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I Never Thought I was Going to Marry One : A Study of Women Partners of Men who Have Sex With Men

Elaine Dowd
Edith Cowan University

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“I NEVER THOUGHT I WAS GOING TO MARRY ONE”

A Study of Women Partners of Men Who Have Sex With Men

Elaine Dowd

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the award of:

**Bachelor of Social Science
(Applied Women's Studies)
Honours**

In the Faculty of Community Services, Education
and Social Sciences

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ABSTRACT

The issue of undisclosed sexual duality amongst outwardly heterosexual men is virtually silent within mainstream western discourses. However, there is evidence that it is a widespread practice and one which is common knowledge amongst workers in related areas such as HIV prevention.

When women become aware that their male partner is homosexually active, they may be extremely traumatised, hurt, confused, angry and ashamed. Many are too ashamed to disclose the truth about their partner to friends, family, colleagues and acquaintances. Some women want to talk about their experience but can find nobody willing to listen, or able to understand. Women partners of men who have sex with men can experience social and emotional isolation, frequently resulting in loss of self-esteem and depression.

This research aimed to provide the opportunity for some women to share their stories with each other and to identify their needs, both met and unmet. Using feminist principles, the voices of the women who participated are loudly heard in this report and their subjectivities are validated and respected.

Cultural context shapes each woman's experience of her male partner's homosexual behaviour. Her understandings of sexualities, her expectations of relationships, and her perception of femininity and masculinity, together determine her needs and influence her responses. The impact of these complex social constructions is explored in this research project.


DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

Incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;

Contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text; or

Contain any defamatory material.

Signed:.....

Date:3.10.00.....

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To the women who shared their lives with me, thank you so much.

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CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

This research is about the lived experiences of women who have had intimate relationships with men who have sex with men. Using feminist principles of social research, the self-identified needs of those women will be discussed and the social context of their experiences will be explored. The voices of the women who participated are deliberately and explicitly central to this research and lead the theoretical discussions. In addition to producing a valuable report which could inform future research, it was vital to me that this project had the potential to empower the women who were involved and this intention is reflected in the process.

BACKGROUND

My interest in this issue as an academic topic began with the uncovering of some surprising statistics whilst researching an undergraduate assignment. As long ago as 1948, Kinsey concluded from an extensive study that up to 20% of married men participated in sexual activity with men (Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, & Gebhard, 1948). Contemporary statistical research on the topic, although sparse, suggested that the figure could be even higher. For example, epidemiological and behavioural studies of bisexually active men

included such statistics as 29% of heterosexually-identified men had engaged in unprotected anal sex with men (Doll, Petersen, White, Johnson, & Ward, 1992); and 15% of men engaging in unsafe, anonymous, homosexual activity identified as married or engaged to a woman (Earl, 1990). The extent of the issue which was evidenced by these statistics did not seem to be acknowledged in mainstream discourses.

My reading also revealed that the majority of bisexually active men believe their female partners to be oblivious to such behaviour (O'Reilly, 1991; Palmer, 1989; Stokes, McKirnan, Doll, & Burzette, 1996). Typically, those men lead a 'double life' in their dual roles within the conventionally heterosexual world and, to varying degrees, within the homosexual world. Amongst my own circle of female and male friends, bisexual identity and behaviour were openly accepted and even taken for granted. What was perplexing to me was not the bisexual behaviour I read about, but the concealment and secrecy surrounding it. As I discussed the issue with a broader range of people however, I become conscious that many people (probably the majority) were disturbed by the bisexual behaviour itself, and the contradictions between it and their understandings of sexual relationships.

Initially I was concerned about the apparently significant number of women who mistakenly assume their male partner to be exclusively heterosexual and their relationship to be monogamous, particularly if they consider these to be important issues. Recognising that I could

not directly reach those women was an important step in the process of planning my research. Instead, I could give attention to women who have become aware of their partner's homosexual behaviour, however this discovery happened. If a woman has the expectation that her relationship with a male partner will be monogamous and heterosexual, what happens when she becomes aware that the reality is very different?

Three American texts (Buxton, 1991; Gochros, 1989; Whitney, 1990), and three Eastern States reports (Dickinson & Tonkin, 1992; Mahamati, 1991; Women Partners, 1993) provided a useful background from which I began my research. The Australian reports are all responses to HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns and consequently concentrate on risk of HIV transmission within sexual relationships. Two recent Australian publications tell the stories of heterosexually identified men who have sex with men, *She's My Wife, He's Just Sex* (Joseph, 1997), and of female partners of bisexually active men, *The Wife, Her Husband, His Boyfriend... Her Story* (Lubowitz, 1997). Each text presents the respondents' stories without overt discussion or analysis.

For an undergraduate assignment, I decided to explore the perspective of some women whose lives have been affected by their male partner's homosexual activity. I circulated flyers and placed advertisements in the community newspapers seeking women to interview. In response, I was contacted by four women. The interviews with these women

highlighted several central themes which I presented in my findings (Dowd, 1998). The women's experiences of the issue were diverse yet they expressed many similar reactions and emotions. Although not every woman interviewed by me was shocked by her partner's bisexual behaviour, they all experienced a sense of social isolation. None of the women felt that they could express complete honesty with family, friends, and acquaintances about an issue which affected their lives to such a great extent.

During the interviews I became acutely aware of the women's powerful need to talk about their experiences. Despite being a virtual stranger to them, I heard not only about some very intimate aspects of the women's lives, but also about some of their previously unspoken thoughts and feelings. The women all expressed a desire to talk with other women who could relate to their experience and from whom they did not have to conceal such a vital part of their lives. When previously seeking women to interview, I attended a meeting of a self-help group, *The Straight Spouse Support Network*. Whilst providing valuable support to many of the men and women who attended, some of the women interviewed by me felt that this group was not appropriate to meet their complex needs. For example, it was openly unsupportive of those people who chose to remain with a partner who was known, or suspected, to be bisexually active. The group has since ceased meeting.

As a secondary part of my previous research, I devised a questionnaire which was completed anonymously by men who regularly attend a

venue where men meet each other, primarily for sex. Most of the men who completed the questionnaire identified as 'straight' or 'bisexual' and almost all were in a current relationship with a woman who was unaware of their sexual activity with men. Despite the absolute anonymity assured by the data collection process, the co-ordinator of the men's venue informed me that more than two thirds of men approached by him were unwilling to complete a questionnaire about their sexual activity. The absolute priority on maintaining the secrecy of sexual activity with men is also documented in many studies of non-homosexually identified men who have sex with men (Dowsett, 1994; Hood, Prestage, Crawford, Sorrell & O'Reilly, 1994; O'Reilly, 1991).

My current research is concerned with the experiences of women whose lives have been affected by their male partner's homosexual behaviour. It draws on my own previous research and expands it in a direction proposed explicitly by the women who participated in that research. The need expressed by those women to meet others with whom they could share experiences is a primary motivation for this research and necessarily determined the process undertaken.

The title, "I never thought I was going to marry one", is a quote from one of the participants in this project but could apply to many other women with similar experiences. 'Maria' recalled her very limited awareness of homosexual behaviour before she married. Although she knew that some people had same-sex relationships, it never occurred to her that her husband could be one of those people. These restricted

understandings of homosexual behaviour and sexual relationships provide the basis for exploring the experiences of the women who participated in this research.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Reinharz (1992, p. 13) suggests that feminist research employs a particular approach, rather than particular methods, and that *how* the methods are employed is crucial. Oakley (1981, p. 39) suggests that traditional interviewing techniques arise from a masculinist paradigm which insists on dominant and subordinate social groupings. Many feminist researchers advocate the use of self-disclosure or reciprocity on the part of the researcher to place the interaction on a more equal footing and to promote true dialogue rather than interrogation (Cook & Fonow, 1984; Oakley, 1981; Reinharz, 1992). Instinctively investing my own personal identity in this project invited intimacy and created an atmosphere conducive to disclosure. During my research, the women talked about very painful aspects of their lives which, according to Cotterill (1992, p. 597), inevitably affects the research relationship. Whilst not leading to the intimate friendships which some feminist researchers, such as Oakley (1981), claim can arise between interviewer and interviewees, the confidence and trust which I established with the women who participated in my project created close, friendly research relationships.

A central theme of feminist research is that objectivity is regarded as neither achievable nor, more importantly, desirable (Reinharz, 1992; Roberts, 1981). The emphasis in this project is on the experience and subjectivity of the participants and consequently their voices and stories are fundamentally central to this report. As researcher, my own subjectivity has also been made visible throughout this project rather than 'bracketed' into obscurity. According to Harding (1987, p. 9), feminist research requires that the researcher continually assess her own, as well as the informants' positions and that the author must be explicit about where she stands.

Incorporated into this research project are the feminist principles of consciousness-raising and empowerment which promote the sharing of knowledge and experiences. "It is precisely in the homogeneity of isolation one *cannot* see patterns and one remains unintelligible to oneself" (Frye, 1996, p. 39). Providing an opportunity for women to share their experiences facilitated a movement away from the isolation of individual women who happen to have male partners who have sex with men, to a recognition of the pattern of which they are a part. Frye (1996, p. 39) further points out that the discovery of patterns also requires acknowledgement of differences. The value in a sharing approach is that it provides women with a social basis on which to understand themselves and their world, and to construct their own solutions to their problems (Stanley & Wise, 1993).

AIMS

The aims of this research can be summarised as follows:

- ❑ to provide an understanding and empathetic forum in which women can share their experiences of having a male partner who has sex with men;
- ❑ to encourage the women to individually and collectively identify their met and unmet needs. This could have the dual outcomes of providing mutual support for the participants and creating a possible starting point for future research;
- ❑ to identify outcomes for the women of participating in a project which involves sharing experiences; and
- ❑ to explore the social context in which each woman experienced her relationship with a bisexually active man.

The issue of undisclosed sexual duality amongst outwardly heterosexual men appears to be common knowledge among experts who work in related areas such as prevention of HIV transmission (Joseph, 1997). In the broader community, however, there is virtually no discourse which acknowledges this issue. The lack of community awareness or acknowledgement of the issue prevents many women from recognising that their experiences are part of a social phenomenon rather than their individual and unique predicament. By providing the women participating in this research with the opportunity to share their

stories with each other, I have aimed to make visible the social context in which this trend occurs.

Respecting the women's ability to identify their own needs is consistent with feminist research practice, which takes women's lived experiences seriously. *Felt needs* are described by Kenny (1994, p. 214) as "those articulated by the people with the needs" rather than by 'experts' whose values and theoretical opinions are rarely examined. The value for the participants in identifying their own needs lies in recognising advances they have already made in meeting some needs and in the articulation of those needs which can never be met. In the formation of one's self-image, identification of needs is an important part (Lasswell & Lasswell, 1987, p. 213).

The very act of participating in this research has had the potential to make a difference to the lives of the women involved. One of my primary concerns has been that the women who participated were not objectified and that they were given an opportunity to further their understanding of their experience. Women-centred research is concerned with process rather than solely with product and thus the effect on the women of their participation in my research was of significance.

PROCESS

The need expressed by women in my earlier research to meet others with whom they could share their experiences led to the development of this project towards a group meeting format. I had remained in contact with the four women who I previously interviewed and who indicated that they would like to participate in this project. In addition, two women who had contacted me too late for my previous research, expressed their willingness to be included. I spoke several times with each woman by telephone to discuss constructive ways of implementing this project. I suggested, and the women agreed, that a personal journal would allow them to trace their emotional development and to express their reactions to participating in the project. They began writing their journals four weeks prior to the group meeting and continued for eight weeks afterwards in order to record any changes resultant from sharing their experiences with each other.

Initially, I planned to hold individual interviews with each woman shortly after the group meeting to ascertain their reactions to the meeting. However, I later decided against this as I considered that a more personal level of reflection would be possible through journal writing. In addition, a journal allowed the women to determine their own themes, rather than simply responding to interview questions. Reinharz (1992, p. 221) refers to Kramer's conclusion that diary research can serve to complement feminist consciousness-raising by providing a method which "uncovers the dynamics of women's lives".

Kramer (cited in Reinharz, 1992, p. 222) proposes that the sharing of information and identification of common problems can allow individual women to justify their own experiences and feelings and that the diary provides a means by which women can define themselves both individually and collectively. This was my intended consequence of blending a sharing experience with individual reflection.

I arranged to meet each woman in an informal setting to give her a blank journal and to discuss with her the intention of the research process. At this point, one of the women indicated that she did not want to participate further in the research. She explained that she was very reluctant to risk disrupting her current relationship by re-living the events and emotions experienced when her marriage had ended many years previously.

Two weeks after receiving their journals, I contacted each woman to make arrangements for the group meeting. Consensus on meeting arrangements proved extremely problematic due to the complex commitments of the women regarding working hours and childcare arrangements, as well as transport difficulties. During this period, two further women decided not to continue participating in the research. One of those women had been involved in my previous project, was initially very keen to continue, and had actually started writing her journal. However, when she subsequently made the decision to end a long-term relationship with a man she believed to be bisexually active, she felt that she would prefer not to participate in research on the

issue. The other woman was still in a relationship with a man who had disclosed to her many years previously that he had been bisexually active during their relationship. Although she had processed many issues in the relationship, she considered that participating in my research might undermine the equilibrium which she and her partner had established.

Despite my disappointment when each woman told me of her decision, I fully respected her wishes not to continue participating. It is significant, however, that these women were initially eager to be involved but started to feel apprehensive when their continued participation required them to give deep consideration to their own emotions and needs. Cotterill (1992, p. 602) proposes that events such as participants withdrawing are unpredictable at the planning stage of a research project but often emerge as fieldwork progresses. The dependence of projects on respondents who provide source material means that there is always the possibility of adverse circumstances developing. In this research, the continuing participants were particularly enthusiastic in their involvement and their contributions were abundant and extremely valuable. However, the diversity of experiences was dramatically reduced and it is therefore possible that fewer significant themes were identified than if all initial participants had continued. I did consider trying to locate more women to participate but was concerned about the limited time available for the project. I had known the three remaining women for a considerable

time and had established relationships with them which I felt were comfortable and conducive to the discussion of personal issues. Time constraints would have made it impossible to establish similar relationships with any new participants.

The transport difficulties were eventually resolved by arranging to hold the meeting at the home of one of the women. The meeting began with morning tea to encourage an informal atmosphere and to provide a period in which participants could become acquainted with each other. When one of the women did not arrive, we mutually agreed to continue. I later contacted the missing woman who initially told me that she had forgotten about the meeting but went on to discuss how she had been very apprehensive that she might be judged by the other women because of her decision to remain with her bisexually active partner. Although this woman expressed a desire to participate in future research, neither she nor I considered it appropriate to include her journal in this project as she had not been involved in the mutual sharing experience.

Despite so few participants, the group meeting lasted for six hours. The two women talked extensively about their experiences, feelings, reactions and needs. Their spontaneous questioning of each other's feelings served to elicit much more considered and open responses, I believe, than carefully worded interview questions would have done. As discussed by Sue Wilkinson (1998, p. 117), the interaction between participants in group discussions can elicit the elaboration of responses

thus producing high quality information. Additionally, participants are able to exert their power through directing the topic of conversation (Wilkinson, 1998, p. 114) which is precisely what happened in this research. Although the focus of the meeting was the women's identification of their needs, they determined the exact direction of discussion throughout the meeting. At the end of the meeting, I encouraged both women to continue to express their thoughts in their journals.

The meeting was audio taped and each woman received a copy of the transcript a week later. Approximately eight weeks after the meeting, I collected the journals from the two women who had attended the meeting. Each woman expressed to me how fulfilling it was to read the transcript as the length of the meeting had made it difficult to remember every issue discussed. The women indicated that another meeting would probably be of no further benefit unless the number of participants increased. However, they both expressed their sense of gratitude and personal gain at having taken part in the project. It is my intention to hold further meetings which do not form part of this research but which include other women who have experienced similar situations.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The sensitive nature of this issue demands a high level of consideration for ethical issues. At every stage of the research process, the need for absolute confidentiality and anonymity was vital, as was the need to reassure the participants that I have an understanding of the issue.

Written information about the research process was provided to each participant and their written consent obtained prior to commencement (Appendix 1). Verbal information was provided to the participants who were encouraged to ask questions and offer suggestions about the research process. The women were aware that their participation was voluntary and they could choose to withdraw at any time. They were also provided with contact details of my supervisors and details of qualified and experienced counsellors in case the need arose.

At the commencement of the group meeting, I emphasised the need for mutual respect and anonymity and the women agreed with the importance of this. The meeting was tape recorded and transcribed by myself and the transcription has been made available only to those present at the meeting. The journals completed by the women were seen only by myself and explicit consent has been obtained for any material quoted from the journals. The journals remain the property of the participants and were returned to them on completion of the project.

This report contains no real names nor any identifying information about the participants or their families. The audio tapes, transcript, and journals have been identified by pseudonyms only and have been stored securely at all times.

RESEARCH PARTNERS

'Maria'

Maria came to Australia as a young adult and met her husband very soon after arriving, when her knowledge of English was still very limited. She believes that he pressured her into getting married and, being infatuated with him at the time, she agreed despite many doubts about the validity of the relationship. She describes him as very attractive and gregarious and remembers that he treated her very well before they were married. After the birth of their child, however, Maria indicates that the nature of the relationship changed.

The discovery that her husband was having sex with men was only one factor which led to the demise of Maria's marriage. The frequent emotional and physical abuse she experienced were reminiscent of her childhood and her life on the streets as a teenager. Maria became suspicious that her husband may have been having an affair with a woman but was totally shocked when she walked in on him having sex with a man. His refusal to subsequently discuss the incident led to

much confusion and trauma for her. She decided to maintain the facade of a marriage for her young child's sake but her sexual relationship with her husband ended. It was about fourteen years later that the marriage was dissolved and her child, unaware of the real reasons, continued to live with the father.

More than twenty years after discovering her husband with his male sexual partner, Maria has undergone extensive counselling and has participated in many personal development and self-growth courses. She has not, however, fully discussed the issues surrounding her ex-husband's sexual behaviour due to lack of opportunity to meet women with similar experiences.

'Julie'

Julie enjoyed her life as an army wife and believed her marriage to be extremely happy. A chance remark by her husband's friend at a party made sense of a number of previously confusing incidents. Julie suddenly realised that her husband was sexually active with men, and possibly had been for several years. After seventeen years of marriage she discovered that her husband had been keeping part of himself secret from her. She could not, however, bring herself to discuss it with him and instead tried to ignore it, hoping he would stop being attracted to men. For a year she continued to act as though nothing was wrong until he left her, still without disclosing the real reason. It was several years before she discussed it with him and during that time she kept

his homosexual activity a secret from all but a few close friends. Julie did not discuss the issue with her teenage children for about three years although she subsequently discovered that her son had deduced the truth for himself.

For several months Julie attended the now defunct Straight Spouse Support Network which met monthly in Perth. Through this group she met a number of other women and men whose partners are involved in same-sex activity or relationships. This provided her with an opportunity to release some of the frustration and anger she felt towards her ex-husband and to recognise similar feelings in others.

Myself

My interest in this topic at an academic level has been fuelled by my own experiences which are very relevant because of the effects on my position as researcher. Disclosure of my relationship experiences to the participants allowed for reciprocity during preliminary conversations and contributed to discussion at the group meeting. I did not want this project to be about me and my experiences and therefore I did not specifically participate in the group meeting except to the extent that my comment was sought by the other women.

My relationship began with my full knowledge of my partner's sexual preference. He identified as gay and I was aware of his previous sexual relationships with men, as well as those with women. I entered the relationship without the expectation that it would be forever although

with the understanding that it would be monogamous. We had three children together and separated after around six years when he felt that he could no longer continue living a monogamous, heterosexual lifestyle.

During our relationship, many people were unaware of my partner's sexuality and regarded us as a conventional heterosexual couple. Therefore despite my acceptance of his sexuality, disclosing to some people the reasons for our relationship ending has not always been easy and this has had a somewhat isolating effect on me, despite my network of supportive and understanding friends. Whilst identifying with the participants of this project on one level then, our experiences are quite different in many ways.

THIS PROJECT DOES NOT...

The scale of this project made it inevitable that many important issues could not be dealt with and many questions were not asked or answered. For example, consideration could not be given to how the women's male partners understand or depict their own behaviour or how they regard their own sexuality. Whilst acknowledging that the men may have their own concerns and needs, my research aimed to focus exclusively on the women's stories.

This project does not examine the experiences of men whose female partners have sex with women, although a project comparing experiences would be interesting. Jeffreys (1999, p. 273) suggests that different power dynamics in male and female bisexual behaviour ensure that the issue is not as problematic for men with bisexually active female partners.

Potential consequences for the children of the women who participated in this project, and children of other women with similar experiences, is not specifically discussed in this report. However, I do consider this to be a very significant issue and worthy of separate research since informal conversations with acquaintances indicates to me the possibility of long-term negative effects.

This project is specifically about the women who participated and therefore it does not intend to abstract from the participants to all women with male partners who are homosexually active. Reading this report, however, may prove useful to other women who are attempting to understand the issue. Women with similar experiences of this issue may have different or extra needs from those women who participated. In particular, health needs such as safer sex information and HIV/STD testing have been mentioned only briefly in accordance with the themes prioritised by the participants.

The role and functions of support groups and their relevance to the participants of this research was also outside the scope of this project.

These, and many other relevant issues, require extensive research and attention in order to understand the broader issue of undisclosed sexual duality amongst outwardly heterosexual men.

THIS REPORT

The chapters of this report have been arranged around issues identified as significant by the women who participated in the research, although my role as researcher necessarily determined which particular issues would be discussed in depth. Sexualities, femininity/masculinity and marriage/family relationships are interwoven and overlapping issues which together constituted the main substance of discussion at the group meeting and in the women's journals. For the purpose of this research, I have separated the issues into individual chapters and I have discussed how each issue relates to the experiences of the women who participated and their self-identified needs. In broader terms, the social construction of each issue, and the ways in which they overlap, are also discussed to put the women's experiences into context.

In chapter two, I explore understandings of sexualities in a general sense and, more explicitly, the dissonances between the women's established perceptions of sexualities, and their husband's sexual behaviour. Similarly in chapter three, I will discuss how the women's

understandings of marriage and relationships impacted on their experience.

Identification of needs is the one issue which I specifically asked the women to discuss in order to provide a focus and to encourage the women to acknowledge their own strengths and abilities. Rather than being provided with 'solutions', self-identification of both met and unmet needs encouraged the women to see the achievements they have already made and perhaps help each other towards further developments. Chapter four demonstrates how the women's experience of discovering their husband's sexual activity with men impacted on their everyday lives by producing particular needs, some of which were met and some of which were not.

The needs identified by the women who participated are linked to their awareness of their husband's and their own sexualities, and to their expectations of marriage. Understandings of femininity and masculinity shape attitudes towards sexualities and sexual relationships and intersect with other social divisions so that individuals experience gender from different locations within society. Chapter five draws together the women's perception of their own femininity and their husband's masculinity based on their understandings of sexualities and intimate relationships as evidenced in their self-identified needs.

CHAPTER 2 - SEXUALITIES

In this chapter I will discuss some of the ways that sexualities are understood in contemporary western society and relate these understandings to the women who were involved in my project. What are the conditions which support some men concealing important aspects of their sexuality from some of their sexual partners? More importantly for this research, how does those men's behaviour impact on their female partners? The diverse range of women with male partners who have sex with men will respond to their experiences differently, depending on their preconceptions of male and female sexualities. Their understandings may alter dramatically as a result of their experiences, or they may remain unchanged. Regardless of outcome, it seems inevitable that their experiences will cause them to give significant thought to sexuality issues. Julie and Maria each struggled to understand their partner's sexuality at the time of becoming aware of his sexual activity with men. Each woman was shocked and confused when she realised that the man she had married did not conform to her notions of heterosexuality and neither woman seemed to have an adequate framework to make sense of it.

Elizabeth Grosz (1994, p. viii) describes sexuality as a "slippery and ambiguous term" and proposes four different senses in which the term can be understood: an impulse or drive of one thing towards another;

an act or series of practices involving bodies, organs and pleasures; an identity, sometimes referred to as gender; and a set of orientations, positions and desires (Grosz, 1994). This broad definition demonstrates the diversity of areas which sexuality affects, including those not directly related to sexual acts, and further it opens up the possibility of sexualities being inconsistent and contradictory.

Julie and Maria each married a man who they assumed to be heterosexual, which they understood to mean having sexual relationships only with people of the opposite sex. This understanding seems to stem from their perception, grounded in their personal observations, that men who marry women 'must be' heterosexual otherwise they would choose a different course of life. Both women acknowledge that their prior awareness of homosexuality defined it as a lifestyle entirely separate from their own. Thus, "I knew there were gay people and that was fine, they did their thing and as long as they didn't infringe onto my lifestyle that's alright" (Julie, group meeting, 30th May, 1999) and, "homosexual people don't go around getting married" (Maria, group meeting, 30th May, 1999). The clearly defined categories in mainstream discourses of sexuality encourage the construction of such boundaries which marginalise non-conforming sexualities and make it possible to ignore any inconsistencies, such as married men who have sex with men.

Dividing sexuality into neatly boxed identities polarises heterosexuality/homosexuality and treats anything else as suspicious.

The tide of political activism in the 1960s and 1970s exposed the existence of distinct sexual communities which became deliberately visible in their resistance to oppression, most notably gay and lesbian communities (Bacchi, 1990, p. 211). As important as this has been for people belonging to those communities, one by-product has been an emphasis on the life-altering, and one-way, process of 'coming out', openly declaring one's homosexuality and thus connection with the gay and lesbian communities. Once 'out', alliance with the gay or lesbian communities renders the straight world 'the other' and return to a conventionally heterosexual lifestyle, even if desired, would be virtually impossible. McKenzie Wark (1997) proposes that defining sexuality in this way, by what it excludes, is a very negative construction. He suggests that by situating themselves within discrete communities, gays and lesbians present to the straight world an opposite pole which is safely removed (Wark, 1997, p. 69). Events such as Mardi Gras confine the visible homosexual world, allowing heterosexuality to continue to define itself as an opposition, as being 'not gay'. "Homosexuality has taken on the burden of bounding the category of straightness by identifying itself" (Wark, 1997, p. 68). When not confined within the boundary of the homosexual world, homoerotic behaviour, such as that which takes place on football fields, is rarely defined as sexual (Altman, 1992, p. 38). Heterosexuality is not only constantly valorised in mainstream discourses but it is defined explicitly by the non-existence of homosexuality. Thus, Maria and Julie believed that they 'knew' their

husbands were heterosexual because they did not display 'homosexual behaviour' and did not identify with the gay community.

The polarisation of the straight and gay worlds has either suppressed or ignored alternative sexualities such as men who have sex with men but do not identify as homosexual. Both the straight and gay worlds seek to attach a solid identity to each sexuality, thus the term bisexuality is often used, as with Maria's General Practitioner when he attempted to explain her husband's behaviour. Maria states that she had never previously heard the term or had any understanding of its meaning and that her ex-husband has never identified himself to her as bisexual. Wark proposes that sexuality should be described without identity, a process or fluidity which exists without the need to negate something else (Wark, 1997, p. 71). This would provide a more appropriate framework to understand the behaviour of Julie's and Maria's husbands. Many writers challenge the categorisation of sexual identities as being limiting and unproductive (for example, Califa, 1983; Vance, 1984). 'Gay', 'lesbian', and 'heterosexual' all define sexual orientation according to the biological sex of one's partners rather than sexual practices. Pat Califa (1983, p. 25) argues that behaviours should define sexual identification and therefore maintains that sex between two gay people of opposite sexes is still gay sex.

In *Sexy Bodies* (1995), Elizabeth Grosz & Elspeth Probyn present a series of papers concerned with the production of sexualities rather than their description. In exploring what lies within all sexualities, the

authors suggest that sexualities which are now considered culturally unacceptable, may be in the process of becoming normative. When I introduced this idea at the group meeting, Julie was adamant that society would never be accepting of behaviour such as her husband's, which she saw as an aberration. Whilst recognising the extent to which this behaviour occurs (as discussed in Chapter 1), Julie strongly believes that heterosexual monogamy is "what nature intended" for sexual relationships (Julie, group meeting, May 30th, 1999).

Michel Foucault has contributed to debate which emphasises the cultural rather than biological forces determining sexual behaviour (Foucault, 1984). By historically deconstructing sexuality, Foucault has intentionally disturbed beliefs long taken to be true in dominant western discourse. He attacks the idea that each individual has a true sexual self and proposes that sexual identity is the product of particular sets of rules which change historically thus regulating what is thought of as normal or perverse at any particular time (Foucault, 1984). By demonstrating the variability in perceptions of sexuality across times and cultures, Foucault concluded that sexuality is entirely a social construction. Julie's and Maria's understandings of their own, and their ex-husband's sexualities have thus developed consequent to their particular lives and the culture and time in which they live. Julie's understanding of heterosexual monogamy as the only 'natural' model of relationships contrasts dramatically with notions of sexuality in many of the non-western civilisations studied by Raymond de Becker (1967).

For example, in societies such as ancient Greece and Rome, both male and female homosexuality were not only accepted, they were almost an institution. The primary purpose of heterosexual sex was procreation and was predominantly associated with duty (de Becker, 1967, p. 61).

Victorian Christian morality has played a large part in shaping western constructions of sexualities and is still evident today although diluted and altered, particularly during the last three decades. Labelling monogamous heterosexuality as the scientific standard of normality, the field of medicine attempted to 'cure' all non-conforming thoughts, feelings and relationships (Weeks, 1985, p. 149). Male sexuality was asserted as natural and uncontrollable, whereas female sexuality was denied, repressed and served as passively functional in the satisfaction of male desires (Jones, 1990). The virgin/whore dichotomy has been a persistently dominant theme in historical definitions of women's sexuality (for example, Bacchi, 1990; Summers, 1994). Understandings of sexuality were based almost entirely on a male perspective centred on penetrative intercourse and male orgasm while legitimate female sexuality remained synonymous with heterosexual, monogamous marriage (Pringle, 1992, p. 77). In contrast with these expectations, Julie and Maria each describe having had an active sexuality prior to their marriage, and having had numerous sexual partners. This is consistent with social transformations which took place during the 1960s and 1970s - a period when the double standard of sexuality was challenged and, potentially at least, women's active sexuality was

attributed equal validity with men's (Bacchi, 1990; Hyde, 1990; Jackson & Scott, 1996).

Julie suggested that the HIV/AIDS era has seen a repackaging of the nuclear family as a safe sex practice, a theory which is echoed by Linda Singer (1993) and Jill Julius Matthews (1992), among others. The irony being, that for women with male partners who secretly have sex with men, the heterosexual family may be extremely dangerous. For Maria, the risk of HIV transmission from her husband was never considered as her sexual relationship with him ended prior to public awareness of the virus. Julie continued to have a sexual relationship with her husband for approximately a year after becoming aware of his sexual activity with men. During this period Julie did not reveal to her husband that she knew about his clandestine sexual activity and therefore did not discuss health issues with him, although she states that she believed his later assurances that he did not put her at risk of HIV/STD transmission.

Grosz (1994, p. 153) suggests that in the era of HIV/AIDS, it is still the sexuality of marginalised groups including openly gay men, which is increasingly scrutinised and targeted by public policy while the sexuality of the heterosexual couple remains largely private and unobserved. The discourses of HIV/AIDS widely categorised it as 'deviant' (Altman, 1992; Ballard, 1992) and early strategies to reduce HIV transmission concentrated on 'risk groups', particularly gay men, rather than 'risk behaviours'. The assigning of 'safe' and 'unsafe' categories to sexuality remains evident today and provides a screen

(monogamous heterosexuality) behind which some men hide. Apparently significant numbers of men maintain a heterosexual relationship whilst having sex with men (AIDS, 1992; Joseph, 1997; O'Reilly, 1991), possibly indicating their reluctance to move from a safe category to a marginalised unsafe category. Janet Halley (1993, p. 83) contends that the "threat of expulsion from the class of heterosexuals" bribes individuals to conceal desires or conduct not consistent with the pervasive representation of the class. Eve Sedgwick (1993, p. 77) details the recent work of an American psychiatrist, Richard Green, who advises his young gay male patients to "consider favorably the option of marrying and keeping their wives in the dark about their sexual activities". This provides an indication of the pervasiveness of the discourses which validate heterosexuality.

There is substantial evidence that many men are genuinely in love with a woman and want to live with her but find themselves drawn to having sex with men (AIDS, 1992; Bartos, 1993; Jagose, 1996; Joseph, 1997). In some instances this occurs with the full knowledge and consent of the woman and it is these situations which apparently cause least negative outcomes for all parties (Joseph, 1997; Mahamati, 1991). A multiplicity of circumstances exists in which men are bisexually active without traumatising their female partners (Hutchins & Kaahumanu, 1991; Rose & Stevens, 1996), although such relationships seem to be virtually invisible in mainstream discourses.

The discovery that their husbands were involved in sexual activity with men prompted dramatically different responses from Julie and Maria with regard to their own sexuality. Ceasing sexual activity with her husband almost immediately, Maria devoted her energies to her daughter and her business and “wasn’t a sexual being” for many years (Maria, group meeting, 30th May, 1999). Shortly before leaving the marital home, some fourteen years later, she started “becoming sexual, I was aware of my own sexuality” and soon after, began having sexual relationships with men (Maria, group meeting, 30th May, 1999). Julie expressed absolute disbelief that Maria had remained sexually inactive for so many years, “I would have crumpled up and died” (Julie, group meeting, 30th May, 1999). Julie states that her urge to prove that she was still “sexy, needed, wanted” prompted her to initiate sexual relationships with men within the first year after her husband left the marriage (Julie, group meeting, 30th May, 1999). An interesting commonality between Julie and Maria is that each woman had a post-marriage sexual relationship with a much younger man. Julie however admits to being embarrassed about people, especially her children, knowing she was sexually active after her marriage, “I kept it hidden” (Julie, group meeting, 30th May, 1999). Yet she “took pride in [her] sexuality as a wife” (Julie, journal entry) to the extent that “our sex life was the pride of the neighbourhood...the neighbours even heard us” (Julie, group meeting, 30th May, 1999). Julie says that the pride she took in her sexuality as a wife was “shattered” (Julie, journal entry) by the revelation that her husband was sexually attracted to men. She

seemed to find it difficult to believe that the “great sex” (Julie, group meeting, 30th May, 1999) they had in their marriage could have been significant to her husband if he later chose to have quick, anonymous sex with men.

Although Maria had difficulty understanding her husband’s sexual behaviour due to her lack of prior exposure to non-mainstream discourses, she made no attempt to try to change his behaviour. In contrast, Julie initially believed that she could prevent her husband from being sexually attracted to men, “I want you to change and if I’m a better wife...you will change” (Julie, group meeting, 30th May, 1999).

Julie, unlike Maria, has never pondered whether any male partners subsequent to her husband might be sexually attracted to men. Accepting that her ex-husband’s sexuality “just is” (Julie, group meeting, 30th May, 1999), does not prompt her to consider that other outwardly heterosexual men she knows may also be homosexually active. Maria, however, interrogates all male partners, and potential partners, until she is satisfied that they are not sexually attracted to men. At least two relationships with men were ended by Maria due to her suspicions (Maria, group meeting, 30th May, 1999).

Although legislation and social change since the 1960s have increased acceptability of homosexuality, mainstream western culture continues to marginalise non-heterosexual relationships. Alignment with the homosexual world offers relative safety and security, yet the chasm

dividing it from the heterosexual world encourages secrecy and insecurity creating an isolating environment. Sexualities which lie outside of the heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy are often afforded suspicion and hostility or, more frequently, they are ignored by discourses on both sides of the divide. For many women, including Julie and Maria, the set of rules by which they understand sexual identities legitimates heterosexuality and tolerates homosexuality but maintains the two as separate and unconnected identities.

For both women, the question of sexuality became central to their lives because of the actions of their male partners. The years of consideration that each woman has given to the matter has not substantially altered either Julie's or Maria's understandings of sexualities. Maria's distrust of subsequent partners is, she states, due primarily to her need for total honesty in intimate relationships but she would not entertain the idea of a relationship with a bisexually active man. Julie's acknowledgement of her ex-husband's sexuality seems to have had little impact on her understandings of sexuality. With her expectations of relationships still firmly grounded in the 'naturalness' of heterosexual monogamy, Julie assumes that she "could instantly tell" (Julie, group meeting, 30th May, 1999) if a potential male partner was sexually attracted to men. In the following chapter I will consider how Julie's and Maria's understandings of marriage and relationships evolved and the context in which the women developed their ideologies of marriage.

CHAPTER 3 - MARRIAGE AND FAMILIES

In this chapter I will compare and contrast the attitudes and experiences of Julie and Maria with regard to marriage and family relationships and relate their stories to relevant literature on the constructions of marriage and family. Although of a similar age, each woman's previous life experiences and family of origin prepared them in different ways for intimate relationships and created expectations of marriage which, although similar in some respects, encompassed many differences. In turn, this prompted quite diverse reactions and strategies for dealing with their experience of discovering their husband's sexual activity with men. During the course of the group discussion, the women recognised the differences in their attitudes to relationships despite having been through similar experiences with their respective husbands.

General discussion of marriage in this chapter implicitly encompasses relationships considered to be 'marriage-like' or 'de-facto' by those in the relationship. For both Julie and Maria, however, the legal status of their relationship was of particular significance.

Julie depicts the seventeen years of her marriage as being blissfully happy. She says that she and her husband were considered to be one of the most loving and happiest couples amongst their peers and within her own family. Describing her family of origin as "complicated", she

indicates that her parents' marriage was unhappy and that she was envied by her sisters for having the "happiest marriage" and a husband who was loved by all her relatives (Julie, group meeting, 30th May, 1999).

When she married, Julie implicitly believed that she and her husband were making a lifelong commitment to each other. Julie's expectations of marriage conform to the ideology of companionate marriage, a concept which emerged most strongly during the post-war period of the 1950s baby boom. The prominence of these ideas denotes marriage as a relationship with partners whose roles were essentially different but who worked as a team (Finch & Summerfield, 1999, p. 12). Julie discussed how she supported her husband's army career through her involvement with other army wives, whilst also being his friend and lover. Readily accepting her role as a mother, she gave up paid employment and relied financially on her husband. Even after the marriage ended, her ex-husband initially paid her an allowance until she gradually re-established her career.

Julie's description of her marriage fits the functionalist model of the nuclear family described in the 1950s by American sociologist, Talcott Parsons (cited in Wearing, 1996), which defines clear roles and functions of the family. The 'expressive' wife/mother provides a caring, supportive partner for the 'instrumental' husband/father who leads and provides for his family. However, despite her love of married life and pride in her roles of wife and mother, Julie goes on to describe how she

often resented her husband spending much time at home. She describes how she welcomed him home on weekend leave but if he remained for an extended period, she began “going spare” and wondering when he would be going away again. “I had the best of both worlds, he was away, I got the weekly wage” (Julie, group meeting, 30th May, 1999). A similar situation exists in Julie’s current relationship which she considers a committed one, yet she and her partner have separate rooms in each of their homes.

In contrast with Julie, Maria considers that “everything was wrong” with her marriage (Maria, group meeting, 30th May, 1999). She had been content having a relationship with an older man, the “father figure” she had been “craving” since being forced to live alone from a very young age (Maria, group meeting, 30th May, 1999). When she finally agreed to his persistent requests to marry, she told him “if it lasts five years you are lucky” (Maria, group meeting, 30th May, 1999). On her wedding day, she tried twice to leave the registry office, “my gut feeling said you’ve got to get out of here” (Maria, group meeting, 30th May, 1999) but was persuaded to stay by her husband. When the time came, she went through with the ceremony, regretting it immediately afterwards.

Once married, however, Maria accepted her role of wife and conformed, at first, to the model of nuclear family life. The dynamics between Maria and her “father figure” created “so much dysfunction” (Maria, group meeting, 30th May, 1999), particularly following the birth of their daughter quite early in the marriage. Maria relied financially on her

husband to support her and their daughter and attempted to establish a successful marriage and family life despite problems such as physical and emotional abuse. In Parson's model of nuclear family life, the importance of relationships within the wider kin group were generally less significant due to the centrality of marital home (Finch & Summerfield, 1999, p. 23; Wearing, 1996). One result of this for women was less support from extended family and less intervention into the 'private' relationship between husband and wife.

When Maria realised that her husband was having sex with men, it seems as though she stopped trying to conform to expectations, at least in most respects. She became the financial provider and her husband became dependent on her. Although she no longer considered her marriage to be functioning, she remained committed to providing her young daughter with her own ideal of a family environment. She admits to staying in the marriage "simply because I thought I had to" (Maria, group meeting, 30th May, 1999) and explains that she would have needed a lot of support and counselling to "release myself from the conditioning" which shaped her expectations of marriage (Maria, group meeting, 30th May, 1999). This seems to contradict Maria's assertion that she entered marriage with the view that it would probably be temporary. The birth of her daughter possibly provided the impetus to recreate her ideal of family life, albeit only as a façade. Although rejecting her role as emotional supporter of her husband, Maria maintained a role in keeping the family together, despite feeling that her

husband was "letting me down in many ways" (Maria, group meeting, 30th May, 1999).

Diana Gittens (1985, p. 73) explains that most people lack concrete reasons why they marry but that it is social forces which have made it easier for people to marry than not. Edgar (1990, p. 105) and Sarantakos (1996, p. 117) both report that marriage is still the most prominent lifestyle in Australia today, despite declining numbers choosing it. Sarantakos (1996, p. 117) goes on to propose that some people now see marriage as a temporary arrangement in order to leave their options open, however he provides no elaboration of this statement. Maria's assertion that she initially saw her marriage as temporary, is possibly a manifestation of her specific cultural position at that time. Seeing her migration to Australia as a means of escaping the restricting society in which she grew up, Maria embraced the idea that divorce was an option for the first time. As part of his argument to persuade her to marry, her husband actually told her, "you are in Australia now, you can divorce me any time you want to" (Maria, group meeting, 30th May, 1999).

Wearing (1996) proposes that the power imbalance generated by differential roles within the nuclear family model results from the man's control of family income and his superior status as leader. The interests of the wife and children are regarded as secondary to the husband/father's and the dominant ideology ensures that women's subordination is internalised and therefore accepted. Both Julie and

Maria took for granted the reduced power resultant from their roles of wife and mother, although it is likely that neither would have seen it that way at the time. When Maria regained power by becoming financially independent, she concurrently relinquished her 'female' duties such as house cleaning and childcare to her husband. Julie, however, remained in a less powerful position than her husband until some time after the marriage ended due to her fear that he would force her to sell the marital home. It was only after he had been "honourable" (Julie, group meeting, 30th May, 1999) and signed his share of the home over to her, that Julie felt she could disclose to him how his actions had affected her and thus validate her own interests.

Despite her experiences, Julie seems to want to keep believing in the fairytale ideal of marriage as something attainable, although not for herself. Refusing to marry her current partner, she states that she does not want another marriage to "fail" (Julie, group meeting, 30th May, 1999). Julie discussed elderly couples celebrating fifty or sixty years of marriage and expressed a sense of sadness and envy that she had not achieved that goal. She stated that she wants to be able to look at her wedding album and know that her husband loved her on that day and that her marriage was 'real', yet she also states that she believes her husband got married to "cover-up" his homosexual activity (Julie, group meeting, 30th May, 1999). Julie says that she can, in some ways, understand her husband not disclosing his sexual attraction to men and that if she was "in his shoes", she wouldn't have had the courage to

be honest because "I would have to lose everything" (Julie, group meeting, 30th May, 1999). The presumption seems to be that Julie believes marriage was very important for her husband and that not being married would have been losing everything. Edgar (1997, p. 148) suggests that a vast array of social values and sanctions in the post-war era encouraged men to marry. Social respect was achieved with maturity and one measure of maturity for men was reaching the status of married breadwinner. Gittens (1985, p. 86) adds that marriage was seen as an equally important status passage for women.

Linda Nicholson (1997) challenges the notion of the 'traditional' family which, she says, is a normative rather than descriptive label. What was regarded as the 1950s traditional family model was alternative to its historical predecessors in the same way that new family types – homosexual, single parent, two working parents – are to the 1950s model (Nicholson, 1997, p. 28). Julie and Maria both married in the 1970s when second-wave feminism was beginning to challenge expectations of marriage but 1950s ideology was still dominant. By the 1990s, a version of the 50s ideal was still regarded as traditional but certain features are seen as less crucial. A high percentage of married women are now in paid work, even those with young children, therefore, people no longer see this as unnatural. The criteria for defining a 'traditional' family have now changed (Nicholson, 1997, p. 35). Families with both partners working can be considered 'traditional', "as long as both partners are heterosexual" (Nicholson, 1997, p. 35). New family

forms which resemble the 1950s model on the surface but on closer inspection are not (for example, remarriage after divorce), reinforce ideas about the pervasiveness of the 'traditional' family (Nicholson, 1997, p. 36). Included in this could be families in which the male partner has sex with men, either with or without the knowledge of his female partner.

Unless the dominant discourse is openly and actively challenged by disclosure of non-conforming behaviours, 'alternative' families can be fitted into the 'traditional' model. Nicholson proposes that the deep distinction between 'traditional' and 'alternative' families encourages those who experience such clashes to think of them as the relatively isolated effects of living a slightly 'deviant' life (Nicholson, 1997, p. 39). Thus, despite evidence of so many men in heterosexual relationships being homosexually active, such relationships are most often thought of as 'deviant' when they become known. It is precisely this which creates the isolation and shame described by Julie who believes that she would have been able to disclose to many more people if her husband had left her for another woman, "I would have been able to talk about it because other people's husbands leave for women and so other people would have been through it too" (Julie, group meeting, 30th May, 1999).

Julie asked Maria whether or not she would have left the marriage if she had discovered her husband having sex with a woman to which Maria replied that the primary issue for her was not that her husband had sex with a man, but rather his dishonesty and infidelity (Maria,

group meeting, 30th May, 1999). Maria discussed that being totally monogamous in a relationship is an absolute priority for her and an expectation she has of any partner. Julie reasons that some wives turn a blind eye to their husband's affairs with women but that the threat of HIV/AIDS will prevent women from allowing their husbands to remain married while having sexual relationships with men (Julie, group meeting, 30th May, 1999). Despite this belief, Julie remained in her marriage and continued a sexual relationship with her husband for a year after discovering his homosexual activity.

Julie's expectations of marriage stem from her belief that "mother nature made men and women want to marry one another, have children, have marriage forever" (Julie, group meeting, 30th May, 1999). During the group discussion, Julie related an account of her older sister who was "very big and very plain and we thought she would never marry" (Julie, group meeting, 30th May, 1999). When her sister became engaged to a man who Julie knew to be gay, she and other family members made a decision not to disclose the information prior to the wedding. It was preferable to Julie for her sister to marry someone, even if he was gay, than to remain 'on the shelf'. The guilt that Julie now feels about not telling her sister is compounded by the fact that her sister will not leave what has become a very unhappy marriage.

Both Maria and Julie speculated that their husbands had married to "cover up" their sexual attraction to and/or relationships with men (Maria/Julie, group meeting, 30th May, 1999). Julie's husband has

told her that his first venture into homosexuality was approximately eight years after they married which indicates that he may have been unwilling or unable to recognise his homosexual desires earlier. Julie feels that after this first incident, he made a conscious decision to “put it on the back-burner” and continue in the marriage (Julie, group meeting, 30th May, 1999). Maria knows very little about her husband’s homosexual experiences due to his steadfast refusal to discuss the issue with her, even after her discovery of him in a sexual situation with a man. Her analysis of the relationship with what she terms “retrospect wisdom”, has fed her belief that his homosexual activity continued before, during and after the marriage, “looking back it was happening all the time” (Maria, group meeting, 30th May, 1999). She can see now that her husband was able to hide that part of himself from her due to her infatuation with him and also her limited knowledge of English, “I couldn’t see anything that he was doing” (Maria, group meeting, 30th May, 1999). His refusal to discuss his behaviour with her, she now believes, was due to his awareness that she would leave the relationship if he articulated his desires for men.

Retrospectively, Julie and Maria acknowledge that there had been signs of their ex-husbands sexual behaviour which either went unrecognised or were ignored. Maria had hints that her husband was sexually involved with other women and was prompted to discover the truth by various people who, she later realised, already knew that he was sexually active with men. One of those people was her husband’s

teenage son from a previous marriage. Maria actually witnessed another man sitting on her husband's lap but ignored it because "I saw him only as the father of my daughter, there was no other role he was supposed to play" (Maria, group meeting, 30th May, 1999). Julie implies that the signs she later recognised were much less obvious, "to the normal average everyday person you wouldn't have even known that's what they were" (Julie, group meeting, 30th May, 1999). Although Julie states that she had no suspicions prior to becoming aware of her husband's sexual behaviour, she recognises that, immediately she became aware, several incidents over the seventeen years of their marriage started to make sense, although she did not elaborate. At the time, it had not occurred to her that her husband could be attracted to men, simply because he seemed to be so happily married to her. "Once I knew about my husband then everything became clear" (Julie, group meeting, 30th May, 1999).

Julie indicated that if her husband had not left, she could still be in the marriage today, despite not wanting to accept his homosexual activity but simply because she "didn't have the courage to up and leave" (Julie, group meeting, 30th May, 1999). Matthews (1984, p. 142) proposes that women are convinced by gender ideology that they must be happy once married and therefore remain committed despite evidence to the contrary. The strength of Julie's commitment to her marriage seems to indicate that she had strongly internalised the dominant ideology of marriage and family. Whilst Maria remained

committed to providing an ideal family environment for her daughter, she recognised that her expectations of marriage would not be fulfilled and consequently reassessed her role.

Both women who participated in this project saw marriage as necessarily being a monogamous relationship. Each woman's discovery that her own marriage was therefore 'aberrant' was compounded, particularly for Julie, by the realisation that her husband was something other than heterosexual. The devastation experienced by each woman came primarily from the realisation that her marriage was somehow 'deviant'. For Julie, her husband's homosexual activity was the only trouble in an apparently happy relationship whereas Maria had many reasons to feel disillusioned with marriage. The different paths chosen by Julie and Maria are indicative of differences in their backgrounds and social conditioning. Maria's commitment to provide her daughter with "what I never had before, a family" (Maria, group meeting 30th May, 1999), caused her to put aside her own expectations and ideals about marriage. Julie's internalised ideology that marriage is the source of happiness caused her to attempt to hold onto her fairytale notion of marriage by continuing to ignore behaviour which did not fit the picture. In the next chapter, Julie and Maria identify their needs, both met and unmet, which resulted from their experiences during and after their marriages.

CHAPTER 4 - NEEDS

Identification of needs is outlined by Kenny (1994, p. 212) as an important aspect of applied research projects and can provide direction and focus for future planning. Concentrating specifically on identifying their needs provided Julie and Maria with a definite area on which to focus, and a positive objective for both their discussion and their journals. Whilst thinking about their needs, the women also discussed many other aspects of their experiences during the extensive group meeting. If Gillwald's (1990, p. 116) suggestion is correct, that needs cannot be measured directly and that they can be measured only on the basis of their manifestations, the women's need to talk about their experiences in a supportive environment was amply demonstrated.

This chapter will outline some frequently used definitions of needs and then detail those needs identified by each woman and some of the strategies adopted by the women to meet those needs, or the reasons why some needs could not be met. When asking the women to identify their needs, I did not specify any particular definition but left it to their individual interpretations. It is worth noting that the needs identified were mostly of an emotional or psychological nature rather than practical or material.

The needs expressed by the women who participated in this research can be summarised as follows:

- ❑ to understand their husband's sexual attraction to men, in the context of his choice to marry a woman;
- ❑ to discuss their experience with friends, family and children if desired;
- ❑ to express anger about their experiences without being judged;
- ❑ to tell their ex-partner how his actions affected them;
- ❑ to be autonomous; and
- ❑ to be fully informed about the sexuality of subsequent sexual partners.

Defining needs can pose some problems due to the diverse uses of the word 'need' in everyday language. Our understanding of what sorts of things needs are is varied and often confused and ambiguous. Lasswell and Lasswell (1987, p. 213) propose that a need is something which a person must necessarily have to stay healthy, including mentally and psychologically healthy. People, like other animals, have basic physical needs such as air, food, water, rest, and elimination. Each individual also has personal emotional needs, some of which, Lasswell and Lasswell suggest, are universal whilst others vary according to background and cultural or social differences. Recognition, having one's self-image validated by others, acceptance, and being loved and cared for are some universal needs (Lasswell & Lasswell, 1987, p. 213).

Many writers define all needs as compelling drives which are innate and therefore universal across cultures, societies and political systems (Doyal & Gough, 1991; Fisher, 1990; Maslow, 1954; Roy, 1990). Although the needs may be innate, the means of satisfying them are culturally determined (Roy, 1990, p. 125). Mary Clark (1990, p. 38) describes as "derived needs" those which arise due to an individual's membership of a particular society, such as cars in western society. Statements of need can therefore be seen as essentially normative. Doyal & Gough (1991, p. 39), in contrast, propose that all needs are universal but that wants derive from a person's particular preference and cultural environment. A further demonstration of the difference between needs and wants is given by Miller (1976) who contends that needs are linked to the avoidance of harm whereas the fulfilment of wants can actually be at odds with human interest, such as wanting to drink excessive amounts of alcohol.

Doyal and Gough (1991, p. 44) suggest that the distinction between wants and needs is far from clear as there is no neutral reality to which one can turn to assess them. What may be a need for one person can be a want for another. The intensity of wants can produce a strong motivation to attain the desired object or condition and can therefore lead to confusion with needs (Lasswell & Lasswell, 1987, p. 214). Doyal & Gough (1991, p. 42) contend though that it is not possible to want something of which you have no awareness but it is often the case that something can be needed without an individual knowing of its

existence. This could be true for the apparently significant number of women whose male partner continues to engage in clandestine sexual activity with men. Although the women are oblivious to the situation, I believe that they need to know about their partner's actions in order to make informed decisions about their lives and their health, both physical and emotional or psychological. It is likely that for many of these women, however, this need will never be met. Alternatively they may, like Julie and Maria, gain the information in an unsatisfactory and unsupportive manner leading to problems with decision-making, such as whether or not to continue the relationship.

A contrasting experience was described by a woman who participated in my previous research project (Dowd, 1998). After 16 years of marriage, her husband disclosed to her his desire to have sex with men and proceeded to have regular, casual sexual encounters with men, with her full knowledge and consent. Her acceptance of his behaviour stemmed largely from her belief that she could trust him to be completely honest with her after making such a disclosure. Her decision to continue in the relationship was, therefore, a fully informed one. Although many men choose to keep their sexual behaviour secret, this particular woman's husband recognised and respected her needs even though she herself could have remained unaware of them. Given the same information, other women may have made the decision to leave the relationship as their needs would have been differently constructed according to their social and cultural background. Doyal and Gough

(1991, p. 44) suggest that searching for an objective grounding for needs and wants is pointless as individuals within a culture, as well as those in different cultures, simply find different things morally outrageous.

Identifying one's own needs is an important part of an individual's search for their self-image (Lasswell & Lasswell, 1987, p. 213). Maria's primary need was to know why her husband had married her if he was aware at the time of his sexual attraction to men, which she believes he must have been. At the time she discovered his sexual activity with men, she had limited knowledge of diverse sexualities. Maria talked to her General Practitioner who explained her husband's behaviour by telling Maria about bisexuality. Once recovered from the shock, Maria tried to discuss the situation with her husband. She needed to understand his actions and his sexuality but her husband was either unable or unwilling to talk to her about it. Whatever his reason for maintaining his silence, her husband's needs directly conflicted with Maria's need for information and created substantial tension between them. Maria has never been able to meet her need to talk about her husband's sexuality with him.

Described by Doyal and Gough (1991, p. 53) as a basic human need, autonomy is the ability to make informed choices about what should be done and how to go about doing it. Impaired autonomy thus seriously limits a person's capacity for action. Maria's attempts to talk to her husband about his sexuality were intended to enable her to regain her

autonomy but this was thwarted. She states that her husband believed she would leave him immediately if he was open about his sexuality so he denied her the ability to make an informed choice by simply refusing to give her information. Maria made a decision to ignore the issue of her husband's sexuality and instead concentrated on other ways in which she could regain her autonomy. She set about establishing her own business and simultaneously insisted that her marriage become non-sexual. The capacity to formulate options for oneself is an important variable affecting levels of individual autonomy.

With hindsight, Maria would have liked to have known about her husband's sexuality before marrying him and feels disempowered because of his non-disclosure. During the group meeting, Maria told me "you made the choice [to have a relationship with a man known to be sexually attracted to men] and that's empowering in itself, I would have loved to have had the choice" (Maria, group meeting, 30th May, 1999). The fact that Maria feels that her choice to marry was not a fully informed one, affects how she enters all intimate relationships now as she seeks to consolidate her autonomy. She takes great care to gain as much of an insight as possible about any potential partner's sexual background and attitude to homosexuality. Her need to be able to trust sexual partners is one which presumably existed prior to her marriage but, Maria indicates, has undoubtedly been prioritised due to her experience with her husband.

In contrast, Julie does not express the feeling of being disempowered by a lack of information and even indicates that her need is to *not* know. Having “nitty gritty” details about her husband’s homosexual activity would, Julie believes, only increase the pain she experienced as it would reveal her marriage as a “sham” (Julie, group meeting, 30th May, 1999). Julie does however describe how she had a “dreadful need” to “make sense of the whole thing”, meaning to understand why her husband chose what she describes as “male quickie” sex in preference to their great marital sex life (Julie, group meeting, 30th May, 1999).

Both Julie and Maria discussed how the overlap between heterosexual and homosexual worlds caused them enormous confusion, indicating the extent to which this experience was outside their frame of reference, “I simply knew that there were people who have sex with the same sex, but I never thought I was going to marry one” (Maria, group meeting, 30th May, 1999). Discussing relationships, Lasswell and Lasswell (1987, p. 214) propose that individuals have expectations about how their chosen partners will behave and about the likely progress of the relationship. These expectations are products of past experiences, values and goals. Unmet expectations are a common source of stress and frequently result in feelings of disappointment, hurt, and anger (Lasswell & Lasswell, 1987, p. 214). The feelings experienced by Julie and Maria, and their subsequent need to understand their husbands’ behaviour, was undoubtedly related to their expectations about

behaviour within a marriage and the discrepancy between their ideological framework of marriage, and actual events.

For Julie, the need to understand was met through reading a book, *She's My Wife, He's Just Sex* (Joseph, 1997) which details the experiences of a few other women and some men involved in similar relationships to Julie's marriage. Julie also attended the support group which met in Perth and states that talking to other people has helped her a lot but that she has only felt quite recently that she understands, many years after becoming aware of her husband's behaviour. Previously, she tried counselling but financial restrictions prevented her from continuing with the counselling sessions and thus being able to fully resolve her concerns. She gradually talked to some of her friends and then her family and, after three years, told her children because she "needed them to know" about their father's behaviour and wanted them to understand her hurt (Julie, group meeting, 30th May, 1999).

The connection between specific emotions and specific needs indicates that the triggering of negative emotions produces the need to act in ways to reduce the distress or unpleasantness. Sites (1990, p. 18) links the emotion of fear to the need for security, the emotion of anger to the need for meaning and similarly depression to the need for self-esteem. Thus the emotion of anger is experienced when a person is treated by others in a non-rewarding and confusing way. "When socially constructed realities are threatened, anger occurs, indeed 'righteous anger' often occurs ... meaning is lost" (Sites, 1990, p. 18). Secondary

emotions are considered by Kemper (cited in Sites, 1990, p. 19) to mask primary emotions such as the experiencing of shame which often hides a person's anger. An individual can take the blame for an act which has reduced their autonomy but about which it is socially difficult to express anger. Both women, but particularly Julie, acknowledge the social constrictions which prevented the complete expression of their anger. Julie described her friends' shocked responses when she wished her husband would step on a landmine whilst overseas because her incomplete disclosure of his behaviour made her anger appear unjustified, "they thought that was a little bit strong for a wife to say about her husband who's left" (Julie, group meeting, 30th May, 1999). "Because I couldn't talk about it for so long, I went through the agony of, people must be thinking 'oh [he] left her because she's such a ratbag'" (Julie, group meeting, 30th May, 1999).

Each woman described, both in her journal and at the group meeting, the strong need to tell her ex-partner how she felt about him and about how he had hurt her. For Julie this need could only be met once she felt financially secure which happened after her ex-husband signed his share of the marital home over to her several years after the marriage ended. Julie further states that she needed permission and time to grieve for her lost future and lost security. When disclosing her situation to a social worker at Centrelink, she was encouraged to realise that she was continuing to love her husband and still wanting him to change. It was only when encouraged to do so, that she could come to

terms with her significant loss and recognise the anger she felt towards her husband as a result. She finally told him by telephone how much she hated him, "I let it spew ...he had to see what he had done" (Julie, group meeting, 30th May, 1999). Subsequently she felt relieved as though all the hatred had drained out and Maria suggested, "that's very healing" (Maria, group meeting, 30th May, 1999). Sites (1990, p. 16) recognises that individuals have needs for conditions which alleviate suffering caused by negative emotions and which will enhance the possibility of satisfaction. Once Julie was able to express her hatred to her husband, the feeling dissipated. Maria expressed the wish that she could have had a similar opportunity to express her hatred verbally but her ex-husband persistently refused to listen. Julie encouraged Maria to verbalise her feelings to her ex-husband now but Maria reasoned that "I don't feel the need any more because I've done it in therapy. At that time I would have loved to do it, I carried the hatred of him" (Maria, group meeting, 30th May, 1999). The conditions which prevented Maria from expressing anger about her husband's non-disclosure of his behaviour, led to her emotions being 'bottled up'. On one occasion she was able to express her anger physically, punching her husband for so long and so hard that her body hurt for weeks afterwards (Maria, group meeting, 30th May, 1999)

Being unable to verbalise her feelings was a significant problem for Maria and a need which remained unmet for a considerable time. When she became aware of her husband's sexual activity with men, she had

been in Australia for a relatively short period and was still mastering English and making friends. She says that by the time she had established friendships, it would have been "opening old wounds" to discuss her feelings (Maria, group meeting, 30th May, 1999). Members of her family of origin were unwilling to listen to any of her marriage problems and, at the time, counselling was less readily available than it is today. Maria believes that she would have been significantly empowered if she had been given the opportunity to talk to people immediately after discovering her husband's homosexual behaviour. In particular, Maria insists that she would have welcomed the opportunity to meet other women with similar experiences. "If another human being had said, 'hey that happened to me', it doesn't matter the account, whether she stayed [in the relationship], didn't stay, but someone else saying 'yes it does happen and I'm here, it happened to me', I would have probably dealt with the whole lot differently" (Maria, group meeting, 30th May, 1999).

Given adequate support and counselling, Maria feels that she would have left her marriage immediately rather than remaining, unhappily, for fourteen years. Julie also expressed the wish that she could have talked to other women in a similar situation much earlier than she did as it would have reduced the isolation she experienced. She describes feeling that she was the "only person going through it" (Julie, group meeting, 30th May, 1999).

Another need which Julie describes was to prove herself as a complete sexual person, someone who was still attractive to men. Her self-esteem was dealt a severe blow by the shame she felt of having a husband who was sexually attracted to men. After Julie's first sexual relationship following her marriage, she felt wanted and needed and she gained self-confidence. When Maria asked Julie whether she needs a man in her life, Julie conceded that she does and that if she was not in her current relationship she would "go and find someone else" (Julie, group meeting, 30th May, 1999). This is in contrast with Maria who says that she is happy being on her own now and regards having an intimate relationship as a luxury.

Maria and Julie, both individually and collectively, gave considerable thought to the needs which arose for them subsequent to their experiences of marriage. Through discussion, they recognised that their needs differed somewhat due to the various expectations they held and their different positions within their culture. The strategies each woman developed to deal with her experience were consequent on her unique set of understandings. Maria's need for autonomy was contradictory to Julie's need to prove her attractiveness by pursuing relationships with men. Many needs were very similar however, such as needing to express their anger and hatred to their husband, reducing their sense of isolation, regaining a sense of trust, and primarily making sense of a situation which was previously outside of their frame of

reference. Some of their needs were met and others were not and never can be.

Many of the needs which arose for Julie and Maria resulted from their internalised ideologies of marriage and motherhood and their understandings of sexualities. Each woman had developed expectations of relationships compatible with the time and culture in which she was born and lived. These understandings and expectations were interwoven with their notions of their own femininity and of their husband's masculinity. The following chapter will draw together these complex constructions.

CHAPTER 5 – FEMININITY/MASCULINITY

The themes of sexualities, marriage/family, and identification of needs have been discussed in the previous chapters. These themes intersect in the understandings that the women have of their own femininity and of their ex-husband's masculinity. In this chapter I will discuss social constructions of femininity and masculinity and how they affect, and are also affected by, themes covered in the preceeding chapters.

Femininity and masculinity have traditionally been defined in structuralist theories as dichotomous and as linked to female and male bodies respectively. Betsy Wearing (1996, p. 4) outlines traditional explanations of gender construction, such as those of Freud who saw psychological differences as resulting from biology and therefore innate, natural and unchangeable. 'Typical' feminine and masculine traits were identified in a 1970s clinical study by Broverman, Vogel, Broverman, Clarkson and Rosenkrantz (cited in Brownmiller, 1984; Hyde, 1991; Wearing, 1996). Feminine traits which were identified included: being very submissive, emotional, subjective, and crying easily, whilst masculinity was characterised by objectivity, aggression, independence, logic and lack of emotion. In this model, masculine traits are much more highly valued than those identified as feminine. In addition, individuals displaying characteristics inconsistent with their biological sex are considered poorly adjusted and deviant (Wearing, 1996, p. 4).

Although weakened by decades of feminist debate which has challenged these definitions, the basic expectations of 'correct' female and male behaviour remain dominant throughout mainstream western culture as evidenced in media, institutions and recreational organisations.

In addition to the 'typical' traits outlined above, traditional theories define femininity and masculinity in terms of each other rather than by their own specificity. More significantly, feminine traits are defined by their relationship to masculine traits which are regarded as the norm and therefore superior. The discursive and representational construction of the world as a series of binaries defines emotionality in relation to rationality, dependence in relation to independence, private to public and so on (Grosz, 1994; Threadgold, 1990; Wearing, 1996). The consideration of femininity and masculinity in terms of opposites, effectively excludes individuals not fitting neatly into the categories. Transvestites and drag queens, for example, prove problematic to these dichotomous structures. Catharine Lumby (1997, p. 90) has suggested that they could perhaps be seen as a third sex which questions the traditional opposition of femininity and masculinity, although this seems a simplistic approach which still relies on categorisations.

Established definitions of masculinity and femininity are readily represented in discussions of role expectations of heterosexual, monogamous relationships. Within the nuclear family strong, objective, dominant men are ideally partnered by weak, subjective, submissive women. These feminine traits equip women for their role of dependent

wife and associated duties such as providing home comforts for their male partner. In western, patriarchal societies, women's femininity has been measured by their adaptation to the work required as a wife and mother with women who demonstrate independence or other 'masculine' qualities being labelled unfeminine or even deviant (Matthews, 1984). Oakley (1981, p. 86) labels the "glorification of motherhood" as "perhaps the most important aspect of capitalist ideologies of femininity". Nurturing and caring for a male partner and children are synonymous with established notions of femininity (Brownmiller, 1984; Oakley, 1981).

Both Julie and Maria are women who demonstrate considerable assertiveness and self-confidence and each woman described herself as being independent and autonomous prior to marriage. Despite these traits, Julie's self-identified behaviour conforms fairly closely to traditional expectations of feminine roles within marriage. Her paid employment has been predominantly in secretarial positions, which she says she adores because she enjoys serving the needs of a "bloke" (Julie, group meeting, 30th May, 1999). She married a soldier, symbolically the epitome of masculinity, and she then unquestioningly assumed the role of army wife, "I loved army life so being in a marriage was just great" (Julie, group meeting, May 30th 1999).

The image of male masculinity encapsulated in the Australian soldier has been romanticised in masculine cultural production (Allen, 1992, p. 25) and constantly reproduced in mainstream discourses.

Heterosexuality is implicit in this particular notion of masculinity but, argues Lynne Segal (1990, p. 142), so too is an underlying possibility of homosexuality. Dowsett (cited in Joseph, 1997, p. 142) recognises that the potential for men to be sexually active with each other is permanently visible within masculine cultures, although rarely made explicit. Often this potential is articulated in the form of homophobic language and behaviour which, whilst seeming to deny the possibility of homosexual contact, serves to highlight it as an option. Sedgwick (1991, p. 186) identifies a “strangling double bind” at the heart of masculinity, the simultaneous desire for and fear of erotic attachment to other men.

Julie appears to define her femininity both in contrast to male masculinity and by her roles of wife and mother. Her perception of her own femininity presumes heterosexuality, which she appears never to have questioned, having unequivocally rejected the sexual advances of a female friend. Julie expresses pride in her support of her husband’s army career and describes how she felt she was the “luckiest person out of the whole family” because of her “happy marriage” (Julie, group meeting, 30th May, 1999). For Julie, her roles of wife and mother seem to essentially symbolise her femininity and her womanhood.

Maria identifies herself as somewhat androgynous in appearance at the time she met her husband, “I had no hips, no boobs...and my hair was very, very short” and that she dressed in clothes which were not stereotypically feminine, “I was dressed very boyish in a military

uniform" (Maria, group meeting, 30th May, 1999). In fact, Maria continues to challenge established codes of femininity in her fifties with her flamboyant clothes, men's hats and Doc Marten boots. Her ex-husband told her that when he saw her walking into the factory where they both worked, he thought she was the owner because of her self-confident demeanour. She held very high ambitions for herself which did not necessarily include a man and her intention when she came to Australia was to be a success both socially and in business as soon as she was sufficiently fluent in English. In spite of her ambitions and her self-confidence, however, she was talked into marriage when she had strong doubts that it was the right move and admits she would have preferred to continue in a less formal relationship.

Maria admits that she has never understood why she took the step to marry. However, she states that her social conditioning was so strong that, once married, she assumed a stereotypical role and had expectations that it would be a traditional relationship. Becoming pregnant very early in the marriage, she left paid employment to care for her child, thus becoming financially dependent on her husband. Her conformity to her role as a wife left her feeling very let down when her husband did not play his role as a husband, "he was letting me down in many ways, he wasn't a provider" (Maria, group meeting, 30th May, 1999). The reality of Maria's marriage was very much at odds with her expectations and her difficulties in understanding his sexual activity with men can be clearly linked to these expectations, "I only saw

him as the father of my daughter, there was no other role he was supposed to play and there was this guy sitting on his lap" (Maria, group meeting, 30th May, 1999).

The simplicity of traditional structuralist theories is ineffective in trying to understand the issues which Julie and Maria faced. Feminist theorists have been highly critical of traditional definitions of femininity and masculinity, particularly regarding the relatively higher value placed on all traits considered masculine (Brownmiller, 1984; Wearing, 1996). Many feminist discussions of gender, however, retain the structures which define masculinity and femininity as polar opposites in order to demonstrate issues of power relations or inequality in society. Poststructuralist feminisms provide frameworks within which the complexities and contradictions of gender relations can be explored through meanings of femininity and masculinity which are not fixed but are produced through discourses and therefore constantly open to change (Weedon, 1987). Language which permits fluidity in understandings of femininity, masculinity, and sexualities, may acknowledge that an individual in a heterosexual relationship may also desire a same-sex relationship, whether concurrently or not. Such discourses would, however, be marginalised as they challenge the current status quo. Particular forms of behaviour appropriate for gendered subjects, and their roles in nuclear families are implied, and often enforced through social practices and institutions (Weedon, 1987).

Julie's and Maria's understandings of their own femininity and of their husband's masculinity were produced through their exposure to the dominant, highly influential discourses which constantly reinforced their expectations of heterosexual relationships and roles within marriage. Julie mentioned that, in hindsight, she could recognise signs of her husband's sexual attraction to men throughout her marriage but she ignored them as they conflicted with the meanings she already understood. Within her world, at that time, the dominant discourse did not challenge her understandings of femininity and masculinity.

With the awareness of her husband's sexual activity with men, Julie's understandings of masculinity, marriage and sexuality all had to be reviewed. The implications of this on Julie's notion of her own femininity stem from her tacit understanding of femininity and masculinity as opposite poles. Initially when Julie discovered that her husband was having sex with men, she thought that conforming even more strongly to her role of wife would lead to him changing and resuming his heterosexuality. When he actually moved out of the marital home and she had to acknowledge that he was not going to change, for a time she ceased playing the role of mother and her daughter became the "pseudo mummy", taking over household tasks and even looking after Julie (Julie, group meeting, 30th May, 1999).

Maria's awareness of her husband's bisexual activity heralded a change of roles within their relationship. Although she states that her social conditioning compelled her to stay in the marriage, she redefined her

roles of wife and mother. She became the family provider when her husband went bankrupt and he undertook household tasks and child-care. In many ways, traditional patterns of masculine and feminine behaviour were reversed with Maria becoming very assertive while her husband became passive, "I had everything under control. He became my dependent" (Maria, group meeting, 30th May, 1999). The meanings which Maria had understood about roles in heterosexual relationships had been altered by her husband's behaviour but rather than attempting to reaffirm those meanings, Maria constructed new ones. At this time, Maria was still exposed primarily to patriarchal discourses which reinforced her conditioning, yet Maria somehow created her own meanings which challenged the dominant discourse. Maria and Julie together discussed the ways in which Maria does not conform to conventional femininity. With hindsight, Maria agrees with Julie's suggestion that it may have been this which attracted her husband to her, "he married me because I was a strong woman" (Maria, group meeting, 30th May, 1999). Maria expressed her opinion that Julie's story fits into the stereotype of women's experience but that her own is different, "how come, I want to know?" (Maria, group meeting, 30th May, 1999).

When Julie began to cope with her marriage ending, she launched on a vigorous exercise routine, resulting in significant weight loss which, she says, made her feel good about herself. She also "went blonde" (Julie, group meeting, 30th May, 1999) at that time. This can be seen in

different ways. On one hand, Julie could be characterised as trying to make herself attractive to other men by conforming to mainstream stereotypes of an ideal female body (Brownmiller, 1981; Woolf, 1991). Alternatively, she could be seen as trying to regain some power and control which she had previously transferred to her husband, and her own body was one thing which she was able to control. Julie herself does not elucidate how she perceives her motivation for this change to her appearance. She does state, however, that proving she was attractive to men by having relationships with them, particularly one with a younger man which was “sex, pure sex” (Julie, group meeting, 30th May, 1999), boosted her self-esteem and restored her confidence.

For Maria, moving on from her husband began with the success of her business, which she started alone, and led to her increased confidence and self-esteem. Maria noted that Julie’s confidence increased because of a man whereas she says that she saw herself flourish “without a man around” (Maria, group meeting, 30th May, 1999). Maria also suggests that she became “a sexual being again” some time before she began having relationships with men. She began “exuding sexuality and confidence” and consequently “the men came around” (Maria, group meeting, 30th May, 1999). Despite her commitment to the ideal of marriage, it was Maria who was active in eventually leaving her husband and divorcing him whereas Julie states that she could not have left her husband, despite being so distressed by his behaviour.

During her marriage, Maria says that she was totally committed, that everything was for the welfare of her husband and daughter because this was what she had been conditioned to see as her role. When she finally left, she thought only of herself for a time and spent large amounts of money on clothes and jewellery. She says that when she was ready “to make the jump”, to actually move out of the marital home, she had to give herself permission to think of herself and she then “went for everything” (Maria, group meeting, 30th May, 1999).

An impression I have got very strongly from Maria throughout my conversations with her, has been that she would have handled the situation very differently if she had met her husband a year later. Having very limited English and few friends in whom to confide, Maria was unable to discuss her husband’s behaviour although she was more than willing to talk about it. At no time has Maria intimated that she felt shame about her husband’s sexual attraction to men, in contrast with Julie, and Maria does not seem to have questioned her own femininity. She has, however, pondered whether her androgynous appearance may attract men who are sexually attracted to other men but are unable to admit this even to themselves. She sees this as the men’s problem rather than something she should strive to change about herself and ended two relationships in which she felt this was the case. Possibly this is linked to Maria’s self-contained sense of her own femininity and the fact that she does not define herself in opposition to traditional masculinity, “I don’t need a man in my life, I’m totally happy

without a man because my lifestyle is interesting" (Maria, group meeting, 30th May, 1999).

Julie appears to continue to identify herself in opposition to a man. Although her expectations of relationships are different now than they were prior to her marriage, she prefers to be in a relationship with a man and is unhappy when she is not. Stating that she is unfulfilled by female friendships, and by her own company, she needs to be part of a couple. Although she controls her current relationship to a large degree, she admits that it is not a completely satisfactory one but she keeps returning to it because it is better than being alone. Maria sees her current partner as temporary because "he's not a person that can challenge or stand up to me. I don't like a man that says 'yes darling' all the time" (Maria, group meeting, 30th May, 1999). Although stating that she does not want to be on her own forever, Maria now affirms that "I've found myself. The potential is unlimited when I'm on my own" (Maria, group meeting, 30th May, 1999).

Both women have moved on from the trauma of their experiences but their lives remain affected by it. For Maria, the need to trust intimate partners has consumed much of her time and energy. She has "put them through hell" (Maria, group meeting, 30th May, 1999) in her efforts to ensure that she is not open to the same sort of betrayal she experienced with her husband. Marriage is still a consideration for Maria but only if she could trust her partner to be totally committed and totally honest with her. She recognises that, so far, she seems to

be happier when she is not in a relationship with a man than when she is and therefore is happy not to “settle down at the moment with anybody” (Maria, group meeting, 30th May, 1999).

If a woman defines her own femininity only in relation to masculinity, it is possible that she will question her femininity if her male partner's masculinity is questioned or seems to be 'deviant' within dominant discourses. However, if perceptions of femininity and masculinity are recognised to be fluid as in poststructuralist feminist theories (Weedon, 1987), the woman's subjectivity can recognise variations and conflict between different forms of discourse. They can, of course, choose to ignore the marginalised discourses as Julie did, for example, when she acknowledges “I didn't want people to tell me it was alright for him to be gay, I desperately didn't want that” (Julie, group meeting, 30th May, 1999). In rejecting any validation of her husband's sexuality, she was in effect reinforcing the dominant discourse which constantly reaffirmed her notions of 'proper' behaviour in marriage.

Julie's and Maria's subjectivities incorporated their perceptions of femininity, masculinity, marriage, and sexualities as produced within a particular society at a particular time. “The individual is always the site of conflicting forms of subjectivity” (Weedon, 1987, p. 33). What emerged in both Julie's and Maria's marriages conflicted so directly with their subjectivities, that it was almost impossible to reconcile.

CHAPTER 6 - CONCLUSION

In this concluding section I draw together some of the themes of this research as well as highlight the significance of the research process.

Maria and Julie participated in this research because of their shared need to further their understandings of the experience of marrying a non-homosexually-identified man who has sex with other men. The world of these men is often secretive, hidden and not part of popular discourse. Different cultures reinforce particular modes of sexual expression as acceptable or not acceptable. Mainstream Australian culture constantly reinforces the notion that men must refuse the eroticism of other men's bodies. Both women and men internalise this notion through constant messages from media, advertising, and institutions as well as those messages received from everyday social interactions. The refusal of homosexual activity and the consequent normalising of particular heterosexual activities, channels all erotic potential in a particular direction – married, monogamous, adult, heterosexual sex.

At the same time, heterosexuality is synonymously linked with representations of gender. The expressions of 'real' femininity and 'real' masculinity presume heterosexuality and thus deny contrary expressions such as 'feminine' men. Julie's and Maria's presumptions that their husbands were heterosexual, were predicated on their implicit

understandings of the connections between married men, masculinity and heterosexuality. Although each woman held an awareness of homosexual acts and identities, they did so in the context that homosexuality was a discrete category which was mutually exclusive from their own lives. The binary opposites of 'them' and 'us' perpetuate the reasons for some men maintaining the secrecy of their homosexual activity. Remaining part of the heterosexual majority is preferential to joining the homosexual minority or, worse still, entering the abyss in between. This dichotomous categorisation provides some explanation of why so many women never suspect that their male partner may be having sex with men. "I still think it probably falls into the category of exotica that most people think wouldn't apply to anyone they know and in their own relationships" (Crawford cited in Joseph, 1997, p. 150).

The revelation that their husband's behaviour was inconsistent with their expectations of masculinity, heterosexuality and marriage, was highly traumatic for Julie and Maria, although their reasons varied somewhat. Maria's expectations of marriage were already proving unrealistic and the awareness that her husband was sexually active with men was simply the breaking point. Maria was confused by her husband's sexual behaviour rather than repulsed or outraged. In contrast, when it finally became clear to Julie that her husband was sexually attracted to men, she was scandalised and appalled to such an extent that she had difficulty functioning in everyday life for several months. The contradictions between Julie's reality at that time, and

her understandings and expectations of masculinity and heterosexual marriage, were so great that it was several years before she could “make sense of it” (Julie, group meeting, 30th May, 1999).

For each woman, understanding the context of her husband’s homosexual activity has been a prolonged and lonely process. Maria and Julie both felt that the route to understanding would have been less traumatic if opportunities had existed to process their experiences in an empathetic environment. Restrictions preventing Julie and Maria from discussing their ex-husband’s sexual behaviour arose from each woman’s distinctly different positions in their cultural environment. Julie’s association with the army, placed her in a social group where there were expectations of (visible) exclusively heterosexual behaviour as well as clearly defined gender categories. Julie chose to conceal her husband’s homosexual behaviour rather than face the “shame” of disclosing it to friends, family, and acquaintances. For Julie, it was better to put up with the “agony” of people thinking that she was to blame for the marriage ending (Julie, group meeting, 30th May, 1999).

Maria’s position as a migrant with limited English and few close friends, severely restricted her opportunities to disclose her husband’s sexual behaviour despite her willingness to do so, “I was looking for people to talk to. I had nobody to talk to, that was the most frustrating and painful thing” (Maria, group meeting, 30th May, 1999). Unlike Julie, Maria did not feel ashamed because of her husband’s behaviour, “I just needed to know, if this is what’s happening, is this normal?” (Maria,

group meeting, 30th May, 1999). Had she been able to talk to someone with a similar experience at that time, Maria feels that she would have been greatly empowered.

As Maria and Julie shared their experiences, they recognised that their social conditioning had caused each to react in very different ways when placed in a similar position, “how different the needs are, more and more it’s becoming clear to me” (Maria, group meeting, 30th May, 1999). Maria recognised that those differences, however, did not lessen the impact of the experience, “background, expectations about marriage, baggage that comes into it, what you come out of it with, it’s totally different but the substance is that you were destroyed at that time” (Maria, group meeting, 30th May, 1999).

Taking part in this research has been a worthwhile and fulfilling journey for both Julie and Maria. Talking in such depth about an extremely painful and traumatic part of their lives took enormous strength and courage as well as trust in me and in each other. Their stories reveal the enormous consequences of the social invisibility of a particular type of behaviour. Bringing this issue into the open could expose fewer women to the trauma and isolation experienced by Julie and Maria simply by making it less covert and less stigmatised. Both women expressed the desire to share their learning with others and to help more women to contextualise their experiences. This research could generate the energy for a participatory action project which creates opportunities for women to further their understanding of the

issue. The development of such a project could also help to bring the issue into mainstream discourses thus opening the possibility for other women to realise that they are part of the statistics.

This research has also proved enlightening for me. In the opening chapter I mentioned my concern for women who mistakenly believe their male partner to be both monogamous and sexually attracted only to women. Having grasped the depths of Julie's and Maria's devastation, I think that, ironically, women who remain unaware of their partner's behaviour may be more content. Whilst I believe they are undoubtedly disempowered and possibly at some health risk, they may continue to be happy and fulfilled by their relationship for the rest of their lives. I am still struggling to reconcile this with my feminist ideology. Julie expressed the need to keep believing that her marriage was real despite recognising that her husband was sexually attracted to men, and possibly sexually active with them, during a substantial part of the marriage. Thus, she is adamant that, even now, she would prefer not to know the details about his homosexual behaviour. She says that she "didn't want to know because I didn't want to lose the fact that the marriage was real" (Julie, group meeting, 30th May, 1999).

"One cannot speak about the way people speak and mean without affecting, sometimes perpetuating and sometimes changing, the way they do it." (Eco cited in Threadgold, 1990, p. 3). One of my aims has been that any effects of participating in this research would be positive for the women involved and I believe this to be the case. However, the

women who withdrew in the early stages did so due to their apprehension that participation would negatively affect their emotional well-being. Whether or not that would have been the reality cannot be demonstrated. It seems apparent, however, that the experience for those women who withdrew continues to be a potential source of disharmony in their lives. When I returned Maria's journal at the end of my research, she expressed regret that so few women chose to participate in the sharing experience. Maria suggested that some women may be reluctant to contextualise their experience as this would necessitate the recognition that any male partner could potentially be sexually attracted to men. I think that this provides an insightful account, although the diversity of circumstances and experiences suggests that more complex analysis would be necessary to gain a complete picture.

Towards the end of their journals, Julie and Maria thanked me for giving them the opportunity to share their experiences and also the motivation to put their thoughts and feelings in writing. Maria noted that "through this study I have learned and grown immensely" and that "I feel I have been emotionally cleansed and I see my future bright and fulfilling" (Maria, journal entry). For me, this makes the whole project worthwhile.

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APPENDIX 1

EDITH COWAN UNIVERSITY

FACULTY OF COMMUNITY SERVICES, EDUCATION AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

Project Title: A Study of Women Partners of Men Who Have Sex With Men
Researcher: Elaine Dowd Phone: 9328 5383
Supervisors: Dr Suellen Murray Phone: 9400 5712
Pamela Weatherill Phone: 9400 5640

CONSENT FORM

The primary purpose of this research is to identify the needs of some women who have a past or present male partner who is attracted to, or has sex with, other men. I would like to know about any met or unmet needs which have arisen from this experience as well as strategies for meeting those needs. I hope that my research will highlight this issue within the general community. In addition, I hope that the women who participate will benefit from the opportunity to meet some other women who share similar experiences in an environment which is non-judgemental and accepting.

A group meeting will be arranged where the participants can get together at a venue to be mutually agreed. It is not intended that this meeting will act as a structured support group but rather as a forum for women to share their experiences and feelings. Several weeks after the meeting I will interview each woman individually to discuss her reactions to the meetings, and any issues which may have arisen for her. The meeting and the interviews will be tape recorded. The tapes of the interviews will be transcribed and each participant will be given a copy of the transcriptions for editing and clarification before analysis. Following analysis, I will consult with participants to ensure that my interpretations are representative of their experiences. Additionally, each woman will be asked to complete a journal which traces her thoughts and feelings throughout the study. The entire journals will remain the property of the individual women and will not be included in the report. Extracts from the journals may be used in the final report to reinforce issues raised as a result of the interviews or focus group. Your permission will be sought prior to any particular extracts from your journal being included and any identifying information will be removed.

At no time will real names be used in the transcriptions or on the covers of the tapes. When not in use by the researcher, the tapes and transcriptions will be stored securely. Any material from either the transcriptions or the journals which is used in the research report will not contain identifying information. Participants may withdraw from the research project at any time up to the completion of the final report. Participants may also request that any material be omitted from the transcripts. Several qualified and experienced counsellors are available to all participants both during and after the research project if needed. The research supervisors may be contacted if participants have any concerns or queries about the project.

THIS IS TO CERTIFY THAT I hereby agree to voluntarily participate in this project under the conditions set out above. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the proposed research and my questions have been answered satisfactorily.

Participant Dated:

Researcher Dated: