with that, this woman responded:

Oh, my God! Yes! Terrible, because I felt so guilty, so tortured. I thought, "I can't..." I mean, I felt as if I was being pulled apart. [Clock chimes] One part of me wants to be HERE. The other part knows that I am THIS person. How will I ever rectify this? I tried several times to go back to my husband, thinking all I have to do is just pray about this, and God will fix it. Not that I don't think, or that I think that God does NOT fix things, 'cause he DOES! But that wasn't to be fixed. I was who I was, and that's the way things went. My good friend, [Name], and another woman in the church went to my husband and said, "What we need to do is go to the court and declare her an unfit mother." [Tears] My dearly beloved [friend]. And so, I was grieving about my loss of my community with my church, with my friends, with my family. What will people think of me? How am I going to DEAL with this? And then, I wanted - the 2 youngest kids were in high school, and I wanted them to be with me. And so this [Name] and this other woman and [Ex-husband] said, "If you do that, we will go to court and declare you unfit." And so I couldn't take them and there. UNBELIEVABLE agony. And talk about suicide being an option - it was, many times. And people often say that folks who commit suicide are cowards. Not so. You have to be - that has to be the LAST resort. You have to have tried everything else, and you just - you can't go forward, you can't go back, you can't stay where you are.

This same participant later attempted to reconnect with this friend by going to the friend's daughter's wedding, and she experienced another horrible wound due to homophobia:

So anyway, it went like that for - [Friend] never spoke to me again. In 197\_, [Partner] and I were living in [City]. And [Name], [Friend]'s oldest daughter, was

the same age as my daughter, [Name]; and she was getting married down in [City], and [Daughter] was supposed to be in the wedding party as maid of honor. So [Daughter] was in [State] at the time, and she flew to be with us, spent a couple days with us. Then we went down to [City]. [Friend] met us and showed us to a room in the basement and said, "You know, I have to go back downtown for some business stuff, whatever; but I've locked the door up at the top of the stairs so that there won't be any problem." She thought - her kids were upstairs, and she thought that I might go up and do something to them - a woman who knew me! [Voice shaking] Oh, boy! That was a ripper.

This woman's religious faith was very important to her; and many years later, she reconciled somewhat with her friend, though things were still fairly uncomfortable between them:

Well, you know, God does fix things. About a month ago, I got a phone call. And this voice that I didn't recognize said, "Is this [Name]?" And I said, "Yes, it is." And she says, "Now, don't hang up." And I said, "I won't hang up! Who is this?" And she said, "It's [Friend]." And I said, "Oh, you're an answer to prayer. I've prayed for more than 30 years that you'd call me." [Tears] She said, "Well, I didn't know whether you'd talk to me or not." And I said, "You know, [Friend], the essence of loving is forgiveness. You have to forgive people." And she said, "Can you ever forgive me?" And I said, "I already have long ago." So last week - a week and a half ago, I guess - she drove up - she lives in [Town] - she drove up to see me. It was awkward for her. But it gave me an opportunity to talk to her about who I was. She said, "Why did you choose to become a lesbian?" I said, "Well, first of all, I didn't choose. I did not choose." And she says, "You mean you think you were born that way." And I said, "Yes. I do." And I said, "[Friend], just think about it. Who in their right mind..." [Laughter] "Who in their right mind would say, 'Oh, this looks like such fun! I think I'll be a lesbian!' Are you out of your mind?" Impossible. So...

When this researcher asked if she thought her friend heard her, the participant stated:

I HOPE so. I don't know. I think being from [City], she's probably affiliated with [Right Wing Organization] and some of that. And I said, "You know, my relationship with Christ has not changed. I am who I am, and he is who he is. And he loves me unconditionally. And it says in Psalms that He has forgiven all our iniquities, so I'm as clean standing before him as you are." "Well, yeah..." [Laughter] She wasn't quite sure about that! And, as I say, it was a little strained; but it truly was an answer to prayer.

Finally, a woman in her 70s described her own grief due to homophobia as she experienced run-ins with police, a terrifying experience when she was in the military even though she tried to hide and conduct her relationship with secrecy, and an experience when her mother expressed the wish that she and this participant were both dead:

I've had, you know, some times that WEREN'T easy, but I - you know, the police were looking in the car and wondering what we were doing there; and I said, "We're looking at the lake." And I was a teenager at the time and, you know, I was really scared when the cop stopped beside us and looked - shined the light all over and asked us what we were doing. And in the military, I was caught; and the person that I had a relationship with and I wrote through a third party so that nothing came directly back and forth? We didn't carry each other's address and phone number. We didn't carry each other's picture. But she was stationed one place, and I was transferred to another place; and she came to visit me one time. And I heard footsteps coming down the hallway, and I just had a strange feeling. I had just gotten off my second midnight shift in the weather station. And then, the footsteps stopped at my door; and I was just - I was in bed, and she was sitting in a chair reading. And it was the captain of - the CEO of our flight - they called 'em flights - of our group of people who lived in this particular barracks. And she just opened the door and said, "Get dressed and come with me." Man. I was just petrified! And, you know, I couldn't get my clothes on. I was shaking, and she stood there with me while I got dressed and then took me on down the hallway where there were 2 OSI - Office of Special Investigation - civilian people attached to the Air Force; and one was the good guy, and one was the bad guy. And I KNEW from the questions they were asking that they had access to my mail and had access to my phone calls. So, you know, I finally just asked - you know - literally, I was sitting on a chair under a bare light bulb, and they were questioning me. And I just thought - my mother already had found out, and that was a bad scene where she'd said, I wish I was dead, and I wish you were never born. You know, I was 18. And - so, you know, I had some times when it was really a hindrance to be out or to even be closeted and have certain people find out. So these 2 men questioned me until - I think I got off work at 7, so it must have been about 8 when I got to bed, and I hadn't gone to sleep, because I didn't sleep well in the daytime. But they questioned me from 8 in the morning until 9:00 at night, and I just - I finally just broke down crying. And I said, you know, "What are you gonna do?" And they said, "Well, we'll take you over to the hospital to the mental ward." And they did, and I was crying there; and someone came and gave me a shot, and I went to sleep. Then I woke up and was crying,

and that went on for a week! And, um, so they came up and said, “Um, we're talking about sending you to a civilian institution.” And I said, “Institution for WHAT?” And they said, “Well, for mental problems.” And I said, “If I go there, I'll never get out.” And I just - that was the most frightening thing that I would go there and never get out! So, I said, “What do you want me to do to stay here?” Because I didn't want my mother to know, first of all. And they said, “Well, you could talk to our psychologist, and we'll take his judgment on whether you can be rehabilitated or not.” So I talked to the psychiatrist and said, “[Whisper] What does he wanta hear?” So I told him what I thought was the life of a normal person, and he did! He told 'em, “Yeah, I think she can be rehabilitated.”

### *Grief Due to the Political Climate*

As stated throughout this document, the lines between these categories of grief become blurred. It has already been evident that the narratives under the headings of Personal Grief and Interpersonal Grief have, at times, been infused with political overtones. By the same token, the grief experienced by these older lesbians that will be discussed under the current heading, though the main grief experience may be due to the political climate, also greatly affects these women's personal lives as well as their interpersonal relationships in a variety of contexts.

A participant in a focus group described the grief she experienced when she felt powerless to correct things she sees that are going wrong in society – not just in relation to lesbian issues, but to life in general:

Talking about grief. That's another kind of grief, too. Grief that we don't seem to be able to correct the problems that we come across or are being made aware of on a daily basis, and it gets so frustrating. I mean, you see these things, and you say, “Yeah, the third time you're convicted of drunk driving, dude, you're out of here on a permanent basis, thank you very much! This is a family of five that you killed because you were blotso when you got behind the wheel of a car.” You have a grief over that. You have a grief as you see the news reports, or you have a grief as you see the mangled car in the newspaper; or, as you find out about what is really going on, the more grief you have. The justice system, you just want to...Yeah, and you feel so sad that you can't do better. You know, I mean you

can't make a positive change. Yeah. That's it. You feel emasculated. Well, that's not the word I want, but you know what I mean.

Obviously, humor is a part of this woman's way of communicating, even when she is expressing strong feelings about very difficult issues.

The oldest participant in the study described the political climate as she was growing up when people of her generation arrived at dances separately and how different things are now for the younger generation:

There are people, you know, there are couples that even now, you know, you go to [Lesbian Dance], you see a thousand young people there, doing whatever they jolly well please, you know, coming and going together, you know, driving, coming and going together, doing... You know, "I'll meet you at..." you know, was the modus operandi growing up.

A number of participants described grief over the lack of financial benefits that they are denied because they are denied the right to marry. One participant discussed this issue as well as her own activism in her younger days as an advocate for girls' sports:

Yeah! And I do - I do grieve a little bit about, um - I don't know what it is - but whatever it is we're missing because we aren't married. Yeah! That's so interesting, though. I mean, we [Birds chirping in the pine trees] - I mean, WE consider ourselves married. We've been together for a really long time. We're committed to each other. We're not gonna go anywhere else. And I DON'T get all uptight about that like some people do. You know, like I'm not getting what I deserve kinda thing. And, thank God, there are people who say that, because things are better for us because of them. But I've never been, I've never been kind of on the activist end of much of anything. The thing I was mostly - if there was anything I was on the activist end of, it was women's sports, girls' sports, 'cause I was in at the beginning of that, and I was advocating all the time for girls to be able to play. And NOW look at it!

Another participant also talked about lack of financial benefits as a grief issue, especially for older lesbians:

So, and also, then, of course, you don't get the financial benefits that other people will get, because it's amazing what married couples get in terms of tax benefits

and Social Security benefits but, in particular, tax benefits. And so those - and those only become, often times only become really meaningful after you're age 60. When you're in your 20s, it really doesn't matter. So then, when you're after age 60, it becomes somewhat meaningful; and you, of course, don't qualify for any of those no matter if you were together 30 years.

One participant described how horrified her straight neighbor was when she discovered that the participant could not get the same benefits that straight couples get after the death of a spouse:

I have a straight friend across the street who, when [Partner] died said, "[Name], you know, this is not going to make you or break you, but you might as well file for everything you can get; and Social Security's going to pay so much." I said, "Are you kidding? We're not legally married." She was so embarrassed. She was so upset, because she said, "I would have NEVER brought that up to hurt you." I said, "It doesn't hurt me. It's a fact of life. I know it," you know. It hurts me that the government won't do anything about it. But I said, "[Friend], there are over 1400 benefits that you're going to get at some point in your life that I won't get." She was just, like, blown away. She said, "That's so damn unfair. That's ridiculous!"

Another participant described the grief of coming out to herself but remaining closeted publicly due to the political climate at the time:

And, finally, you know, at 25 years I had given up trying [in heterosexual marriage]. It seems silly to hang on that long; but I really just thought, maybe I didn't try hard enough, or maybe it was me, or it was me. It is me. So anyway, that was - I don't know. I just started crying and, um, it took a couple years to admit even who I was. And the woman I fell in love with was so in the closet. She wasn't gay, I wasn't gay, I didn't know anything about being gay. I grew up in a small, conservative town in [State]. [Sighs] And when I think back, there were some hints, like in my 20s; but before that, the only thing I knew was, Thursday was queer's day; and I didn't know what queer was, but you didn't want to be it. I didn't know what queer was. I thought it was like a nerd or something. So I didn't know anything; and then the military is quite reserved, too, so there were no opportunities. I just didn't respond. Till I finally did, and then it was like, "Oh, my word!" So that was - I'd say, I call it my four years of hell.

Participants also expressed grief due to concern for political leaders. For some, the grief was due to a woman not being elected in this past presidential election:

I never volunteered for the Democratic Party before. I never had a candidate that I could follow. I mean, I was one of these Hillary advocates, and I was crushed when she lost.

For others, the grief is due to concern for our current President's life due to the violence that is pervasive in our political climate:

Somebody said to me the other day that they are afraid for Barack Obama's life. That would be very grieving to me. I mean, I worked, I worked hard - not for him - I worked for Hillary; but then, of course, she didn't make it. Then I moved on. I still didn't like it, but I moved on; and I'm still working for the Democratic Party, and I always will. So I hope nothing happens to Barack Obama. And I think it would be a big eyesore for the rest of the world that we are so biased that we can't have a Black president.

For some participants, grief due to the political climate included grief due to the Religious Right in all faith traditions as well as grief due to not being accepted in their own childhood faith communities. One focus group participant described attempts by straight people to segregate them into a lesbian group in their synagogue and her attempts to educate them regarding the fact that they wanted to be with all kinds of people:

Now, I had an interesting experience at our synagogue - because you know, we know people there, and we're active a little bit, and our Rabbi is the only social justice Rabbi in [City]. He speaks publicly about gays and lesbians. He's really good. We have different - we call them a word that is Hebrew for small groups of friends. And so we thought that since we're so large, they're going to break up into small groups. And [Name] called and said, "Oh, [Name], this is the group I'm going to start for you." I said, "What?" "A gay and lesbian group." I said, "[Name], [Partner] and I don't only want to be in a gay and lesbian group. We know the gays and lesbians there, and particularly - I mean, there's a couple of them we care for; but it's just like you meet any friends, certain people you have an affinity for." And I said, "[Name], I don't really want that." And I tried to explain to her that we want to be with everybody. We want to be with women, men, even teenagers. But she did put it in the bulletin. And she had one call. I think I know who it was, but she had one call. But I think that we do sometimes tend to segregate ourselves.



Another participant described herself as being wary of joining a church due to fear of discrimination:

I attended my church for ten years before I joined, because I kept expecting to find prejudice. I kept looking for prejudice in every activity that I went to. And finally after ten years when I hadn't found it, I decided to go ahead and join. But, I mean, look at how long that took me to accept. You know, if I were a straight person, I would never have done that.

One participant talked about the grief issue that churches and other groups may give different support (or no support) to gay and lesbian people who have lost partners:

And then I think that most churches may not give the support to gay people if they lose their partner that they would a straight person. And I've heard funeral directors, a lot of them, are pretty strange about it, you know. So, I mean, if you're in a church that's not welcoming, or whatever it calls itself, you know the minister can't really go overboard, or else the people that are against us will be mad. And the church is one place a lot of people get a lot of support when a partner dies.

Another focus group participant talked at length about the grief she and other older lesbians feel about being rejected and/or not welcomed by the faith community in which they grew up:

When she started talking about religion, I think that that's another area of grief for many gay women. And kind of an interesting situation happened over Christmas when we had our [Group] meeting, and, you know, we had the party, and da, da, da, da, and everything. Anyhow, a couple of our [Group members] made mention of the fact that they were going to be attending an Episcopalian church service, because that was the faith in which they had been raised. And I have gone back to the Methodist church, especially during the major holiday season, O.K.? And I grieve for that loss of being able to have that sense of a religious community, if you will, O.K.? And it was very interesting to me, because one of these ladies is an ordained minister, not in the Episcopal faith. But, when something major comes up, you look to that area of faith in which you were raised, whether it's the ritual - and, certainly Episcopalians are ritualistic especially during the holidays. You can go to the high something or other, the 2-hour church service. I mean, they've got candles, they've got incense, the whole 9 yards. I have talked with Catholic people who feel very disenfranchised, even though they're a member of Dignity. They still feel very disenfranchised about not being able to walk into

their own church saying, "This is me. This is who I am. I'm here," O.K.? So that is a HUGE amount of grief, and it seems to be exacerbated during the major holiday seasons - Christmas and Easter, you know? Because you're so used to having that. See, and I think that's a kind of grief that has to be, whether you choose atheism or whether you choose to be a person of faith or whether you choose a denomination per se, O.K.? It is that ritual which is a major part of your life. You were brought up with it. You've grown up with it. Whether you believe it or not any more is neither here nor there. And yet, and you walk in, and you think that you want to be a part of it; and you know when to kneel, you know when to stand, you know, you know, whatever kind of thing; and yet you're not really any longer a part of this group, because you know you're not accepted. And that's a huge grief. That's a HUGE grief for a lot of people.

One woman described coming out to her church and having that be the end of her relationship with that faith community:

Oh, one dramatic piece that I, talking about what you do, I'm an Episcopalian, and I have lived through all the Robinson stuff, and everything; and it became quite an issue. In [State], it is one of the most conservative and worst Episcopal situations in the country. As a friend of mine says, if you want to find out what's really going on in the Episcopal Church, you have to leave [State]. And so, we were in the throes of all of this, and I came out to my congregation; and that was it. That took care of that.

This woman's grief was compounded when she was in an almost fatal car accident, and her church did not respond in what she considered to be a caring way:

And here again, uh, discrimination doesn't have to be overt, you know. It can be a very subtle. So I have two friends in the congregation, and I keep - I have said to them, because I don't go to the church anymore, and people keep - these two keep saying, you know, and I haven't gone back since the accident, because they, uh, for whatever reason, as long as I was in the hospital and in the nursing home, where it was convenient and sort of a, would be noticeable or what have you, the, uh, Pastoral Deacon and the new Priest that came in while I was recovering came. The new Priest came twice. And uh, but the minute that I came home, no meals, no offer of anything; and one of the ranking parishioners lives up there.

The above examples of personal, interpersonal, and political grief provide a basis for understanding the surrounding milieu in which these women lived their lives and experienced the interaction between grief, aging, and lesbian identity. In the following

sections, we will examine additional topics related to grief in the lives of lesbians age 60 and older.

#### *Additional Topics Related to Grief*

In the following sections, these women, the co-researchers in this study, will continue to provide the thick description needed to more fully understand their experiences of grief. They will describe their perceptions of what experiences might be unique to older lesbians, their experiences with end-of-life issues and documentation they have created for themselves and/or others, coping strategies and supports that were or were not available to them when they are grieving, and their vision for social action and/or change that may help grieving older lesbians that come behind this generation in the future.

#### *Unique to Older Lesbians*

This researcher specifically asked these women to describe their perceptions regarding which of their grief experiences might be unique to older lesbians. As stated earlier, it is difficult, if not impossible, to divide these experiences into distinct, mutually exclusive categories. Even some of the experiences perceived by these women to be unique could be judged by others as also applying to all grieving people, all older women, younger lesbians, and other human persons within various intersections of identity. However, these descriptions are these women's ideas regarding what is unique to them, and future studies may be able to confirm or disconfirm whether they can be generalized to lesbians age 60 and older as a whole.

A number of women described living a double life as being unique to this age cohort. These women grieved over the fact that marriages would have to end, and they considered the idea of living this double life forever an unsatisfactory solution. Some women also described looking back over their history, especially women who had previously been in a heterosexual marriage, and feeling as if they had lived two whole different lives. The women also rebelled against becoming a label rather than simply a human being, and participants had a sense of their role in making life better for the younger generation. One woman described her experience this way:

And that became about a seven-year journey of letting go of a heterosexual life. And it wasn't - when I came out to myself finally, it was a celebration. I mean, I wanted to stand on the rooftop and say, "My God, yes! This is beautiful! This is incredible, and what a relief!" So many twos and twos are put together from my whole childhood through my teen years. But, I had this wonderful family; and what was I gonna do with that? What was I gonna do with that? So, therapy, and knowing that the marriage was going to end, because I couldn't - I mean, I couldn't live a double life. And we had such a good unit. We functioned so very well. But I had to deal with that. And that was extremely painful. So, the sadness of ending that relationship, that marriage, and all that that - we were a pretty entrenched family in the [Name] neighborhood. Everybody knew us. We knew everybody, you know. The kids had started in preschool at 3 years old and graduated from [Name] High School with a lot of those kids. So you know, coming out, and letting go of that other life, and walking into a new one, involved a huge amount of loss. So I think that that sadness and all that we went through those two, three years or so, including the actual divorce, was a huge transition. You step back into that old world, and then you're stepping into a new world. You're hurt, you're mad, you're angry, confusion...well, I think one thing I've gained over these-I came out in 198\_, so I've had about twenty, about twenty plus years, that sense of loss of...you have a sense of history. You have a sense of having lived two entirely different lives. And, what would have happened if I'd come out in high school? Or even in college? We didn't have that chance. Some did, but at great cost. [I came out publicly at] forty. Right around forty. It's like that [Entertainer] concert that I went to. Here are all of us, in our 50s and 60s, and these baby dykes sitting right along here that are probably teenagers and twenties; and it's like, you know, we have really done a huge amount in our own lives that makes it free for you to be who you are. And that's true. I mean, we fought some very tough battles and went through an incredible amount of pain,

agony, throughout our years, 20s, 30s, 40s; because, you know, it's like the scarlet letter. You are labeled. You are nailed.

Another woman described some gay males who were living a double life and her perception of the hurt and the loss connected with making that decision:

And it's just there. And when that never happens, and/or it's faked, you know, what is more sinful or demeaning or whatever you want to tag it with, of going through the motions with someone because it looks right? I dated a guy a million years ago who had political ambitions, and he got married. Not only did he get married, he married a beautiful Hispanic gal and everything, you know, and he led this double life; and it accomplished, you know - he ended up in Washington, and that's what he wanted. But, you know, what a dues to pay, and what a hurtful... You know, people use each other all the time, in one way or another, and stuff; but to build a false life because that's the way it's supposed to look. And then the other side of the coin, of not being able to be out in the open or hold hands or do whatever you want to do, you know. So much of the emphasis is on the medical side, and visiting and being together. People have got to know and understand that they're not just being ugly or amoral or whatever, but that it's a feeling and an attachment and a strength and powerful thing that draws them together in the same way that any other heterosexual relationship is established.

One professional woman described the grief that she believed to be unique to older lesbians in terms of living two lives as well as living separately from her partner:

Well, I felt that I lived two lives. You know, there was the professional person, and um, within the department, within the University, there weren't a lot of social things. So it wasn't like, oh, I'm going to this social event, and I can't tell them. I can't bring my partner. Um, none of the male faculty brought their wives to many things. Occasionally. Occasionally. So, it was just that I had to lead two lives, and it was just kind of the way it was. So I would go on the weekends, um, to my partner, my then partner, who lived in another end of the state, the one I was with for 11 years. We lived...you know, she didn't want to move to the [Area]. I didn't want to move to [City]; so, it was a commuter [relationship].

Another participant described the specific milieu that older lesbian women lived in, including the necessity, as they saw it, of living two lives:

I think, I think that in the - I think that in the gay community, and probably especially with the OLDER gay community, lesbians - 'cause this is about lesbians - I think that one thing is that, um, a lot of us went through a very

difficult time with parents and families, and a lot of people were ostracized; and even if they weren't, they had to seek that REAL family from outside their biological family. And I think we all learned to stand by each other and be there for each other if something happened, because we were TRULY family, the TRUE, TRUE family. And that's the way I - that's what I think anyway. You know, I may not be RIGHT, but I THINK that, because I think that a lot of people had to MAKE their own family, CREATE their own family. Absolutely! Oh, yeah! You know, you couldn't let anyone KNOW. So you truly had to live kind of 2 lives - one for the outside world where you lived and worked, you know, particularly where you worked and that sort of thing - and then you had to have your lesbian family that you could be yourself with.

Some women described the fear associated with coming out publicly, which they don't believe younger lesbians have to deal with now. One woman stated:

Well, I think the older you are, gay and lesbian, the more you have gone through having to hide; so I'm sure there's a lot of fear attached to that.

Another woman described her fear and grief this way:

But, what happens is, the homophobia that you're growing up with and that you're actually in creates such a fear. And when you're afraid, you have a sense of loss of feeling safe. And if you're not safe in your environment, because you have this big monster over here that says you're queer and you're awful and you have a mental illness, everywhere you turn, it's either fear, discrimination, loss of loved ones who aren't gonna love you because...I mean, my brother didn't talk to me for two and a half years. He called me a disgrace to the family. That was 100% his issue...well, sadness - sadness, grief. Well, with my brother, yeah, because he would have nothing to do with me for about two and a half years. It was like he was gone, and I missed him. I mean, it's like, come on! It's almost like - like I said to my kids, "I'm your mom." I'm not defined by my sexuality. I'm still your sister. No more, no less, amen. But I became a label. As recently as a year ago, when he said, "I don't want you to come see me,"-he lived in a little town in [State]-"because people don't...you just don't know what it's like here for people like you." Whoa. "[Brother], get a grip!" But it was about him.

Several of the women described the fact that grief experiences unique to older lesbians have to do with the generation in which you grew up. One woman described this concept and indicated that this is not a situation that is experienced by lesbians in younger generations:

[Granddaughter] is on a committee - she's at an international school, a charter school - she's on a committee of - what do they call it? Diversity. It is this committee at school that makes sure that people feel safe at that school. Everyone's safe - gay, straight, transgender. She does it because she knows. She knows. So it's a whole different thing. But when I look at my generation, in our 60s and 70s now - I go to [Group for Older Lesbians]. I've been going for a couple of months; and you sit there, and you look around, and we went through hell to be able to be true to who we were and to live our lives without fear and discrimination at a huge price. And some very, very painful times. These generations coming up don't have that at all. Don't have that at all. [Daughter] and [Son-in-law], when they got married, had a gay minister; and at the after-the-wedding party when they all went back to the house, there was this transgender friend of theirs that dressed to the hilt. I mean, I couldn't believe my eyes. How cool! How wonderful! I think that we live with still a sense of - what would be the word? Not anxiety, but - of tenderness. We know. We know what it's like to be discriminated - we know what it's like to hide. You know, you take African-American people, whom I have worked with and been with all my life. They can't hide. We can hide - but then, we know we're hiding. And what does hiding mean? It means being fearful, anxious, there's something wrong with us. I don't think you have that now. But we have all lived with that, big time.

Another participant described how age at coming out publicly affects your grief experiences and your feelings about being out and open, and she contrasted her own experience with those who came out earlier as well as with younger women who are coming out in a new generation:

Yeah, [I came out] about 30. So I missed that whole first 10, 12 years that [Friend] experienced. But I know, though, that when we would park and walk to the bar and in the bar, I always felt safe. Parking and walking to the bar, we were always cautious. You know, we never held hands. We never acted like anything but just two women walking down the street. So there was a fear, like when you were out, away, I mean you never showed any kind of affection anywhere. 'Cause now, you go to [City], and you see women walking down the street hand in hand, or even downtown [City], you see women walking hand in hand, and it feels so nice to see that; but it's like, wow, I certainly could have never had that when I was young. And still to this day, I don't feel real comfortable in public taking somebody's hand, just because of all those years of that.

Another participant also spoke about the differences between generations:

Um, older lesbians, I think, tend to be more just like older PEOPLE, into their own lives and their own family, you know, and their own support system and not necessarily as connected with the community. So, maybe that's where the age kinda changes it? Plus, lesbians that are 20 or 30 or 40 have grown up in a different WORLD than you and I grew up in. You know, they've grown up in a world where - what? You know, worry about somebody knowing that I'm a lesbian? They, you know, they - I mean, I go to PARTIES - they wear, you know, um - you know, SYMBOLS! You know, and I've been, I was in a book club for a little while, and most of the women were out and about at work. And I've heard women say, "I wouldn't work at a job where I couldn't be out." Well, that's nice, you know, that they're that lucky in whatever their profession is, and they can DO that; but that doesn't necessarily work for everybody. But, there are women - and I'd say they're in their 40s, who just assume that it's O.K. with everybody. And that wasn't my life. So that's maybe where it changes as you get OLDER is, it's the world that you grew up in. There was a thing I remember - it's what age you were when whatever was going on in the world was going ON! And my experience was certainly different than my MOM'S woulda been, you know; but it still is not like it would be for a 20-year-old now, and I also don't have thumbs, you know, to do text messaging.

When this researcher asked if this participant believed that this is where aging and lesbian identity intersect, she stated:

I think that's - yes! Yeah, and I think if you, you know, you look around in the suburbs, then you'll find POCKETS, um, of women living together, um, probably in a lesbian relationship; and maybe they have a small community, or maybe they're just part of a larger community, and nobody, you know, THINKS about it.

This participant also compared the experience of older lesbians to an older gay male couple she knows and went on to speculate about the younger generation:

You know, or like my friend, [Gay Male Friend]. You know, nobody thinks about the fact that they're gay, although - I don't know! You know, you don't know what people think! Because, you don't ask 'em. Yeah. So I do think that that's where the age makes a difference is because society has changed in the last 40 years. I came out in 197\_, so that's 30 years ago. And things are certainly different today than they were then - not necessarily better or worse, they're just different. And I think somebody comin' out today has a different experience than I did comin' out 30 years ago. Now, the good part about comin' out 30 years ago was it was the throes of all the good feminism stuff, you know; so that was



actually a pretty good time! Um, you know, it was a pretty exciting time - to now - I don't know what it would be like now. Yeah. It's hard to tell, 'cause - I'M NOT! [Laughter] I'm NOT 30! You are a product of whatever was going on in the WORLD, you know, when you were living through it! And, uh, you know, the kids today, I mean, they can't - they can't imagine what it would be like not to have an iPod! And I think the people a little bit younger than us, they wonder what it was like to not have a Sony Walkman. [Laughter]

Still another participant described an extremely excruciating, yet ultimately releasing, public coming out experience at her work, and she believes such an experience may be unique to lesbians age 60 and older:

Yeah. 'Cause when I moved out here, and I got the job with Social Services in [Name] County, we were in [City]; and there were a few of us social workers there, and we would have a little group on Thursdays, just to kind of be a support group or whatever. And I hadn't been there real long, I don't know how long, but I think a few months; and this one woman leaned across the table at me, and she says, "[Name], tell us your deepest darkest sexual secret." And I'm like, "Oh, shit!" I mean, I'm a lesbian, right? I came from [Midwestern State], where I didn't tell anybody. And I didn't say a word. And I got really scared about it, and people were sharing things, and it was like, "They're going to expect me to share! And I could get fired for this." That is what was going through my head. So I didn't want anybody to know. So, I decided one day, I thought, "Well, I have to do something. I have to tell somebody." So I went to our director in the [City] office, and I sat down with her, and I said, "Well I, I need to talk to you." And it took me forever to tell her. I mean, I kept going around and around and around by saying things like, "You know, what I'm going to tell you has absolutely no bearing on my ability to do my job," and just going on, around and around and around. She helped me not an iota. I'm just struggling and struggling, and I'm crying by the time I finally tell her, because it was so hard for me. And I finally had to tell her that I'm a lesbian. I tell her, and she just leans over and pats my hand and says, "That's O.K., so am I." And I'm like, "Oh, my God! I just went through this excruciatingly painful thing!" And I said, "You didn't even help me!" And she said, "Well, I thought you needed to do it." And that just sticks out, because it was such a painful thing for me. I mean, it was just the hardest thing; and I must have been in her office an hour, I don't know - it felt like an eternity, just trying to get this out; and in my head believing that I could tell her this and get fired. She could just say, "Ohp! You're done! You're out of here!" And that was my own fear of homophobia, having that whole idea that I couldn't tell anybody. I mean, it was just an extremely painful thing for me, because I was a lesbian, and because of the prejudice that I had already

experienced just in the brief time that I was out, or you know, was coming out, as I discovered my own sexuality.

The above examples give a glimpse into the thoughts of these lesbians age 60 and older and what they thought made their grief experiences and experiences in general unique to their generation.

### *End-of-life Issues*

This researcher specifically asked this cohort about their experiences with end-of-life issues for themselves or others due to evidence in the literature that preparing a living will, power of attorney, and other legal documents are vitally important given the current political climate in which same-sex marriage is still not legal in most states (though many states were passing inclusive marriage laws right during the time of this study), and many older lesbians may have experienced estrangement from families of origin and/or adult children. The experiences of these women ran the gamut from women who had all the paperwork completed for themselves and encouraged everyone they knew to do the same to women who had not yet started this process for whatever reason.

A situation that does not seem to be widely reported in the literature regarding this generation of lesbians is that many of them include themselves in the “sandwich generation” as they care for adult children and/or grandchildren (or even the children of neighbors and friends) as well as aging parents, most of whom are in their 80s and 90s.

One participant described her own situation:

I brought my dad here, too. My father is here. He’s 91.

When the researcher asked if her father lived with her, the participant said:

No, no, dear God, no. He lives in a retirement home in [City]. He's in independent living, and he's doing just fine. He's losing a lot of his brain cells and can't remember hardly anything, but he gets up and can shave and shower and cook his breakfast. I take him to the grocery store. It won't be long before that's my next grieving process. I actually got to know my father better after my mom died. And my sister lives in [State] still, so it's just the 2 of us. So his total care is on my shoulders. So I'm one of these sandwich people where I have my grandchildren on this side and my father on this side. We learned about this in our gerontology courses, and I'm the middle; but pretty soon, I'm going to be moved over to one side of my daughter. She's going to have her twins on one side and me on the other side. But that's life. I mean, that's passages.

A number of the women described grief over having all the end-of-life documents in place when they were with a partner, then having to redo the documents after the partner died or the relationship ended. For some women, there was the added grief that they did not know any other person they felt they could ask to be their power of attorney. One participant described her experience with this type of issue, including anticipating her own mortality, making it clear what she wants done after her own death, and the regret that she will not die having been in a long-term lesbian relationship:

Yes. When I was partnered, we did go in and get joint power of attorney; and then I went and changed it all after we broke up, and I have all of that. My daughter's the power of attorney. She knows all my end-of-life wishes. Some of my fears around that are that I won't just die right away. I do not wanta linger. I do not wanta linger in pain. I am not one of those who think I'd have to hang on to the bitter end. I want to be terminated. [Laughter] In fact, I had neck surgery last fall and told my daughter that IF I came out of it a quad, I was not to go on a ventilator for any reason. And I told her, too, not to be too upset if I died then, because I feel like I've had it all in life - that I've been straight, I've had kids. [Laughter] I've been single. I've been a lesbian. You know, I've traveled in the world, and so for her to realize that I've done a hell of a lot in my lifetime. Yeah, and not to be really, really upset. It's better than being a quad or having cancer and lingering, lingering, lingering, lingering, uh uh. No. That's not for me. And she totally understands that and said that she could, she could do that for me - so, yeah, so yeah. I don't particularly wanta die TODAY [Laughter] or tomorrow; but I think I - of course we SAY that when we're not in a terminal position. I guess one of my regrets would be that I wasn't in a 30-year relationship with the love of my life, you know.

This same participant also had experiences dealing with end-of-life issues with her parents:

I was with my mother. My mother was still alive when my father was in a nursing home; and he was in a nursing home for about 3 years, and he was miserable. He was in pain the whole time - oh, godawful. She - and they had, both of them had always told us, "We don't want respirators. We don't want extraordinary means." Now, that's interesting, because when she went to the hospital - and she had had a massive heart attack. She had moved up here from their home in [State], and she had a massive heart attack; and I went in to the hospital - they called me - and I don't know what she would have said right at that minute. You know, I started kind of second - does a person change their mind when they're right in that situation? But I told the doctor what she'd always said, no extraordinary measures, and he was wonderful. He was really wonderful. And, she DIED then. I don't know if my brother knows that I did that. But he knew their wishes.

When this researcher asked if the end-of-life documents were all in writing, the participant stated:

No, at that point in time, we didn't have the - oh, the living will wasn't universal at all or anything. [I knew] what she had SAID, what she felt earlier, yeah. And she had told me many times, "I'll never go in a nursing home." Oh, God, so what are you going to do if you have a stroke, you know? [Laughter] And that was very difficult for me to make that and think about it and think, would that be what she really wanted at the time? Would she have changed her mind right then?

This participant's experience with her father's death also was laden with grief issues over trying to deal with his end-of-life wishes:

Now, with my dad, I remember going in the - he'd had a heart attack, and then he had a stroke; and I didn't know he'd had the first heart attack until after he had the stroke. It was a pretty severe stroke, and I was in the room with him, and I'm also a nurse; and they were trying to put a blood line in, and they couldn't get it, and they couldn't get it, and it's up here, it's a big bore needle. And he was turning blue. Oh, it was so horrible! And I said, "I don't know as I'm gonna let you try again." And the doctor said, "Well, let me try one more time." And there was a neurologist in the room watching the man doing it; and he said, "Oh, so you'd just let him die, huh? He's a doctor, he made enough money, and you'd just let him

die." I thought, "You son of a bitch." "No, I don't want him tortured either. I don't want you to kill him right here." You know, that was horrible!

One participant made it very clear how important it is for older lesbians to have all their end-of-life documents in writing so that the grief for their loved ones is not exacerbated by difficulties at the time of the person's death:

Absolutely. Absolutely, because people could walk in there, and if you're in a partner situation, absolutely make that person disappear. I think it's - you have to be so much more specific. And you especially have to if you're in a family situation. If there's a child, grandchildren, whatever it might be, you want to - you want - number one, them to know that they've been thought of, and they're part of your family. So you have to make all of your decisions based on THEM AS well AS the partner, because if there were - if we were - as older lesbians, usually the parents don't get involved. You know, they don't come in and say, "Well, you didn't have that baby, so WE'RE gonna take her. We're gonna fight you in court for that kid." As an older lesbian, there's really not that big an issue, because they're - if you're without a partner - your kids are grown, you know, you're just making - whatever you say in your will is gonna be handled, you know. I think it's a little easier for us, being older, because we have usually witnessed more as to what has happened, you know, with friends or family, whatever. You know, we've gone through that process of having to make decisions for people.

One participant described having all her documentation when she was with her last partner, but now feeling afraid of what would happen since she is single and very much alone:

Well, yes, in the last relationship I was in, we had all sorts of documentation, because I had had my health problem. So we had living wills and power of attorney and everything. So if I went into the hospital, my partner would go and she would say, "She's not a DNR." Of course, that's Do Not Resuscitate. So now, it's very scary, because I don't have a living will or power of attorney or anything set up. I haven't had it since that relationship ended, and it's something I need to do.

Another participant added her voice to those who have documentation and responsibility for parents as well as who grieve over breaking up with a partner and not knowing who to ask to be in charge of their end-of-life documentation:

I've done it all, just because I'm dealing with my mother. I'm her, um - [Sighs] - I'm responsible for everything. So, I've done my own living will, you know, before I got involved....well, here's a grief issue. A woman I was involved with, uh, when that relationship ended, uh, I didn't...I had moved from [State] here, and so I didn't have friendships, where I felt like I could ask them to be, uh, a responsible party. So there was a lot of feeling of, uh, loneliness and sadness that I didn't have somebody who I could have be my beneficiary and be responsible for all my stuff. And so I had a durable power of - no, what do you call it? A trust. A revocable trust; and uh, it was hard going through that, that feeling that there wasn't anybody there. Part of it was that I was in a new city, and I hadn't made the contacts; um, but also a lot of the people who I got to know were friends of hers. rather than mine. So. And, uh, we moved here, and broke up. Well, it was beginning to - the foundation of that relationship was deteriorating well before we came here. But that was a very difficult thing for me. And so there was a lot of, you know, grief, sadness, over that. And even though I'm in a relationship now, I've kept the uh, the trust because, in reality, I think it's easier on the partner not having to deal with all that since I've already got a trust established.

Another participant used humor to describe her situation regarding end-of-life

issues:

Anyhow, but if you're NOT partnered, and you DON'T have family, O.K.? What do you do? Who's your power of attorney? Who makes the medical decisions for you? You know, ta da, ta da. And I'm in the process of kind of going through that right now. Thank goodness I have [Friend] who is my medical power of attorney; but, you know, it's written right down there, "If she doesn't ask for a cup of coffee in 45 minutes, you might as well pull the plug, 'cause she ain't comin' out of it," right? [Laughter]

One woman makes a point as a medical social worker to help LGBT people with

end-of-life documentation:

Because I'm a social worker in a hospital, I have encouraged - when we've had gay and lesbian couples - I've encouraged them to do that. I, of course, filled out paperwork with Mom [age 98 and living with participant], her medical power of attorney and stuff, and I'm really glad that I'm in the position I'm in, because whenever gay or lesbian people come on the unit, I'm usually one of the first ones that recognizes the situation; and I really try to be as supportive about a partner or friend or whatever as I can.

Another participant helps LGBT people with these things in her capacity as a lawyer:

Well, as a lawyer, I've helped some people with those issues. LGBT people. And luckily, no one's died. And I'm going to actually start doing that again, now that my other project is, I think, over.

Thus, for these women, end-of-life documentation is seen as important for older lesbians; and the women are well aware of the things that can happen if an older lesbian dies, and the documentation is not in place. Further, women in professional capacities see it as part of their task to assist other older lesbians with these issues. A number of the women in the study said how comfortable they felt either with lesbian professionals such as doctors, lawyers, and social workers, or at the very least, open and welcoming straight professionals. This leads us to the next section regarding supports.

### *Coping Strategies and Supports*

This researcher asked participants about coping strategies, and about supports that were or were not available when they were grieving, as two separate questions during the interviews; but it soon became clear that there is some blurring between these two categories. Thus, the categories will be discussed as subheadings under the larger heading combining the two concepts.

*Coping strategies.* Many of the coping strategies described by these women will seem familiar to anyone who works with people in general in any aspect of loss and grief. Other coping strategies are connected specifically to these women's age and/or lesbian identity. Some of the coping strategies were helpful to the women, such as walking in the park or journaling. Other strategies were less helpful, such as suicidal thoughts or

returning to smoking after quitting for many years. In all cases, the resilience of these women allowed them to only use unhelpful behaviors for a short time and get back to healing behaviors, either on their own, or with the help of therapists and other support persons in their lives.

For some women, coming out publicly was a powerful coping strategy in itself. One woman described coming out more publicly after years of secrecy, especially when she was in the military:

So, you know, it was just - the whole military scene was just a really trying time. So I've had good experiences lately, and I had really bad experiences prior to that when I was still a, you know, a 19, 20-year-old person; and I just was sure that I was going to end up someplace where I would be a prisoner, and I would never get out. So I've, you know, I've enjoyed being out to more people, and [Partner]'s parents, I think, knew, but they were very Right Wing religious people, and I think if they didn't say the word, they were O.K.

Another woman described how freeing it was when she came out in her local newspaper, though she did experience the grief of some of her long-time customers refusing to come through her grocery store line:

Um, when the [Local Newspaper] did the article on me, I had a store customer - [Name] - who said that National Public Radio was looking for stories of everyday people. And so, she said, "I wanta do a story on you." And I'm going, "Get out! I'm a checker at the grocery store," right? No, no, no. Do you know what I mean? So she sat down, and she interviewed me; and this was about 4 years ago. It was right after I moved in with [Friend and Friend]. And, interviewed me, and she did a piece. Well, it did very well, O.K.? Well, then the [Local Newspaper] got wind of this, and they picked up on it; and so then, I was officially outed. Absolutely, positively! There ain't no doubt about it! "We know her story! We know who SHE is!" [Laughter] And I probably had 3 - 5 customers that, after that time, chose not to come through my line. And I thought to myself, hey! You know, your choice. I didn't necessarily GRIEVE about it other than I thought, what can we do, and how many more years is it going to take for people to realize that we're all facing the same stuff, O.K.? I mean, we're facing the, you know, get outa high school, go to college, get that diploma, get a job - I mean, we ALL face this, O.K.? We're all in this together. And just because you have blue eyes, and I



have hazel eyes, or you have, you know, brown hair, and I have blonde hair, or something - you know, whatever it might be - you know? Yeah. And I was surprised at the - because I think - I always think that the more educated a person is, perhaps the more open they are to differences, O.K.? And obviously, I'm wrong! Yeah. Um hm.

A couple of the women described wanting to make a quilt out of some of their deceased partner's clothing as a memorial to the partner and a comfort to the grieving surviving partner. One woman described her experience this way:

I was going to make a quilt out of [Partner]'s T-shirts that had sometimes kind of outrageous things written on them or, you know, pictures - some of them were beautiful, and some of them were funny. And I got everything. [Daughter] got me all the equipment I needed, and I haven't started yet. She says, "I hope you're not depending on me to do that FOR you after you're gone, because I don't wanta DO it!" So I have to take myself in hand and get started on that. And that will help me, too, you know. I would have it on the top of my bed or hanging on the wall, and just the memory of, you know - one group gave her a T-shirt that said, "Blind Lesbian From Hell!" [Laughter] She was a big woman - she said, "There's so little for big women at that second hand thing at the [Name] Guild, so, you know, that - my dying will help a lot of people who weren't able to FIND clothes." And so, but I said, "I don't wanta give them these T-shirts, 'cause they're just too precious to me." Just, you know, just stuff that was pretty much tied up with us. Not a piece of clothing that I would like to see on somebody else. So I got the fabric for the backing and the divider strips between the T-shirt sections, and I have to just get a friend to come over and walk me through it. I do better when someone is telling me and showing me than I do reading it. So just walk me through making one square, and then I can do the squares as I get to them and put the fabric between 'em and put the backing on and just use it as a topper. That is a warm quilt. So I have so many options to keep me from getting into a really deep hole of grief that I was in the beginning. So I feel fortunate that I do have all these ways that I can keep myself, you know, on a fairly even plane.

Another woman had a similar idea regarding the clothes of her deceased partner, though she, too, has not started on the project:

And I actually had asked a friend to make a little quilt out of some of her [transgender partner] dresses, but it didn't happen unfortunately. I still have the dresses, but I'm not motivated to make a quilt at this point. [Laughter]

One woman described getting involved with trips through Elder Hostel as a coping strategy for herself:

I think that's a coping skill, and I find as a single person myself, and I don't really have any need or urge to become partnered again, O.K.? I mean, it takes a lot of effort, and I just plain don't have it, O.K., you know, I'm the first one to admit it - so, happily single, right? But that doesn't mean that I cannot, as I age, and utilize as a coping skill, or - I guess maybe that's a form of grief - I mean, that you're going to be alone for the rest of your life, and it's by choice, not by whatever. Elder Hostel - and I get those catalogues, and I go, and I mean, I'm chomping at the bit. Jimmy Carter said, "I have lusted in my heart." Well, little did he know [Laughter] - oh, some of these trips are just incredible. Once I get [State] done, that's kind of a "bucket list" [Referring to a recent movie in which the Bucket List was made up of things to do before you 'kick the bucket'.] trip, last trip home, you know, ta da da da, and then I'm going to do an Elder Hostel trip, O.K.? It's educational, but you get to meet other people from different walks of life. I just can't think of anything for me that would be better as far as a positive, constructive coping skill to have in dealing with this last stage of my life.

Other positive coping strategies mentioned by these women included hiking, biking, other sports and exercise, enjoying or creating music, writing, photography and other hobbies, spending time with children and grandchildren, therapy, and even medications as needed. Coping strategies that were viewed as not so positive were such things as suicidal thoughts (which were all in the distant past for these women), withdrawal, anger, and habits such as drinking and smoking. One woman described, with humor, her return to smoking after her partner of many years died as well as her use of other more positive coping strategies:

One night, I was driving back from having dinner with my neighbor; and I said, "We've gotta stop at the store, and I've got to get a pack of cigarettes. If I don't have a cigarette, I think I will kill myself." And she said - and [Friend]'s a chain smoker - and she said, "Oh, for God's sake, [Name], don't do that! Everybody's gonna blame me!" [Laughter] And I said, "Oh, no, I'm a big girl. I have my own mind," you know. "I'll do what I wanta do." So, I did! And, of course, that was it! I started back. And now, I'm tryin' to quit! And, uh, I said, but you know, I can have my drinks. I like to smoke. I love havin' people in. I'm very social.

Finally, humor was a positive coping strategy used by almost all of these women as well as a natural part of their personalities as they told their stories, even their stories of intense grief. Some of their humor has already been shared in other sections of this document, so this researcher will share just a few more examples here.

During the focus groups and interviews, a common situation was for one or more women to forget what they had been saying or the point they were trying to make. The other women in the focus groups deflected these situations with humor, and we all were sympathetic with the experience. This is one exchange from the first focus group to illustrate this coping strategy:

33: Yeah, I read a wonderful book - of course, I no more could tell you the name of it - but it was great about older women, and the woman who wrote it happened to be a lesbian also.

66: Don't remember her name, though.

33: No! [Laughter] But she was the author.

7: Was she cute? [Laughter]

Another woman used humor when describing adjustments she and her older lesbian friends have had to make to their activities due to aging:

You know, I'm a great tomboy, and I love to camp and all of that; and back in the day, you know, we ALL did. We ALL did the tent thing. Don't do that anymore. We either have the condos we go to [Laughter], or we do - some of 'em have trailers or, you know, motor homes or whatever. So there's SOFTNESS under your body, not rocks. And, uh, we still do a lotta that stuff. We're just doing it a different way.

Even as her partner was dying, one participant and her partner used humor to cope with the grief due to the impending death, the “grief before the grief” as one participant put it:

And when we were - on Saturday afternoon, our friend who is a doctor in [City] - not a medical, she's a psychiatrist - she came to see [Partner] at [Lesbian Friends]' house; and so many people do this. They say, "Oh! You look so GOOD!" [Laughter] And it's such a LIE! And it's so stupid! And [Partner] said, "[Name], you've forgotten that I'm lying right across from those mirrored closet doors. I KNOW how I look!" [Laughter] Of COURSE, she didn't look good. She looked like hell, you know? [Laughter]

Finally, one woman made a humorous comment at a focus group regarding the stereotypes some straight people have about lesbian life; and another woman urged this researcher to include the comment in the dissertation:

I'll tell you something that's fun. Tell your straight friends that Ginger's doing this grief study for lesbians, and they'll say, "Really? Ya'll do that differently than us, too?" [Laughter]

P: Put that in your dissertation, if it got recorded.

*Supports.* This researcher asked a specific question of these participants regarding supports that were or were not available to them when they were grieving. Some participants reported having a great deal of support from a variety of sources, while some reported very little support. Again, some of the supports were directly related to the participants' age cohort, and some supports were provided by individuals or groups specifically aimed at supporting older lesbians. Other supports were those that any grieving person might anticipate receiving.

Several participants reported receiving support from their adult children. One focus group participant stated that her adult children had offered to take care of, not only

the participant in her old age, but her partner as well, though the participant and her partner are no longer together:

My daughter said to my partner that she would take care of her as she aged, as well as she would take care of me, and that she was our family. My son and daughter-in-law said the same thing, and the older grandchildren have accepted her. It wasn't like there was any kind of hate because you were gay, nothing like that. We were totally accepted as partners, and she was totally accepted into our family.

Another participant described receiving support from her adult children when her partner of 30+ years died:

I am blessed in that my children are very supportive of me. They were very - they just really helped me during that grief time. Not that anybody can DO anything. There isn't - you can't go to someone who's grieving and say, "Oh, I know how you feel," because they don't.

One participant described the grief she felt at leaving her children behind after divorcing her husband; but she also reported that she and her adult children received support from a group, PFLAG (Parents, Family, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays):

Moving wasn't so hard. It was just leaving my kids behind. Two were in college, and [Daughter] was in high school at the time. She wouldn't come with me, and she knew what she was doing. She was 14, 15, you know. She was old enough to know that she'd have another strict mother all over again if she were with me. It had nothing to do with my being gay, nothing, no. For some reason, the kids never - that never meant anything to them. You know, it was the breakup of the marriage and the separation, but it wasn't because of being gay. And you know, my daughter this year has gone to the PFLAG stuff, and she's gone to the Pride Parade with me and all that stuff.

Another participant described the support she and her partner both received from the participant's daughter when the participant's partner was dying of cancer. She described how they got together and wrapped Christmas presents for the partner's

grandchildren. Then, even though the participant's partner died in November, all her grandchildren received Christmas gifts in their grandmother's handwriting:

And, uh, the first thing she wanted me to do was to call MY daughter. And she wanted to see her. So my daughter took off from work and got somebody to keep the children, and she flew out here for a week. So, and we did - she did Christmas shopping for [Partner]'s grandchildren, and, um, uh, we, uh, wrapped 'em. We would have a drink, and [Partner] was in the bed, and she'd have her drink. You know, why not? So she would have her drink, and we'd all, we'd have a drink, and we would wrap, and she'd make out the nametags, you know. Yeah. So we did all that. [Partner died in November.] And her - 'course [Daughter] had so many children, she just went out and, you know, if there was anything [Partner] wanted specifically, she would say so. And, um, we just had a whole bunch of stuff for 'em and, you know, and it was all in Lynn's handwriting, which was nice. And, um, but, she, uh, was wonderful, wonderful.

One participant described the lack of support from adult children that she witnessed for people in her independent living facility. Though she had no children of her own, she did not see some residents of her building getting much support from theirs, which many older lesbians may have in common with older people in general who need to live in some sort of a facility. This participant used the term "depository of elders" to describe her living facility:

But I think a lot of them feel like they've been put here by their children, and I think that's true. You can see that the children are free to go and do and be whatever as long as the parents are here. They've got one meal a day, and someone's gonna call them if there's an emergency. So, it is a dropping-off place. I would call it a depository of elders, which I don't think is very good.

Some of these women found great support specifically from lesbian doctors, attorneys, and other professionals. One participant described the great relief she felt when there was a lesbian doctor on the floor of the hospital where her dying partner had been admitted. She felt further supported when she found that this doctor and the participant had the same attorney:

And we were very fortunate that, when they finally got her a room, we were on a floor where there was - the DOCTOR was a lesbian. Now, I was pretty sure she was. I didn't know for sure, but I was pretty sure, and I'm sure she knew right away that we were. And, but, uh, I think she suspected cancer. She was kinda tryin' to - NOT say - you know. She SAID it; and she said, "I really shouldn't say anything since we haven't had any tests yet." So they did all these tests; and, um, when she told us that night, that it was REALLY bad - and a friend was up there, and it just so happened that, um, some lesbian friends called me. And, of course, I was like, HYSTERICAL. And, um, they came right to the hospital. And so, the doctor was there, and, um, she asked me for my, if I had a medical power of attorney. And I said, "Yes, I do." And, uh, [Lesbian Friend] said, "Well, I'll go to your house and get it." And I said, "Hell, at this moment, I don't even know how to tell you where it is. I don't even know where to look for it myself if I went there." And I said, "Call [Lesbian Attorney]." And the doctor said, "[Lesbian Attorney]'s your attorney?" And I said, "Yes." And she said, "She's mine, too. Forget it."

Another participant described the joy of drawing up a will and other documents with her partner and the support of a lesbian attorney, only to feel the deep grief that came later when the relationship broke up:

When [Partner] and I got together, and then had a union ceremony, and she's a couple years older than I am - we, uh, did a will, we did power of attorney, we had a will; and we had a lesbian attorney, who was very good, who put the whole thing together. And it felt so natural. It felt wonderful that we could do that, and it wasn't fearful. 'Course, then we split up, and we had to undo it. Not undo it, but I mean, it became null and void. And I thought, "I will never do that again. I will never do that again." My will is, everything goes to my girls, and have at it, whatever you do with it. I don't care. But the experience of seeing this woman who you're in love with and you think you're going to spend your life with, and you do a will, and you talk about things that only men and women ever talked about - you just want to shout to the sky, "YES!" You know? And why can't we be happy? We shouldn't be fearful of that. We need to celebrate that and be happy for that.

For some participants, their religious faith and/or spiritual beliefs were a great support to them during times of grief. For others, religion in general seemed to present only lack of support if not blatant discrimination. One participant talked about religion in this way:

But, anyway, this is another issue, too, as far as grief is concerned. I am grieving for the fact that I am living in a time when the religious community looks down upon us - if not totally, you know, sets us aside. What's going to happen when they find out that it is genetic? How are they going to backtrack on this? How long - a lot of times you don't get support from the straight community, from a church where you aren't accepted, you know.

One participant had the experience of losing the support of her minister and her church due to trying to stand up for what she thought was right:

Well, I'll just give you the headlines. I became the whistle blower about our minister, who was being sexual with a parishioner. And of course all hell broke loose. And I couldn't get the proper authorities to get it, because this person was very charismatic and well admired, and it was a gay and lesbian congregation; so the straight people on this Board didn't really want to step on any toes. So I finally did get her - I mean, my objective was to make it so she could never have a church again, and I finally did; but it literally almost killed me. So I lost her, because it was a small church; I had a relationship with her. And I lost who I thought she was, which was not even close to who she really was. And then I lost - I mean, I had to leave the church. I had to leave the church. [It was a] loss of illusions.

One woman found support in Goddess religions and Wicca after her partner and later her transgendered partner died, partially due to the support she received from the Wiccan community when her partners were dying:

I think the most important thing that remained after [Partner] died and [Female Name] came through my life was that I've connected with the Goddess in a more visible way. I don't have the money, but I used to go to the activities that they had planned nationally where they would have groups celebrating the different things that happened in the Wiccan world. There are places where they teach, you know, Women's Studies, and Goddess stuff is included in that. This is out in [State]. And basically what it is, is the way we live our lives; and rather than putting the didactic theory onto you, all that evolves from who we are and what we do. And if you look at it through the ages in different faiths, it's the same. It's being kind. It's being kind to people.

Many of these women reported receiving a great deal of support from both the lesbian community and the straight community. One woman described her straight



friends' comments about the support the participant and her partner received from the lesbian community when the participant's partner was dying:

Oh, I've got friends in the straight world that say, "God, I wish we had the support that y'all had in the gay community." Yeah! Older - my neighbor across the street says, "I would NEVER have the people that y'all had." And we had 'em all - we had friends of all ages - I mean, not YOUNG young, but, you know, we had friends that were, of course, younger than us, uh, maybe, you know, in their, probably in their 50s now, um, late 50s. Um, [Partner] woulda been 70 this past [Month], because - no, a year ago - 'cause I turned 66 this [Month] - and, um - let's see, she woulda been 71, because I turned 66, and there was 5 years difference. But we were - she took care of all of the phoning and socializing, the calendar stuff, you know? But, yeah, I think that, uh, I think that a lot of people in the straight world that really KNOW and have seen how we are there for each other really are jealous.

Another woman received instant support from her straight neighbors after her mother died, two days before this woman's interview with this researcher:

My neighbors two doors down, they're retired. A Hispanic couple. I love 'em - [Female and Male Name]. And [Male Name] and I are always kidding around. But he came over and poked his head over my deck the other day - it was Sunday. And he said, "How ya doin'?" I said, "Well, my mom passed away this morning." "Well, I'll say a prayer for you." About 20 minutes later, he came back over with a card. He didn't go to the store and buy it. They must have had it. And it was the sweetest card, from both him and [Female Name]. Now, they know I'm gay. They know the girlfriends come over (not that I have a revolving door); but they know [Name], my girlfriend who comes over...it didn't matter. Had it mattered, you've got a door that just shut, big time. And they'd lose, and I'd lose. How beautiful! It didn't matter. But I think that we've come a long way, in that not mattering. But, get rid of the labels. Look at the human condition, the human emotion, the human sadness, all that. Don't label it as, "Well, that's lesbian sadness, and this is transgendered anger," and, you know. Start with what we have all in common.

Finally, for several of these women, the LGBT choruses provided much needed support. One woman described the meaning of the chorus in her life:

Then I joined [Name], the gay and lesbian chorus. [Lesbian's Name] was the director, and it was the very beginning. It was the first four years of that. And what a - I needed that music big time. And actually [Ex-husband] and [New

Wife] came to a couple concerts. My daughters came to a couple concerts; and I remember one of them, [Daughter] sat right in the front row; and when she saw me come on the stage - this is down at [Concert Hall] - "Hi, Mom!"

Another woman had this to say about discovering the LGBT chorus world:

Have you heard of the GALA? Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses. I now belong to a choir in [City] that is 125 voices. It's absolutely the best thing I've ever done for myself in my life! I just love it. This is my third year coming up, and the conductor is lesbian, and her partner is in the chorus, and there's a good mix of lesbians and straight women. And at one point, she said, "I think it would be advantageous for our chorus to connect UP with the GALA organization, 'cause I get so much information, and I get so much music, stuff that I hear the other groups doing." And she said, "How many would leave the chorus if we became a member of that organization?" Nobody! She said, "How many would be uncomfortable?" Nobody! They, you know, everybody knew there was a mixture of women in there, and some of them are identified, and some of 'em AREN'T! So that chorus is a GREAT grief eliminator or softener, because I LOVE it so much,

These are some of the main supports identified by the women in this study. The examples given are by no means exhaustive. Some supports were available in abundance when these women were grieving, and some supports were nonexistent. The women in this study were very open in sharing their perceptions of this issue.

#### *Vision for Social Action or Change*

The final question this researcher asked these participants (other than the very open-ended invitation at the end to share any final thoughts, or respond to anything they wished the researcher had asked) had to do with sharing their vision for social action or change to make life better for grieving lesbians age 60 and older that come behind us. For many of the women, this vision had to do with the political situation and/or political solutions. For others, the vision simply had to do with their desire to be accepted by the wider world as "normal" human beings deserving of respect and kindness. Several

women expressed sadness that they would not see these changes in their lifetimes (a grief in itself).

A focus group participant described a group specifically for older lesbians that is doing social action work right now in behalf of lesbians age 60 and older. She encouraged the women in the focus group to consider joining this group.

OLOC is doing that - Older Lesbians Organizing for Change. It's a national organization, and then there's a local chapter here. Most women seem to be from [City] and [City] area. But those women are very socially active and aggressively looking for change. And with a group like that, then you're part of it; whereas as a single person, you don't really have much clout. But there's strength in numbers.

One woman specifically stated that she believed there is a need for grief groups specifically for older lesbians, or even groups for older lesbians to discuss aging issues:

I think there should be some GRIEF groups! I think most of the groups at [LGBT Center] are for much younger people. Yeah, and maybe just some groups for people to process getting older, facing the end of their life issues. I don't KNOW how many people would go down to those things, but I don't think they're available now. I know Gay and Gray is maybe trying to work up some things. I don't know SPECIFICALLY that they're doing things like that.

Another woman described a movie she had seen recently in which an older lesbian's partner died, and a basically unknown relative came in and took her house away. She stated that this movie reminded her how much older lesbians need equal rights:

Well, obviously, to have equal rights in the death and dying scenario. Absolutely. Absolutely. To not have people have to worry about what's going to happen to their HOME if only one person is on the title to that house. I saw a play or a movie once that had several scenarios, and one of them was with Vanessa Redgrave. Did you see that? Years ago. And I was so struck by that. OH, my goodness! And all of those issues are what I've been TALKING about! You know, she [Ex-partner] was – “You have to get out of this house.” Well, ya know... [Laughter] For 35 or 40 YEARS they'd been together! Or whatever it

was! Then, some nephew that isn't even KNOWN to the person comes in and makes those decisions. So all of your medical, all of your legal rights need to be protected. There has to be some sort of legislation that says - I mean, you have common law situations where the wife or the husband or whichever WILL GET the house simply because they can state that they have been in a common law MARRIAGE! We don't have that opportunity to even do THAT!

This participant also went on to talk about the importance of financial equality for older lesbians who are grieving so that injustices do not compound the surviving partner's grief:

Um, in this day and age, um, the financial situation is always very important, obviously, you know? Um, again, there HAS to be some way, if you don't have all of your papers, it HAS to be recognized SOMEWHERE so that the grief for the LOSS of a partner or someone you love doesn't get all caught up in this HORROR! You don't need anything else. You're dealing with probably the most horrific loss you're ever gonna HAVE in your life. And that's - you need not to worry about everything else! And it depresses you more and more! I mean, to not be VALIDATED for your love of another person, to not have that validated? I can't imagine. I can't imagine.

One participant pointed out the importance of interventions and changes in three areas – domestic violence, gay and lesbian partnerships, and assistance for seniors with lower income, no matter their sexual identity:

Well, I guess it would be nice if they, if um, some of the actions I've seen that people are trying to initiate about partners having rights, civil unions and trying to recognize your partner for who they are. I think that that would be a big step against discrimination in the world against partnership of a different kind, let's say. So, being able to have a civil union anywhere. Because I know they have that opportunity in other countries, like in Holland and so forth; so my partner and I talked about going there to get married at one point, but we never did. We just felt like we were, anyway, on our own. But some formal recognition of rights for older lesbians in that way, where you could have an official recognition of your partnership. Um, and for me, having always just fought for WOMEN'S rights, so to speak, I would like to see support for seniors of lower income; and so, if you could approach being a senior without the fear of being financially devastated in some way, or homeless or whatever, I think that that would be an important thing to have nationwide instead of just maybe a few states. And also, of course, I'm very big, since I worked at the sheriff's department, on the domestic violence

issue. I would like to see, because that really affects women more than anybody else, I would like to see those issues brought up by people on a national level. So, domestic violence, recognition of lesbian or gay partnerships with civil unions, and, um, assistance for seniors on a lower income for whatever reason.

Another participant focused on the need for community to come together – the older lesbian community as well as the wider community – especially in creating safe places for older lesbians to go when they need care where they will be accepted for who they are and be able to share a room with their partners:

Well, I think it's community. Uh, not only the lesbian community, but the greater community. [City] is very unique in, um, doing a lot of outreach and awareness to nursing homes and, you know, care facilities, hospitals, places where older lesbians and gay men are likely sometime in the progression of life to end up. And my experience is that, when I have said to a doctor, I'm a lesbian, there's no, um, no response that gives me a sense of, "Uh oh," or "Oh, I'm not accepted." But again, that's this area, this community. But that's the kind of thing that has to be there, is that you - especially as you become more vulnerable and frailer and have greater need for the support services, uh, I think it's essential that you be acknowledged for who you are and recognized for who you are and what your particular needs may be. Some lesbians probably are comfortable just being in the greater community, the heterosexual world; but a lot of us really want to be among, or accepted by, the community that we're gonna be forced into interacting with.

This woman went on to describe her vision for communities that even now exist in some areas that have been created specifically for older LGBT people:

You know, there are some places that are providing, that are establishing gay communities with all the resources; but they are so few and far between that we are gonna be forced to deal with - like, my mother's in a very conservative nursing home, but yet they have undergone a training to recognize the needs of gay and lesbian people, whether there are any out. Quite a few of the women there have children who are gay and lesbian, and are open about that; but whether any of the seniors, the older seniors who are there, are, I don't know. But at least the awareness is getting to them; so hopefully when it comes time for us to be in that situation, it will be a lot more of an accepting community. But, uh, for example, supposing I go into a nursing facility - a retirement community - I don't want to say nursing home; but, let's say I want to live with my partner there. I want that to be accepted. Or two men living together. I don't know personally anyone

who's in that situation, but I want that to be available. I know one woman whose partner has Alzheimer's who's in a care facility, but she's still living in her own home; so I just don't know anybody who's in that kind of facility with their partners.

One participant stated that she thought it was difficult to get older lesbians together to be unified for any kind of ongoing groups or actions for change:

I talked with my friends there, too, about what seems to happen is this dynamic, old people together; but then people pair off, and then the whole thing kind of collapses inward. We're a hard group, I think, to come together. And I think what I notice is that in my own life, too, is that I'm very, very independent, and I know a lot of lesbians that are very, very independent. And so, it's harder to get an elective group together. I don't know if I'm just making excuses here or what; but, I think these young people are going to have to figure out something.

This same participant, who is a retired social work professor, also talked about not liking how she was treated by a staff person at the Senior Center in her community – not because she is a lesbian, but because she felt talked down to as an older person:

I don't like how I'm treated on those hikes with the Senior Center. I ended up hiking with the 33-year-old guide, the one that was driving us, 'cause I had spilled all my water and - anyway, I had to keep up with her, and I did, and I was so proud. But the way she talked to me! By the time I got done with that, I was exhausted. I was. It wasn't like just a human conversation. She had this certain..tone..of..voice that was so CHEERFUL; and oh, seriously, by the end, I thought, "You are a really great person," and they all love her, but oh, my gosh, "You don't have to talk like that. We're not children!" I think we have a hard row to hoe out there as we get older. I do. And I think it takes a lot of strength; and I think if we stay in the workplace longer, I mean, I think people need to come together.

Another participant talked about the need to challenge what has been called the "assumption of heterosexuality" in our society:

Well I think that - and gradually maybe this is happening - the assumption that people are straight needs to change, you know. Because I think that exists in nursing homes or wherever, you know what I mean? That assumption needs to change. I don't know how you do that. I guess just through general education.

We are a minority, and we're a minority that has more political clout than our numbers.

When this researcher asked one participant about her vision for social action and change, she stated:

Well, wholehearted acceptance from everybody would be the utopia of that.

This participant went on to describe the greater awareness that she sees in her community, including allowing a group for LGBT seniors to meet right at the community center. She also talked about the importance of coming out publicly in terms of making life better for older lesbians:

I think there is a greater awareness, you know, in like senior centers and things. When I went to the Senior Center in [City] was where I saw a thing about the Rainbow Elders. You know about the Rainbow Elders? I saw that on the bulletin board. We have meetings up there at the Senior Center. So I think there is more awareness. I can't imagine that there is any - maybe it's just in this part of the country. It may not be in the Deep South. They might not make any reference to it at all. And if not, those are the places that need to change and get up with at least the times that we are here. And I can't help but think it may be different here. And it's a shame. And I don't know how that can work except just to make people more aware somehow. It's just like my friends back there, they don't have the courage to come out. And it's going to take courage from people. It's going to take people who are not afraid, you know. They wouldn't dare tell anybody, people they've known forever. And if people would have the courage and come out and tell other people, people would just, you know, "Oh, well, I've known her forever. She's no different now than she was a week ago when I didn't know." And that's kind of the attitude I had at work. Anybody that doesn't like me, if that's the only reason they don't like me, then I don't really care. But if I tell them, and they like me, then that's fine. But I've never really had anybody I thought shunned me or wasn't nice because of that.

One participant had a relatively simple request in terms of her vision for change for grieving older lesbians – simply for people “to see us” and to treat us as people:

For people to see us as REAL people, because just as you - you're not as old as I am - but you know that you don't THINK your age. You do not. And I do not THINK like a lot of 77-year-olds think. And I'm THANKFUL for that! My

mother used to tell me, "Oh, [Name], you laugh about everything. You'll never amount to anything!" So, O.K. But, I think, for others to see us, because the world has a - not all the world, I don't want to generalize - a lot of people have the thought that once you get to maybe 60, you're senile, and so there. You couldn't possibly have any good thoughts or applicable solutions to things. And I would like for people to just see people as people whether they have wrinkles or whether they're baby faced or whatever. Gay or straight, yeah! As human beings. Isn't that important?

Another participant talked about the Religious Right and their hate, especially toward gay people. She described some things that she believed needed to change, and she expressed the grief that she may not see it in her lifetime:

Probably something that none of us can fix, but the far right religious groups - somewhere somehow, some little hole has got to get into their thick skins so that legislation can be passed - like when Proposition 8 was just failed, and big money from the far right is what stopped Proposition 8. They barely did it, but they did it. And if those kinds of people would slowly open their eyes and open their hearts and their brains, and realize that we're not perverts and monsters, and we are really O.K. people...I mean, what business is it of theirs if two people of the same sex get married? Is that interfering in their religious rights? But until something like this happens, until society supports us, it's not going to change. There's still going to be hate and discrimination, for women, for minorities, gay people. A lot of hate, and a lot of hate from the religious right who are religious. It makes no sense. It's an oxymoron. All these religious people hate. It's mind-boggling. And until we are equal, I don't think there's gonna be changes, and it's very slow coming. I think we're gonna get there. I don't think I'll see it, but...

Still another participant described how many older lesbians she knows have been wounded in various ways, specifically by interactions with various religious organizations and/or their families of origin. She advocates that we need to be thought of differently – again, to be seen as “normal” people:

So many lesbians I know are wounded - wounded Catholics, or don't see their families at all. That's very sad. That's part of the reason we have these Thanksgiving dinners and things, is they don't have any families to go to. Even as loving and kind as my kids are, I don't see them. I live a long way away from them, but they don't come too often. And that's normal. So I would say, um -



and I'm not sure how we're going to do it, but we need to be thought of as not odd, not sinful; and some of the churches are making strides, but it's also causing serious schisms in the Presbyterian Church and in the Episcopal Church. The Catholics are just kind of sliding backwards a little.

For another participant, education is the key to change. She also described the grief LGBT people often feel due to unkind and unrealistic stereotypes, such as that gay people molest children; and she believes that needs to change:

Education. They're ignorant. Which is an outgrowth of fear, you know. Or, fear is an outgrowth of ignorance. It depends on which way it's going. Then, of course, the liberal straight community is much more accepting and open and what have you; and as you have people in the public eye, like [Gay Public Officials], and I think we have three legislators now, and [Lesbian Couple in Their 80s] that are on the LGBT Caucus, and stuff like this. And you know, the more people get to know people open and only care about them relative to what their common interests are or whatever, then there's gonna be change and movement and what have you. But believing in it, and understanding, like I said earlier, that no one would choose, you know? Now you may get some younger people, now, that say, "It doesn't make any difference to me, because..." - but its just been a constant and a bending over backwards to fit in, you know, as much as possible, and things, that make people either forget, not care, or accept, you know. And that's why, again, the schools, you know, the issues that come up in the schools, and the sex education and what have you, the erroneous piece of us being a danger to kids is, you know, stupidity. When have you ever seen, you know, when have you ever seen - show me one case of pedophile, you know, that had any to do with, you know. "Well you teach 'em to be..." No, I don't think so.

One woman came to a realization recently that there is no country on earth where lesbians are in the majority; so, in her vision for change, countries need to look at how their minorities are treated:

But what came to me is, whether you're in Iran, whether you're in China, whether you're in America, European countries, Israel, South America, if you're a lesbian, you are always a minority person. There's no country, there's no culture, there's no society where you as a lesbian or a homosexual run the show. That - and it took me a long time to figure this out [Laughter] - and I think it was having Barack Obama as the, he's an African American, and I got to thinking about it, whether he were - yes, he is a minority in this country; but if he wanted to, he could live elsewhere and be supposedly one of the majority if we go by just, you

know, racial or, I mean, skin tone or that type of looking at people's - not status, but - but for a lesbian or for a gay man, there's no place where they'll ever be a majority. And so, how does the country, or how does society look at its minority members? Because I think there are times, I think it's human nature, I hate to say it, of wanting to have someone to bully.

One participant expressed ambivalence about the whole gay marriage issue, but she did acknowledge that it would at least make it harder for society to ignore the impact of the loss when a gay or lesbian person lost a partner to death:

Well, you know, there's been all this discussion about gay marriage, and I'm frankly not sure how I feel about it. But the one benefit from it would be that if there were a formal commitment ceremony of SOME SORT that you did and was recognized by society, then, in the case of a loss, no matter what your age is at the time of the loss, there's gonna be less of those ISSUES. Um, there would be at least - people would find it harder to ignore the impact of the loss.

Another participant also addressed the marriage issue and equal rights:

Because, first hand, I know that, um, you know, we can go to the marriage thing - and I don't care if they call it marriage or commitment or WHAT - what I want to see happen is for people to come that will have the same rights as the straight community has, the heterosexual community. Because, um, there were so many things that - I mean, just like [Deceased Partner]'s IRA - if we had been a heterosexual couple, it coulda stayed IN there until I turned 70 without ever touching it. If you are NOT a married couple, you have to take so much out a year.

One participant expressed the wish that lesbians would be treated equally in terms of housing, that doctors and educators would have information and training that would allow them to deal effectively with older lesbians, and that the military's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" would be abolished:

Well, for housing, um, you know, I know that sometimes it's a policy, and sometimes it's just an understood thing that they don't deal with old lesbians. And some of the women I know have had problems with their doctors. So I would like for doctors, when they're going through their training, to have training in dealing with homosexual patients and gay guys and what, you know, things that may be especially a part of their lives and understand what lesbians... Yeah. So I would

hope that doctors would get training in treating patients who are same-sex related for their sexual lives, and that they would get rid of the military, "Don't Ask, Don't Tell". That - I always felt like the Other. And the Senior Center - when [Deceased Partner] was director, I'd go there sometimes for lunch. And I was known as "that woman who calls herself [Deceased Partner]'s roommate!" [Laughter] And I said, well, you know, these people are the same age as I am mostly, so I can understand that this is a foreign thing for them, and that they're wondering what the deal REALLY is, 'cause, you know, we'd just say, nah, we're housemates. So I would, you know, I would have these public institutions be talked to by people. [Deceased Partner] and I used to go out to schools and that and talk to the students about being lesbians, to the schools that would let us come IN. And we'd talk about it; and then, you know, somebody would say, "What do you do in bed?" And she'd say, "We sleep! What do you do?" Yeah. So I - and I wish that classrooms would have that information. Like, when I was still at the library, someone came in and slapped down a book, and it says, So-and-so Has Two Mommies"; and she said, "Do you know what this story's about?" And I said, "Yes, I do. I've read the book". She said, "Well, it's right on a low shelf where my child could get it!" And I said, "Well, it's sorta aimed at - your child's - level." And no, they didn't want it! And then, I would start getting, you know, I wanted to counter their arguments, maybe not too gently!

Finally, another participant felt very strongly that "mainstream" gay and lesbian people need to come out so that people can get to know that we exist:

Well, um, I think that MAINSTREAM gay women need to be more out so that individuals can see that there's a whole other side to this issue besides what you see during Gay Pride parade. And I equate it to the same thing - what you see in Pride Parade is the same thing you see on religious TV with [Conservative Religious Personality] crying on TV saying, unless you send him 5 million dollars, God's gonna call him home. That's not representative of Christianity any more than the more outlandish, in my viewpoint, um, what we see during Gay Pride, which is portrayed on TV. Of course, they're not gonna show the librarians and the doctors and the nurses and, you know, whatever's going - yeah. Um hm. Um, and I would like it to be so that teachers particularly, um, people in any professional area, can be open and out, and people see - they punch the time clock, they work with the school, they do this, they do that, they're just as mainstream, O.K.? We need to mainstream. That's huge! That's huge!

#### *Statement of the Grounded Theory*

The essential grounded theory that emerged from the data in this study is that grief as experienced by these older lesbians is an overall global, complex, contextual,

ongoing grief that permeates the essence of every aspect of human life due to the lack of acceptance (often compounded by the assumption that their lesbian status is a choice that could be altered at will), celebration, and support of these women's primary relationships as well as of their individual lesbian identity. The experiences of grieving, aging, and lesbian identity intersect constantly in these women's lives surrounded by the continuously interacting aspects of personal grief, interpersonal grief, and grief due to the political climate.

Due to the complexity of the grief experienced by these older lesbians, this contextual grief is not something that can be worked out by going through the steps of any grief process described by any particular stage theory, because it never completely goes away. Some of the women in this study specifically referred to a sense of "life-long" grief due to some aspect of experiencing their lesbian identity in the current social and political milieu. Even as these women experienced joy in their daily lives, pursued careers, and worked for causes they believed in, their lives were and are permeated by an underlying sense of grief due to their life history of hiding their identity to various degrees, their experiences of both overt and covert discrimination, and their experiences of constantly "coming out" or "not coming out" as they encounter new life experiences.

This experience of contextual grief, however, absolutely does not mean that these women are constantly sad, depressed, or wallowing in their grief. Their grief experiences are mitigated by coping strategies (including humor), supports from the lesbian as well as the straight community, and their visions for social action and change – in other words, hope for the future and for older grieving lesbians that are coming up behind them. The

participants in this study described various degrees of access to these coping strategies and supports; but in analyzing the data as a whole, the resilience and empowerment capacities possessed by these women enabled them to survive and thrive as they turned their grief into powerful strategies for hope and change.

### *Conclusion*

The women in this study have spoken on the topics related to grief in the lives of lesbians age 60 and older in their own words. They do not always agree on every single topic, but their passion shines through as they individually share their own personal experiences of grief, their ideas regarding which of their experiences may be unique to older lesbians, their strategies for coping and finding support, and their vision for social action and change. Each of these women touched the life of this researcher in a very profound way, and many expressed gratitude for the study at the end of the interview. This researcher is grateful to each older lesbian woman who had the courage to share her life as part of this study.

## Chapter 5: Discussion and Summary

The purpose of this study as stated at the beginning was to understand the lived experiences of lesbians age 60 and older in terms of grief related to various life situations. The purpose also included generating a grounded theory related to the findings. Through the 3 focus groups, 22 individual interviews, and 1 interview with an interracial couple, an extensive amount of rich data was generated regarding the topic. The women shared openly about their experiences of grief due to very personal events such as death losses and partner relationship breakups as well as events in the wider society such as discrimination and the effects of the current political climate.

The original purpose of the study was additionally to go beyond grief strictly related to death loss as seems to be the focus of much of the extant literature regarding the use of this particular term. As one participant stated in the third focus group:

I think we've pretty well identified the fact that grief is not just loss of a person, which most people tend to, you know - when you say grief - it's, yeah, because they've lost a grandparent or whatever. I think we've really expanded what loss meant, as far as loss of job, loss of faith or religion, you know, loss of status, loss of economic standing...

Her language (use of “we”) indicates her ownership of this whole process and her role as co-researcher. Other participants also expressed gratitude for the research itself and for being a part of it.

The grounded theory generated from this and as stated in Chapter 4 above indicates the experience of a global contextual grief that permeates the lives of these

older lesbians, even as they experience joy and even empowerment in their daily living. As described by the women in this study, data emerged that indicated that the grief experienced by these women could be classified as personal grief, interpersonal grief, and grief due to the political climate. Within this milieu, the aspects of grief, aging, and lesbian identity are constantly intersecting. At the point of intersection, the women identified some aspects of their grief that they believed to be unique to older lesbians; but the women themselves identified many aspects of their grief experiences as being experienced in common with grieving people in general, older people in general, older women (regardless of sexual identity), other members of the LGBT community, and younger lesbians.

Along with these commonalities, however, these women expressed having a strong sense that certain aspects of their grief experiences were specific to their cohort. Some of the impact of their experiences had to do with whether they came out as lesbian at an early age or whether they came out later in life. This information could be the catalyst for a whole study in itself. Women who came out earlier described spending much of their life hiding their identity, passing, and “living a double life” or “living 2 lives” as several women stated. Some of these women did not, themselves, experience such things as being beaten up by police or being victims of bar raids, but they often knew people their age who had experienced such things. Women who came out later in life still experienced some sense of not being able to be openly affectionate in public and/or not coming out in every social setting (such as work or the military); but they

seemed to feel more joyful and comfortable about their coming out than the women who came out as children in the 1930s and 1940s.

Personal grief experiences reported by these women included death losses of family members, partners, friends, and beloved pets. They also included grief over losses due to aging, such as loss of physical and/or mental abilities, grief due to things not done in life that they would now not be able to do because of health or financial issues, and feeling rendered invisible in the wider society due to their age. An added layer for this group of women consisted of grief due to aspects of lesbian identity – in some cases, grief due to the very fact of being lesbian.

Interpersonal grief experiences that emerged from this study included grief related to various forms of discrimination, including discrimination due to homophobia, sexism, ageism, racism, and others. This researcher also chose to include grief due to the breakup of a partner relationship in this category, though this can obviously be a very deeply personal loss. In these women's lives, grief due to a partner relationship breakup was often experienced through a layer of additional grief due to not being out to anyone outside of the relationship, grief to being out and being ostracized by extended family members or others in the wider community, grief due to their relationship not being validated by others, and grief due to discrimination by professionals such as medical staff or funeral directors. Other forms of interpersonal grief experienced by these women included being rejected by their families of origin and feeling isolated due to not knowing any other lesbians as they were growing up or even as adults in their present living situations and communities.



Grief due to the political climate included grief as a result of anti-gay candidates and/or laws, grief due to lack of equal rights in terms of marriage rights and lack of financial benefits after the death of a partner or the breakup of a partner relationship, and grief related to rejection by their own faith communities due to their lesbian identities or overt religious persecution by the Religious Right of any faith tradition. Many of these women were very politically active, working actively for candidates and on LGBT political caucuses. Fighting for equal rights was one strong coping strategy these women used to combat their feelings of grief and helplessness.

In addition to these categories of grief experiences, the women also tried to identify grief experiences that are unique to them as older lesbians. Though they realized that these experiences probably were not totally unique, they also knew that some of their experiences would not be experienced by, for example, an older straight woman. Again, some of these experiences had a great deal to do with their lesbian identity, such as being rejected by parents or “close” friends solely due to their identity, undergoing an excruciatingly painful coming out experience with a supervisor at work, or not being included in the obituary when a partner’s parent died. These women expressed the belief that, not only would a straight older woman not go through such an experience, but that many younger lesbians who are just now coming out would not have these experiences.

The women also talked about the importance of end-of-life issues for older lesbians due to the intense grief that can be experienced if a partner dies or becomes incapacitated, and a person from the family of origin comes in to take possessions and even the very home that was shared by the couple. They also described coping strategies

and supports that were available or not available to them when they were grieving. Some of these strategies and supports were identified as being helpful to anyone who is grieving, such as crying, walking, journaling, and talking with a good friend. Others seemed more particular to older lesbians, such as grief groups specifically for older lesbians, which some women found, and others did not.

Finally, another aspect of the original purpose of this study was to go beyond simply a sharing of grief experiences, but to explore the connection between the personal and the political. Therefore, the women were asked to share their vision for social action and change, which might make life better for grieving lesbians who are coming after us. The vision suggested by these women included education, “mainstream” older lesbians coming out publicly, active political involvement, and people opening their hearts and minds. One woman said her wish would be simply for people “to see us” and to know that we are people with many experiences and feelings in common with everyone. This woman considers herself a devout Christian, and rejection by her conservative religious denomination was one of the greatest grief experiences of her life.

### *Linkages*

The data gleaned from this study will add to the body of theoretical literature in a number of areas. First, in terms of grief theory, it is the hope of this researcher that this study will help to expand the concept of grief to embrace grief due to a wide variety of life experiences. It is evident from reading the narratives of these study participants that the experience of grief is not confined to those who have experienced death losses. These older lesbians experienced grief due to personal, interpersonal, and political events in

their lives; and the theoretical implications for conceptualizing this wider definition of grief are immense. Viewing the experience of grief through this wider theoretical lens may help older lesbians feel that their particular web of contextual grief has, at last, been understood by at least some grief theorists.

This study also will add to the body of aging theory. Though much more has been written in recent years concerning aging theories specifically pertinent to the LGBT population, much more is yet to be discovered. These older lesbians who have shared their lives and experiences with us have surely contributed to making the body of aging theory stronger and given it more depth. Specifically, the theory generated by this present study enables us to see more clearly the intersection of grief theory with aging theory as well as how both of these theoretical areas intersect with lesbian identity.

In terms of feminist and queer theory, this study will add greatly specifically to the concept of grief in the lives of older lesbians in particular. It was in the course of completing this study that this researcher began to identify strongly with the theory and practice of feminist and queer research. According to Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2007), “Feminist research is a complex process that intimately links theory, epistemology, and method” (p. ix). Though feminist research can incorporate quantitative, qualitative, and mixed study methods, the main thrust of the theory base is that the research will, in some way, improve the lives of women and other marginalized groups. In the same way, a goal of queer theory is to improve the lives of people with sexual identities that differ from the dominant society, and that would include the lives of older lesbians. Thus, both these theoretical paradigms urge us to move beyond simply the research and the

formulation of theory to an emancipatory paradigm of change in the social milieu in which these older lesbians grieve and live their lives.

This study also contributes to the research literature in a number of areas. As stated in the initial literature review, this researcher found much literature on the individual categories of grief, aging, and lesbians. There was even much available literature on the intersection between grief and aging, grief and lesbians, and aging and lesbians; but there was very little research combining all three of these categories. It is hoped that this study will contribute toward filling this gap in the literature, and that other studies will come forth to fill the gap as well.

#### *Implications for Clinical Social Work Practice*

As the data was collected and the theory emerged, a number of implications for clinical social work practice became clear. First, for social workers who offer individual counseling, it is vital to offer clients the opportunity to divulge their sexual identity and to provide a safe and supportive environment in which they can do so. A number of the women in this study stated how important it was for them, when and if they decided to take advantage of therapy, to find a therapist who was either lesbian herself, or who was very open and welcoming to older lesbian people.

Second, similar implications seem to apply to social workers who provide support groups of various kinds. For some of the older lesbians in this study, it was important to find a support group for grief and/or aging issues that was for lesbians only. Other women sincerely wanted to be in groups with a variety of people; but, at times, they were not sure if the members of the group and even the group leader would be welcoming to

them and willing to listen to their experiences. Advertising groups and/or individual counseling in LGBT publications or putting Safe Zone symbols on the doors of offices would go a long way toward helping older lesbians to find the services they need.

As social work clinicians, we are urged to start where the client is. In working with older lesbians, another implication of this study would be to ask openly about the client's needs. Perhaps most important is for all of us as social workers in whatever capacity to be very conscious of the assumption of heterosexuality that pervades our society and even our profession. One older lesbian, a retired social work professor, admitted that even she has held this assumption at times. It seems to be a natural tendency to assume that someone is a member of the dominant group unless proven otherwise.

#### *Implications for Community Social Work Practice*

For social workers in community practice, an implication from this study seems to be that we must advocate for institutions at all levels of care (such as independent living, assisted living, and skilled nursing facilities) that are specifically created for LGBT people or that are openly LGBT friendly. Several women in this study expressed a preference for all-lesbian facilities, whereas others stated that they would like to be around a variety of people as long as they could be themselves and not be thrust back into the closet. Social workers are often in a unique position to help to create stronger linkages between LGBT clients and "straight" community-based agencies and services that already exist.

Another implication for community social work practice is that we, as social workers, must not rule out older people in general, including older lesbians, when it comes to community organizing or other political activities. Many of these women were very politically active, either in an LGBT Caucus of the Democratic Party or in an organization specifically for older lesbians, such as OLOC (Old Lesbians Organizing for Change). These women are not just sitting in rocking chairs waiting for straight people or younger lesbians to do their work for them. They are ready and willing to march, stuff envelopes, work at conventions, write letters, or do other activities that will further the causes that will make their lives better. As many older people of all sexual identities live longer lives and stay healthier, we as social workers in community practice need to remember not to write them off in terms of rallying them to use their own energies to speak out for their own issues and to create stronger linkage between age groups.

Finally, another implication of this study is that we, as social workers in community practice, must get used to thinking in terms of LGBT people in every aspect of community practice. Whether we are fighting for housing rights, civil rights for various racial groups, immigration rights, or the rights of steel workers, chances are there are older lesbian amidst the ranks of any of these populations. We need to learn to be aware. As one participant said, she would simply like for people “to see us” and remove the cloak of invisibility that many older lesbians have lived under for too long.

#### *Implications for Policy and Societal Change*

In terms of policy and societal change, an implication of this study is that we, as social workers, must continue to advocate for equal rights for all people in the political

arena. A number of the older lesbians in this study told horrendously heart-wrenching stories of things that happened after the death of a partner, whether extended family came in and cleaned out all the possessions, or the surviving partner did not get financial benefits that are given to the survivors of straight marriages. These kinds of inequalities obviously added a layer of grief to these already grief-stricken women. Social workers can, hopefully, influence legislators and other policy makers so that some of these women can see themselves experiencing equal rights within their lifetimes.

Another implication of this study for policy and change is that we, as social workers, can encourage political activism in all our clients who express an interest in such activity. This can include encouraging them to run for office, to work for candidates, and/or to write letters regarding causes they believe in. Most of these older lesbians had seemingly unlimited ideas of how almost all older lesbians could be politically active in some way. It seems that sometimes, for disenfranchised people, they are just crying out for an avenue to make a difference in some way. Social workers can help even isolated older lesbians find an avenue for this kind of activism.

Finally, though some of the women in this study expressed ambivalence regarding the whole issue of gay marriage, almost all of them agreed that LGBT people should have that option as a choice. An implication of this study is that social workers must advocate for the right to legal marriage for all citizens. Equal marriage rights for older lesbians and other LGBT people would go a long way toward mitigating much of the grief that older lesbians feel when a partner dies, and they are not treated as a married couple, even though they may have been together for 30+ years. During a partner relationship

breakup, older lesbians have realized the pros and cons of not having divorce rights since they do not have marriage rights. As long as their relationships are not legally validated by society, these women will continue to feel the added layers of grief brought on by being treated as “less than” in terms of their partnerships.

### *Implications for Social Work Education*

An implication for social work education that seems to arise from this study is that LGBT elders content needs to be infused into every aspect of the curriculum. Social work courses such as Human Behavior in the Social Environment, courses in addictions, courses in animal assisted therapy – all these could be infused with LGBT elders content in addition to, perhaps, more obvious courses such as multicultural courses and clinical and community practice courses. This researcher has spoken to professors who have taught in social work departments for years who expressed surprise at the idea of incorporating LGBT elders content into these kinds of courses. The issue was not that the professors were against considering it. They had just never thought about it. The voices of the older lesbians in this study seem to speak eloquently to those of us in the social work profession who are aware of this population to spread that awareness to others in our profession.

Another implication is to create open and accepting classroom environments in which concepts such as grief in the lives of lesbians age 60 and older can be discussed. Several women in this study indicated that education was a way to create change and acceptance in society. We, as social work educators, are in a unique position to foster



dialogue on these issues, which may lead to more understanding and less invisibility for these women.

Finally, a number of women in this study expressed gratitude for the study. They said such things as, “Thank you for doing this,” “It will be interesting to see what you find out,” and “I feel like I’ve been a part of it!” As social work educators, an implication of this study seems to be that those of us with an interest in this area must continue to research, write, and publish, including participant co-researchers in these activities, so that social work educators and others who do not have much knowledge or awareness in this area can be educated regarding this population and the grief issues it faces.

#### *Implications for Further Research*

There are almost unlimited implications for further research that can build on the findings of this study. First, additional research would be extremely valuable regarding the coming out process and its effect on grief in the lives of older lesbians or on others who would define themselves as LGBT. Some of these women talked about their coming out process and its effect on their grief, and further delineation of the grief experiences of older lesbians who came out as children and teenagers compared with those who came out later in life would be enlightening.

Another area of needed research would be to search out older lesbians of color to see if their experiences were similar to this group of mostly White older lesbians or whether their experiences were radically different, perhaps partially due to the added intersection of racial and/or ethnic identity. Perhaps exploratory research could be

conducted within different communities of color if older lesbians from various racial and ethnic groups would be willing to come forward and talk to researchers. The lack of ethnic diversity was one limitation of the present study.

Also, this researcher succeeded in interviewing women in their 60s and 70s, but no women in their 80s and 90s came forward to participate in the study. Some of the participants in this study speculated about where those older women might be, and it would be interesting to know if and/or how they experience grief in various areas of their lives differently than these women in the “younger older lesbian” cohort.

Sexual minority communities are often lumped into an “alphabet soup” identity designation that seems to grow larger with each passing year – LGBTQIA, etc. However, if we believe that more research needs to be done with gay and/or lesbian participants, even more needs to be done with participants representing the other letters in this group. It would be interesting to see further research regarding the grief experiences of gay men, bisexual people, transgendered people, younger lesbians, midlife lesbians, and others, and compare their experiences to the experiences of the older lesbians in this study. This researcher hopes to contribute additional research in some of these areas.

Finally, the area of grief in the lives of older lesbians and other marginalized groups appears to be a wide open area of opportunity for additional qualitative research as well as quantitative research and mixed method studies. This researcher hopes to conduct additional studies as well as collaborate with colleagues to continue to add to the scholarly conversation and to contribute continuously new knowledge in the area of grief experiences with marginalized populations.

## *Conclusion*

Though, as Wolcott (2009) indicates, qualitative studies are not necessarily “concluded” in a final sense, this study is finished for now and, hopefully, will be the catalyst for more research on this topic in the future, by this researcher and others. In the course of this study, this researcher was even more thoroughly convinced that the grounded theory method of qualitative research, including the process of constant comparative analysis, is truly an innovative method for exploring topics such as grief in the lives of lesbians age 60 and older. Through conducting a relatively larger number of interviews than are usually conducted in some other qualitative methodologies, and through the successive layers of coding and meticulous analysis, new knowledge truly emerges that allows us a window into the lives of these women. Though multiple interpretations of this data might be possible, as is true of most qualitative inquiry, this researcher presents the current analysis as one possibility out of a potential multiplicity of meanings.

An impression that sticks with this researcher as this study draws to a close is the hope for the future that these women expressed. Though several women expressed their grief that they may not see many of the changes they hope to see in their lifetime, they are not prisoners to their grief process. Their grief is woven into the fabric of their lives; but rather than their grief turning into depression and despair, hope and determination allow these women to rise up and celebrate their lives. This researcher is changed forever after participating with these co-researchers in this endeavor, and it is with gratitude that we share the results of our interactions now with the wider world.

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Appendix A – Demographics Form

Participant # \_\_\_\_\_

Age \_\_\_\_\_

Ethnicity \_\_\_\_\_

Annual Income

1. \$0 - \$9,999 \_\_\_\_\_
2. \$10,000 – \$19,999 \_\_\_\_\_
3. \$20,000 –\$ 29,999 \_\_\_\_\_
4. \$30,000 - \$39,999 \_\_\_\_\_
5. \$40,000 - \$49,999 \_\_\_\_\_
6. \$50,000 - \$59,999 \_\_\_\_\_
7. \$60,000 + \_\_\_\_\_

Educational level

1. Less than high school \_\_\_\_\_
2. High school \_\_\_\_\_
3. Associate’s Degree \_\_\_\_\_
4. Bachelor’s Degree \_\_\_\_\_
5. Master’s Degree \_\_\_\_\_
6. Doctoral Degree \_\_\_\_\_

Geographic location

1. Urban \_\_\_\_\_

2. Suburban \_\_\_\_\_

3. Rural \_\_\_\_\_

Spirituality \_\_\_\_\_

Occupation \_\_\_\_\_

Partner status \_\_\_\_\_

Children \_\_\_\_\_

Pets \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B – Individual Interview Guide

1. What has been your personal experience of grief in your own life?
2. What are your experiences of grief related specifically to discrimination due to ageism, sexism, or homophobia?
3. What are the aspects of your experiences that are unique to you as an older lesbian?
4. What experiences have you had related to dealing with end-of-life issues for you or someone else?
5. What have been some of your strategies for coping with grief in the past?
6. What experiences have you had related to supports that were or were not available to you when you were grieving?
7. What is your vision for social action and change to make life better for grieving older lesbians in the future?
8. Are there any other experiences or thoughts you would like to share regarding your experience of grief as an older lesbian?

These questions were used as a guide only to focus the interview on this particular topic. The purpose was to collect a wide range of data in an open-ended way from participants and to allow themes to emerge.

## Appendix C – Focus Group Interview Guide

(drawing from Krueger and Casey, 2000)

1. Opening Question: What is your name, and what is an activity or hobby you love to do?
2. Introductory Question: How would you define the concept of grief?
3. Transition Question: What are some kinds of losses that could lead to experiencing grief?
4. Key Questions: What kinds of grief experiences do you consider to be unique to older lesbians?
5. What grief experiences do older lesbians face related specifically to discrimination due to ageism, sexism, or homophobia?
6. What are your views regarding supports that are or are not available to older lesbians who are grieving?
7. What coping strategies are used by older lesbians in dealing with grief?
8. What suggestions do you have for social action and change to make life better for grieving older lesbians in the future?
9. Ending Question: Is there anything else that you would like to share regarding grief in the lives of lesbians age 60 and older?

Appendix D - Informed Consent Form for  
the Experience of Grief In The Lives of Older Lesbians

You are invited to participate in this research project. The purpose of this study is to understand your experience of grief as a lesbian age 60 and older. The expected requirements of your participation in the study will be to participate in one open-ended interview with the researcher, estimated to take from 1 – 2 hours, at a location of your choice. The researcher may need to check back with you by phone to clarify any information, and you are welcome to contact the researcher if additional information occurs to you related to the topic of the study. You may also have the opportunity to participate in a focus group related to this topic.

If you have any questions at any time during the course of this study, you are welcome to contact Dr. Enid Cox, faculty advisor for this study, at (303) 871-4018; or Ginger Meyette, LCSW, researcher, at (303) 815-8781.

Risks to you during this study may include feeling some anxiety, stress, anger, or discomfort in talking about the topic of grief, in making personal disclosures, or in thinking about times when you experienced discrimination. Every effort will be made to minimize risks or discomfort during the study. You are free to refuse to talk about any particular topic related to the study, and you are free to terminate the interview at any time. If you feel extremely upset after discussing this topic, the researcher will refer you to a grief counselor for support.

Benefits of participating in this study might include the opportunity to talk about topics you may never have discussed for research purposes before. The benefit to society of your participation may be a vital contribution to the current body of knowledge about this particular topic, and ultimately may lead to the betterment of the lives of lesbians age 60 and older who are grieving.

All information provided by you for the purposes of this study will be confidential, and your name will not appear on any materials. All materials related to the study will be kept in a locked file cabinet, and names and identifying information will be



kept in a master file separate from the number coded materials. There are three exceptions to the promise of confidentiality. If information is revealed concerning suicide, homicide, or child abuse and neglect, it is required by law that this be reported to the proper authorities. In addition, should any information contained in this study be the subject of a court order or lawful subpoena, the University of Denver might not be able to avoid compliance with the order or subpoena.

Please feel free to contact the researcher, Ginger Meyette, LCSW, for questions about the research or your rights as a research participant at (303) 815-8781. If you have any concerns or complaints about how you were treated during the research sessions, please contact Dr. Susan Sadler, Chair, Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects, at (303) 871-3454, or Sylk Sotto-Santiago, Office of sponsored Programs at (303) 871-4052; or write to either at the University of Denver, Office of Sponsored Programs, 2199 S. University Blvd., Denver, CO 80208-2121.

Participation in this study is voluntary. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits, and you may discontinue at any time.

I have read and understood the above description of the research project, The Experience of Grief in the Lives of Lesbians Age 60 and Older. I have asked for and received a satisfactory explanation of any language that I did not fully understand. I agree to participate in this study, and I understand that I may withdraw my consent at any time. I have received a copy of this consent form.

---

Signature

Date

\_\_\_\_\_ I agree to be audio taped.

\_\_\_\_\_ I do not agree to be audio taped.

---

Signature

Date

Appendix E – Informed Consent Form – Focus Groups for  
the Experience of Grief in The Lives of Lesbians Age 60 and Older

You are invited to participate in this research project. The purpose of this study is to understand the experience of grief of lesbians age 60 and older. The expected requirements of your participation in the study will be to participate in one open-ended focus group interview with the researcher and 6 – 8 participants estimated to take from 1 – 2 hours. The researcher may need to check back with you by phone to clarify any information, and you are welcome to contact the researcher if additional information occurs to you related to the topic of the study. You may also have the opportunity to participate in individual interviews related to this topic.

If you have any questions at any time during the course of this study, you are welcome to contact Dr. Enid Cox, faculty advisor for this study, at (303) 871-4018; or Ginger Meyette, LCSW, researcher, at (303) 815-8781.

Risks to you during this study may include feeling some anxiety, stress, anger, or discomfort in talking about the topic of grief, in making personal disclosures, or in thinking about times when you experienced discrimination. Every effort will be made to minimize risks or discomfort during the study. You are free to refuse to talk about any particular topic related to the study, and you are free to terminate the interview at any time. If you feel extremely upset after discussing this topic, the researcher will refer you to a grief counselor for support.

Benefits of participating in this study might include the opportunity to talk about topics you may never have discussed for research purposes before. The benefit to society of your participation may be a vital contribution to the current body of knowledge about this particular topic, and ultimately may lead to the betterment of the lives of lesbians age 60 and older who are grieving.

All information provided by you for the purposes of this study will be confidential, and your name will not appear on any materials. All materials related to the study will be kept in a locked file cabinet, and names and identifying information will be kept in a master file separate from the number coded materials. There are three

exceptions to the promise of confidentiality. If information is revealed concerning suicide, homicide, or child abuse and neglect, it is required by law that this be reported to the proper authorities. In addition, should any information contained in this study be the subject of a court order or lawful subpoena, the University of Denver might not be able to avoid compliance with the order or subpoena. In the focus group setting, participants will be encouraged to keep any shared information confidential. However, it is important for you as a participant to realize that the researcher is unable to guarantee that all participants in the focus group will honor confidentiality.

Please feel free to contact the researcher, Ginger Meyette, LCSW, for questions about the research or your rights as a research participant at (303) 815-8781. If you have any concerns or complaints about how you were treated during the research sessions, please contact Dr. Susan Sadler, Chair, Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects, at (303) 871-3454, or Sylk Sotto-Santiago, Office of sponsored Programs at (303) 871-4052; or write to either at the University of Denver, Office of Sponsored Programs, 2199 S. University Blvd., Denver, CO 80208-2121.

Participation in this study is voluntary. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits, and you may discontinue at any time.

I have read and understood the above description of the research project, The Experience of Grief in the Lives of Lesbians Age 60 and Older. I have asked for and received a satisfactory explanation of any language that I did not fully understand. I agree to participate in this study, and I understand that I may withdraw my consent at any time. I have received a copy of this consent form.

---

Signature

Date

\_\_\_\_\_ I agree to be audio taped.

\_\_\_\_\_ I do not agree to be audio taped.

---

Signature

Date

Appendix F – List of Counseling Referrals

Joan Hummel, LCSW  
(303) 561-5705

Val Stepien, LCSW  
(720) 314-8123

Beth Patterson, MA  
(303) 817-8571

Ellen Perricone, LCSW  
(720) 810-4740

Mary Lyles, LCSW  
(303) 246-3826

Barb Lamperski, LSW  
(303) 674-6400

Christy Burns, MA, NCC  
(303) 403-7283