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A Grounded Theory of Liberated Identity: Lesbians transcending oppression

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to generate theory that emerged based on the conceptualized data from interviews with lesbian women through Classic Grounded Theory methodology. Theory generation is grounded in the unique perspectives of lesbian women's experience in cultural contexts. This is a strengths-based process that focuses on how participants meet challenges in culture, rather than how they are consumed by them. From the data, a basic social process emerged that is both complex and paradoxical: transcending oppression through liberating one's identity. The paradox lies in the aspect that from a lesbian woman's pain comes her strength. This difference, lesbian identity, is also the source of strength. This paradox is compounded with the awareness that culture negates lesbian loving relationships. There are three stages to lesbian liberated identity: authenticating, reconciling, and integrating. Application to and implications for professionals and academics are presented.

Keywords: lesbians, liberated identity, spirituality, political, classic grounded theory

Introduction

Historically, behavioral science theories and developmental models have focused on the individual outside of culture, hence negating the unique cultural oppression of lesbian women. The few theories that address lesbians are seated in "heterosexist paradigms" that fall outside the lived experience of lesbian women (Brown, 1995, p.18). Subsequently, theory has pathologized lesbian development through the absence of biopsychosocial frameworks (Brown, 1995). Research and psychological interventions have also focused on the internal daily living problems of lesbian

women instead of the oppressive cultural experiences that lesbian women encounter (Kitzinger & Perkins, 1993). The absence of political theories that explore lesbian cultural experience have opened the door to pathologizing explanations that blame the victim (Kitzinger & Perkins). Instead of investigating the challenges posed by the system the individual is navigating within, labels of coping are applied to the individual (i.e. internalized homophobia) as opposed to the source (homophobic and heterosexist oppression), thus minimizing external forces and maximizing assumed pathology of the person within the system.

Using Classic Grounded Theory, the purpose of this study was to generate theory that emerged from conceptualized data from interviews with lesbian women. Findings revealed that the women in this study created unique social processes to maintain, even edify, their lesbian identity when it was threatened. From conceptualization of the data, theory emerged as a specific process in which strengths were utilized to face challenges when interacting within culture. This process and theory, transcending oppression through liberating one's identity, is complex and paradoxical because the participants garnered strength from the pain caused by oppression. Although this oppression may lead to suffering, it also created resilience. Since lesbian loving relationships are thus ignored or minimized within culture, this compounded the paradox.

Method

Participant selection was based on lesbian identity and diverse demographic characteristics because heterogeneous sampling is required to expand and refine the emergent theory (Glaser, 1978). Heterogeneous lesbian subgroups were recruited to enhance non-comparability of groups. Key informants, lesbian women identified as resources with exceptional knowledge of the potential sample, were used for access to lesbian subgroups and later as interview participants for theoretical coding. Using the researcher's own network, key informants, snowball participants, and lesbian social services, theoretical sampling was conducted.

Lesbian Social Services

To diversify potential participants, the initial sample was drawn from lesbian social service agencies. Four social service agencies agreed to publicize the study. Theoretical sampling began with a local lesbian social service sponsoring a function for recipients. Interviews were conducted onsite and from this event additional participants were recruited. All agencies and participants were immediately supportive and verbalized investment in research that increased the visibility of lesbian issues.

The final sample consisted of 28 lesbian women from differing backgrounds, classes, ages, races and ethnicities, geographic locations, and educational levels. Over-sampling for Hispanic lesbian women was conducted to ensure racial diversity. Other means to sample for diverse lesbians included: (a) sampling from specific agencies that served lower-income women, (b) snowball sampling from ethnic minorities, and (c) requesting agencies to recruit for women of color. Socioeconomic status ranged from lower to middle class. Some women were physically challenged; all women had worked in a profession. Some women had been married, some had children, but all identified as lesbian. Participant ages ranged from 18-72 years old. Face sheet variables that remained significant throughout the study were geography, identification as lesbian in less than two contexts, and traditional family of origin. Constant comparison of face sheet variables also directed the researcher in theoretical sampling, compelling sampling for diverse characteristics dissimilar to previous participant characteristics.

Lesbian identity as an integral part of cultural experience was grounded in the data; therefore, theoretical sampling did not occur outside of lesbian subgroups. This is a limitation in that it precludes generalization across other groups who may share similar if not the same basic social process, but also an implication for future studies.

Arranging and conducting interviews presented protocol problems. Screening for race, age, and other variables within an oppressed group was problematic in that asking a participant to divulge sensitive information about her identity

seemed insulting. Because of this issue, some interviews were arranged with minimal information, i.e. only knowing the participant was a lesbian woman.

Data Collection and Analysis

Constant comparison generated coding categories and began after the first field notes were transcribed; this was the primary activity in data collection (Glaser, 1998). Constant comparison was an ongoing process and very critical throughout all stages of this study. Completing 28 interviews, and no more, increased intimacy with the data and subsequently increased the flow in conceptualization. To memo from constant comparison and conceptualization, memoing sessions occurred for line-by-line analysis with coding written in the margins of field notes. Through this process, the transition from open coding to selective coding occurred at the seventh participant interview. When the theoretical codes were named later in the study, data were fractured by cutting incidents, properties, and categories into strips directly from field notes and constantly compared through sorting and memoing. When face sheet variables became evident, they were used to expand the codes and directed theoretical sampling.

Adjusted conversational interviewing was the data collection method. Conversational interviewing uses flexibility to determine concepts embedded in participant reports (Glaser, 2001). The researcher is “just listening in a kind of open ended conversational interview,” using different interviewing styles as theoretical sampling dictates (Glaser, 1998, p.174). The initial spill question was: “What is your experience as a lesbian living in today’s culture?” Interviews ranged from twenty minutes to two hours. Field notes contained *in vivo* codes (codes taken directly from language that define how the group resolves the main concern) and researcher abstractions. Conceptualized codes were extracted from hand-written notes taken during interviews. At the end of each participant field note, a separate section for conceptualized ideas and concepts was added.

As theoretical codes were fleshed out of the data, meanings of substantive codes including comparing and

contrasting codes, conceptualizing beyond concepts, and spending much time searching through the dictionary for the perfect word to convey meaning, was an ongoing process. To ensure theoretical sensitivity, social science definitions were not used in order to avoid forcing existing theory onto the emergent concepts. Dictionary definitions, as suggested by grounded theory methodology, were used to describe the conceptualized data because they are based in daily customary language. The main concern and resolution were named after the basic social process was evident.

The final stages of data analysis included the documentation of abstracted ideas into memos. Memos conceptualized data, operationalized categories through their extracted properties, and provided hypothesized connections between categories. Memo sorting began the formulation of the theory for readability. This study also utilized photography to add meaning and representation to the codes, after all interviews were conducted. Memos were transcribed directly from interviews with added conceptualization memos at the end of each note and all were analyzed line-by-line. Additional hand-written memos were later typed. Ideas were also voice recorded and transcribed as memos ultimately resulting in 30 voice recordings. Memo sessions consisted of writing about the data and documenting ideas about the data.

The Grounded Theory: Liberated Identity

Liberated identity emerged from the conceptualized data as a comprehensive and strengths-based process to transcend oppressive cultural forces. The *Webster’s* (Mish et al., 1987) definition of *liberated* is “freed from or opposed to traditional social and sexual attitudes or roles” (p.688). Traditional attitudes and roles contain heterosexual bias and can be harmful to lesbian identity since they negate and pathologize lesbian loving relationships. Liberated identity therefore is a basic social process used to affirm integral lesbian identity and lesbian loving relationships. Resolution of the main concern is hypothesized as being accomplished through liberated identity. The theory was named by answering questions during conceptualization like “How does a lesbian woman find peace in cultural contexts that demean the identity that she considers an asset?” The answer was that

she *liberates* her identity by transcending oppression. Formulating the main concern presented itself as a sociological construct or a broader social concern.

The main concern that emerged from the data is *transcending oppression*. The participants were actively attempting to rise above and resolve aspects of oppression, including exclusion, judgment, and prejudice. The data revealed patterned complex behaviors while facing the paradox that one must transcend oppressive culture but also live in oppressive culture to acquire needed resources. These resources in turn are essential in transcending oppression that originates from these cultural contexts. Transcending oppression is the catalyst to begin stage progression to liberate identity.

Transcending oppression can result from a culturally forced proclamation of difference that is based in the identification as a different other, a person who is not a member of dominant culture; an identity that cannot be conceptually separated from cultural context. However, context does not define identity but social interactions are based in identification as a different other and are integral to these interactions. Identity, like cultural contexts, was constant and verified as central during data collection. Similarly, oppression was assumed to occur and required an understanding of how oppression it was justified. The need to transcend oppression is assumed in all interactions because it had been experienced repeatedly in all contexts. All women in the study spoke of emotional, psychological, and physical pain from authenticating. The most extreme cases of violence involved rape, physical assault, ostracism from family, forced resignation and/or termination of employment, excommunication from church membership, vandalism to property, verbal assaults and abuse, sexual harassment, and physical separation from partner.

Liberated identity, as a basic social-psychological process, has three stages: authenticating, reconciling, and integrating. Figure 1 shows this nonlinear process. The stages are theoretical codes; the core code of “liberated identity” names the complete process. Each theoretical code is comprehensive, as is the process as a whole.



Figure 1. Lesbian Liberated Identity

The basic social process is not continuous. The three stages are permeable, neither sequential nor exclusive, and they are often revisited. When stages are revisited, differing properties of the stage may be experienced, such as visual showing when verbal correcting had been experienced in previous stage encounters; however, the overall purpose for progression remains the same, for example, to authenticate one’s identity. Progression from one stage to another is compelled by cultural experience. Thus, being in one stage at a particular time does not force a progression to another stage. Women instead operated within each stage at multiple times, returning to the first two stages when compelled by oppression. Movement toward the sought-after integrating stage comes with external and internal problem-solving. Stages were heuristic (“generally not perceivable by the persons involved, but demarcated by the sociologist for theoretical reasons”) (Glaser, 1978, p.98); the women in this study were unaware of their impact as creators of a formal basic social process.

Authenticating

Authenticating is the first stage in lesbian liberated identity, overt disclosure that one is a lesbian. This is an external action (authenticating is an action for others, not for oneself) that has personal implications. Mish et al. (1987) gives this definition of *authenticate*: “to prove, confirm, in an authoritative manner; worth of acceptance or belief as conforming to fact or reality; trustworthy, of a cadence; veritable, actuality, true existence and actual identity” (p.117). For this fitting definition, three key concepts that

guided sorting and analysis were *proving*, *confirming*, and *establishing worthiness*.

Authenticating is the least complex of the three basic social process stages. It is visited in three main cultural contexts: family of origin, work, and general society. Authenticating is conceptualized as behavior to challenge heterosexist bias by proclaiming one's difference as a lesbian woman. Authenticating was not a *process*, as coming out theories assert (Cass, 1984; Coleman, 1982; Lewis, 1984; Sophie, 1986), but a *stage* in a process—a tool or a tactical action. Authenticating is taking control over cultural expectations and assumptions of heterosexuality to present self in an honest manner. Lesbian women authenticated in at least one cultural context, the lesbian community. Authenticating as a lesbian is a singular, strategic, and purposive action to proclaim lesbian identity and establish this difference from traditional sexual attributes and roles. Women who do not authenticate in more than this one cultural context, however, experience greater grief and loss of integrity. This affective component is revisited in the reconciling stage. Authenticating is done by degrees through overt statements, through differences embedded in language, or through signs and symbols. In this study, authenticating occurred mostly in overt statements that immediately set limits and proclaimed difference. Women considered less “out” than others had authenticated in only one or two cultural contexts, the lesbian community and/or the family of origin.

Hypothesized purposes of authenticating are (a) defying traditional sex roles, (b) sharing relationships, and (c) proving worth (Sub-Hypotheses 1a, 1b, and 1c). Authenticating properties served one or more of these purposes in this study. Vulnerability to oppression presumably compels authenticating, but the often spontaneous action is founded more in a sense of accountability for educating others about identity and for limiting heterosexist assumptions identity.

Education and responsibility are conditions of authenticating as women go from the safety of the lesbian community to advise heterosexuals about lesbian identity through language, visible difference, and standards of interaction. This responsibility serves the purpose of

authenticating by exploding the assumption of heterosexuality, sharing with others, and proving worth. The properties of authenticating are (a) verbal correcting, (b) visual showing, and (c) behavioral proving.

Verbal correcting refers to the defiance of assumptions, honesty, and sharing that lesbian women bring to daily conversations, all with little thought for the consequences of oppression and as strategy to forestall uncomfortable interactions. Verbal correcting maintains the integrity of lesbian relationships and proclaims difference. In the study this property was evident in the family of origin and in social interactions within a more generalized realm of culture. There are three proposed conditions to verbal correcting: defiance, honesty, and sharing. Verbal correction makes lesbians visible and exaggerates proving oneself worthy of acceptance and inclusion.

Visual showing is the second property of authenticating. Its purpose is to externally reveal differences as a lesbian woman. Simply put, it is *being out in the open*. It is authenticating as visual action. Through visual showing, women take on the responsibility to show that lesbians are among society and can act appropriately. The underlying assumption is that cultural cues can distinguish lesbian women from those adhering to traditional role ascriptions in dress, mannerisms, or associations. Such visual cues include taking a partner to public places, going out with other women, associating with other women, taking adopted children with one's partner to church, being in public places, etc. But the lesbian woman has an additional responsibility: even as she visually reveals that she is different, she is also responsible to the lesbian community as a whole to set a good example. It is a deliberate action to raise the consciousness of lesbian identity difference in the public realm.

Behavioral proving is the third property of authenticating. It refers to the unspoken effort to avoid oppression as a lesbian woman. Taking control over the things one can is central to proving one's worth as a public citizen living in multiple cultures. This property was evident in the study within the cultural contexts of work and social interactions within a generalized realm. Oppression in any context due to

lesbian identity is expected; therefore, anything may be used to oppress. Combating this requires tenacity in any action, whether on the job, in a neighborhood, or in daily social interactions. Behavioral proving is founded in this concern that any characteristic, even those irrelevant to lesbian identity, may be used to oppress.

Following are examples of properties within the authenticating stage of verbal correcting. One participant discussed her being a member of a campus club: “I am not very invested in it, but thought it would be good to meet other people at school. Unexpectedly, they begin talking about fundamentalist Christian values and homosexuality as a sin. This of course makes me uncomfortable, so I come out to them that I am a lesbian. The rejection is obvious on their faces, but I am not seeking their approval. Instead I am seeking exclusion from their group since I do not want to be judged. Exclude me they do.”

The second example relates to authenticating within the family of origin: “My family is traditional and assumes I simply have not met the right man to marry. After taking it as long as I can, I finally tell them to stop the madness and to move on. They are devastated and need time to grieve. They cannot understand why I don’t want to wear the long white dress. That is just it—I don’t want that. I am a lesbian woman and love women.” Finally, an example relevant to more casual encounters: “I keep others from assuming I am heterosexual by telling them about my partner and what *she* does. I have her picture on my desk at work.”

Another property in authenticating is visual showing to reveal identity; lesbian women may go out together—to restaurants, concerts, events, etc.—to be seen as a group. This organized and intentional outing to be seen, *going out to be out*, assumes others see the differences in identity. One aim is to show others how mannerly and well-behaved lesbians are, and that they can operate in culture beside heterosexuals without incident.

Reconciling

Reconciling is the second stage in lesbian liberated identity. Reconciling is an internal, cognitive, and affective act

done for oneself to reconcile one’s lesbian identity with oppressive cultural contexts. Lesbian women in this stage must decide whether to continue their connection with oppressive cultural contexts or to break with them. The inner resolution of one’s difference from overt or covert heterosexist assumptions and expectations is the primary purpose of reconciling.

This definition of *reconciling* (Mish et al., 1987) was used as the basis for naming the theoretical codes: “to resolve friendship or harmony; to settle, resolve; to make consistent or congruous; to cause to submit to or accept something unpleasant; to check against another for accuracy; to account for” (p.984). The properties derived from this definition to fit the data in the study were (a) checking, (b) submitting, and (c) making congruous. Conceptually, this entails a *suspension* of lesbian identity, not the *negation* of that identity. Reconciling has three purposes: (a) checking identity against culture, (b) submitting to the reality of oppressive culture, and (c) making identity congruous with cultural contexts. Reconciling occurs in four primary cultural contexts: family of origin, work, church, and regional location. For study participants, reconciling within their family of origin and church had the most damaging affective repercussions. Yet, while the most painful, these contexts were the places women most desired continued connection.

Reconciling requires that individuals take a very attentive, observant, and measuring perspective on culture. It functions as a kind of cultural note-taking while one observes how others react to homosexuality. (For that reason, authenticating is often negotiated in this stage.) Like authenticating, reconciling is forced by cultural circumstances. It is the price of authenticating, one that was universal for all study participants. Reconciling is free of anger, fueled by an inherent forgiveness of others, though this forgiveness does not imply the acceptance of oppressive cultural contexts or their heterosexual requirements. Instead, a lesbian woman understands the oppressive forces of certain contexts and figures out how to maintain harmony within those contexts. If that is impossible, she finds or creates cultural contexts that affirm her lesbian identity.

Protectively embracing one's lesbian identity is required in reconciling — even if that identity must be suspended for a time, it remains an asset and source of strength. Vulnerability is felt in the reconciling stage, whether one is authenticating or not. It is experienced as grief, loss, and emotional hardship as one encounters the affective pain, psychological discomfort, and suspension of identity that comes in the reconciling stage. Finally, reconciling is the struggle for identity preservation in a culture that negates, ignores, and oppresses lesbian identity. To survive oppressive cultural contexts that will not change, one option is to suspend one's identity: to set aside, make temporarily inoperative, or defer lesbian identity to be revisited later (Mish et al., 1987). The other option is to remove oneself through migration to safe places and/or to create new contexts that affirm lesbian identity, such as the creation of a family of choice.

The basic social process stage of reconciling begins with checking one's lesbian identity against a given cultural context to find if they are congruous. This requires the note-taking aspect of reconciling; it screens a context for safety or threat. Beginning with lesbian identity, it progresses to an investigation of cultural perceptions of this identity. While it is an internal act, checking does involve observations of external culture. There are three properties of checking: (a) assessing safety, (b) negotiating out, and (c) altering behavior. Assessing the safety of a cultural context is part of evaluating how one's identity may be received. If circumstances warrant it, *outness* is negotiated. Although based solely on the actions and verbalizations of others, this is an internal decision. The lesbian woman considers when to disclose her loving relationships and to what degree. This requires suspending identity as she collects information. As a last resort, women may alter their behavior to avoid disclosure of their lesbian identity. Altering behavior does not imply any change in identity or feelings about being a lesbian. It is simply a survival strategy required to endure a heterosexist environment.

The second property of reconciling is internally submitting to the unpleasant nature of oppressive cultural contexts. Acknowledging the incongruity between lesbian

identity and ascriptions of heterosexual culture, lesbian women use their identity as a source of strength to face such oppression. They engage in an internal debate to find harmony between self and world. Again, identity is not changed but may be suspended for the sake of this harmony. Submitting is the acceptance of others' oppressive attitudes toward lesbian identity. It requires a sense of forgiveness and compromise that is based in serendipity and destiny — the trust that life events happen for a reason and embracing what happens even if oppression is the consequence. Reconciling operates within two conditions: naming oppression and resolving pain.

Making identity congruous with cultural contexts is the problem-solving property of reconciling. A lesbian woman knows her lesbian identity is not congruous with most cultural contexts; otherwise, she would not have to screen for safety, submit to the realization that she is oppressed, and work out how to attain a whole sense of self. Making identity congruous sometimes requires leaving a cultural context: when the lesbian woman has no influence over an oppressive context, she may opt to leave to maintain the integrity of her lesbian identity. She always has the option of returning to these contexts. Thus the principal choices are leaving oppressive contexts, finding safe contexts (migration), and returning to contexts that are oppressive. Determining whether or not identity can be maintained in spite of counterinfluences is central. Migration is a way of leaving in an attempt to connect: women migrate from oppressive cultural contexts for anonymity and to connect with the lesbian community. After being away for a time, lesbian women sometimes consider returning to a given context, usually church and family of origin. Reconnection depends on the lesbian woman, since she makes the effort, not the context she has left.

An example of submitting in the reconciling stage of liberated identity follows: "I would not be the person I am today if I had not experienced the pain of being made fun of by classmates for being a tomboy. I was teased for how I acted and what I wore, my intense relationships with my girlfriends, and the confusion I felt about my identity. I would not be the

good, forgiving, and lighthearted person I am today if this had not happened to me. Those events made me stronger and I can deal with whatever comes my way now. I like who I am.”

Integrating

Integrating is the final and most complex stage, representing a higher level of lesbian liberated identity. It is an internal and external behavioral, affective, and cognitive process. The definition of *integration* (Mish et al., 1987) is “to integrate; to form, coordinate, blend into a whole; to unite, incorporate as equals into a larger unit; to end segregation of and bring into common and equal membership in society, desegregate; coordination of mental processes into a normal effective personality or within the individual’s environment” (p.630). This definition matched the theoretical codes and includes (a) equal membership, (b) to unite, (c) to blend into a whole and, (d) effective personality. Integrating gives lesbian women the personal and political power to transcend oppression by liberating identity from heterosexist ascriptions and proscriptions: the integrating lesbian is not anxious about such cultural requirements. Personal power is rooted in the control of self-disclosure. Personal and political advocacy are properties of integrating; however, there are no qualifiers to how this advocacy is accomplished.

Integrating is characterized by balancing multiple identities, using lesbian identity as an asset, making similarities with others visible, and defining difference as positive. Integrating does require that the lesbian woman not avoid any cultural contexts because then she may be denying herself resources. Integrating can be visualized as *diffusion*: weaving, interconnecting, and spreading “cultural elements from one area or group of people to others by contact” (Mish et al., 1987, p.354). Integrating is the absence of shame, anger, and the need to defend one’s lesbian identity. When lesbians authenticate in the integrating stage, it is done for themselves and to enhance a valued relationship; it is not done to defy heterosexism.

The four properties of the integrating stage do not imply a lesbian woman’s complete integration into all cultural contexts. As long as oppression exists, complete integration is

neither possible nor desired. Integrating does represent, however, a lesbian woman’s ability to operate within a heterosexist context. There is a fearlessness and grace to integrating because women who do so are not consumed by a concern with reprisal. Integrating is the ability to render cultural boundaries and barriers, whether overt or covert, permeable. While authenticating is proclaiming difference and reconciling is negotiating difference, integrating is *defining* difference. Being out in the integrating stage is natural and no longer qualified as limited to certain acts.

An integrating lesbian does not feel compelled to authenticate, even in heterosexist contexts. She saves her energies for more important things, like loving relationships. Lesbian women want to be seen for both differences and similarities. Integrating allows them to make the decision when to educate others about difference and affinity. In the integrating stage, women feel less concern about vulnerability and the avoidance of oppression. Knowing that one can transcend whatever oppressive forces cultural contexts deliver changes vulnerability to strength. Women feel a sense of perseverance. Cultural contexts in integrating are less discernable, replaced by a more political and spiritual awareness of the larger nature of culture.

Operating in some oppressive cultural contexts may be necessary for gaining (a) financial resources, (b) provisions for family, (c) educational attainment, and (d) status and power. This refusal to avoid such contexts in turn forces authenticating and reconciling and may subsequently lead to forced or chosen segregation. Integrating thus requires the knowledge that lesbian women will never fully be part of culture and will always experience some segregation; integration is complete in a given setting when the woman no longer deems difference as negative or feels forced toward authenticating and reconciling by heterosexist expectations. Lesbian women integrate into cultural contexts whether the participants in those contexts know it or not. The hypothesized properties of integrating ((a) cultural awareness, resistance, and knowledge of equality, (b) uniting with culture, (c) being in culture, and (d) effective personality) are outlined below.

Awareness, resistance, and knowledge of equality signify an understanding of privilege, segregation, inequality, and difference. The integrating lesbian woman must (a) be aware of oppression, (b) resist oppression, and (c) proclaim internally that she is equal. She must understand the cultural contexts of gender, race and ethnicity, sexual minority membership, and the multiple oppressions she experiences in each of these subgroups. She ends segregation within herself through cognitive, affective, and social knowing. With this property comes a strong *us and them* mentality. This is not perceived as negative but as a way to define differences. *Us and them* has negative connotations only when oppression is evident. Lesbian women, with their unique understanding of culture through experience, use this knowledge to transcend cultural oppression. Thus they seek to establish an understanding of *us and them* that increases their knowledge of oppressive contexts. To reveal this knowledge of her equality in different and possibly oppressive contexts, lesbian women must reach out to culture by uniting with it.

The second property of integrating is uniting with culture. This is an external action undertaken to connect with, minister to, and educate others in those contexts that present heterosexual bias through the properties of (a) ministry, (b) tolerance, and (c) healing. The underlying belief behind uniting is not only that lesbian women must integrate to gain greater resource access, but also that it takes many more random acts of kindness on the part of the lesbian community to make an impact on the perceptions of oppressive others. Uniting means to affect change within other persons through a relationship with them. It is reaching out to different others to connect and reconnect. The first category is educating others through ministry. It is leaving the safety of lesbian community to establish relationships within which to educate others via shared similarities and informing them of differences. The second category of uniting is respecting and accepting others. Due to their oppressive experiences, lesbian women are sensitive to the need to be tolerant and non-judgmental in their interactions. Healing is a spiritual process with political ends. The primary catalyst for healing is the ability to love others regardless of one's own

oppression.

The third property of integrating is being in culture. This is both internal and external action that benefits the lesbian community and other cultural contexts, uniting the community and blending into other cultures. The underlying purpose of being in culture is to end segregation through participation. These actions are achieved through the properties of (a) creating equal culture, (b) advocacy, (c) visibility, (d) weaving cultures, and (e) self-reliance. This includes the refusal to remove oneself (unless forced) from any culture due to ascriptions and proscriptions of heterosexism. Once the lesbian woman is diffused within all necessary cultural contexts, she cannot be denied resources.

Being in culture requires the lesbian community to create an equal culture to give its members inclusive and accepting places to be. This goes beyond reconciling and finding a family of choice, and instead entails the creation of an ideal culture that is safe and sustaining. With the creation of an equal culture comes the responsibility to advocate for that community. Advocacy requires taking care of your own; it is the logical next step in creating equal culture. Being in culture requires that lesbian women remain visible as a community and on an individual level. You must be seen so others know you exist. Because lesbian women are necessarily in culture, they weave their multiple identities together, integrating cultures by their participation. Since oppression is unlikely to end anytime soon, integrating lesbian women need a safety net of self-reliance. When integrating into culture, the woman knows she has the support and resources to fall back on if she is excluded. This was especially true for lesbian women of color in the study because their experience of multiple oppressions made them self-reliant.

The fourth property of integrating is effective personality. This is an internal process that integrates one's lesbian identity with culture. The woman learns to use what she is scorned for, her lesbian identity, as a source of strength. This internal acceptance of lesbian identity enables her to be fully in culture. Women in the study said that this was the property of integrating they aspired for; some had acquired it

and some had not. Older women said that at the age of 40 they experienced an epiphany as they simply stopped worrying about other's reactions to their lesbian identity. They became their effective selves without struggle or forcing it. After that, finding comfort in any context was easy: being the best person she could be was enough, and her lesbian identity was the primary source of this stability. With this epiphany came peace and self-actualization. Three properties are embedded in effective personality: (a) changing attitudes about lesbian identity, (b) spirituality, and (c) fortitude.

Attitudes about oneself in culture change at this stage in integrating. The lesbian woman is now out in all contexts without qualification: she is comfortable anywhere. She also saves her energy for herself and her relationships; she does not waste time arguing with others or trying to convince them about her equality. Spirituality, characterized by hope, balance, and belief in serendipity, is a second property. This does not mean women deny cultural oppression or misunderstand reality. They simply shift their focus to spiritual hope and their belief that someday oppression will be alleviated. The third aspect of effective personality is fortitude, expressed as a fearlessness, grace in living, and high standards. The standards the integrating woman sets for herself are to refuse to be hypocritical, feel shame, or overreact about her lesbian identity. Instead she strives to be a good person and positive example. Women feel more control in how they present themselves, so no longer need to placate.

Examples of the integrating stage follow: "You must be seen so others know you exist"; and "See that I am here with you; I am like you but I am also different, and I have manners and respect for others." Visibility is a political act. Also, ending segregation and no longer adhering to heterosexist paradigms were evident: "We are everywhere and you may or may not know it." and "Stop being fed." Additionally, focusing on similarities with others is important in this stage and was mentioned multiple times by participants: "We are not different: It is not about sex, we are not different; They'll see we're like them"; "Respecto;" and "Our relationships are just as meaningful."

Discussion

Analysis of existing literature integrates liberated identity through constant comparative analysis. This weaving of the literature enhances the understanding of liberated identity as well as identifies the contributions of the grounded theory to the knowledge base. In grounded theory research, existing literature is data. Existing literature informs and expands the grounded theory.

Liberated identity offers adaptations and modifications to existing theories to better understand cultural experience. Analysis of authenticity in social work practice and coming out stage theories exemplifies the emphasis liberated identity places on cultural contexts and external forces of oppression. Reconciling reveals the necessity to suspend identity and the power of separation from oppressive cultural contexts. Analysis of existing literature with liberated identity's integrating stage reveals the importance of historical, political, and spiritual movements.

Much positivistic literature is inadequate to understand integral identity because it has ignored the impact of oppression and instead has focused on individual pathology. The stability and empowerment provided by created communities among marginalized groups has also been negated. What informs liberated identity well are existential, community, and political theories that contribute to a contemporary shift in the importance of interactions within culture. Although multiple theories can be applied to liberated identity, the most fitting is Young's Politics of Difference. Young (1990) identifies how *cultural imperialism* (when a group is "invisible at the same time that it is marked out and stereotyped" p.123) has universalized socially appropriate norms and thus assigns inferiority to difference. For a new paradigm of justice to be endorsed, differing cultures cannot assimilate and comply with cultural imperialistic standards of this universality. Politics of Difference reveal the parallel to liberated identity in the (a) reinvention of different others' identity, (b) creation of equal culture, (c) proclamation of difference as good, (d) political action on behalf of created communities, and (e) most importantly, the refusal to replicate oppression in the basic social process undertaken to

liberate identity. This theory represents that action and affective processes liberate identity through the use of what is oppressed (difference) as the source of strength (difference). In turn, creating equal cultures that do not replicate oppression is valued and primary.

Cultural contexts reproduce cultural imperialism by ignoring difference and then regard these as inferior, which is the main barrier to cultural equality in contemporary Western culture (Young, 1990). "Cultural imperialism involves the universalization of a dominant group's experience and culture, and its establishment as the norm." (p.59) Young states this is a violent paradox for diverse groups because they are simultaneously made invisible but also marked as inferior and abject. The dominant and powerful never need acknowledge their group status since it is assumed to be universal and standard.

Cultural imperialism rests on the standard that body and mind are separate; body is the antithesis to the mind, or reason, which is symbolized as white, objective, bourgeoisie, and male (Young, 1990). This "scaling of bodies" (Young, p.124) reduces pluralistic attributes to the concepts of unity and standardization. This measuring of physical characteristics against an approved norm allots differences as deviant, inferior, and deficient of reason. Observation is then the only means to assess difference, and this reliance on visual assessment exaggerates the exclusiveness of reason versus body. Persons associated with sexual behaviors, i.e. lesbian women, are "easy to identify because of the physical symptoms of ugliness and degeneracy they exhibit" (Young, p.128). For example, under cultural imperialistic standards, women are considered affective, associated with the body and sexuality; they are the opposite to the assumed norm of the white, bourgeoisie male. Measuring (scaling) bodies unconsciously defines plurality and difference as ugly, physical, and identifiable (Young).

Paradigms of liberation are critical guides in the Politics of Difference, as well as in liberated identity. When applying equality in universal standards, as contemporary discursive consciousness purports, it implies that group difference is accidental and coincidental (Young, 1990). Group difference

cannot be "transcended" (p.157), but rather should be defined as a *social process* that can privilege and oppress. Accidental implies that society has no control over the distribution of justice. Group differences are a reality and as such a part of contemporary culture. Oppression of group difference is also a reality and cannot be considered accidental.

Emancipation implies that assimilation is not desirable because group difference may be misplaced and in turn support the notions of cultural imperialism, according to Young (1990). Diverse cultures would lose their integral identity if they relinquished their traditions, values, and specific cultural existence; diverse cultures would not give up these associations even if it meant they were no longer oppressed (Young). Emancipation in a Politics of Difference requires transcending oppression by proclaiming difference, making it visible, and redefining it as good; assimilation is not an element of this process.

Because equality is consciously based on universality and social rules, Young (1990) claims that if different groups were to affirm and proclaim difference, this may again justify their oppression. Without the knowledge that oppression operates even when social rules assert equality, pluralism and group difference continue to be invisible but yet marked out as inferior. Reclaiming difference requires understanding of how one is oppressed. Young states that affinity, group difference, and public discourse in pluralistic society are requirements of a Politics of Difference in which persons are not deemed inferior, ugly, or abject.

Liberated identity transforms cultural imperialism into a catalyst to increase visibility of otherness and then to educate that this is beneficial to society. What is used to oppress is used to liberate. Liberated identity and Young's *Politics of Difference* complement each other and expand this grounded theory in the analysis of different as *good* and the critical nature of redefining what *good* is.

Application and Implications

This research led to the discovery of a basic social process of liberated identity that is used by lesbian women to transcend oppression in cultural contexts. From this model,

the impact of culture on marginalized groups is evident and the necessity of transcending oppression is a link to maintain integral identity. The paradox of liberated identity is that the source of unpredictable oppression is also the source of strength. Lesbian experience is heavily influenced by cultural factors; culture and individual are inseparable. Cultural barriers and social definitions of difference as being inferior are used to redefine and proclaim difference, increase visibility, and connect with oppressive contexts. The creation of equal culture is also seen in the integrating stage of being in culture property through creation of community.

Liberated identity has implications not simply as a basic social process but also in the political, spiritual, and relational implications seen in the study. Political action implications for lesbian women include culture and community, naming oppression, and economic factors. Oppression is a social process that is maintained by political forces and agendas; therefore, the oppressed must find political routes, which includes economic power, to empower self and community. Each basic social process stage of liberated identity contains politically-laden behaviors. Authenticating is an overt action to challenge heterosexist assumptions. Reconciling involves forced or chosen segregation from oppressive cultural contexts. Integrating is the primary political stage of liberated identity. With a focus on external factors, a shift from blaming individuals to placing responsibility in the proper places has begun.

Liberated identity contains spiritual themes throughout the social process, specifically in the reconciling and integrating stages. The reconciling stage involves redefinition of spirituality. Integrating in liberated identity exerts spiritually-laden attempts to unite with culture and to define an effective personality through equanimity, hope and balance. A major implication of liberated identity is expanding our understanding of how spiritual practices resist political agendas originating in religiously-exclusive doctrines. This also implies a non-dichotomous way of thinking about spirituality. Fusion of different spiritual practices, leaving institutionalized religion, and redefining spirituality can enhance faith to transcend oppression and liberate identity.

Lesbian women are oppressed *because of their relationships with other women*. Thus the implications for relational processes are numerous. Transcending oppression and liberated identity are based on relationship as well. Relationship with self is more evident in spiritual processes of reconciling and integrating. Further, relationship with others is evident in all three stages of the basic social process. Authenticating is sometimes done to establish a relationship with others, but mostly to challenge heterosexist bias. Relationship with others in reconciling involves creating a family of choice and connection, disconnection, and sometimes reconnection. Integrating involves a deliberate effort to establish relationship with culture through uniting with and being in culture. In addition, strengths-based approaches must be taken to understand how marginalized groups use relationship and outreach to liberate identity.

It is essential that practitioners integrate external forces of oppression instead of solely focusing on internal problems when working with lesbian women. While looking within to transcend culture through a liberated identity may be essential for a lesbian client, naming the oppressive forces in culture is essential as well. Professionals are ethically required to consider cultural forces that hinder quality of life for marginalized populations. Focusing only on the individual has contributed to pathologizing and depoliticizing practice theories of lesbian development. Using liberated identity as a model in professional and academic settings can assist not only in ideological shifts to what is personal is political, but also in addressing needs of lesbian women to increase strengths-based approaches to authenticating, reconciling, and integrating lesbian identity within oppressive cultural contexts.

Liberated identity has implications not simply as a basic social process but also in the political, spiritual, and relational implications seen in the study. In sum, the application of the liberated identity model reveals the importance of conceptualization as research method, a paradigm shift from focus on individual pathology to the impact of oppressive culture, and using participant's strengths to guide formulation and expansion of theory.

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