

**Black lesbian identities, power and violence**  
**in public and private spaces**

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## Abstract

This study examined black South African lesbian women's lived experiences of power and violence through a reading of the lesbian body as a site through which social identities and power are produced, maintained, contested and reframed. The analytic gaze was cast *inward* on intimate relationships as well as *outward* on the social and community contexts. Forty black lesbian women who were or had been in intimate same-sex relationships participated in five focus group discussions and 22 depth interviews. Discourse analysis, edified by a feminist poststructuralist theoretical paradigm that advanced an intersectional analytical approach, revealed that participants assumed multiple and ambiguous gendered subject positions, and vacillated between positions of power and powerlessness in various contexts. The enactment of gendered and sexualised violence on the lesbian body within intimate lesbian relationships, as well as in public and social spaces that also marked politicised and racialised spaces, reflected tensions and contradictions that may be situated within the historical juxta-positioning of colonialism and democracy. While black lesbian women generally exercised high levels of self-surveillance in order to avoid culturally and socially endorsed raced and gendered practices that served to regulate and punish black lesbian sexuality; the lesbian body represented a powerful site of resistance in which gendered identities and sexualities were reconceptualised and renegotiated in more fluid ways within the current historical period in South Africa. Within this reframing, black lesbian identity represented and embodied a personal and a political statement of identity and resilience which troubled and contested citizenship in democratic South Africa. This study has foregrounded the importance of considering the interconnectedness of the public and private domains, and the intersections of history and contexts in the enactment and experience of power and violence in the lives of black lesbian women. It has important implications for research, programme design and policy.

## Declaration

I declare that this dissertation is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy to the Department of Psychology at the University of Cape Town, Cape Town. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in this or any other University.

Signature: 

Signed by candidate
---------------------

 Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Dedication

For Nirvana and Vedahl –

*A way that can be walked*

*Is not The Way*

*A name that can be named*

*Is not The Name*

Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*

## **Acknowledgements**

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## List of isiZulu and Colloquial Words and Phrases used by Participants

ama-	isiZulu prefix
ay	equivalent to a sigh / complain
bru	A slang word derived from the Afrikaans ‘broer’, meaning brother; often used to signify a sense of comradeship.
cos	because
eish	form of exclamation
gonna	going to
ja	yes (Afrikaans)
mena	me (isiZulu)
ne	Ok
stabane	isiZulu word that literally translates to mean intersex but is used in a derogatory manner to refer to women who are considered to be like men
uti	you know (isiZulu)
wanna	want to
wena	you (isiZulu)
what not, what not	Etcetera

## Chapter One: Lesbian Sexuality and Violence in South Africa

This study explored violence enacted upon the black<sup>1</sup> lesbian<sup>2</sup> body in South Africa through a feminist-intersectional analysis of the subjective experiences of identity, power and violence in the public and private lives of black lesbian women. By deploying a feminist lens to focus *outward* on the public domain and *inward* on the private sphere, this study sets out to interrogate the interconnectedness between violence in the public and the private domains in the lives of black lesbian women in South Africa. The study is situated at a particular point in the history of South Africa and thus asks questions around how history shapes how black lesbian sexuality and how violence is enacted and experienced.

I am mindful that black lesbian women constitute a marginalised group in South Africa and across the world, and that a focus on violence, especially violence in the private lives of black lesbian women, might reinforce such marginalisation. However, my intention in producing this body of knowledge, is to speak a ‘truth’ that would disrupt the silence and

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<sup>1</sup> *Black* is inclusive of persons currently classified by Statistics South Africa as being ‘black African’, ‘Asian’/ ‘Indian’ and ‘coloured’. Under the Population registration Act (Act No 30 of 1950) which formed part of Apartheid law, South African citizens were classified into one of four racial groups. The racial groups were ‘white’ ‘native’ or ‘black’, ‘Indian’ and ‘coloured’, with the latter two categories having consisted of further subcategories such as ‘other Asian’ and ‘other coloured’ respectively. The Act worked in tandem with other key Apartheid laws to discriminate against citizens classified as African, coloured or Indian through the varied control of access to political, legal and social rights, resources, opportunities and geographical locations. Following the release of Nelson Mandela in February 1990 and as part of the negotiations that preceded the first democratic elections in April 1994, the Act was repealed on 28 June 1991. However, the categories continue to be employed for statistical purposes relating to population groups, transformation and redress. Importantly though, the distinction between black and white racial groups also signifies a political positioning. Given the social and historical construction of race and its material effects which have become so entrenched in the lives of South African citizens, the distinction between ‘black’ and ‘white’ identities also functions politically to position those who identify as black as a distinct identity from white and ‘non-white’ identities. This positioning is aligned to the philosophy of Black Consciousness as advanced by Stephen Biko (1978/2004) and represents a conscious subversion to white colonial oppression.

<sup>2</sup> The identity label lesbian is used in this study to refer to women in same-sex intimate relationships. I have elected to use this label as the majority of women who participated in the current study self-identified as ‘lesbian’ in constructing their identities. It is noted that the label lesbian is a contested one as it does not constitute a singular construct but is instead further qualified by several sub-categories such as soft butch, stud, tomboy, lipstick femme and hard femme, each with its own identity markers and behavioural descriptors. Current debates challenge the dominant assumption that lesbian constitutes the primary identity for women in same-sex relationships (Swarr & Nagar, 2003). These debates are discussed in Chapter Three.

stigma around *violence* and *black lesbian women* as subjects. The ways in which violence that is perpetrated in the public and private domains are kept separate in public and academic discourse represents a material effect of dominant heteronormative post-colonial approaches to violence in South African society, and is embedded within the broader context of societal violence and forms of institutional and social homophobia that encourage silence. Silence thus functions to legitimise the continuation of violence against and between black lesbian women. This study seeks to expose the linkages between violence in the public and private domains in the lives of black lesbian women and violence in post-apartheid, post-colonial democratic South Africa through the voicing of silenced experiences. This study thus hopes to make a contribution to the dismantling of artificial barriers and categories that keep the discourses and practices of particular

The historical, social, cultural and political contexts in South Africa structure sexuality and gender in particular ways. These contexts shape how we have come to think about and respond to black lesbian sexuality in post-colonial democratic South Africa. In engaging with the subjective experiences of power and violence in the public and private spheres, this study hopes to disrupt the kind of *black lesbian* subject that has been produced in post-colonial discourses and practices in South Africa. By centring the focus on the lived experiences of black lesbian women themselves, this study hopes to expose the social and historical impact on the lives of black lesbian women, while also disrupting post-colonial framings of black lesbian women as disempowered victims. The South African context is mapped in the sections that follow.

### **1.1 Why Focus on Black Lesbian Women in South Africa?**

The current corpus of South Africa LGBTQ scholarship, including psychological scholarship, focuses primarily on white, middle-class gay men (Reid & Dirsuweit, 2002; Nel,



2009) and on homophobic violence perpetrated *against* black lesbian women and black gay men. The focus on homophobic violence may be justified within the broader contexts of violence and LGBTQ activism in South Africa. As Morgan and Reid (2003) point out, gay and lesbian history in South Africa has not unfolded along the lines of identity politics as was the case in North America and Western Europe, but rather as part of the broader agenda for liberation. A key feature of the campaigns which led to the eventual dismantling of the apartheid system and the subsequent democratisation of South Africa, was the strong lobbying by marginalised groups, including sexual minority groups, around human rights issues such as affordable access to antiretroviral therapies and medical treatment for HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) and AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome) related diseases, especially for persons from lower socio-economic groups (Achmat, Raizenberg & Holmes, 2003). It can be argued that redressing issues pertaining to lesbian women and sexuality were generally considered less urgent in comparison to other post-apartheid social and political imbalances. The current scholarship on homophobic violence is important and necessary in foregrounding LGBTQ issues as part of the political and social agenda around redress and transformation in a society that has a long and painful history of political violence, gender inequities and material disparities. I argue, however, that one of the paradoxical consequences of the politicised post-apartheid South African gaze, through its focus on ‘macro’ issues has been the obscuring of how history shapes the enactment and experience of violence in the lives of black lesbian women. Thus, despite the human rights discourse that permeates the post-apartheid South Africa landscape, *black lesbian women* continue to be marginalised and made invisible.

Current scholarship on homophobic violence perpetrated against black lesbian women makes an important contribution to documenting lesbian experiences of violence at a societal level. Such scholarship firstly deepens our understanding of the negative impact of

homophobic, heterosexist and patriarchal societies on black lesbian sexuality, citizenship and well-being. Secondly, it provides a tangible platform from which to advocate for social justice and change. Indeed, acts of violence enacted upon the lesbian body by communities and society at large featured prominently in the women's talk in the current study and is analysed further in the dissertation. However, equally important is the need to document experiences of violence *within* lesbian relationships, especially if we are to understand the nuances and complexities of violence that impact black lesbian women, engage in advocacy and provide affirming forms of support that respond to the challenges faced by lesbian women in a post-colonial, post-apartheid context. While some local studies have explored the subjective experiences of lesbian women that have accorded some attention to power in relation to gendered roles, sexuality and sex (Potgieter, 1997, 2003; Smuts, 2009, 2011; Wells, Kruger, & Judge, 2012;) and to violence against lesbian women (Judge, 2015, 2018; Pakade, 2011; van Dyk, 2011), to my knowledge there is currently no study that explores the intersections and subjective experiences of power and violence in the public and private lives of black lesbian women in South Africa.

Lesbian women are also marginalised within public discourse and policy implementation. For example, a current challenge is the exclusion of lesbian women in preventative healthcare programmes. Recent policy development in South Africa has seen the deprioritisation of lesbian women' and bisexual women's sexual health and sexual violence interventions<sup>3</sup> (Daly, Spicer, & Willan, 2016). Daly, et al. (2016) argue that the myth that women who have sex with women (WSW) are not at risk for HIV infections underlie the recent shift in the discourse around health issues for lesbian and bisexual women. Yet, research indicates that WSW and women in same-sex relationships in South Africa and in

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<sup>3</sup> This is in contrast to the increasing number of programmes and interventions that target men who have sex with men (MSM) and men in same sex relationships. This provides yet another example of how women are marginalised within a patriarchal society.

other Southern African countries face sexual health risks both within same-sex relationships and through heterosexual encounters and that "...lesbian and bisexual women experience greater vulnerability to sexual ill-health" (Daly, et al., 2016, p. 185) due to homophobic sexual violence. A review by Shai and Sikweyiya (2015) of seven local programmes<sup>4</sup> designed to prevent and address sexual and IPV (SIPV) illustrates the deprioritisation of lesbian women's health issues. An examination of the interventions and target groups suggested that the programmes were primarily designed within heterosexual paradigms that focused on heterosexual families, mothers and their children, and the promotion of sexual health, psychological well-being and socio-economic capital through the reduction of the risk of HIV infections and risk behaviours within heterosexual relationships and families. In addition many of the programmes that were reviewed by Shai and Sikweyiya (2015) focused on adolescent and young adult populations that were likely to include persons who identify as LGBTQ. Although LGBTQ scholarship points to the increased stressors faced by adolescents who identify as LGBTQ (Ford, 2003; Tharinger & Wells, 2000; Thompson & Johnson, 2003) including IPV (Freedner, Freed, Yang, & Austin, 2002; Halpern, Young, Waller, Martin, & Kupper, 2004), intervention aims did not make any explicit mention of same-sex relationships or violence experienced by lesbian women, either by partners or members of the heterosexual community.

The marginalisation of the experiences of black lesbian women in South Africa is further evidenced in the reliance on same-sex scholarship that primarily originates from the global North. Notwithstanding its contributions, such scholarship is limited in its applicability to the South African context due to its history of racial segregation, political strife and varied socio-economic strata. Swarr and Nagar (2003) argue that analyses that do not consider the

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<sup>4</sup> The programmes were *Thula Sana*, *The Sinovuyo Caring Families Programmes*, *Stepping Stones*, *PREPARE*, *Skhokho Supporting Success*, *Stepping Stones and Creating Futures* and *IMAGE*. *Stepping Stones* and *Stepping Stones and Creating Futures* are two separate programmes.

intersecting social, political and economic (including access to material resources) matrix in lesbian identity formation are essentially incomplete. Current gay and lesbian scholarship points to the added complexities and challenges in same-sex relationships due to the fundamentally homophobic and heterosexist nature of the societies in which they are enacted (Miller, Bobner & Zarski, 2000) as well as the existence of multiple sites of oppression that arise from the complex intersections of social constructs such as race, class, and gender (Cole, 2009; Collins, 2000, 2004; Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 1981, 1984, 1992; Lorde, 2003; Yuval-Davis, 2006a). This is particularly significant in the South African context where historically, social constructs such as race and gender were used to justify oppressive practices and power differentials within the apartheid system. Within the South African context, black and white lesbian women are differently constructed and positioned.<sup>5</sup> Black lesbian women from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, as a collective, may be argued to constitute the most vulnerable of the LGBTQ population due to their marginalised status in terms of gender, race and sexual orientation (Reid & Dirsuweit, 2002, Sanger, 2010). During the apartheid era, the discourse of ‘blackness’ (and marginalised groups) was often entangled with the discourse of violence. Unintentionally, though significantly, this study is about *black* lesbian subjectivity. What this reveals is how *black* and *blackness* continues to be the ‘unmarked normal’ in relation to violence while white and whiteness continues to be the unmarked normal for that which is not violent (F. Boonzaier, personal communication, May 2018). At this stage, it is cogent to indicate that gendered subjectivities of black lesbian women are of particular significance in subverting dominant gendered and racialised constructions in South Africa.

In light of the above motivation, this qualitative study, framed within an intersectional-poststructuralist feminist paradigm, makes an important and timely

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<sup>5</sup> The different positioning of black and white lesbian women is explored further in the dissertation.

contribution to address the gap in South African LGBTQ and psychological scholarship. This study specifically explores the intersections of identity, power and violence among black lesbian women in South Africa. Intimate relationships do not exist in isolation from their social contexts, but are instead, products *and* agents in the various intersecting contexts. This study, therefore, sought to explore the dynamics and micro forms of power in both the public and private domains in black South African lesbian's lives, and make visible the nuances, complexities and unique intersections in such relationships and contexts. As a qualitative feminist study, it has privileged the subjective experiences of lesbian's themselves and has created the discursive space to disrupt and deconstruct dominant heteronormative conceptualisations and meanings around black women, same-sex sexuality and violence.

In this section, I have provided a motivation for why psychological research into the intersections of black lesbian identities, power and violence is warranted and represents a worthy contribution to local and international LGBTQ scholarship, and to the South African human rights and transformation imperative. I extend this argument in the exposition that follows which sketches the salient structural conditions and systemic contradictions in the South African context which intersect with lesbian sexuality; including an examination of how South African (critical) psychology and feminism, as agents of power and change, have engaged with same-sex sexuality. I conclude the chapter with an outline of the research questions and an overview of the dissertation.

## **1.2 Contextualising Lesbian Sexuality in South Africa**

The enactment of violence in the lives of black lesbian women cannot be divorced from the broader contexts of gender-based violence and sexuality within South Africa. The crime statistics report published by the South African Police Services (SAPS) for the period 1 April 2016 – 31 March 2017 indicates an overall decrease of 2.93% in the broad category 'Contact Crimes' (crimes against the person), with the rate of murder reported to have

increased by 1.84% (Africa Check, 2017; SAPS, 2017). Sexual offences, which are listed under the broad category ‘Contact Crimes’, is reported to have decreased by 4.31% (Africa Check, 2017; SAPS, 2017). Rape is recorded under the ‘Sexual Offences’ category as detailed in the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act 32 of 2007. The number of rape cases recorded by the SAPS for the 2016/2017 period was 39 828 nationally (Africa Check, 2017; SAPS, 2017). This means that the annual rape rate for this reporting period based on the Statistics South Africa’s mid-year population count of 56 21 900 citizens is estimated to be 71.3 rapes reported per 100,000 people in the country (Africa Check, 2017; Statistics South Africa, 2017).

The decreased rate from 41,503 in 2015/16 reporting period does not hide the fact that the rape rate in South Africa remains high in comparison to global statistics. For instance, the rape rate in the United States (US) in 2016 was reported at 40.4 per 100,000 US citizens based on the revised<sup>6</sup> definition and 29.6 per 100,000 US citizens based on the legacy definition (United States Department of Justice – Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI], 2017). The decrease in the overall sexual offences rate in South Africa may need to be interpreted with caution, as it may point to under-reporting ascribed to factors such as stigma, feelings of shame and guilt, secondary trauma and secondary victimisation. Furthermore, under-reporting is likely to be more prevalent among marginalised and stigmatised groups (Herek, Gillis & Cogan, 1999). A survey study by Wells and Polders (2004) of the issues impacting LGBT persons in the Gauteng province, South Africa, found that under-reporting of crimes was consistent across a sample of 487 self-identified black and white LGB

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<sup>6</sup> In 2011, the FBI’s Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Program’s definition of rape was revised, after being used for a period of 80 years (legacy definition). The revised definition is inclusive of all victims and recognises that physical force may not necessarily be employed. The revised definition now reads as “[p]enetration, no matter how slight, of the vagina or anus with any body part or object, or oral penetration by a sex organ of another person, without the consent of the victim.” (<https://www.fbi.gov/services/cjis/cjis-link/ucr-program-changes-definition-of-rape>)

participants. Thirty four percent of black participants and 25% of white participants reported that they felt embarrassed to report an incident due to their sexual orientation. This pointed to the experiences of homophobic victimisation and secondary trauma. In addition, 41% of black participants and 22% of white participants reported that they did not want to disclose their sexual orientation to the police, suggesting the existence of higher levels of stigma among black communities. Alarmingly, 50% of black participants and 37% of white participants reported that a friend had had poor experiences with the police, while 45% black and 52% white participants reported having had direct poor experience with the police. These rates are consistent with international trends (Guadalupe-Diaz & Yglesias, 2013; Herek, et al., 1999; Merlis & Linville, 2006; Renzetti, 1992; Simpson & Helfrich, 2005). I now examine how crime relates specifically to black lesbian women in South Africa.

**1.2.1 Sexual violence, ‘corrective’ rape and hate crimes in South Africa.** Against the historical backdrop of political and racial violence, as well as current violent crimes against the person; violence against women continues to be a dominant feature of post-apartheid South Africa (Vetten, 2005). Moffett (2006) argues that:

...contemporary sexual violence in South Africa is fuelled by justificatory narratives that are rooted in apartheid practices that legitimated violence by the dominant group against the disempowered, not only in overtly political arenas, but in social, informal and domestic spaces. ... Thus, in post-apartheid, democratic South Africa, sexual violence has become a socially endorsed punitive project for maintaining patriarchal order (p. 129).

South Africa’s history of political and gender based violence has in effect normalised other forms of violence such as homophobic violence, wherein cultural and social mechanisms function to maintain and legitimise sexual violence as a way of promoting the

continuation of a heteropatriarchal order. Homophobic violence reflects an intolerance embedded in race, gender and culture. The brutal killings of black lesbian women and the alarming practice of what is termed '*corrective rape*' in which black lesbian women or gender non-conforming women are raped by heterosexual men in the belief that it will 'correct' or 'cure' them and bring about a change to heterosexuality, may be submitted as evidence to support Moffett's (2006) argument. The discourse of *corrective rape* exposes dominant heteronormative ideas of what is considered morally 'right' or 'correct' (sexual) behaviours. The rape of black lesbian women functions to discipline women for their gender and sexual nonconformity (Morrissey, 2013) and suggests that certain forms of rape are justified (Tamale, 2014). The discourse of 'corrective rape' reveals cultural constructions of same-sex sexuality as a pathology that needs to be cured (Hames, 2011).

The ways in which the media report incidents of rape and murder of black lesbian women serve to sensationalise same-sex sexuality and crimes against black lesbian women (Hames, 2011; Nel & Judge, 2008; Sanger, 2010) and discursively construct black lesbian women as powerless (Morrissey, 2013). Furthermore, the media focus on crimes against black women reinforces the discursive association of *blackness* and *violence* and positions black lesbian women as disempowered, powerless victims. Boonzaier and Zway (2015) argue that the discourse of 'risk' presents black lesbian women as "perpetual victims" (p.8) who lack agency. Yet, as Boonzaier and Zway's (2015) photovoice study with 14 isiXhosa women<sup>7</sup> from a township in the Western Cape province of South Africa showed, young lesbian women also deploy narratives of resistance to dominant representations of lesbian women as powerless. Inconsistent reporting that do not engage with social norms and the various intersections in violence against lesbian women serve to perpetuate and reinforce

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<sup>7</sup> Twelve women identified as *butch lesbian* and two women identified as bisexual (Boonzaier & Zway, 2015).



normative ideas around gender and sexuality (Sanger, 2010). This, coupled with the continued use of the term *corrective rape*, whether in communities, media reports and scholarly articles, serves to legitimise the practice (Hames, 2011).

The *Prevention and Combatting of Hate Crimes and Hate Speech Bill* came into effect on the 28 March 2018 in South Africa (Government Gazette No. 41543 of 29 March 2018). This landmark legislation recognises the rape of lesbian women as a hate crime and offers legal recourse that acknowledges and addresses the *bias* motive, in this case sexual orientation, that underlies such crime. Breen and Nel (2011) define a hate crime to be “an act which constitutes a criminal offence that is motivated in part or whole by bias or hate” (p. 34). The two key elements of a hate crime is that the incident would constitute a criminal offence under other existing laws and secondly, the victim is selected on the basis of “...some form of specific bias” (Breen & Nel, 2011, p. 34). One of the fundamental consequences of a hate crime is that it extends beyond the victim to the larger group to which the individual belongs or is perceived to belong to (Breen & Nel, 2011; Herek et al., 1999; Lannert, 2015).

A study by Herek et al. (1999) was one of the first empirical studies to compare levels of psychological distress among victims of hate crimes based on the victim’s sexual orientation to victims of other kinds of crime, and to non-victims. A total of 2 259 LGB self-identified persons from the greater Sacramento, California area, completed a self-administered questionnaire. The results indicated that lesbian and gay participants who had experienced a bias crime in the previous five years scored significantly higher than other participants on four of the five symptomatic measures, namely: depressive, traumatic stress, anxiety and anger. Further analyses revealed that lesbian and gay “hate-crime survivors displayed significantly less belief in the benevolence of people, more fear of crime, greater perceived vulnerability, lower self-mastery, and more attributions to sexual prejudice than did non-bias crime victims, victims of earlier crime, and non-victims” (p. 949).

Victims of hate crimes present with a higher risk for mental disorders and psychological distress (Breen & Nel, 2011; Herek et al., 1999; Herek, 2009, Lannert, 2015). A local study that was the first large scale study in South Africa to include white and black men and women from resourced and under-resourced areas in its sample, explored factors affecting vulnerability to depression among 385 self-identified gay men and lesbian women in the Gauteng metropolitan (Polders, Nel, Kruger, & Wells, 2008). Analyses revealed that self-regard, alienation and hate speech were significant predictors of vulnerability to depression (Polders, et al., 2008). An earlier report by Wells and Polders (2006) indicated a high mistrust of the police in light of the prevalence of hate crimes against sexual minority groups. Given the far-reaching consequences of hate crimes, the Bill will hopefully be more than just a ‘paper promise’ and its implementation will enjoy greater success than other progressive legislation that seeks to protect LGBTQ persons. Much of its success will depend on community perceptions and understanding as well as institutional and constitutional protection. The following section examines the influence of cultural and contextual factors on violence and crime perpetrated against lesbian women.

**1.2.2 Lesbian sexuality as ‘un-African’.** While race and class formed the basis for ‘othering’ during the Apartheid era (Moffett, 2006), gender and sexual orientation have become the basis for ‘othering’ in the post-apartheid context despite the legislative advancements in the areas of gender and sexuality. A culture of heterosexist and homophobic attitudes and behaviours towards black lesbian women in particular may have fuelled this divide between progressive legislation and continued discriminatory practices. Heterosexism encompasses forms of institutionalised oppression of non-heterosexual people based on societal ideologies that position heterosexuality as superior to homosexuality (Herek, 2000) and the assumed naturalness of heterosexuality (Victor, Nel, Lynch, & Mbatha, 2014). Herek

(2000, 2004) argues that there is a need to reframe these terms to include the cultural and social psychological basis for discriminatory and prejudicial beliefs and behaviours. Herek (2000) argues that the term *homophobia*, through its association with the historical conceptualisation of homosexuality as pathology; is also implicitly associated with individual psychopathology and irrational fear. The latter association does not account for the historical and social contexts that shape homophobic attitudes and behaviours. Herek (2000) proposed that the term *sexual prejudice* conveys a better conceptual understanding of the social psychological processes that underlie prejudice generally. Sexual prejudice therefore refers to the negative attitudes and behaviours towards individuals and communities based on sexual orientation, whether real or perceived.

In similar vein, Herek (2009) uses the term *sexual stigma* to refer to “society’s negative regard for any non-heterosexual behaviour, identity, relationship or community” (p. 57); a “cultural belief system” (p.58) which finds expression through society’s institutions. Patriarchy, a system of gender inequality that privileges men over women through its various institutions, is deeply rooted in South African culture (Msibi, 2009) and in African culture generally (Brown, 2012) may be argued to illustrate such a cultural belief system. Patriarchal systems construct masculinity as powerful (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) and masculine power is often enacted and maintained through violence in patriarchal societies (Gqola, 2007; Msibi, 2009; Reid & Dirisuweit, 2002). Black lesbian women, especially those who present in more explicitly gender non-conforming ways, appear to threaten masculine identity within African culture and spaces (Muholi, 2004). As Muholi (2004) explains, their “...black sexual agency and autonomy is so threatening to how this new nation imagines itself” (p. 117).

This perceived threat is used to justify the rape of black lesbian women (Brown, 2012) on claims that same-sex sexuality is ‘un-African’, an idea advanced by some African leaders as well (Cock, 2003; Croucher, 2002). A national survey ( $N = 2163$ ) of public

attitudes to gay, lesbian and AIDS issues in South Africa, conducted by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) reported that 41% of Africans considered homosexuality to be un-African (Reid & Dirisuweit, 2002). Interestingly, socio-economic and religious reasons accounted for the differences between the 'pro' and 'anti' groups (Reid & Dirisuweit, 2002), which pointed to the influential power of cultural representations of sexuality. There are essentially two points to the argument that homosexuality is un-African. The first is that same-sex relationships are not part of traditional African culture and values and the second is that same-sex relationships are a Western colonial import (Croucher, 2002; Morgan & Reid, 2003). Yet, several accounts of the existence of same-sex relationships across many African cultures have been described (Dlamini, 2006; Nkabinde & Morgan, 2006) which were considered to be normative and were accepted within the contexts in which they unfolded. The erotic friendships between Basotho women (Dlamini, 2006) and the practice of *unyankwabe* in which women *sangomas* (traditional African healers) who receive a calling from a male ancestor are commanded to take an ancestral wife (Nkabinde & Morgan, 2006) are examples. These same-sex relationships were situated within the contexts of supportive, friendship circles and cultural ancestry respectively, and are therefore not viewed as cultural transgressions; neither was the western label of 'homosexuality' applied.

Morgan and Reid (2003), in agreement with Gevisser and Cameron (1995), argue that the idea of homosexuality as un-African reflects two distinct ways of approaching homosexuality. In the traditional African approach, same-sex relationships are not explicitly acknowledged but are instead accommodated within the private and cultural domains. On the other hand, the western approach centres on the creation of a public gay identity. The tension created by the divergence in traditional and modern approaches influence perceptions of 'belonging' in communities and cultures, and has a direct bearing on citizenship in post-apartheid South Africa (van Zyl, 2011). Black lesbian's subjective experiences are not only

influenced by such tensions but are also multiple, fluid and changing in spaces that are considered traditional and African and those that are considered modern and western.

Williams (2008) argues that those who view gay and lesbian identities as being un-African also view the constitutional protection afforded to gays and lesbian women as being imposed by government. This non-acceptance of diverse sexual orientations forms the basis for hate crimes against gays and lesbian women and represents a specific paradoxical positioning of the progressive legislation with the intolerance and sanctioning of violence against those who are 'othered' (Collins, 2004). This is eloquently articulated by Zanele Muholi (2004):

The lived realities and experiences of lesbian-identified women, such as those living in and around urban townships, are still overwhelmingly dominated by a set of intersecting raced, classed and heterogendered politics that blur the lines between our apartheid past and our new constitutional democracy. (p. 117)

Thus, constitutional reform intersects with sexuality and gender in post-apartheid South Africa in ways that have created points of tension within cultural contexts that do not view same-sex sexuality as legitimate. These constitutional-community-cultural tensions have several effects on the lived experiences of lesbian women and are explored below.

**1.2.3 Constitutional reform, sexuality and gender.** The system of democracy underpinned by the pioneering egalitarianism of the South African Constitution, the first in the world to explicitly recognise diverse sexualities and sexual orientations, has served as a catalyst for dramatic transformation in South Africa. Several pieces of progressive legislation have been passed that recognise the rights of LGBTQ individuals. These include the Civil Union Act of 2006, the Children's Act of 2005 which allows the adoption of children

irrespective of the sexual orientation of partners, the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act of 2000, the Domestic Violence Act of 1998 (discussed in more detail in this chapter), the Rental Housing Act of 1999, the Employment Equity Act of 1998, the Medical Schemes Act of 1998, and the Labour Relations Act of 1995.

Two core shifts that are pertinent to this research inquiry have been in the areas of sex and sexuality, and of gender. Posel talks about the “politicisation of sexuality” (2004, p.54) and the “politicization of sexual violence” (2005b, p. 241) to describe the ways in which sex and sexuality, framed within the discourse of citizen rights and state responsibilities and juxtaposed with the challenges of HIV/AIDS and sexual violence, has been thrust into the public domain in post-apartheid South Africa. To fully appreciate the extent of transformation in the area of sex and sexuality, one has to consider the “heavy censorship and repressive policing” (Posel, 2004, p. 53) under apartheid law which situated sex and sexuality exclusively as a matter for the private, domestic sphere, prohibited inter-racial sexual relationships, criminalised homosexuality and promoted the notion of uncontrolled black hyper-sexuality juxtaposed with that of a vulnerable white minority sexuality (Posel, 2004, 2005b).

Sex and sexuality, like gender equality, is therefore about human rights. Seidman (1999) maintains that South Africa’s new democracy has adopted an explicitly gendered stance with respect to citizenship. Despite this focus on gendered citizenship, lesbian women are denied access to full citizenship through the continuing forms of institutional homophobia/sexual stigma/sexual prejudice, societal discrimination and hate crimes. Women’s empowered status is perceived as a threat (Muholi 2004; Reid & Dirsuweit, 2002). While legislative recognition of diverse sexual orientations has created greater visibility of the lesbian population, it has simultaneously increased their vulnerability to discrimination, homophobic acts and hate crimes, especially in the absence of adequate and effective legal

and social support to deal with such occurrences. Lubbe (2008) argues that while lesbian-headed households are now more visible as a result of constitutional reform, they also create societal unease as they disrupt dominant perceptions around gender, sexuality and family. This tension impacts the ways in which lesbian-headed families and their children negotiate their interactions in a largely heteropatriarchal society, in which forms of social support play a critical role in negotiating the challenges experienced by lesbian-headed families (Fredriksen-Goldsen, & Erera, 2003; Glass & Few-Demo, 2013). It is evident that the paradoxes contained in the social and political spheres have tangible implications for the everyday lived experiences of lesbian women. Perhaps no area other than that of violence illustrates so compellingly, the underlying paradoxes and interfacing of visibility/invisibility, of power/powerlessness and of the personal/political spheres that impact the lives of black South African lesbian women.

**1.2.3.1 The Domestic Violence Act (DVA).** The Domestic Violence Act (DVA) (118 of 1998) replaced the Prevention of Family Violence Act (PFVA) (no 133 of 1993) and is considered a more inclusive piece of legislation due to its broad definition of violence. The DVA makes an explicit statement of protection for victims of violence within intimate relationships, including those in same-sex relationships. The comprehensive listing of types and contexts of violence includes both overt and more subtle forms of violence:

...physical abuse; sexual abuse; emotional, verbal and psychological abuse; economic abuse; intimidation; harassment; stalking; damage to property; entry into the complainant's residence without consent, where the parties do not share the same residence; or any other controlling or abusive behaviour towards a complainant where such conduct harms, or may cause imminent harm to, the safety, health or wellbeing of the complainant. (Government Gazette, 1998, p. 4)

‘Violence’ is understood to include not just physical forms of abuse, but also violence of a verbal, emotional and psychological nature. Although psychological abuse may be deliberate, all types of abuse have psychological effects. Psychological abuse is thus reported most often. This may be of particular significance for lesbian relationships where power may find expression in less explicit forms of violence. The DVA defines emotional, verbal and psychological abuse as:

...a pattern of degrading or humiliating conduct towards a complainant, including repeated insults, ridicule or name calling; repeated threats to cause emotional pain; or the repeated exhibition of obsessive possessiveness or jealousy, which is such as to constitute a serious invasion of the complainant’s privacy, liberty, integrity or security. (Government Gazette, 1998, p.4).

Furthermore, the DVA recognises that notions of power and control are central to violence, which may constitute a single act of violence or a pattern of repeated acts of violence. The latter distinction has been debated in the US given the methodological implications for reporting accurate prevalence rates of violence and abusive practices in lesbian relationships (Rohrbaugh, 2006). Hart’s (1986) definition, widely quoted in lesbian scholarship, characterises lesbian battering as a “pattern of violence [or] coercive behaviors whereby a lesbian seeks to control the thoughts, beliefs, or conduct of her intimate partner or to punish the intimate for resisting the perpetrator’s control” (cited in Renzetti, 1989, p.157). Although the DVA is evidence of laudable post-apartheid legislation, its implementation has been problematic primarily due to resource limitations and negative attitudes of service providers (Vetten, 2005). Resources are still disproportionately allocated between rural and urban areas with rural areas being markedly under-resourced. Black lesbian women from rural areas are more likely to have limited access to resources and be more vulnerable to



harassment. In addition, the SAPS have been ineffective in implementing the DVA and victims of abuse are often subjected to secondary victimisation (Parenzee, Artz, & Moul, 2001). It may be argued that the poor implementation of the DVA works against full citizenship and access, especially in the case of black lesbian women. In many instances, civil society organisations have had to step in and take on state responsibilities as both a consequence of and a way of addressing poor implementation, with positive and negative consequences.

### ***1.2.3.2 The role of civil society and community-based organisations in South***

***Africa.*** Civil society organisations (CSOs) and community-based organisations (CBOs), also termed non-profit organisations (NPOs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), have played, and continue to play, a pivotal role in consolidating democratic processes in South Africa (Heinrich, 2001) and across the African continent, "...moving between public visibility and invisibility as they press for social acceptance, religious tolerance, and political recognition" (Currier & Cruz, 2014, p.337). "The space between a progressive legal code and a conservative society became the arena for action by [NGOs]" (Massoud, 2003, p. 301). In many African countries, CSOs operate in contexts that are characterised by state-endorsed homophobia, the criminalisation of same-sex sexualities, the framing of same-sex sexualities within the discourse of HIV/AIDS, and where the agendas of western donors are questioned (Currier & Cruz, 2014). In addition to advancing the broad LGBTQ agenda, Currier and Cruz (2014) argue that (LGBTQ) CSOs offer a platform where identities and their meanings, especially heteronormative constructions, may be contested and redefined. Moreau (2015) illustrates, through the case of *Free Gender*, a lesbian and bisexual women's organisation based in Khayelitsha, Cape Town, how organisational goals advance black lesbian's full citizenship through the embodiment of multiple identities such as 'lesbian', 'woman'

‘African’ and ‘community member’ which might otherwise be denied to lesbian women by virtue of their identification as ‘lesbian’. However, Swarr and Nagar (2003) maintain that whilst such organisations are typically associated with discourses of empowerment, as sites of struggle they offer diverse and conflicting ways in which the exploration and development of identities and subjectivities are either suppressed or facilitated.

Graeme Reid (2005) provided a detailed and poignant mapping of the interwoven relationship between sexual identity politics and the politics of the liberation struggle and showed how in the South African context, “...it was impossible for a gay group to be apolitical” (p. 39). Drawing from the Gay and Lesbian Archives of South Africa (GALA) and from private and public archives in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, Reid (2005) traced the history of gay organising in South Africa through the case of Simon Nkoli who was charged with treason in the Delmas Treason Trial in 1985 during the state of emergency, and that of Tom Evans, a gay medical doctor who featured prominently in the End Conscription Campaign (ECC) which had lobbied for an end to the compulsory conscription of white men into the South African Defence Force (SADF), to illustrate the “...political complexities of the time – in particular the tensions that existed between personal identity and political strategy” (Reid, 2005, p. 32), in which sexual identity and the gay and lesbian agenda were side-lined in favour of the broader agenda for political liberation.

Civil society organisations have played a pivotal role in advocating for LGBTQ rights in South Africa, but continue to be positioned somewhat ambiguously. However, while Thoreson (2008) applauded the gay movement’s success in ensuring the inclusion of sexual orientation as a protected category in the constitution, Anguita (2012) maintained that CSOs/NGOs are limited in their ability to influence government to bring about changes in addressing homophobic violence towards lesbian women. Anguita (2012) specifically suggested that NGOs need to engage with the Commission for Gender Equality (CGE) and

the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) in both a collaborative and a confrontational manner as they “...have the political power and moral authority...” (p. 490) to put corrective rape on government’s national agenda.

The above argument highlights the divide between ‘on paper’ protection and ‘grass-roots’ lived experiences of lesbian women, particularly black lesbian women. Some LGBTQ organisations in South Africa have made significant contributions to advance the rights of LGBTQ persons. For example, OUT LGBT Well-being’s (OUT LGBT) submission to the SAHRC’s public inquiry into rights to access to public healthcare services illustrates the role of CSOs in advocating for LGBTQ rights with the state (OUT LGBT, 2007). Framed within a human rights discourse, the submission called on the state’s obligation to protect the most vulnerable groups in society, to provide healthcare services in a non-discriminatory manner, and to ensure the privacy of clients. An important point made was that the majority of LGBT persons are unable to access the legal protection and services afforded by the constitution and continue to face societal discrimination (OUT LGBT, 2007). At the same time however, interventions by civil society organisations might inadvertently detract the state from its responsibility of the full protection of all citizens and state accountability in criminal matters (Williams, 2012). Williams (2012) questioned the relationship between the state and civil society organisations through an analysis of the intervention by OUT LGBT in its capacity as *amicus curiae* (a friend of the court) in the case of Deric Mazibuko who was a victim of a hate crime. Williams (2012) maintained that the prosecutor relied solely on the evidence and legal submissions by OUT LGBT instead of viewing it as supplementary evidence to support the framing of the crime as a homophobic hate crime. Furthermore, the lenient sentence that was imposed by the judge indicated a dismissal of the serious nature of the crime as a hate crime motivated by prejudice; and the transfer of constitutional and moral responsibility from the state to civil society to firstly, protect and uphold the constitutional rights of LGBTQ

persons; and secondly, to provide services in the case of rehabilitative punishment (Williams, 2012).

An enquiry into the gendered subjectivities of black lesbian women in South Africa warrants consideration of the diverging and multiple contexts that exist. However, an examination of the South African context in its entirety is impractical within the scope of any single study. This study thus considered the ways in which CSOs/NGOs suppress or facilitate the construction of identities among lesbian women as they emerged in the women's talk. Many of the participants revealed that their associations with such organisations formed an important part of their identity construction.

Similar to civil society organisations, the discipline, profession and academy of psychology has to be considered within the political and historical contexts in which it exists and has been shaped by. Psychology has had a somewhat dubious role within the South African political landscape due to its role in maintaining certain apartheid ideologies and practices. Its role and relevance, especially in a post-colonial, post-apartheid context, as a key producer of certain 'truths' has been questioned and debated. Thus psychology's role in advancing the LGBTQ agenda needs to be interrogated. Lesbian issues and the lesbian agenda in South Africa has been advanced through NGOs and feminist psychology in South Africa, although often in parallel and disconnected ways. In the section below, I briefly explore the history of feminist psychology within South African psychology and how it links to lesbian sexuality.

**1.2.4 Lesbian sexuality, psychology and feminism in South Africa.** Painter and Terre Blanche (2004) contend that South African mainstream psychology has developed in similar ways to that of psychology in western-European countries, with traditional positivist approaches dominating much of psychology. The relevance of psychology in South Africa

has been debated since the 1980s Apartheid era, when the role of psychology in an apartheid context was examined (de la Rey & Ispier, 2004; Macleod, 2004; Sher & Long, 2012).

Psychology was seen to collude with apartheid ideology (Macleod, 2004, Potgieter & de la Rey, 1997) through for example, its use of psychometric testing to justify classist and racist practices (Painter & Terre Blanche, 2004). The need for a psychology that was responsive to the socio-political and socio-economic contexts was recognised. Community psychology and indigenous psychology emerged as responses to such a need. While there is no doubt that these were and continue to be noteworthy developments towards a more relevant psychology, other categories such as feminist psychology, were excluded. Macleod (2004) in her situational analysis of articles published in the *South African Journal of Psychology* (SAJP) from the period 1999-2003, found only 1.5 % as belonging to the category 'feminist psychology'. This trend reflected the marginalised status of feminist psychology within mainstream psychology in South Africa.

In addition to the questions around the relevance of psychology in South Africa, two significant developments within South African psychology allowed for a more critical consideration of gender within psychology, and the emergence of feminist psychology. These developments may be conceptualised as a convergence and negotiation between western feminist thought within formalised South African psychology and academia on the one hand, and the grassroots activism of the South African women's movement on the other. With reference to the academic and formal scope of psychology, the 'difference' debate and the launch of the women's and gender studies division of the Psychological Society of South Africa (PsySSA) were significant events. The 'difference' debate challenged fundamental assumptions within mainstream feminism, especially those that related to women as a homogenous group different to men and the notion of a non-racialised sisterhood among feminists (de la Rey, 1997). This debate emerged as a critical and political response by black

feminists who felt marginalised within the women's movement seen to be dominated by western-European thought that privileged middle-class white women (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1981; Shefer, Shabalala & Townsend, 2004) and by virtue thereof, failed to fully articulate the complexities and nuances of women's experiences due to issues of race, gender and class oppression. It was argued that western-European feminism conceived of women as a unitary and fixed category in which similarities were emphasised and differences minimised, characterised by a romanticised white understanding of black women's oppression (hooks, 1981).

Within South African feminism, the difference debate was first voiced at the *Woman and Gender in Southern Africa* conference held in Durban in 1991. Black feminists questioned the authority of white feminists' representations of black women as well as the material basis of white feminists' positions of power on editorial boards and within the sphere of authorship. Attention was drawn to the differences in experiences within socially constructed categories and the intersections thereof. However, although the debate drew attention to differences within various social categories including sexual orientation, the debate in South Africa was still dominated by issues of race and class (de la Rey, 1997). In fact, issues of gender were not considered a priority in relation to the broader focus on racism (Potgieter & de la Rey, 1997). Nonetheless, the difference debate paved the way for a more critical approach to gender and other salient intersections in South Africa within South African psychology. Moreover, the launch of the women's and gender studies division of PsySSA emphasised the need to address gender within formalised structures (Potgieter & de la Rey, 1997).

Similar to mainstream psychology, the emergence of feminism in South Africa mirrored international trends in several ways. However, its political history distinguished it from other contexts. South African feminism emerged within the broader contexts of trade

union action, the struggle against apartheid and societal transformation (Berger, 2007). Against the backdrop of the Depression and World War 2, increasing numbers of black and white women migrated to urban areas to seek employment in factories, mainly in the canning industry in the Cape and the textile industry in what was previously known as the Transvaal. Union action initially centred on women's rights as workers, such as access to higher wages and increased employment opportunities for women. Women's voices were located within the discourse of liberation and it was therefore difficult to consider issues of gender without also considering issues of race. Advocacy for women's rights unfolded within political activism and not within feminism itself. Black women activists in particular, were sceptical of the western concept of feminism (Gasa, 2007) and "...considered questions about marriage and the division of household labour as bourgeois distractions , divisive to the larger struggle against apartheid" (Berger, 2007, p.186). However some black women began to indirectly challenge the system of patriarchy when they spoke about their hardships in having to undertake traditional roles at home such as cooking, cleaning, looking after their children's and husbands' needs after working a full day at the factories.

Feminism, gender and indeed LGBTQ issues have grown in South Africa. However, feminism, lesbianism and psychology in South Africa often exist in disconnected ways. Lesbian feminism is still, largely, located within the sphere and discourse of activism, particularly within the civil society sector. It is not uncommon for issues that are pertinent to lesbian women, such as sexual prejudice and corrective rape, to be voiced through non-governmental organisations (NGOs) as was the case in the shocking and brutal gang rape and murder of *Banyana Banyana* soccer player, Eudy Simelane in April 2008. While this form of advocacy and activism is necessary, it is also limited in its conceptualisation of lesbian women as a homogenous collective, and as 'different' to the heterosexual norm.

In present day South Africa, the relevance of psychology has become a question of the role of psychology in transformation in a democratic post-colonial, post-apartheid context, and the extent to which psychology critically engages with and interrogates social constructs that are salient in the South African context. This implies that the focus of psychology should extend beyond the intersections of race and class to also include intersections of gender and sexuality. South African psychology has embarked on a process of transformation in which its role has shifted towards advocating for social justice, including for sexual and gender diversity (Nel, 2014) and where individual gendered, raced and classed subjectivities may be foregrounded (de la Rey, 1997). Increasing scholarship in the area of gender and sexuality in peer-reviewed publications, annual psychology congresses and the inclusion of sexuality in current psychology curricula in some universities is evidence of this shift (Nel, 2014) although De Gruncky and Lewin (2001) cautions against the practice of institutional heterosexism by some research ethics committees which do not give priority to research with LGBTI populations.

Nel (2014) argues further that South African psychology has an important role to play in facilitating "...attitudinal and behavioural change" (p. 148) both locally in South Africa and the broader African continent which is in most parts, characterised by institutionalised homophobia and criminalised homosexuality. Collaborations between feminists, LGBT community-based organisations and activists, and LGBTQ psychology academics indicate a more critical and progressive role for feminist/lesbian psychology in South Africa. For example, the studies by van Dyk (2011) and Pakade (2011) were written under affiliation to *OUT LGBT* and *Behind the Mask* NGOs respectively. Many studies, including this study, draws participants through NGOs.

Another significant development is the Position Statement that was produced through a collaboration between the Gender and Sexuality Division of PsySSA and local community-



based organisations and partners from the African continent. The Position Statement provides an affirmative stance and framework for psychology professionals who work with LGBTI persons (Psychological Society of South Africa, 2013; Victor et al., 2014). The current study is situated within a framework that may be described as a critical feminist/lesbian psychology in South Africa that values lesbian women's experiences as credible objects of study (Wilkinson, 1996) and that seeks to contribute to the relevance of psychology as a vehicle for gender and sexual identity transformation.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

The current study explores the lived experiences of power and violence in the lives of black lesbian women at a particular point in South Africa's history, i.e. the post-apartheid, post-colonial democratic context. Thus the study explores the intersections of history, contexts, identity, gender, sexuality, power, and violence. The current study thus asks the following questions:

1. What is the nature of the power differentials that impact black lesbian women in their interactions in the public and private domains, and,
2. What are the implications thereof for black lesbian identities and the enactment of violence?

### **1.4 Outline of the Dissertation**

This dissertation has a strong emphasis on contextualising theoretical discussions and analyses within historical and social events in post-apartheid, democratic South Africa and within 'lesbian history'. This somewhat 'genealogical' approach advances the idea that the 'origins' and contexts reveal something about the "force relations" (Foucault, 1978, p. 92)

operating within particular historical moments. This chapter contextualised the focus of the study and motivated for its importance. It has shown that black lesbian identity and its intersections with power and violence remain an under researched area in South Africa despite the growing scholarly interest in sexuality and against the national imperative that seeks to address gender based violence. The need for a critical feminist-lesbian psychology in South Africa that is cognisant of these tensions and of the intersections of gender, sexuality, identity and history is advocated.

Chapter Two interrogates the kind of lesbian subject that is constructed through public discourse, history, and scholarship. Lesbian identity within feminism, as well as psychological theories that are seek to understand violence in lesbian relationships, are reviewed. The review shows the extent to which such research is limited in recognising and exploring the complex intersections of multiple identities that converge in the lives of black lesbian women, and in the enactment and production of various forms of violence in the public and private domain, especially as it unfolds within the South African context.

Chapter Three begins to problematise the subjective experiences of women in same-sex (violent/abusive) relationships. It examines the concepts of identity, gendered subjectivity and sexuality by drawing on selected theoretical concepts advanced by Michel Foucault and Judith Butler to critically examine the concept of power through a reading of the lesbian body as a site through which institutional and discursive power is maintained and contested.

Chapter Four outlines the methodological processes and ethical considerations that were followed in this study. It motivates why a feminist-qualitative methodology, informed by an intersectional-post-structuralist theoretical framework, suited the research enquiry.

Thereafter, Chapters Five and Six present the analytical findings by adopting a ‘macro’ to ‘micro’ approach. Chapter Five considers the gendered nature of lesbian subjectivities within social and cultural spaces. More specifically the chapter examines lesbian subjectivities in relation to gendered citizenship, race, class, culture and their interactions in social and political spaces. Chapter Six explores the gendered nature of lesbian subjectivities within intimate relationships and IPV. It examines positioning, roles, power dynamics and the meanings attached to these. Chapter Seven draws the dissertation to a close by highlighting the key contributions to the existing LGBTQ scholarship in South Africa, as well as noting its implications for further research and practice.

## **Chapter Two: Historical and Scientific Constructions of the Lesbian Subject and Violence**

This chapter interrogates the kind of lesbian subject and object that is created by feminist history and discourse, and psychological scholarship. It considers how such knowledge production that is often considered to be scientific and credible, influences societal perceptions of lesbian women, lesbian sexuality and violence. Chapter One focused on the social constructions of lesbian identity within the contexts of community and homophobic violence in South Africa. This current chapter extends this interrogation but shifts the focus inward through an engagement with the historical and theoretical conceptualisations of lesbian women, and how violence within lesbian relationships has been constructed and understood. The framing of intimate partner violence (IPV) within feminist historical contexts and academic scholarship enables a critique of how history, and scientific discourse, shape societal perceptions of lesbian women and violence. The historical contexts have implications for black lesbian's lived experiences of power and violence in public and private spaces as well. This chapter makes visible the intersections of what happens 'out there' (public domain) and what happens 'in here' (private domain), and exposes the gendered, raced, sexed and classed nature of contexts.

### **2.1 A Historical Feminist Perspective**

Feminism, as a movement, gained momentum within the context of the civil rights movement and more specifically, within the women's movement of the 1960s. Far from representing a homogenous and singular perspective, various strands of feminisms have emerged, each reflecting differences in the conceptual emphasis of the primary source of women's oppression (Kiguwa, 2004). Wilkinson (1996) asserts that two central themes

underpin all forms of feminism: firstly, feminism values women's experiences as credible objects of study<sup>8</sup> and, secondly, feminism has a political agenda through its stance to bring about social reform. As a political movement, feminism sought to give voice to women's issues that were marginalised within social and scientific spheres. Feminist advocacy in the late 1960s and the 1970s, especially in the global north, gave rise to and included what was termed 'the battered women's movement'. Notwithstanding the criticism levied against this reference and the term *battered woman syndrome* (Dutton, 1993; Rothenberg, 2003; VanNatta, 2005) and its positioning of women as victims (Rothenberg, 2003), the movement was instrumental in highlighting several structural and socially constructed institutional disparities that favoured men, and specifically foregrounded domestic violence as a social problem (Merlis & Linville, 2006; Miller, Greene, Causby, White, & Lockhart, 2001; Walters, 2011).

Early feminist analyses of violence within relationships, usually framed as *domestic violence*, regarded violence and abuse as a systemic feature and consequence of patriarchal societies that were characterised by male privilege and hegemony, and the control and domination of women (Dobash & Dobash, 1979, 1998; Milner, 2004; Yllo & Bograd, 1988). Dobash and Dobash (1979, 1998) maintained that patriarchal socio-cultural belief systems contributed to and sustained IPV. The institution of marriage bestowed upon husbands (and male partners) the privilege and sense of entitlement to own, control, and abuse their wives (and partners). Women were constructed as victims who were not capable of being batterers or of being violent. Such constructions reinforced traditional gender stereotypes of women as nurturing, caring and innately nonviolent. Violence and abuse was conceptualised as involving a powerful male and a powerless female and occurring within heterosexual relationships, and often confined to the privacy of the domestic home.

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<sup>8</sup> Feminism as a research methodology is examined in Chapter Five.

However, while feminist analyses have highlighted women's experiences of the power dynamics inherent within patriarchal societies, they have paradoxically created a gender-biased approach to understanding partner abuse (Barnes, 2010; Miller et al., 2001; Ristock, 2001) as they have shaped the ways in which all abuse is conceptualised within heterosexist and heteropatriarchal paradigms. This bias was evident in practice and strategy. In a strategic effort to project an acceptable representation of a female survivor that would elicit social awareness and concern (Duke & Davidson, 2009), domestic violence campaigns and the provision of services for domestically abused women focused almost exclusively on white, middle-class, heterosexual women (Walters, 2011). Thus despite the advances in the area of women abuse and despite the fact that many lesbian women actively campaigned in the battered women's movement, the issue of lesbian partner abuse was not highlighted (Renzetti, 1989, 1992).

**2.1.1 Lesbian sexuality and the feminist agenda.** Historically, lesbian women have been perceived as a threat to male dominance, and by some feminists, as a threat to the broad feminist agenda (Wilkinson, 1996). Lesbian relationships were not explicitly acknowledged or integrated into the broad feminist agenda. This invisibility served to situate lesbian relationships and the lesbian agenda within the personal/private domain. It may be argued that the mainstream feminist strategy to negate lesbian sexuality constituted a form of policing of lesbian sexuality. Adrienne Rich (1980) has argued that the heterocentric position assumed by mainstream feminism functioned politically to maintain the institution of compulsory female heterosexuality that disempowered women. She suggested that the feminist movement, through its lack of focus on lesbian women's issues and through its lack of support in creating a positive image of lesbian women, had in effect, colluded with patriarchal groups which had used *lesbian baiting* as a way of opposing the feminist

movement. Prominent feminists, such as Betty Friedan, referred to lesbian women as the *lavender herring* of the movement and accused lesbian women of being divisive and detracting attention away from key women's issues and rights (Kitzinger, 1996). Lesbian feminists counter-argued that many of the key issues pursued by the feminist movement, such as the feminist campaigns that advocated for childcare for women at the workplace and the right to legal termination of pregnancies, reflected uncritical support for a heterosexual society and were viewed by lesbian feminists as advantaging heterosexual women only. They maintained that liberal feminism adopted an uncritical approach to women's issues as they unfolded within the patriarchal structures of society and in doing so, presented women's heterosexuality as a natural, taken-for granted process.

They argued further that the feminist movement prioritised heterosexual women's rights over lesbian women's rights (Kitzinger, 1996) and failed to develop theories and practices that were informed by lesbian perspectives. For example, liberal feminism focused on the equal distribution of resources between men and women but has been critiqued for its lack in challenging socially constructed institutional structures that perpetuated and maintained such gender disparities. Although liberal feminists lobbied for equal pay and equal work opportunities for women and questioned the inequitable sexual division of labour linked to the construction of motherhood and child care within the institutions of marriage and the family, it did not challenge the presumed 'natural' structure of nuclear families (Weedon, 1997) nor did it contest the underlying relations assumed in the male/female binary (McPhail, 2004). McPhail (2004), however, critiqued lesbian activism for being similar to liberal feminism in that while it advocated for equal rights for LGBTQ persons, it did not challenge the social construction of categories such as sexuality or the heterosexual/homosexual binary.

Lesbian women have occupied dubious positions within the feminist movement, due to the ‘heterosexual/lesbian’ split in membership as well as the ‘lesbian/lesbian’ split between radical and social lesbian feminists (Wilkinson, 1996; Kitzinger, 1996). Lesbian feminism, and in particular, lesbian separatist feminism, argued that the only way to truly challenge and dismantle patriarchy was through women solidarity, including same-sex or lesbian relationships (Barnes, 2010). While there was not much support for lesbian women during the first wave of feminism, radical feminists during the second wave of feminism attempted to reveal how the construct of *lesbianism* was used by patriarchal structures to maintain its continuity.

Socialist feminism, which drew upon Marxist ideology, recognised the need for changes in society through its focus on classist issues and the inequalities created by capitalism. However, issues of racism and sexism were not accorded the same level of relevance. Bhavnani and Coulson (2005) maintained that in negating the issue of race, socialist feminism had not acknowledged differences in the material basis of power due to race<sup>9</sup>. On the other hand, radical feminism acknowledged that racism and classism intersected with sexism, but foregrounded the systematic marginalisation of women as historically preceding and underpinning all other forms of structural inequalities and oppression. Women’s oppression was considered to be ubiquitous across cultural and economic structures (Campbell & Wasco, 2000). Radical feminists emphasised women’s biology as the source of women’s oppression but also argued for the existence of a distinct and fundamental femininity that bound women together and which needed to be evoked in the fight against patriarchy (Weedon, 1997). Lesbian sexuality was seen to be linked to this distinct feminine quality. The debate centred on the political implications of mobilising around a lesbian

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<sup>9</sup> Differences in the lived experiences of women due to factors such as race, socio-economic status and cultural contexts emerged as a salient argument within black feminist critiques of the idea of a universal sisterhood based primarily on the experiences of white, middle-class women. This argument is discussed further in this chapter when considering intersectional approaches to same-sex IPV.



identity and the subsequent creation of lesbian theory in relation to the broader feminist agenda. While radical feminist lesbian women saw lesbianism as essential to the advancement of the feminist movement, socialist feminist lesbian women argued that the majority of women within the women's movement were heterosexual and were therefore likely to be threatened by the concept of lesbianism (Thompson, 1993, cited in Kitzinger, 1996). It may be argued that the fractured approach to lesbianism within feminism and the women's movement may have partly contributed to the current negative constructions of lesbian women.

### **2.1.2 The politics of lesbian feminism and violence in lesbian relationships.**

Radical lesbian feminists in the 1970s were concerned to shift societal perceptions of lesbian relationships as pathological and abnormal; a discourse perpetuated and maintained through key professional texts such as the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) published by the American Psychiatric Association (APA). Being "...one of the 'gate-keepers' of society's attitudes" (Silverstein, 2009, p. 161); the profession of psychiatry governed how people viewed and responded to same-sex sexuality. The enduring negative effects of diagnostic labels used in the conceptualisation of same-sex sexuality as pathological was highlighted in a study by Rubinstein (1995) that examined the effect of sexual orientation on the perceived severity of mental health. Participants, comprised of psychiatrists, clinical psychologists and psychiatric social workers, were presented with a hypothetical case study that described an unmarried male, with a presenting problem described as obesity due to overeating as per the diagnostic criteria for nervosa bulimia in the DSM III-R and a case history of bulimia in the DSM-III-R Casebook. Half the participants received a version that described the patient as heterosexual, and the other half received a

version that described the patient as an *ego-syntonic* (as opposed to *ego-dystonic*<sup>10</sup>) homosexual, implying that he experienced no distress with his sexual orientation. Rubinstein (1995) hypothesised that there would be no significant differences between groups given that *ego-syntonic* homosexual orientation was indicated and no mention was made of the diagnostic label of *ego-dystonic* homosexuality which was removed in 1986. However, the results revealed a small but statistically significant difference between groups, with the hypothetical homosexual patient having been perceived as having a more severe mental disorder compared to the hypothetical heterosexual patient.

Statistically significant differences were also noted across therapist modalities, with psychodynamic<sup>11</sup> and existential therapists having perceived the mental state of the hypothetical homosexual patient as more severe than the hypothetical heterosexual patient, while the converse was indicated with the behaviouristic therapists. A further significant difference was observed across gender, with the male therapists having perceived the mental state of both hypothetical cases as being more severe than the female therapists.

Although the practice of conversion therapy has been discouraged and discontinued, the results raised questions around the level of internalisation by therapists (Rubinstein, 1995). Even after the declassification of homosexuality as a mental disorder from the DSM-II in December 1973, "...a series of disorders introduced over the past 30 years has allowed for the continued possibility of pathologising lesbian, gay, and bisexual people" (Daley & Mulé, 2014, p. 1291) and the continued legacy of the DSM (Meyer, 2003). The inclusion of *Gender Dysphoria* as a diagnostic category in the current DSM 5 provides evidence for the argument

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<sup>10</sup> *Ego-dystonic homosexuality* was a diagnostic category in the DSM-III (1980) which described feelings of significant and persistent distress associated with same-sex orientation. The diagnostic category was criticised for perpetuating anti-gay sentiment and discrimination based on the pathological and psychiatric view of homosexuality favoured by mainly psychoanalytic psychiatrists. The diagnostic category was removed in 1986.

<sup>11</sup> Perhaps of historical significance is that the APA's Board of Trustees' decision to remove homosexuality from the DSM in 1973 was initially opposed by psychiatrists from the psychoanalytic community. That had consequently forced a vote by the entire APA membership. The decision was upheld by a 58% majority vote in favour of the decision (Drescher, 2015).

that gender and sexuality remain contested categories. Victor and Nel (2016) explored LGB clients' experiences of counselling and psychotherapy in South Africa, and also noted clients' negative experiences related to how counsellors dealt with their sexual orientation around issues relating to homonegativity, heterosexism, and a binary and medical conceptualisation of sexuality.

Given that same-sex sexuality was regarded as pathological and deviant, one of the early goals of lesbian advocacy was the creation of a more positive lesbian image to increase acknowledgement and acceptance of lesbian women. Aulivola (2004) argues that historically, gay and lesbian communities have used denial and rationalisation of violence within relationships as defence strategies to prevent the reinforcement of negative stereotypes of same-sex relationships. To have highlighted intimate partner violence (IPV) at that time would have served to reinforce negative stereotypes of same-sex relationships and would have carried the risk of providing 'evidence' to support arguments that espoused same-sex relationships as unhealthy, volatile and violent (Knauer, 1999). Public reporting of lesbian IPV was discouraged and viewed as harmful to the lesbian community. Consequently lesbian IPV was confined to the domain of the personal and the private, and in this way, served to protect the lesbian community and lesbian identity, albeit at the expense of victims of IPV. Building on the feminist argument that patriarchy was the main source of women's oppression, radical lesbian women maintained that only men were violent and aggressive (Walters, 2011). This served to validate lesbian relationships.

Several core ideas pertinent to lesbian sexuality and violence were perpetuated as a result. Firstly, it was assumed that lesbian relationships were devoid of violence and aggression as it involved two women (Gilbert, 2002). This also reinforced the idea of egalitarian and utopian lesbian relationships, nested in communities that were more enlightened (Elliot, 1996), nurturing, warm and loving in the absence of men. Finally, if

violence did occur, the nature of such violence was not viewed as being serious but rather trivialised and perceived as being minor squabbles between two women (Brown, 2008; Brown & Groscup, 2009).

Balsam (2001) maintains that many lesbian women have difficulty accepting that women are capable of violence, especially towards other women as it highlights a discord with central tenets of feminism. Barnes' (2010) qualitative study based on in-depth interviews with 40 lesbian women from the UK who had been in abusive relationships revealed several tensions between lesbian feminist ideology and the experience of abuse. The women reported that it was difficult to identify incidents of abuse in the absence of a male perpetrator, as this phenomenon was incongruent with key feminist arguments. Women who were abused reported feelings of self-blame and were discouraged from reporting such abuse either to friends or more formal community structures that offered support, for fear of disclosure and further homophobic discrimination. One participant shared how her experience of abuse was dismissed when she tried to access support. She recalled how a woman who had worked at a support centre that she had visited to access help informed her that acts of violence were only perpetrated by men and that women only played supportive roles (Barnes, 2010).

The inconceivability of women as perpetrators relates broadly to how women who are violent are labelled "...as either mad, bad or a victim, by both the criminal justice system and society, depending on the construction of their crime, their gender and their sexuality" (Weare, 2013, p. 337). The discursive construction of women as 'bad', 'mad' or 'victims' repudiates women's agency and autonomy, and serves to keep the existing gendered status quo in place (Weare, 2013). Kaschak (2001) adds that abused women may be exposed to secondary forms of trauma as a result of "...being misunderstood, shamed, blamed or even endangered" (p. 3). It is usually a case of double stigma for lesbian women who experience

partner violence as they have to deal with the stigma of the abuse itself, as well as the stigma of being lesbian.

Kaschak (2001) argues further that the act of violence is not limited to the private realm but extends to the entire lesbian community. Merlis and Linville (2006) investigated a lesbian community's response to domestic violence in same-sex relationships and the factors impacting the response by drawing on the experience and perspectives of mental health professionals who had worked predominantly with lesbian women in domestically violent relationships. Of the 15 professionals who were purposively sampled from the greater Chicago area, 13 participants were female, nine participants identified as lesbian, one identified as bisexual, one identified as gay, and four identified as heterosexual. Three participants also identified as survivors of domestically violent relationships. Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were based on sixteen questions which focused on current views and responses to domestic violence, potential barriers to responding effectively, benefits of not responding, and elements required to change current responses. The phenomenon of "lessening the load" (Merlis & Linville, 2006, p. 103), a set of actions taken by the community in response to domestic violence emerged as a central theme. Two opposing causal conditions underpinned this phenomenon; the need to protect the identity of the lesbian community as idealised and utopian, and, disunity. Efforts to maintain the lesbian identity and community as romanticised and utopian was viewed as a form of resistance. This included a strong subscription to the idea that women were not capable of being violent towards each other. The discourse of sisterhood conveyed the idea of strong bonds between the women which reinforced the idea of lesbian community protection and isolation from those external to the lesbian community. On the other hand, disunity within the lesbian community was characterised by differences in community debates and in diversity (race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, political activism, and butch/femme roles), as well as

differences in perspectives on what constituted domestic violence and effective treatment approaches, which was influenced by the level of activism. The feminist notion of sisterhood implied that victims and perpetrators were unable to seek support from friends, family, and support groups within the community. Findings were consistent with earlier research (Renzetti, 1992) that highlighted the silence, minimisation and denial of lesbian IPV and the challenges within the lesbian community.

To acknowledged violence within lesbian relationships would have required a paradigm shift that would have destabilised early feminist analyses (Knauer, 1999) of domestic violence as a consequence of the patriarchal oppression of women (Milner, 2004). Same-sex/lesbian IPV compelled a re-evaluation of "...issues of socialization, power, control and psychology..." (Merlis & Linville, 2006, p. 98). McPhail, Busch, Kulkarni and Rice (2007) undertook a qualitative study to elicit service providers' views of the critique levied against feminism. Thirty-three participants who worked directly with individuals from abusive situations were recruited from eight agencies. Each participant was given a copy of the book *Insult to injury: Rethinking our responses to intimate abuse* by Linda Mills (2003) which offered a critique of the feminist model. Focus group discussions revealed that participants agreed that the feminist model was limited in its application to IPV and that the traditional feminist model needed to expand to incorporate other theories of violence. Using the analogy of a puzzle, an "integrated feminist model" (McPhail et al., 2007, p. 825) was developed which retained core feminist principles while expanding on areas such as theories of causation, female aggression, and multiple sources of power differentials that arise from the intersections of gender and other systems of oppression such as race, class, sexual orientation and disability.

To summarise, while early feminist theorising around violence has made significant contributions to an understanding of IPV as an expression of male power within patriarchal

societies, and to the provision of and access to services for women who have experienced IPV, it has also paradoxically created several key challenges pertaining to violence within lesbian relationships specifically. Mainstream feminist ideology and discourse has contributed to the construction of women as being innately non-violent and as being victims; and to the construction of lesbian women as being sexually deviant and inferior to heterosexual women who display socially and culturally acceptable forms of sexuality. This has reinforced the divide between violence enacted in the public and private domains. Early feminist constructions of women may have also excluded and further marginalised groups of women based on sexual orientation, race, culture, class and the differences in experiences of IPV that emanated from these intersections.

## **2.2 Psychological Scholarship**

The obscuring of salient intersections that are implicated in violence is evident in mainstream psychological scholarship which tends to strengthen the perception of women as victims and of lesbian women as pathological through its focus on individual aetiologies of violence. Early studies were largely quantitative comparative studies that focused on prevalence and frequency. The accuracy of prevalence rates of IPV in hidden populations is always questionable, predominantly due to factors relating to homophobia and institutionalised homonegativity (Balsam, 2001; Peterman & Dixon, 2003; Renzetti, 1997) stigma, shame, social desirability, and disclosure; especially given that IPV, and in particular, sexual IPV, is already under-reported among heterosexual populations. Nonetheless, there is general consensus that the rate of lesbian IPV is consistent with that in heterosexual relationships (Alexander, 2002; Balsam, 2001; Barnes, 2010; Brand & Kidd, 1986; Elliot, 1996; Lie & Gentlewarrior, 1991; Lockhart, White, Causby & Isaac, 1994; McClennen, 2005; Owen & Burke, 2004; Renzetti, 1989, 1992, 1997; Ristock, 1991, 2002; Seelau, Seelau &

Poorman, 2003; Turell, 2000; West, 2002) and ranges between 25% - 50% (Alexander, 2002; Brand & Kidd, 1986; Burke, Jordan, & Owen, 2002; Lie & Gentlewarrier, 1991; McClennen, 2005; Pitt, 2000). The skewed focus on heterosexual IPV reflects broader social and political practices in which institutional homophobia and heterosexism have found expression, including research that perpetuates and maintains normative ideas around heterosexuality.

Comparative studies suggest that the patterns of abusive practices in same-sex relationships are similar to those observed in heterosexual relationships (Eaton et al., 2008; West, 2002). This includes the cyclic nature of abuse and violence as described by Lenore Walker in 1979, in which she outlined domestic violence as being characterised by three distinct phases that repeat itself continuously. These include the tension-building phase, the violent episode or explosive phase which involves the acute battering incident, and the calm and reconciliation / loving-contrition phase which is sometimes termed the honeymoon phase (Peterman & Dixon, 2003; Renzetti, 1992, L.E. Walker, 2006). In addition, the frequency and severity of violent episodes may increase over time (Renzetti, 1989; West, 2002). Similar to IPV in heterosexual relationships, power and control is regarded as a central feature of same-sex IPV (Renzetti, 1998). Many forms of abuse and violence that are used to exert power and control over a partner are common in both heterosexual and lesbian relationships. These include the use of intimidation, threats and coercion, isolation, minimisation or denial of the abuse and violence, blame, and abuse or threat of abuse of children and pets.

**2.2.1 Power and gender stereotyping.** One of the criticisms levied against comparative studies was the tendency to apply heterosexual frameworks to understand same-sex relationships, which were limited as they perpetuated gendered assumptions and expectations. These included the assumptions that lesbian relationships were less violent than heterosexual relationships, that gay men were more violent than lesbian women, and that more masculine presenting partners were the more powerful and violent partners in lesbian



relationships (Ohm, 2008). McLaughlin and Rozee (2001) examined lesbian women's understanding of abuse within heterosexual and lesbian relationships using a sample of 297 self-identified lesbian/bisexual women. Analyses revealed a significant difference in how the women interpreted the same incidents of battery among heterosexual and lesbian women, with abuse in the former group being viewed more seriously. A small qualitative study by Walters (2011) based on a sample of 4 self-identified lesbian women who had experienced IPV revealed some of the challenges associated with a gendered understanding of partner violence. The women reported that it was difficult to identify their abuse as IPV, even in cases where the victim had been working at a domestic violence shelter at the time of her own experiences of IPV. Societal and family gender-stereotypical beliefs that perpetrators of IPV are only males influence how abuse and violence is understood and identified in same-sex relationships.

Using gender-identity theory, Telesco (2003) hypothesised that low levels of femininity would be positively associated with abusive behaviours. One hundred and five self-identified lesbian women, drawn from a non-clinical sample, completed the *Bem Sex Role Inventory Scale (BSRI)*. The scale measured 60 different personality attributes related to constructs of masculinity and femininity. However, the results did not support Telesco's (2003) hypothesis. No significant correlations between femininity and overall perpetration of abuse were noted, although a weak association was found between femininity and dependency, jealousy, and power imbalance. Jealousy and possessiveness were observed in Renzetti's (1992) study as well and were suggested to be correlates that are unique to lesbian relationships.

### **2.2.2 Perpetrator, victim and resistance: Relational constructions of violence.**

Research in heterosexual IPV has focused largely on the experiences of female victims, and

the determinants of IPV. However, studies have begun to consider the relational construction of violence between victim and perpetrator, and how violence is experienced and understood by both partners (Boonzaier, 2005, 2008; Boonzaier & de la Rey, 2003, 2004). In similar vein, research in lesbian IPV has contained bias, as it has focused primarily on the experiences of the victim, even though some studies had included participants who had identified as perpetrators of IPV. For example, in Lie and Gentlewarrior's (1991) study, 51.5% of the women who had reported being abused also reported that they had perpetrated abuse on a partner. Several early studies have been criticised for not differentiating between victims and perpetrators (West, 2002), especially in samples that included both partners from a dyad; and for not having distinguished between acts of self defense, and cases where the victim/perpetrator binary oscillated between partners.

Peterman and Dixon (2003) note the importance of differentiating between self-defence and abuse. The concept of 'mutual battering' in lesbian relationships suggests that both partners contribute equally to the violence in the relationship (Peterman & Dixon, 2003), and is a common misnomer as both partners are seldom both the abuser and the victim (West, 2002) or account equally for incidents of IPV. Scherzer (1998) argues further that the term is problematic as it conveys the idea that abuse between two women is not as serious if perpetrated by a male. Many studies used instruments such as the *Conflicts Tactics Scale*. The scale does not include measures of social desirability, which should be considered when working with marginalised populations, but perhaps even more so when working with samples that include partners from the same dyad, as abusive partners may be less inclined to disclose the abuse in the context of stigma and silence around abuse in the lesbian community (Murray & Mobley, 2009).

Unlike many other studies which looked primarily at victim experiences, a study conducted by Ohms (2008) in Germany explored the *process* of IPV in lesbian relationships,

based on two data sets, namely, the annual analysis of counselling cases kept by the German lesbian counselling services, and a series of interviews conducted with 20 lesbian women who had identified as perpetrators of IPV. Similar to Boonzaier's (2005) study, a component of Ohms' (2008) study included interviews with both partners in order to elicit the interactional nature of complementary structures in a lesbian relationship. The analyses focused on the process of violence/abuse in lesbian relationships as opposed to the perpetrator/victim binary, and pointed to the interactional nature of relationships and a range of violent dynamics (Ohms, 2008).

Ohms (2008) identified two broad categories of violent dynamics contained in abusive relationships. The first, termed the *one-directional model*, resembled most closely the victim/perpetrator binary within heterosexual relationships. This model was further divided into the *abusive partnership* sub-type, characterised by increasingly severe forms of violence and decreasing intervals between incidents; and the *affect-accented dynamic* sub-type, characterised by violence of a more spontaneous nature. Ohms' (2008) study highlighted the complexity of same-sex IPV dynamics and its implications for risk-assessment. Mainstream cultural constructions of women as victims do not necessarily exclude women perpetrators. Women perpetrators of same-sex IPV might also believe that they are victims and that their violence is justified. Perpetrators are also likely to grapple with normative constructions of women as gentle, caring and motherly (Ohms, 2008). The second model presented with more difficulty due to the absence of a perpetrator/victim frame. In this regard, consequences that may be overlooked included contexts in which both women might require protection or the denial of aggression at the expense of the victim who required support or protection.

## **2.3 Correlates of Same-Sex / Lesbian IPV**

Similar to heterosexual IPV, power and control are considered central to understanding intimate partner abuse in lesbian relationships. However, in the absence of different gender partners, researchers have begun to theorise about the balance of power within same-sex relationships when considering conflict, and have argued that both partners are likely to compete for power although not always in explicit ways (Greene, Causby, & Miller, 1999). The power/control paradigm of understanding lesbian IPV, while not aligned to feminist theorising of violence (McKenry, et al, 2006), has shifted the analytical focus on other sources of power differentials. In same-sex relationships, these include the effects of exposure to homophobia and heterosexism, including sexual minority stress, the experience of internalised homophobia, the relationship dynamics that underpin the oscillation of the role of abuser between partners, the psychological threat of ‘outing’ a partner, and social alienation due to society’s non-recognition of same-sex partner abuse and the consequent lack of support from family, friends and community (Elliot, 1996). The growing recognition of the unique dynamics that characterise lesbian IPV has resulted in scholarly attention to correlates that are thought to be specific to same-sex IPV. These are explored below.

**2.3.1 ‘Coming out’ and disclosure.** Berg, Ross, Weatherburn and Schmidt (2013) maintain that one of the ways to counter internalised homonegativity is to promote self-acceptance and a positive sense of self for gay identities. Within mainstream psychology, the ‘coming-out’ process has been viewed as a psychological and developmental indicator of emotional well-being and mental health of LGBT persons and is thought to reflect a positive sense of self and self-acceptance. This view is largely based on stage theories such as the one proposed by Cass (1984) which outlines a linear model of sexual identity development. Disclosure of one’s sexual identity to family, peers, colleagues and other persons is thought to reflect pride in and full acceptance of one’s sexual identity, and integration of one’s sexual

identity with dominant social norms, and hence advances the idea that it is psychologically healthy to disclose one's gay, lesbian or bisexual sexual identity. In doing so, it locates adjustment primarily as an intrapsychic process. While the coming out process might reflect a psychologically healthy state of self-acceptance of sexual identity; the model does not consider important contextual factors, such as social attitudes around same-sex sexuality, that might mediate the decision to disclose one's sexual identity or not. Homophobic contexts, social prejudice and sexual stigma (Herek, 2000, 2004) are factors that are less likely to encourage disclosure of a sexual identity that is not considered normative. A decision to not disclose in a context of homophobia and heterosexism may not imply psychological maladjustment or non-acceptance of one's sexual identity. To ignore contextual factors also means that the power relations inherent in social structures which produce certain dominant truths such as heterosexuality as the superior or normative form of sexuality are also ignored. Such power relations are evident in the assumed heterosexuality of people or the exemption of heterosexual people from the 'coming out' process. Thus psychological discourse around attachment and the coming out process may be argued to maintain heterosexism in covert ways.

Mohr and Fassinger (2003) point to the subtle ways in which context shapes adult interpersonal relationships and sexual identity disclosure among LGB person. They used attachment theory to explore a model linking parental and general attachment variables to two dimensions of the coming out process, namely, self-acceptance and self-disclosure of sexual orientation. Based on a sample of 489 LGB adults which included 288 (58.9%) lesbian and bisexual women, the model examined representations of childhood attachment experiences with parents, perceptions of parental support for sexual orientation, general working model of attachment, and LGB variables. Results generally supported the proposed model that general attachment security was associated with interpersonal behaviours and

internal states related to LGB identity. They also reported that individuals who had difficulties accepting their own sexual orientation were more likely than others to exhibit a pattern of high avoidance and high anxiety known as ‘fearful avoidance’. They were also less likely to believe that others would respond to them in a trustworthy, sensitive, and accepting manner. Attachment avoidance and anxiety were associated with self-acceptance difficulties. Avoidance, and not anxiety (sensitivity to possible rejection) was associated with low levels of outness in everyday life, and was related to willingness to rely on and trust others. While attachment theory showed some applicability to LGB identity and the coming out process, it does not fully account for the complexity inherent in decision making around sexual identity disclosure. The behaviours that are associated with the term ‘attachment avoidance’ may not necessarily be attributed to early childhood relationships but rather to systemic and contextual factors.

Homophobia and heterosexism, impact on issues of trust, even in the presence of supportive and accepting family systems. For example, a significant positive relation was found between avoidance and negative identity for men but not for women which might point to the influence of cultural notions around gender and sexuality. Gender differences were also reported in a doctoral study that used attachment theory to explore parental concerns about their children’s sexual orientation where parental concerns were significantly higher for gay sons than for lesbian daughters (Desnoyers, 2014). Gender differences might suggest that patriarchal societies are more accepting of same-sex relationships between women as this mirrors close friendships between women which are considered to be common and acceptable and strengthens the perceptions of women as being more emotionally dependent in comparison to men. In both studies, the results point to the influence of contextual and situational factors in adult attachments and draw attention to the limitations of attachment theory and linear models of LGB sexual identity development to explain same-sex IPV. More

specifically the complex intersections of contextual factors and LGB identity formation, self-concept and the quality of adult attachments needs to be considered.

**2.3.2 Mental health effects, minority stress, internalised homophobia, homophobia, and heterosexism.** Intimate partner violence (IPV) is recognised as a major public health concern that is associated with a range of negative consequences for mental and physical health, relationships and social networks, occupational functioning, and emotional and behavioural functioning for individuals, for families, and for communities (Jewkes, 2002; McClennen, 2005; McClennen, Summers & Daley, 2002). Depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are the most common mental health consequences associated with IPV generally, with high rates of comorbidity (Campbell, 2002). In their study which explored the risk correlates and health outcomes associated with same sex IPV, Houston and McKirnan (2007) reported that 43 % of the 265 gay men who had experienced IPV, reported higher levels of depression in comparison to the participants who reported no experience of IPV. Psychological abuse and stalking have been found to be significant predictors of PTSD and depression symptoms among women who have experienced IPV (Mechanic, Weaver & Resick, 2008). IPV has also been associated with increased risk for suicide ideation and suicide, increased anxiety, insomnia and social dysfunction (Campbell, 2002).

Alcohol and substance abuse have been shown to positively correlate with IPV in same-sex relationships (Schilit, Lie, & Montagne, 1990; Renzetti, 1992). Although alcohol and substance abuse is not a unique correlate to lesbian IPV, due to sexual minority stress, LGBT persons are considered to be at a higher risk for alcohol and substance abuse disorders. In both Schilit et al.'s (1990) and Renzetti's (1992) studies, lesbian women who reported abuse of drugs and alcohol were more likely to engage in IPV. A study by Fortunata and Kohn (2003) with 100 lesbian women, reported a positive correlation between battering and

alcohol use, with 37% of the 30 battered women having reported alcohol abuse in comparison to 16% of the non-batterer group. Batterers also scored significantly higher on the alcohol and drug dependent scales of the MCMI-III, indicative of greater problems with drugs and alcohol.

However, Houston and McKirnan (2007) point out that mental health and psychosocial correlations of same-sex IPV have to be interpreted with caution as they might not simply reflect effects of the abuse or ways of coping with the abuse, but may have in fact preceded the abusive relationships, due to factors such as minority stress, which increases risk for abuse. This is a salient point as stressors such as social isolation and alienation, social discrimination, homophobia and internalised homophobia that are associated with sexual minority status increase risk for mental health problems and IPV. In psychological literature, stressors are defined as any event that causes change that might require an individual to adapt to new circumstances. Social stress theory suggests that certain conditions in the social environment may represent sources of stress with potential adverse effects on mental and physical health. Minority stress is identified as a form of social stress and is described as the effects on psychological well-being of social prejudice and discrimination based on a culturally and socially ascribed inferior status (Meyer, 2003). Minority stress theory draws upon various social psychological and sociological perspectives, including intergroup relations, suicidality, and self-esteem. While minority stress is applicable to all sexual minority groups, differences in experience exist between groups. It is therefore necessary to differentiate the experiences of lesbian women from other sexual minority groups (R. Lewis, Kholodkov, & Derlega, 2012).

Meyer (2003) undertook a review of 10 studies from 1970 – 2001 that compared the prevalence of mental disorders among LGB and heterosexual persons and included an examination of the effects of within-group processes on mental health between minority and



non-minority groups. The review concluded that compared to heterosexuals, lesbian women and gay men experienced more mental health problems that included mood and anxiety disorders, including major depressive disorder (MDD), and suicidality. The underlying causation was understood to stem from environmental factors relating to stigma, prejudice, discrimination. A large-scale study of 720 LGB women and men indicated higher levels of psychological, physical and sexual violence across the lifespan in comparison to heterosexuals (Balsam, Rothblum, & Beauchaine, 2005). An empirical study by Balsam and Szymanski (2005) sought to examine the impact of minority stress on IPV in same-sex relationships, based on a sample of 272 women of which 210 (77%) identified as lesbian or gay. Minority stress variables that were examined were levels of outness, internalised homophobia, and LGB discrimination and hate crime victimisation. Several significant correlations were noted for between IPV and internalised homophobia. Firstly, internalised homophobia was correlated with being victimised by physical/sexual violence, and was negatively associated with relationship quality. Internalised homophobia was also associated with both perpetration and victimisation of physical/sexual violence in the previous year. Lifetime discrimination correlated positively with all the domestic violence variables except for LGB-specific perpetration and victimisation, with lesbian women having reported more lifetime psychological aggression against a female partner than bisexual women, who reported more LGB-specific aggression against a partner. The negative impact of living in a homophobic context was also reflected in a qualitative study that explored stress in the lives of black lesbian women living in South Africa (Arndt & Hewat, 2009).

Similar to IPV in heterosexual relationships, victims may assume responsibility for the violence by understanding the violence as stemming from some personal fault. However, in same-sex relationships, self-blame and guilt may contain the added dimension of being understood to reflect a personal failure to follow feminist ideology (Balsam, 2001; Barnes,

2010). Thus, the ways in which the environment fosters depressive symptoms and how depression is experienced also needs to be considered. A qualitative study by Barnard (2009) highlighted how the experience of mental illness is both a consequence of and is shaped by context. She explored the subjective experiences of depression as reported by twelve self-identified lesbian women. Problematic interpersonal relationships were reported to be the primary source of depression. Thematic analyses revealed how dominant and alternative discourses shaped their understandings of depression and sexuality. The dominant discourses that underpinned their understanding of their depression related to the medical model that viewed lesbian sexuality as pathological, depression as reflective of dysfunctional family systems, and depression viewed from the perspective of institutionalised religion.

**2.3.3 Jealousy and control.** Jealousy has been identified as a source of stress that features prominently in same-sex relationships. In psychological literature, jealousy has been defined as a negative emotion in response to a perceived threat to an exclusive dyadic relationship by a rival person (Bringle, 1995) and is most commonly considered in the context of romantic jealousy or sexual jealousy. Several theories have been proposed to explain jealousy. These include two opposing perspectives. Evolutionary theorists postulate that jealousy is associated with the loss of exclusive access to a reproductive partner and is thus universal and linked to biological sex - implying that it is independent of sexual orientation and cultural contexts. Sociocultural perspectives on the other hand maintain that jealousy is determined by culturally specific gender-socialisation that also determine how perceived threats are responded to.

Sheets and Wolfe (2001) tested these ideas through an examination of the levels of distress reported by 56 homosexual men, 29 lesbian women, 42 heterosexual men, and 75 heterosexual women, in response to a partner's sexual infidelity and emotional infidelity. The results indicated that lesbian women, gay men and heterosexual women reported more

distress to their partner's emotional infidelity, with gay men showing the highest level of distress. Heterosexual men showed the highest distress over the sexual infidelity of their partners. The results showed no support for the evolutionary perspective and partial, albeit weak support for sociocultural perspectives. This finding was consistent with an earlier study by Bringle (1995) in which homosexual men reported lower levels of experiencing and expressing sexual jealousy compared to heterosexual men. One of the reasons suggested for this is that homosexual men tend to have fewer exclusive sexual relationships. However, in a comparative study by Dijkstra, et al. (2001), based on a sample of 99 lesbian women and 138 homosexual men recruited from various gay bars in Holland, an average of 51% of lesbian women reported a partner's sexual infidelity as more upsetting than did the gay men (32%). Lesbian women also reported fewer sexual partners.

In Renzetti's (1992) study, 70% of the participants reported that jealousy was a source of conflict in their relationships, and 31 of the 40 participants that were interviewed reported that their partners were jealous and possessive. Significant correlations were noted between jealousy and 12 forms of abuse; of which psychological abuse was the most strongly associated with jealousy. Renzetti's (1992) findings were supported in a later study by Telesco (2003). In her study that explored lesbian sex role identity and abusive behaviour, Telesco (2003) hypothesised that jealousy would be positively correlated with abuse. Participants completed a series of questionnaires, including questions relating to dependency, jealousy, and power imbalance which were drawn from Renzetti's (1992) study. Similar to Renzetti's (1992) study, analyses revealed a significant correlation between jealousy and overall abuse and psychological abuse. A weak correlation between femininity and dependency, jealousy, and power imbalance was noted.

While the bulk of scholarship on jealousy in same-sex relationships has examined gender differences and focused on romantic and sexual jealousy, a study by Pelka (2009)

explored a less researched area, that of maternal jealousy. By ‘maternal jealousy’ Pelka (2009) refers to the feelings of jealousy concerning relationships with a child that are traditionally associated with the construct of ‘maternal’ such as pregnancy and breastfeeding. In her ethnographic study, she conducted in-depth interviews with 30 *lesbian-first* families who had at least one child. ‘Lesbian-first’ families refer to families in which children are conceived within the lesbian family, as opposed to lesbian step-families where children have been conceived in previous heterosexual relationships. In her study, 10 couples had adopted infants, 10 couples had used assisted insemination (AI), and 10 couples had used in-vitro fertilisation (IVF) to biologically co-mother. Pelka (2009) argued that although co-parenting presents with the opportunity to build more equitable lesbian relationships, it also poses a potential challenge in contexts where both women wish to mother in the traditional heterosexual sense. In her sample, 85% of the women from all three samples were raised in heterosexual families. Their constructions of motherhood were thus influenced and based on early family experiences of mothers in heterosexual dyads. The analyses revealed that maternal jealousy was reported by all couples in which both partners desired to carry a pregnancy, while only 10% of couples who had adopted children, reported feelings of maternal jealousy. A high rate of maternal jealousy (64%) was also noted in couples where one partner was infertile. Some women reported that sharing motherhood was a difficult task, especially when children preferred a particular parent as the primary caregiver. Factors that mediated maternal jealousy were those that were aligned to more traditional gender roles, such as clear division of labour (92%) and clear role difference (83%).

**2.3.4 Fusion and dependence.** The term fusion, often used interchangeably in psychological literature with the terms enmeshment, symbiosis or merger, was first used in the context of psychotherapy with adult couples to describe a developmental process from fusion to individuation. The term was used to refer to a person’s state of embeddedness in a

relational context (Karpel, 1976). Karpel (1976, p. 65) defined individuation as "... the process by which a person becomes increasingly differentiated from a past or present relational context. This process encompasses a multitude of intrapsychic and interpersonal changes...by which a person comes to see her/himself as separate and distinct within the relational context in which she/he is embedded". This process was assumed to be a universal one and any consequences, defences or ambivalence arising from the perceived prolonged continuation of the state of fusion, was viewed as a form of psychopathology. The term was later used by Krestan and Bepko (1980) in the context of psychotherapy with lesbian women to describe what they considered to be a dysfunctional interpersonal dynamic, characterised by an "intense anxiety over any desire for separateness or autonomy within the relationship" (p. 277).

Krestan and Bepko (1980) adopted a systems framework and hypothesised that fusion initially marked an adaptive response to a hostile environment. In the face of social hostility and social unacceptance, partners depended on each other for validation and support and strengthened boundaries that differentiated the couple from society. However, the increasing rigidity of boundaries that sought to protect the couple from community negativity also increased the possibility for conflict even within committed relationships. Thus, the pathological view of fusion was linked to homophobic social contexts. High levels of fusion was associated with lesbian relationships. While some evidence based on clinical samples have been derived, evidence from studies using non-clinical samples do not support this hypothesis. A study by Causby, Lockhart, White and Greene (1995) with a non-clinical sample of 275 lesbian women found only moderate levels of fusion reported by the women. A smaller study by Hill (1999) sought to examine fusion and conflict in a non-clinical sample of eight couples recruited from a women's summer camp in the United Kingdom (UK). Hill's (1999) study revealed that fusion, as defined as an unhealthy psychological state, was not

characteristic of the couples generally, although it may have presented as a problem in couples that attended therapy as was the case with the clinical sample used by Krestan and Bepko (1980).

A comparative study by Greene, et al. (1999) found no significant differences in the levels of fusion reported by heterosexual and lesbian women. A sample of 66 self-identified lesbian women, recruited from a LGB march in Washington was compared to 77 heterosexual women recruited from introductory communication classes from a southeastern university. All participants completed an anonymous questionnaire that assessed fusion, dependence, closeness, autonomy, and relational satisfaction using a 5-point Likert Scale. The results indicated no differences in the levels of fusion reported by either group of women. Furthermore, both groups revealed high correlations between the level of fusion and satisfaction based on Rubin's (1970) Love-for-Partner Scale, and the level of fusion and dependence. Other similarities between groups included the weak correlation between fusion and autonomy; and that the level of fusion decreased with age and the length of relationships. The one difference between the groups was that closeness was significant for heterosexual women only.

However, in a later study by Miller, et al., (2001) which sought to explore the predictors of violence in lesbian relationships, fusion was found to be the highest predictor of physical aggression. Their sample consisted of 284 self-identified lesbian women recruited from a large women's music festival in the Southeast region of the US. The women completed an anonymous questionnaire that measured conflict resolution tactics (consisting of two subscales, physical aggression and physical violence), fusion, control, independence and self-esteem. The women reported higher incidence of physical aggression than physical violence. Physical aggression referred to forms of physical abuse that were considered 'minor'. These included pushing and shoving a partner, threat of violence, throwing an

object, or slapping a partner. In a Canadian study with 77 women in long-term lesbian relationships, Ackbar and Senn (2010) differentiated between positive and negative types of closeness. This differentiation was based on Werner and Green's (1999) dimensions of closeness-caregiving and intrusiveness. 'Closeness' was operationalised as "warmth, nurturance, physical intimacy, and time spent with partners", and 'fusion' was operationalised as "assuming what partners need and think without asking them, feeling extremely anxious about being apart from partners, reacting more strongly than partners to negative things that happen to them, and being jealous and possessive" (p. 420). They examined the extent to which developmental (age and attachment style) and social (social support and outness) variables predicted levels of 'closeness' and 'fusion' in lesbian relationships. Attachment styles were based on Bartholomew's (1990) four styles; namely, secure, preoccupied, fearful, and dismissing. In addition to a demographic questionnaire, participants completed a series of measures. The results revealed significant correlations between fusion and the developmental variables. Participants who were older and who had reported more secure attachment styles reported lower levels of fusion. The opposite was indicated for participants with preoccupied attachment styles. Significant correlations were also noted for social variables and fusion. With regard to closeness, participants with a dismissing attachment style reported lesser closeness, while greater social support and increased levels of being out were correlated with higher levels of closeness with partners. Age and secure attachment styles did not appear to predict closeness. Instead closeness was correlated with relationship satisfaction. Given the correlation between relationship satisfaction and closeness, Ackbar and Senn (2010) cautioned against pathologising high levels of closeness in lesbian relationships based on heterosexual norms.

The studies discussed above point to some of the criticisms relating to the conceptualisation of fusion. This includes the perception of fusion in lesbian relationships

and by whom. Traditional definitions are both androcentric and heterosexist, in which autonomy, regarded by developmental psychologists as a psychosocial goal, is also associated with typical masculine behaviours (Burch, 1986). While heterosexual relationships involve a male-female dyad in which gender socialisation usually maintains the autonomy-intimacy balance between males and females respectively, this might not be the case in same-sex relationships. In her analytic review of literature that explored the concept of fusion in lesbian relationships, Gold (2003) noted the feminist argument around gender socialisation, and that gender is central to understanding lesbian fusion. Feminist thinking borrows from ego psychology, which advances the idea that girls differentiate from their mothers in ways that still maintain their connectedness as they develop their gender identity. What is considered unhealthy within the context of psychotherapy or the discipline of psychology, generally may be considered in a positive light by the lesbian women themselves. This is particularly significant in the African context where the notion of ‘community’ (Ratele, 2009) might encourage dependence as a healthy relationship dynamic.

## **2.4 Violence in Lesbian Relationships in South Africa**

Although IPV in lesbian relationships was acknowledged soon after the first democratic elections (Kwesi & Webster, 1997), there are no prevalence rates for same-sex IPV in South Africa. There are, however, a handful of studies that, provide some quantitative and qualitative insights into violence and abuse within same-sex relationships in South Africa. A qualitative study commissioned by the Joint Working Group (JWG) in 2003 investigated the levels of empowerment among LGBT persons in the Gauteng metropolitan. The study included several areas of focus. Of particular relevance to the current study were social lifestyles; victimisation experienced; experience of the police and/or criminal justice system; and wellness. Of the 487 participants that completed the self-administered



questionnaire, 86% identified as gay or lesbian and 14% identified as bisexual, with the sample consisting of 160 black women and 56 white women. Domestic violence was reported by 43.8% of black women and 33.3% of white women. Although the rate reported by black men was higher at 57.6%, during the 2002-2003 period, black women reported a much higher rate of domestic abuse (17.2% of 145 women) in comparison to both white women (8.2% of 50 women) and black men (7.8% of 141 men). Thirty one percent of participants had reported incidents of domestic violence to the police (Wells & Polders, 2004).

The same study was replicated in 2005 in the province of KwaZulu-Natal with minor changes to the questionnaire. The sample comprised of 410 respondents, of which 78% identified as lesbian or gay and 22% identified as bisexual (Wells, 2006). Fifteen percent of the participants reported that they had experienced domestic violence and 37% had reported incidents of domestic violence to the police during the 2004-2005 period. However, in the study the category 'domestic abuse' did not differentiate between partner abuse and abuse by family members.

The above two studies with a combined sample consisting of 398 self-identified lesbian and bisexual women, together with a third qualitative study that employed semi-structured interviews with eleven self-identified lesbian women aged between 19 -53 years, formed the basis of a report that sought to explore lesbian women' experiences and understandings of power at individual and societal levels (Wells et al., 2012). Analyses expanded on the dynamic between power located within the self, termed *power-self* and power at a societal level, termed *power-context*. These forms of power were argued to be influenced by the process of 'coming out', the freedom to disclose an authentic lesbian identity and a positive identity. Although homophobic acts of violence were explored in relation to power at a societal level, acts of violence between partners was alluded to in relation to the butch-femme identities in which masculine identities were linked to power and

domestic violence. While some participants viewed gender roles as being fluid, others, particularly young black participants, felt strongly that butch-femme identities needed to be adhered to (Wells et al., 2012).

Baird (2010) reported on a research project on same-sex sexuality in the North-West Province of South Africa; a province that may be described as being mainly rural, poor and under-populated. A total of 319 participants including 134 women, of which 83.6% were black, and who identified mostly as gay or lesbian completed the questionnaires. References to sexual abuse and violence were in relation to experiences at societal level and did not specify if such abuse included partner violence. A doctoral study by Henderson (2010) explored the construction of gay identities in South Africa using in-depth interviews with 15 gay men aged between 20-46 years. Of the 15 participants, six reported having experienced abuse in their intimate relationships. Henderson's (2010, 2012) study showed how abusive practices unfolded against experiences of childhood sexual abuse, heteropatriarchal constructions and constructions of class, race and social inequities. A case study from the same broader study highlighted how stereotypical constructions of masculinities underpinned abusive practices within gay relationships (Henderson & Shefer, 2008).

A study by Stephenson, de Voux, and Sullivan (2011) indicated relatively high prevalence of IPV among men who have sex with men (MSM) in South Africa. Of the 521 participants who completed the online survey through a social network site, 8.09 % reported having experienced recent physical IPV and 4.98% reported recent experiences of sexual IPV. In addition, 4.51% of participants reported having been the perpetrator of physical abuse, and .45% reported having perpetrated sexual abuse against a partner. A later Masters study explored gay men's constructions of IPV based on interviews with six self-identified gay men from Gauteng and Cape Town. Of the six participants, one also identified as a perpetrator (Moodley, 2013). Two recent doctoral studies explored violence against lesbian

women in South Africa; Lake, (2017) explored the discursive construction of corrective rape in post-apartheid literature and its positioning of lesbian women, while Judge (2015) explored the intersections of homophobic violence, identities and contexts. Although the studies did not explore lesbian IPV, they revealed, among other findings, how homophobic violence against lesbian women signalled several paradoxes inherent in how power relations and the discursive construction of violence intersect with queer identities in democratic South Africa. In all these studies, the impact of context on the incidence, dynamics and constructions of IPV were foregrounded.

In summary, current scholarship on IPV is biased towards heterosexual relationships, with the bulk of research having been conducted with heterosexual populations that involved male perpetrators and female victims (Murray, et al., 2007; Peterman & Dixon, 2003). As a result much of the scholarship on same-sex IPV has tended to model positivist theoretical paradigms and methodologies that were used to examine and explain heterosexual IPV. For example, many studies have been primarily quantitative in nature. As a result, the kind of knowledge that has been produced may be limited in conveying a holistic picture of same-sex IPV. As knowledge that is considered to be scientific and empirical, its truth effects are often significant in shaping how lesbian women are constructed and perceived by society. Thus while current same-sex research may offer some insights into same-sex IPV, it does not fully explore important qualitative aspects of the lived experiences of lesbian women. In particular, there is scant research on the complex intersections that are implicated in lesbian identities and the enactment of violence and abuse which have implications for mental health, help seeking behaviours, and the types and quality of support available to women in same-sex relationships who experience IPV. I maintain that this has produced a certain kind of lesbian woman, lesbian perpetrator and lesbian victim which brings into play several tensions that impact same-sex IPV and the lived experiences of lesbian women.

Yet, there are profound differences between heterosexual and same-sex violent relationship dynamics (Duke & Davidson, 2009; McClennen, 2005; McClennen, et al., 2002; Renzetti, 1992, 1997) which limits the applicability and use of heterosexual IPV scholarship to same-sex IPV. There is a need to also consider the interaction of larger social systems and social forces such as homophobia, heterosexism, and the invisibility of lesbian women in analyses of lesbian IPV since lesbian IPV is embedded within cultural and historical practices and ideologies. This necessitates approaches to lesbian IPV that is multi-dimensional and intersectional, and which consider the complex and simultaneous interactions between the individual, dyads, communities, and systems. An intersectional approach to understanding violence and lesbian identities is presented below.

### **2.5 An Intersectional Analysis of Lesbian Partner Violence**

Black feminist and critical race theorists have spoken and written about the complex intersections of social identity categories as early as the 1970s (Cole, 2009; hooks, 1981; Yuval-Davis, 2006a); although its introduction is usually credited to Kimberlé Crenshaw who employed the analogy of a traffic intersection to explain how the US legal system discriminated against black women because race and gender were understood to exist as mutually exclusive social categories (Crenshaw, 1991). Crenshaw (1991) argues that certain discriminatory and oppressive practices are made invisible when the focus is restricted to one particular social identity category at a time. Although identity categories such as race, class and gender may be subjected to individual ontological analyses, they cannot be reduced to categorical entities as categories constitute, and are constituted through other identity categories (Yuval-Davis, 2006b). Individuals occupy multiple social identity categories that intersect simultaneously and are inter-dependent on such intersections for their meaning (Cole, 2009) within a power grid that is fluid and historically shaped (Yuval-Davis, 2006b).

One of the criticisms levied against identity politics is that it focuses primarily on collective identities and highlights differences *between* groups, such as the differences between the experiences of black women and white women (hooks, 1981). However, an intersectional analysis recognises that social identities are both individual and collective (Yuval-Davis, 2006a, 2006b). This implies that any analysis of identities should also include a focus on differences *within* groups, such as the differences in experiences among black women (Cole, 2009; Yuval-Davis, 2006a). Although black women are likely to share some concrete experiences of oppression that are based on the shared raced and gendered identities as ‘black’ and as ‘women’; there are also likely to be differences in experiences. The dynamics of how such categories shape black women’s experiences of oppression may not necessarily be the same since these social categories also intersect with other social identities and spaces, and such intersections are dynamic, shifting and complex.

Crenshaw (1991) maintains that a person’s social identities are comprised of multiple dimensions that shape how social experiences, such as the experiences of violence and oppression, are experienced. The political shift of violence from the personal to the public sphere has brought to the fore other salient ‘identity’ markers or factors that intersect with violence. This is important when we consider violence against women because how women experience and are affected by violence is also shaped by other dimensions of their identities such as race and class (Crenshaw, 1991). As Yuval-Davis (2006a, 2006b) argued, the intersections of social divisions is not a simple additive exercise that reduces group membership to various social categories. In other words, how social identities constitute individual experiences might differ, especially in relation to other intersecting social identities. The debate on whether intersections should be interpreted as additive or constitutive is ongoing (Bowleg, 2008) and has been key in arguments that contest the notion of *triple oppression* (Yuval-Davis, 2006a). Yuval-Davis (2006a) asserts:

Any attempt to essentialize 'blackness' or 'womanhood' or 'working classness' as specific forms of concrete oppression in additive ways inevitably conflates narratives of identity politics with descriptions of positionality as well as constructing identities within the terms of specific political projects. Such narratives often reflect hegemonic discourses of identity politics that render invisible experiences of the more marginal members of that specific social category and construct an homogenized 'right way' to be its member (p. 195).

Yuval-Davis (2006a, 2006b) cautions against an analysis that is reduced only to social identities and categories, since the dynamic intersections of social identities produces a multitude of complex permutations that underpin subjective experiences. Given its historical usage in political advocacy, ideas around the oppression and discrimination of marginalised groups are central to the concept of intersectionality. Intersectionality as a theoretical and analytical framework offers a way of examining how social and structural oppression impacts groups of people as a collective and on an individual basis. Fogg-Davis (2006) used an intersectional approach to analyse how the practice of same-race street harassment intersected with other structural inequalities around race, gender, poverty, cultural violence and harassment, patriarchy, and sexual orientation, to further oppress black lesbian women. Through a comparison of the community responses and national media coverage in response to the deaths of Sakia Gunn, a black lesbian teen from a poor family, Matthew Shephard, a middle-class white gay man, and Rodney King and Abner Louima, two black men who were subjected to racially motivated police brutality, Fogg-Davis (2006) illustrated how conservative attitudes in black communities maintained patriarchal practices that served to dehumanize black lesbian women with fatal consequences for them on an everyday interpersonal and community level. Fogg-Davis (2006) further considered the intersections of

the political discourse employed by black feminists and argued that those discursive intersections served to maintain patriarchy and oppress black lesbian sexual identities.

As a theoretical and analytical framework, intersectionality may also be used to explore the experiences of privilege (Crisp, 2014) and resilience. McIntyre, Antonucci, and Haden (2014) analysed the intersections of race, privilege and sexual orientation through a comparison of the subjective experiences around sexual identity disclosure and self-concealment among black and white lesbian and heterosexual women. Although black lesbian women reported the highest levels of psychological distress due to their multiple marginalised identities as black, as women and as lesbian and the need to conceal their sexual identities, white lesbian women also reported high levels of psychological distress due to differences in experiences of disclosure and identity concealment in comparison to white heterosexual women who were considered most privileged as a group and who were least likely to face decisions around whether to disclose their heterosexuality or not. In another qualitative study Bowleg, Huang, Brooks, Black, and Burkholder (2003) examined the intersections of race, gender and sexual identity among 19 black lesbian women. Although the women spoke about their experiences of sexism and heterosexism in relation to their experiences of racism and their racialised identities, they reported high levels of resilience. This highlights two important points about multiple and simultaneous intersections. Firstly, it reflects the interwoven nature of more primary social identities with other social identity categories that may not be regarded as central to identity in some contexts - for example, race as a primary social identity marker in comparison to sexual orientation. Secondly, this does not necessarily suggest that one identity is subsumed or embedded in another. Rather, the interactions between identities are fluid and changing and reflects the potential for diverse experiences within social identity categories that might otherwise generate certain assumptions about experiences based on prevailing ideas and meanings ascribed to these

identities. For example, ideas that associate marginalised groups with other negatively perceived behaviours creates certain stereotypes or social categories. An example of negative associations might be black communities, poverty and alcohol use.

Intersectionality offers a theoretical and an analytical tool (Hancock, 2008) to examine the complexity of the lived experiences of lesbian women that go beyond only looking for commonalities or focusing on particular social categories exclusively. How social and structural intersections impact on individual and collective identities is taken up further in Chapters Three, Five and Six, while intersectionality as a research methodology is explored in Chapter Four.

## **2.6 Chapter Conclusion**

This chapter attempted to critically review the kind of lesbian subject and object that is constructed in public discourse and academic (psychological) scholarship, as well as the kinds of knowledge that is obscured. While various theoretical approaches have some merits, the strong psycho-medico discourse around violence among lesbian women locates responsibility with the perpetrator. In addition, the theoretical shortcomings reveal the complexities of IPV, especially with reference to lesbian women. Many salient and nuanced dynamics inherent in lesbian violence is not adequately explored in psychological literature. I have argued that the current scholarship on lesbian IPV contributes to the construction of lesbian women as deviant, pathological, and responsible for the violence. Other important social, structural and cultural contextual factors that are implicated in the enactment of same-sex IPV is not adequately examined or considered. In light of the shortcomings, an intersectional approach that considers multiple and simultaneous intersections that impact the lives and subjective experiences of lesbian women and same-sex IPV has been advanced.



### **Chapter Three: Lesbian Identities, Gendered Subjectivities and Power**

This chapter interrogates the notions of *gendered subjectivity*, *identity*, *sexuality* and *power* by situating the lesbian *body* as central subject and site through which lesbian identities are negotiated and embodied, and through which power is maintained and contested. I employ a feminist poststructuralist framework in which I draw upon selected theoretical concepts advanced by Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, the latter whose own work was significantly influenced by Foucault, Jacques Derrida and psychoanalytic theories. The chapter begins with a brief overview of the key tenets of poststructuralism and its relevance to a feminist poststructuralist epistemology (Gavey, 1989, 2011; Weedon, 1997). Chapter Two had traced the historical constructions of lesbian IPV as it linked to lesbian identity and feminism. This chapter extends the historical analysis through a critique of key debates surrounding lesbian identities as gendered and sexualised. It begins by considering the use of labels and identity categories as discourse. As discourse, labels are shaped by historical, social and political contexts and reveal something about how lesbian women are discursively constructed as gendered and sexualised subjects. Foucault's notion of discourse argues for a link between discourse, regulatory practices and power (Foucault & Faubion, 2000) and it is within this framework that the notion of power is explored.

Thereafter gendered and sexualised identities are interrogated through a consideration of some of Butler's (1990a, 1990b, 1993, 2004) key concepts around gender, sexuality and performativity. Given the focus of the current research enquiry, this chapter is also concerned with how gendered and sexed identities intersect with power and violence. The butch-femme dyad has often been cited as mimicking traditional masculine and feminine roles and power differentials. However, while there is some evidence to support this argument, increasingly, recent scholarship points to other sources of power differentials and conflict that impact lesbian relationships. Contextual and relationships factors that are considered to be correlates

of lesbian IPV were examined in the previous chapter. In this chapter, further sources of power differentials are explored through the intersections of race, class and culture with lesbian identities and sexualities. The chapter concludes with an assessment of the utility of intersectional approaches in the study of same-sex IPV within the South African context.

### **3.1 Framing the Enquiry within a Feminist-Poststructuralist Paradigm**

There has been some debate and conflation around the distinction between poststructuralist and postmodernist approaches (Weedon, 1997). Neither construct is monolithic and refers instead to several theoretical strands grouped under an umbrella term. Agger (1991) concedes that a clear distinction between poststructuralism and postmodernism is difficult due to the overlap of several theoretical arguments. Both approaches rejected the humanist and essentialist ideas of a singular universal truth that underpinned the grand narratives that dominated much of western modern philosophy and both recognised the discursive constitution of reality. ‘Postmodernism’ itself is a contested label (Weedon, 1997) and is difficult to define. Postmodernism argued for a socially constructed reality in which there is no objective reality. The individual as subject is constituted in multiple ways through language and discourse (Graham, 2011). Like postmodernism, poststructuralism refers to a range of theoretical positions that share certain fundamental assumptions about language, meaning and subjectivity. For Agger (1991), the Derridean concept of *deconstruction* is at the heart of poststructuralism. Indeed, Derrida’s *deconstruction* as a critique of the structuralist premise that the system of language structures reality and meaning for individuals may be argued to signal a central underlying concept in poststructuralism. While structuralism emphasised the existence of some form of central power, the interrelations between binary oppositions in which one is more important than the other and the conditioning of the individual by linguistic structures; poststructuralism viewed language as being in a state of

flux and created the individual as *subject*, embedded in social interactions that are fragmented. Subjectivity is therefore socially produced through a variety of discursive events. Poststructuralism challenged the foundationalist view of the individual as a rational, autonomous subject on which ontology and epistemology are formed (Namaste, 1994). In other words, poststructuralism refuted the claim that individuals, as rational beings, were regarded as the foundation for knowledge and political and moral action (Namaste, 1994). Instead, poststructuralist thought advanced that subjects do not exist independent of a historical, political and social context but are instead:

...embedded in a complex network of social relations... [which] in turn determine which subjects can appear where, and in what capacity. The subject is... constituted in and through specific socio-political arrangements... [and] are the effects of a specific social and cultural logic. The network of relations determine which subjects can appear where, and in what capacity. The challenge, then, is to make sense of the ways in which subjectivities are at once framed and concealed (Namaste, 1994, p. 221).

Although Foucault's work is most often categorised as being poststructuralist (even though he himself did not wish to be fixed to any specific theoretical orientation), his work is also sometimes categorised as being postmodern (Agger, 1991). As such, some theorists such as Foucault may be argued to straddle both theoretical positions. Likewise, Judith Butler's work has been associated with a range of theoretical frameworks including critical theory, queer theory and poststructuralism. However, as Gavey (1989) cautions in her motivation for the value of employing a *feminist* poststructuralist approach as advanced by Weedon (1997), the very exercise of trying to 'fix' meaning and definition to poststructuralism (and for that matter Foucault and Butler) contradicts poststructuralist thinking given "...its resistance to

definition or even identification, presumably because such practices represent an attempt to pin down an essence that does not exist” (p. 460).

Weedon (1997) used the term *feminist poststructuralism* to refer to the application of poststructuralist theory to advance the feminist agenda by probing how power is exercised and to consider how gender, class and race might be transformed by situating such analyses within historical contexts. Recognising that feminism is a theory, a practice and politics (Bhavnani & Coulson, 2005; Weedon, 1997). Feminist poststructuralism is “a mode of knowledge production which uses poststructuralist theories of language, subjectivity, social processes and institutions to understand existing power relations and to identify areas and strategies for change” (Weedon, 1997, pp. 40-41). Gavey (1989, 2011) argues in support of the utility of Weedon’s (1997) concept of feminist poststructuralism for feminist psychology. A feminist poststructuralist approach challenges the positivist and empiricist nature of mainstream psychology that has produced essentialist notions of human nature and gender that often go unquestioned even within feminist psychology. This is evident in the argument for an ‘essential womanhood’, the assumption of natural female heterosexuality (Kitzinger, 1996) and the ways in which feminist psychology as a science enforce forms of compulsory heterosexuality (A. Rich, 1980). Gavey (1989) argues that feminist poststructuralism should “...be concerned with disrupting and displacing dominant (oppressive) knowledges” (p. 463) that underpin gender relations through the development of “historically, socially, and culturally specific” (p. 463) scholarship. In recognising the discursive constitution of subjectivity, feminist poststructuralism recognises the fluid and dynamic nature of gendered subjectivities as opposed to notions of *woman* or *lesbian* as fixed and stable social identities. Although the very same qualities that allow for the subversion of mainstream feminist psychology and new ways of approaching feminist psychology has been critiqued by some feminist psychologists as problematic due to its lack of theory that is grounded in experience,

its usage of discourse that may limit accessibility, and its relativism, Gavey's (1989, 2011) advancement of feminist poststructuralism illustrates how the gap between feminist psychology, politics and advocacy may be bridged. In a later article in which she reflected on her arguments for a feminist poststructuralist approach, Gavey (2011) refined her stance through the suggestion that feminist poststructural scholarship required a "theoretical impurity" (p. 187) through the simultaneous working of language as descriptive and as constitutive.

However, Foucault has been criticised for not examining how power has been deployed and contested in the lives of women at specific historical moments in ways that produce certain kinds of gendered subjects and subjectivities (Deveaux, 1994). Despite feminist criticism of the androcentric focus of Foucault's work, many feminists have argued for the utility of Foucauldian concepts in understanding issues around power and gender (Diamond & Quinby, 1988; Macleod & Durrheim, 2002; Phelan, 1990; Sawicki, 1986, 1988);. In addition, many feminists have used his notions of discourse, knowledge and power to theorise about women's experiences and gendered subjectivities (Blood, 2005; Boonzaier, 2017; Butler, 1990a, 1993, 2004; Gavey, 1989, 2011; Judge, 2018). Diamond and Quinby (1988) argue that feminism and Foucauldian theory offer new points of empowerment and resistance through a complementary application of both theoretical approaches. They list four points of convergence that they consider particularly useful in revealing contemporary modes of power and domination. These four areas are the body as a site of power, localised forms of power, the constitutive role of discourse, and the challenge of the western, masculinist (white) elite in the production of an essential truth. Furthermore, in regard to the current study, Butler's (1990a, 1993, 2004) extension of Foucauldian concepts in her analyses of how power is deployed in the construction of gendered subjects, subvert earlier feminist constructions of the female 'subject' as possessing an essential feminine sexuality. These

concepts offer a way of understanding the intersections of gender, identity and power within the current historical, social and cultural contexts in South Africa. Thus, poststructuralism, through the work of Foucault and Butler in this study, proffer ways of thinking about how *black lesbian women* as subjects are discursively constituted in current day South African society and the positions that they take up in same-sex, sometimes violent, relationships. The following sections outline key theoretical concepts advanced by Foucault (1972, 1978, 1980, 1982, 1984, 1988, 1995, 2000) and Butler (1990a, 1990b, 1993, 2004) that are pertinent to this study. In particular, it focuses on the concepts of discourse, knowledge, power and gendered subjectivities as a theoretical framework to the study enquiry and analyses.

### **3.2 Discourse, Knowledge and Power**

In Foucauldian analyses, discourse, knowledge and power cannot be understood as separate concepts or entities. Foucault viewed discourse as "... 'large groups of statements' governing the way we speak about and perceive a specific historical moment or moments... as repeatable events that are connected by their historical contexts..." (Salih, 2002, p.47). Discourse may be described as being historically specific bodies of knowledge that produce certain discursive formations that have certain 'truth effects' (Foucault, 1972). Discursive formations, such as *medicine, criminality, homosexuality* and *madness*, refer to regular associations and groupings of particular types of statements, often associated with particular institutions or sites of power, such as schools, universities, prisons and mental institutions, which influence how people perceive and think about their own, and others' behaviours or events (Mills, 2003). Foucault (Foucault & Gordon, 1980) maintained:

...that truth isn't outside power, or lacking in power.... Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of

truth...the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true (p. 131).

Embedded within these discursive formations are disciplinary practices that simultaneously produce and govern how particular subjects and objects are constructed (Foucault, 1972). In this way, behaviour is controlled and regulated in ways that are shaped by and reflect specific historical moments. As a regulatory practice, discourse structures what we perceive and understand to be true. These complex truth effects keep certain dominant discourses in circulation while others are marginalised. Discourse is thus linked to the notion of knowledge and power, being “both an instrument and an effect of power” (Foucault, 1978, p. 101). The historical specificity of discourse means that discourse is never static - instead it has the potential to change as new truths are established and new interpretations and new forms of knowledge are offered. Thus, knowledge produced through discourse is socially constructed and is culturally, politically and historically specific. Given that knowledge, experience and subjectivity are transient and inherently unstable and that knowledge is constructed at different points in time, there is no progressive accumulation towards a particular truth. This suggests that there is no essential truth but rather a plurality of meanings, experiences and subjectivities which are constituted through discourse. For example, the shift in the use of the term ‘intimate partner violence’ instead of ‘domestic battering’ illustrates the historic specificity of discourse and the kinds of subjects and objects that are produced. This change in discourse has brought into being subjects of violence who are not male and somewhat obscure objects of violence that exist within non-traditional domestic spaces. In assuming subject positions other than those associated with traditional constructions of women, women challenge dominant social and cultural scripts around

womanhood and violence, including the visible and hidden forms of violence that are produced. Knowledge, produced through discourse, assists in establishing forms of power by, in turn, producing certain truths that ensure that certain discourses remain in circulation. For example, scientific discourse has been used to produce and justify certain views about sanity/insanity and ‘natural’/perverse forms of sexuality. However, the construction of scientific knowledge itself needs to be viewed historically within the prevailing social conditions at the time. Foucault’s archaeological analysis sought to reveal how knowledge determines what counts as scientific discourse conditions. For example, *Madness and civilisation* (1988) and *Discipline and punish* (1995) may be regarded as historical analyses of how conceptual distinctions between reason and insanity, or the regulation of behaviour and criminality were discursively and socially produced in ways that influenced how people thought about those distinctions and their own positioning in relation to those distinctions in ways that perpetuated such conceptual distinctions.

Foucault’s (1982) notion of power deviated from an understanding of power as something that is possessed by an individual or an institution as argued by Marxist theorists. Foucault was interested in *how* power is constituted and went further to argue that this ‘how’ is also where power is located (Foucault & Gordon, 1980). Foucault (Foucault & Faubion, 2000) argued that it is in the relationship between individuals and institutions, and the “regimes of knowledge” (p. 331) that power operates. It is through socially and historically produced discourses that the material basis of power is established and maintained by those who have the power to regulate dominant, ‘truth’ discourses, highlighting the political and economic agenda inherent within power. McHoul and Grace (1993) provide an eloquent summary of Foucault’s notion of power and the possibilities (of resistance) that come into being as a result:



Power is...the multiplicity of force relations extant within the social body. Power's conditions of possibility actually consist of this moving substrate of force relations: the struggles, confrontations, contradictions, inequalities, transformations and integrations of these force relations. Thus we are 'positioned' within any struggle only as a consequence of a struggle for power...a strategic manoeuvre must be countered by an opposing manoeuvre.... (p. 84)

Foucault was therefore concerned with the complex localised "network of disciplinary systems and prescriptive technologies through which power operates" (Diamond & Quinby, 1988, p. xi) in the seemingly mundane, everyday relations between people and institutions. Power is a set of relations dispersed throughout society rather than being located within particular institutions such as the state or the government. In this sense, power is everywhere and is fluid. Using the analogy of the architectural feature of the *panopticon*, Foucault (1995) showed how disciplinary systems and technologies regulate behaviour through internalised surveillance mediated through a conscious state of "permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (p.201). Forms of surveillance and self-surveillance may be observed in multiple forms of disciplinary measures in society that serve to regulate behaviour. "This new power is continuous, disciplinary, and anonymous" (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983, p.189).

However, the existence of power relations recognise the agency of individuals and subsequently create the space to resist or affirm power effects. "Individuals are the vehicles power, not its points of application" (Foucault & Gordon, 1980, p.98). Foucault (1978) was particularly interested in how resistance may lead to new behaviours. The "multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them" (Foucault 1978, p. 92) has the potential to create a

multiplicity of points of resistance by bringing into existence new forms of being and new behaviours. In this way, power was not limited to being repressive and constraining in nature, but also productive and strategic. Central to this idea is the agency of individuals as active subjects. However, individual agency does not necessarily imply a conscious awareness of power as strategy to bring about new behaviours. Instead, power relations are often hidden and not easily observable. This materiality of power relations at a local level influenced Butler's (1993) ideas around power and gender, where gender is something that is performed in particular contexts, not something that one possesses. The individual as subject is thus an important component in how power is deployed and resisted. This relationship is examined in the following section.

### **3.3 The Subject, Power and Sexuality**

Foucault (Foucault & Gordon, 1980) did not regard the individual as a subject with an essential structure or as a subject that possessed a consciousness that existed prior to ideology<sup>12</sup>. Rather, he theorised the individual as an effect of the relations that existed between individuals and institutions at particular historical moments in society. He maintained that the individual as subject is an ideological representation of society produced through the disciplinary techniques and technologies of power (Foucault, 1995). The body is both subject and object of discourse, knowledge and practice and becomes the site on which institutional and discursive forces are enacted and are contested. Foucault thus questioned the material effects of power on the body. Throughout history, cultural codes impose order on experience. The human as subject becomes an object of enquiry through “dividing practices”

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<sup>12</sup> Foucault found the notion of (Marxist) *ideology* to be problematic as it inferred the existence of a definitive truth characteristic of ‘top-down’ power relations (Mills, 2003).

wherein “[t]he subject is either divided within himself or divided from others” (Foucault, 1982, pp. 777-778). Divisive institutional practices may be observed in the dichotomous categorisations in which psychiatry separates the ‘mad’ from the ‘sane’, or criminology separates the ‘criminal’ from the ‘innocent’, or sexology separates the ‘sexually perverse’ from the ‘sexually acceptable’, as behaviours that were previously socially acceptable become categorised as being deviant. Even though same-sex practices existed before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the ‘homosexual’ as a subject and an object became discursively constituted through the regulatory discourses of psychiatry, forensic medicine and sexology. Through a process of *subjectification* that involves historically located disciplinary technique and concepts, an individual assumes the subject positions aligned to particular categories that transforms the person into a subject (Foucault & Rabinow, 1984). Thus, an individual may become a subject of sexuality for example.

Foucault maintained that sexuality as an object of perception is produced through social practices which structure it in different ways throughout history. Foucault (1978) used the term *repressive hypothesis* to describe what Victorian society considered the ways in which sexuality was repressed. Foucault (1978) maintained that while 17<sup>th</sup> century society was more tolerant of sexuality, 19<sup>th</sup> century Victorian society, and in particular, the Victorian bourgeois, sought to repress sexuality. By repression, Foucault meant that sexuality was silenced and not affirmed. Instead, sexuality was relegated to the privacy of the home, where the parents’ bedroom (Foucault, 1978), through the sanctity and institution of marriage, became a site where sexuality was constituted as legitimate and functioned not as an expression of pleasure, but as a necessary and legitimised act to reproduction. The sexual power vested in marriage also served to establish heterosexuality as the legitimate expression of sexuality, located within the family system. However, Foucault (1978) argued that the effect of such repression was actually to bring sexuality to the fore through the discourse of

silence and control as normative categories bring ‘the other’ into being<sup>13</sup>. Thus the ‘sane’ brings about the ‘mad’, the ‘innocent’ brings about the ‘criminal’, and so forth.

In similar vein, the discursive constitution of sexuality as a disciplinary regime created the possibility for other forms of sexuality. In repressing sexuality and denying its existence beyond the confines of the matrimonial relationship and bedroom, it brought into existence ‘other’ deviant subjects and illicit forms of sexuality which were reconfigured, subsumed and made invisible within the capitalist domain of profit and production. However, it was allowed to exist within spaces that were hidden from the public domain, such as mental institutions and brothels. Within these spaces, sex that was considered illicit was allowed to exist according “...to clandestine, circumscribed, and coded types of discourse. Everywhere else, modern puritanism imposed its triple edict of taboo, nonexistence and silence” (Foucault, 1978, pp 4-5). Foucault (1978) maintained that we have yet to move away from this repressed sexuality. In making the link between repression, sexuality and power, he also suggested that the fight for sexual freedom and expression becomes a political matter. To speak of sex, positions one outside the law as transgressor, as subverting established practices that silence sexuality.

To summarise, Foucault placed much emphasis on the historical events in society at a given time and whether individuals contested or reinforced certain effects of historical events. Thus, historical events were not seen as existing on a historical timeline where events occur in a way that leads to a progressive development of a ‘truth’. Instead, historical events were specific to certain times and could be understood as existing by itself at a particular time. This implied that the effects on individuals would also be such that individuals and their understandings of their identities and truths do not remain fixed or stable across historical

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<sup>13</sup> Butler (2004) builds on this idea in her critique of the ‘being’ of lesbian and heterosexual identities and the extent to which each identity brings the other into existence. This is explored in section 3.4

events or periods (McHoul & Grace, 1993). Being interested in the localised and immediate forms of power that existed outside the realms of institutions, Foucault was concerned with micro-relations of power and the forms of ‘anti-authority struggles’ in which individuals contested the immediate conditions of their lives and the effect of certain groups, people or institutions on their lives (Foucault, 1978; Foucault, 1982; Foucault, 1995; Foucault & Gordon, 1980; Foucault & Rabinow, 1984). His ideas offer a useful framework to consider lesbian identities as gendered subjectivities and the kinds of discourse and knowledge that may shape the subjectivities that are produced or contested within a post-apartheid post-colonial context. Against this theoretical backdrop, the notion of gendered subjectivities is explored and built upon by drawing primarily from the work of Judith Butler in the following section.

### **3.4 Gendered subjectivities**

Within a broad poststructuralist theoretical framework, *subjectivities* are constituted through socially constructed discourses and occur within specific historical and cultural contexts. Weedon (1997) further defines ‘subjectivity’ as “...the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world” (p. 32). The word ‘subjectivities’, in its plurality, is evocative of the fluid, dynamic and changing nature of the social processes of construction and reconstruction. Since subjectivities are not fixed and static, there is the potential for a multiplicity of ambiguous and contradictory subjectivities that differ over context and time (Burr, 2003). The absence of a singular, definitive, universal essence that governs gendered subjectivities allow for “... a multiplicity of experiences for men and women and manifold meanings attached to being masculine or feminine” (Connell, 2005, p.138). “The political

significance of decentring the subject and abandoning the belief in essential subjectivity is that it opens up subjectivity to change” (Weedon, 1997, p.32). This has two important implications: firstly, subjectivities are defined by the social contexts within which they unfold and are therefore sensitive to discursive changes within these social contexts. Secondly, subjectivities are multiple and fluid, allowing for conflicting and alternate subjectivities within the individual who becomes the site of discursive struggles. Discourses, which often predate the individual, offer particular ways of thinking about, understanding and attaching meaning to experiences. “These ways of thinking constitute our consciousness, and the positions with which we identify structure our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity” (Weedon, 1997, p. 32). Thus our positioning and subjectivities reveal something about the other (Hollway, 1984).

Similar to Foucault (1972, 1978, 1995, 1988), Butler (1990a, 1993, 2004) adopted a genealogical approach to trace the processes by which we come to assume certain positions as gendered, sexed and raced subjects within existing social norms and power structures. She challenged the essentialist notion of ontological distinctions between sex and gender and argued that both sex and gender are socially constructed through stylised repetitions or acts, embedded in language (discourse) that precedes the individual historically. Butler critiqued feminism for maintaining the sex/gender distinction and consequent exclusionary practices through the category of ‘women’ and the notion of an essential ‘womanhood’. Instead, she argued that sex and gender are unnatural in that there is no natural link between the anatomical features of one’s body (in other words one’s sex) and one’s gender. Accordingly, Butler (1990a) argued that gender is a process of becoming and that gendered subjectivities are discursive practices that are continuously performed. She used the term *performativity* to refer to the repeated acts of culturally, socially and historically scripted norms for male-female/masculine-feminine gender dichotomies. This repetition functions politically to

present gender dichotomies as natural and subsequently to preserve heteronormative hegemonic structures of power through the normalisation of the sex/gender ontological distinction. Institutional practices of normalisation, both formal and informal, serve to keep the subject in check and preserve the normative aspects of gender. Because they are repeated over time, they are dynamic and historical.

Butler (1990a; 1993) is thus engaged in an ongoing interrogation of the *subject*, the processes through which subjects emerge, and the kinds of subjectivities that are revealed through the subject's positionality. The materiality of the body itself is not static but is imbued with social meanings, which are constantly enacted. Therefore, the body cannot be reduced to its physical material state as social and cultural norms form part of the material body (Reddy & Butler, 2004). The process of 'subjecthood' is continuous, since the subject is always involved in the endless process of becoming. This suggests that it is possible to reassume or repeat subjecthood in different ways. In line with this argument, Butler (1993) posits that gender also presents as a site for resistance to cultural scripts that regulate gender. She used the term *performative agency* to refer to the degree to which one can act volitionally to transgress against normative standards where one is both constrained and enabled through repetition, or the *iterability* of gendered acts (Butler, 1993). In other words, while we come into being through social norms that predate our existence, and that define the subjects we may become; "...in being those subjects, in occupying and inhabiting those deciding norms, in incorporating and performing them, we make use of local options to rearticulate them in order to revise their power" (Reddy & Butler, 2004, p. 117).

Butler (1993) draws a distinction between gender as performative and gender as performed. The latter implies an acting of a gendered role that is taken on and presented to the social world. Gender performativity, on the other hand, involves the production of truth effects through the constant production and reproduction of a social reality brought about by

the repetition of acts that present the gender as normal and natural. Thus, ‘woman’ or ‘man’ implies a set of gendered, social and cultural scripts that seek to describe a subject in a certain way. Butler (1990a) used the notion of drag as parody to argue that drag reveals how the gendered roles that maintain heterosexuality as true and natural may be imitated and re-imitated. Thus drag subverts heterosexuality through the cultural imitation and appropriation of heterosexual gendered roles. Going back to the subjective positioning implied by identities, we might question the kinds of subjects that are produced by the identity *lesbian*. What does the identity category *lesbian* signify about gender or the person that assumes that particular identity? These questions are considered in relation to lesbian identities and subjectivities in the following sections. I first look at the discourse around lesbian as an identity category, before I explore dominant lesbian sub-cultures and the subjects that are discursively constituted within those subcultures.

### **3.5 Being and Doing *Lesbian*: Discourse, Identity and Subjectivity**

*Lesbian* and *lesbian identities* are contested categories. There have been several attempts by academics over the past three decades to define a lesbian identity. Concurrently on a practical level, lesbian women are faced with having to construct a working definition of what it means to be *lesbian*, while negotiating various intersecting spaces in their everyday lives. Attempts to define a lesbian identity have highlighted the complex intersections between gender and sexuality. Butler (1990a) viewed identity categories as an example of the “stumbling blocks” that Foucault (1978) spoke of, and she argued that “...identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalising categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression” (p. 13-14). Several “truth effects” come into play when one aligns to a particular identity category. In assuming a particular identity, the ‘I’ that emerges signifies something



about the subject's identity and positioning, but also conceals certain aspects (Butler, 1990a). As discourse, what does the label *lesbian* signify about lesbian experience, desire and sexuality and what remains unrevealed? Butler (1990a) argued that in aligning to a particular identity category such as lesbian, one is involved in a process of disclosure and coming out. In coming out through the affiliation with a particular identity category, new and different closets are created which may function to maintain oppressive practices. Butler (1990a) added that oppression may be observed not simply through acts that are overtly oppressive, but also through covert acts. Argued differently, identity categories also bring about a process of inclusion and exclusion, much like Foucault's (1982) "dividing practices" that differentiate between subjects that identify with different categories. In this way, the construction of social identities also serve to normalise those aspects of identity that the category signifies (Butler, 1990a) and reflect how dominant knowledges construct certain social identities as natural and others as not (Namaste, 1994). Foucault (1995) outlined this process when he showed how medical discourses in the 19<sup>th</sup> century discursively produced the 'homosexual' even though same-sex sexual practices existed within bourgeoisie circles in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Furthermore, through associations with 'madness' and 'criminality', homosexuality was constructed as pathological and deviant. Earlier, it was shown how modern psychiatry, most notably through the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, continues to construct same-sex sexuality as pathological despite the removal of some previous diagnostic categories. In this sense, the use of labels has implications for access and inclusivity within social and community spaces in everyday interactions, as well as within political and academic spaces. In academic spaces, definitions may determine inclusion (or exclusion) in research samples and scholarly groups (Tate, 2012) and what constitutes research-worthy subject areas and groups. Kritzinger (1996) in the aptly titled chapter *The Token Lesbian Chapter*, challenged the exclusion and marginalisation of lesbian women and lesbian issues

within traditional feminist psychology. In the same vein, despite the plethora of literature on heterosexual domestic violence since the 1960s, violence and abuse within lesbian relationships has only gained scholarly attention since the mid-eighties. Butler (1990a) suggests though that the inclusion of gay and lesbian scholarship within mainstream academia might represent an ongoing process of colonisation and recolonisation in which knowledge is appropriated in ways that create and perpetuate elite “epistemic maps” (p.121) which function to legitimise and domesticate gay and lesbian scholarship within mainstream academia.

Tate (2012) argues that earlier definitions of lesbian identities are limited and may exclude certain groups depending on how gender is constructed. She proposes two models, the ‘current identity’ model and the ‘life-course identity’ model, premised on the idea that gender is a social-psychological phenomenon whereby gender self-categorisation and gender role adherence are seen as separate and distinct processes. In the current identity model a person may be considered lesbian if that person’s current gender identity is female and she is attracted to another person whose gender identity is also female. The life-course identity model is similar but allows for self-identification as a female at any point during the life-course. Both these models imply that a person may self-identify as a woman but may not necessarily adhere to the socially prescriptive behaviours associated with being a woman. In addition, a person may self-identify as a woman but others may not view her as a woman. In both instances, self-identity supersedes public or external interpretation.

The instability of an identity category suggests that identity is a site of oppression and a site for liberation (Butler, 1990a; McPhail, 2004). As discourse, labels function in both empowering and constricting ways as individuals assume particular subject positions. Tate (2012) suggests that labels offer a way of observing the interplay between the “...socially shared meaning of any category and its representation within an individual consciousness” (p.

19). It seems, however, that the shared meanings underlying the use of these labels tend to be formed upon binary conceptualisations that reflect categories as being mutually exclusive and oppositional and involving a hierarchical arrangement where one is privileged over the other (McPhail, 2004). In other words a particular category may be regarded as more powerful than the other and therefore more valued. This raises several questions around the discourses, knowledge and social conditions that allow for the emergence of the 'lesbian' as a social identity and that of lesbian sexuality as unnatural to heterosexuality. What subject positions then are assumed by the use of labels such as 'lesbian', 'femme', 'butch' or any of the other identity sub-cultures adopted by some women in same-sex relationships? How are they differentiated from other social identities and how are these identities included or excluded? Notwithstanding the negative implications relating to the use of these labels, many lesbian women adopt various sub-culture identities as distinct gender categories with distinct gender markers. *Butch*, *femme* and *tomboy* are three of the more common broad sub-culture identities assumed by lesbian women. While butch identities refer to identities that reflect more traditional masculine characteristics and behaviours, femme identities include identities that reflect more traditional feminine characteristics and identities. Although each sub-culture identity contains several variations within, it may be argued that such variations within each sub-category, such as *soft butch* or *lipstick femme* still reflect gender permutations based on traditional masculine/feminine dichotomies. Tomboy identities tend to reflect more fluid identities through a relatively androgynous assimilation of gendered identities. The three broad identity sub-cultures are examined in the following sections.

**3.5.1 Butch-femme identities: A copy or an 'original'.** It has been argued that the butch/femme dyad within lesbian relationships emulates heteronormative dichotomous constructions of gender and the stereotypical behavioural and social indicators of being masculine and feminine. Women who identify as butch tend to adopt behaviours that are

traditionally associated with masculinity, while women who identify as femme tend to display more feminine behaviours. Based on this gendered identities among some lesbian women, it has become a common practice to use external markers such as dress code, hairstyles and gait to categorise women who appear more masculine (short hair, baggy masculine clothes) as butch and those who appear more feminine (long hair, dresses, make-up) as femme, even in the absence of any definitive self-identification by the person. Considerable debate exists around butch/femme identities within feminist discourse, chiefly because these categories are regarded as antithetical to feminist objectives, which challenge traditional gendered relationships (Hiestand & Levitt, 2005) even in instances where actions reflect a conscious decision to contest dominant gendered constructions. For example, Swarr and Nagar (2003) describe how some women in India who subscribe to a feminist framework enter into intimate relationships with other women as a political choice in protest against patriarchal practices, yet simultaneously revert to traditional gender stereotypical roles of 'husband' and 'wife' that are defined by the very discourses that they intend to contest. To utilise what Sawicki (1986) refers to as a Foucauldian "politics of difference" (p. 32), butch/femme roles may be argued to reflect the possibilities of resistance and subject positions that are created as a result of power operating within everyday interactions. In this instance, to take on what is considered traditional masculine roles may be argued to rather reflect a point of resistance to the (central, dominant) assumption of an implied (natural) relationship between gender and sexuality on which traditional gendered roles are built.

An understanding of lesbian relationships within a gender dichotomous framework is problematic and limiting (Butler, 2004). J.J. Walker, Golub, Bimbi and Parsons (2012) assert that societal imposition of identity categories and labels based on heterosexual stereotypes and physical presentations have led to often erroneous assumptions about gender and power dynamics within lesbian relationships. For example, butch lesbian women may present as

masculine through their clothing or gait, but may not necessarily engage in traditionally masculine behaviours or identify with masculinist identities. However, because they present as masculine, they may be assumed or expected to be emotionally tough, competitive, aggressive and sexually dominant. Likewise, femme presenting lesbian women may be assumed to always embrace and exhibit traditionally feminine behaviours. For example, femme lesbian women may be assumed to only prefer butch presenting partners and to be sexually passive in a relationship. The gendered nature of identities is also reflected in how abusive relationships are envisaged. Butch lesbian women are more likely to be perceived the perpetrators in abusive relationships compared to their femme counterparts. Rosario, Schrimshaw, Hunter, and Levy-Warren (2006) cautions against stereotypical associations of butch lesbian women as masculine, assertive and dominant and therefore the perpetrators of violence and of femmes as passive, submissive victims as these are not always accurate reflections of the dynamics (subjectivities) within a relationship. They argue further that distinguishing between the abuser and the victim poses a challenge in determining access to support when dealing with butch/femme relationships. In such cases, the perceptions of service providers are often influenced by heteronormative notions of masculinity and associated power, whereby lesbian women who are perceived to be more masculine are also often perceived to be more powerful and more likely to perpetrate the abuse, even if this is contrary to the facts (Aulivola, 2004).

Subscription to heteronormative notions of masculinity and femininity, though, also implies that certain identities are privileged in certain spaces and may be experienced as empowering. Although femme-presenting identities offer some degree of protection from public scrutiny due to the assumption of heterosexuality, masculine identities may enjoy greater privilege through the freedom to pursue activities that are traditionally considered masculine, such as sport, smoking cigarettes or drinking alcohol. Lane-Steele (2011) in her

ethnographic study of black lesbian women from South Carolina argues that the masculine identities adopted by black lesbian *studs*<sup>14</sup> may be situated within the historical constructions of black masculinity. The emasculation and ‘othering’ of black masculinity due to (white) hegemonic masculinity as well as political, economic and cultural oppression gave rise to what is termed ‘protest masculinities’. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005, p. 848) define protest masculinity as “a pattern of masculinity...which embodies the claim to power typical of regional hegemonic masculinities in western countries, but which lacks the economic resources and institutional authority that underpins the regional and global patterns”. Lane-Steele drew on Coles’ (2008) concept of “mosaic masculinities” which described oppressed and ‘othered’ men’s selective adoption and subsequent augmentation of aspects of hegemonic masculinity that privileged them; to argue that the lesbian studs’ adoption of protest-hypermasculinity functioned strategically in two ways. Firstly it afforded protection from oppressive practices such as homophobia, racism and heterosexism that marginalised black lesbian women in unique ways. For example, because studs appear more masculine, black effeminate gay men may be easier targets for homophobia than the studs, not just by the heterosexual society but by the lesbian studs themselves. Many of the studs in Lane-Steele’s study expressed prejudicial attitudes towards black gay men. Secondly, it afforded them some degree of power and privilege despite their subordinated position as black lesbian women in a patriarchal society. For example, they may gain access to traditional male spaces because they appeared more masculine. Lane-Steele emphasised that the studs adopted aspects of protest-hyper masculinity (as opposed to hegemonic masculinity) that allowed access to power and dominance but also maintained that such a process was an unconscious one. Halberstam (1998, p.2) argued however, that it is this very adoption of masculine identities, linked to power and privilege, that contributes to the perpetuation of patriarchal practices that

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<sup>14</sup> As described by the author.

oppress women. Notwithstanding the adoption of masculine identities, some of the women in Lane-Steele's study insisted that they were female and had no desire to be males, even though they also conceded that they self-identified as studs and understood the discourse and social implications surrounding the use of this particular label. This apparent contradiction provides an effective illustration of both the fluidity and the multifariousness of gender identity and provides support for Tate's (2012) thesis that gender self-identity, as a social-psychological process, surpasses public or external interpretations.

Regardless of the masculinisation and feminisation of butch-femme identities respectively, Butler (1990a, 2004) questions the assumption that homosexuality, and butch-femme identities in particular, represent imitations of heterosexuality. She draws attention to the inter-relatedness of heterosexuality and homosexuality as well as the instability of all identity categories, including heterosexual identities, and maintains that one of the truth effects of gender performativity is that heterosexuality is presented as the true original in relation to all other gender identities, which represent copies. However, for something to be recognised as an original, it requires affirmation from its copy. Thus, the notion of heterosexuality as origin is dependent upon the notion of homosexuality as the derivative. Since the normative essentialism of both identities are constantly being performed and inscribed, both identity categories are unstable. Thus, "lesbianism as fake calls into question the claims of heterosexual priority" (p.124). Such a notion of identities destabilises the power of heterosexuality as an enduring truth.

**3.5.2 Tomboy androgyny: Protection and subversion or acceptable gender-nonconformity?** Tomboy identities, sometimes referred to as *tom*, *thom* or *boi* reflects more androgynous identities which are similar to the heteronormative notion of a tomboy. In other words, a female who displays some aspects of traditional masculine behaviours while still conforming to some traditional feminine gender stereotypical roles and behaviours

(Blackwood, 2009; Craig & LaCroix, 2011; Paechter & Clark, 2007). Implied in this notion of tomboy is the sense of an essential feminine quality – hence although a girl or woman may be tomboyish, she is still recognised as being a girl or a woman. Craig and LaCroix (2011) argue that the tomboy identity offers heterosexual and lesbian women protection as subscription to masculine behaviours and practices may be explained within the context of acceptable gender nonconformity. The tomboy identity offers lesbian women, especially closeted lesbian women, protection in this way as their sexual orientation may not be questioned. The tomboy identity also provides agency for women to defy traditional feminine roles and to access traditionally masculine spaces without the threat of sanctions that may otherwise accompany such defiance. One of the reasons posited for the protective function of this identity is that it is associated with masculine skills and competencies, rather than to sexuality and is therefore regarded as less threatening to traditional heteronormative practices. Based on this reasoning, masculine attire, for example may be seen to be functional and not a statement of gender defiance. For this reason too, tomboyish or more masculine presenting women athletes may be more acceptable, especially if they are part of teams that have a large number of tomboyish women. Craig and LaCroix (2011) extend their argument on the protective nature of the tomboy identity to state that the assumed transient nature of the tomboy identity may also present it as less threatening to established gender binaries as there is an expectation that tomboy girls will eventually outgrow the masculine behaviours and will fully embrace feminine roles.

However, similar to other gendered identities, the transient nature of the tomboy identity is complex and shaped by the social, cultural and political parameters in which they are enacted. Thus although the tomboy identity may enjoy less scrutiny from the panoptic public gaze, the transient nature of this identity also means that complete freedom from binary gender categorisations is limited as any significant or prolonged deviation from



acceptable gender nonconformity may be met with sanctions. In the South African context, gender nonconformity has been met with severe forms of violence as evidenced in the practice of ‘corrective rape’. Sanctions may also take on a more cloaked guise as in the controversial case of Caster Semenya, the South African athlete whose gender was publicly questioned, scrutinised and objectified (Swarr, Gross & Theron, 2009) following her victory in the women’s 800 metres at the 2009 World Championships. An investigation to determine her sex/gender was undertaken despite the fact that Semenya was raised as female and that she identified as female. Gender testing revealed that Semenya was intersexed. The cover of a mainstream tabloid magazine, later featured a more feminine, and arguably more glamorous-looking Semenya in a tight-fitting dress accompanied by long hair, make-up and jewellery (*YOU*, 144, 10 September 2009). However, not all lesbian women hide behind the protective label of tomboy. In South Africa, as in some other parts of the world such as in Indonesia (Blackwood, 2009) and China (Lai, 2007), many lesbian women have appropriated the heterosexual label of tomboy to make explicit reference to their sexuality and sexual identity when they use labels such as *tom* or *boi*. For example, the tombois of Indonesia are biologically ‘female’ individuals who consciously embody the notion of masculinity associated with the social category ‘man’ (Blackwood, 2009). In this way, the tomboy identity may be regarded as a site of resistance through the disruption of normative gender categories.

As will be illustrated in later chapters though, despite this outward resistance to heterosexual culture, some contradictions become apparent as dominant roles and power relations that are common in heterosexual relationships are replicated in various forms in same-sex relationships. It will also be shown how these contradictions may set the foundation for overt and more subtle forms of violent practices. How these constructions influence subject positioning and power relations are analysed in Chapters Five and Six.

### **3.6 Poststructural and Intersectional Approaches to Power and Gendered Subjectivities among Lesbian women in South Africa**

So how does poststructuralism lend to an analysis of lesbian subjectivities at a particular point in South Africa's political history? I argue that an answer to this question involves thought to how an intersectional approach assists in a poststructuralist understanding of South African lesbian gendered subjectivities. Intersectionality was introduced in the previous chapter. As elucidated, intersectionality signals a critical response from a growing body of mainly black and non-western feminists and critical race theorists who have questioned the limitations of using existing first-world, western feminist theories as a framework to conceptualise the experiences of women from other social and cultural contexts, including contexts characterised with high levels of marginalisation and oppression. This challenge to the idea of a 'universal woman' signalled a move away from essential notions of subjectivity, and is consistent with the poststructuralist concept of multiple and fluid subjectivities and identities. Thus, an analysis of lesbian subjectivities in South Africa does not aim to pin down an 'essential' South (African) lesbian subject. Yet, this does not suggest that the manner in which cultural practices and histories shape subjective experiences are ignored.

What the analysis does seek to do however, is to explore the micro-physics of power and its corollaries in the lives and subjective experiences of lesbian women in South Africa. This includes an analysis of how colonial and apartheid history has shaped how different gendered and sexed identities are constructed as being normative or deviant, and the subject positions that are taken up by lesbian women in relation to these 'truths'. For example, the colonial 'truth' that continues to construct black (African) sexuality as hypersexualised. An intersectional analysis provides a framework to consider how power is dispersed in the relations between lesbian women and society at large – the forms of self-surveillance and

disciplinary techniques aimed to govern behaviours. By focusing on individual subjectivities, and the various historical, political, social and cultural intersections and their ‘truth effects’ on positioning and subjective experiences, the analysis has the potential to reveal the ways in which forms of resistance also come into being.

It is precisely because of this decentralised approach to power, that IPV in relation to sexuality and gender may be explored from a perspective that allows a shift away from patriarchy as the only cause of IPV. This opens up the possibilities for analyses that are nuanced and multifarious. It is also precisely for this reason that an analysis of the experiences of IPV in lesbian relationships cannot be limited to the experiences of explicit forms of physical and sexual violence that have become synonymous with IPV. Such an approach would merely serve to strength existing ‘truths’ and discourse that position lesbian women sexually deviant and solely responsible for what happens in their intimate relationships. A careful reading of the ‘mundane’ experiences of lesbian women and the complex intersections and that are implicated in the micro-physics of power within those intersections are required instead.

### **3.7 Chapter Conclusion**

This chapter examined the notions of power, subjectivity, knowledge and discourse as described by the works of Foucault (1972, 1978, 1980, 1982, 1984, 1995, 1988, 2000) and Butler (1990a, 1993). These theoretical concepts proffer an appropriate framework for the current study. This includes the historical, political, social and cultural ‘truths’ and practices that intersect with subjectivities. There is no essential truth but rather a plurality of meanings, experiences, and subjectivities that are constituted through discourse. This implies that knowledge, experience and subjectivity are transient and inherently unstable. Furthermore, power is not seen to belong to particular institutions or individuals as advanced

by Marxist theory, but is instead seen to operate within the mundane, everyday interactions. Accordingly, a reading of lesbian subjective experiences does not reside with the 'truth' of a particular knowledge, but rather with the 'truth-effects of power' and the 'micro-physics' of power which elaborate the techniques and intricacies of the application of power/knowledge and the corollaries of that knowledge. The body (individual) is the site of discursive (social) struggles between different power/knowledge systems, in which dominant 'truth' discourses produce and normalise bodies in ways that serve current social relations of dominance and subordination (Blood, 2005). However, the changing and dynamic nature of the social and historical basis of power creates possibilities for resistance and new subjectivities (Weedon, 1997). The lesbian body may be viewed as a site of struggle in which power is negotiated on multiple levels through the tensions created in the enactment of performativity and performative agency, within the relationship itself and within the broader structures of societal power.

## Chapter Four: Methodology

This chapter provides a rationale for the feminist qualitative approaches employed in the current study. It begins by examining methodologies that support feminist poststructuralist epistemological assumptions and that advance the feminist agenda. Thereafter, the methodological steps, challenges and ethical concerns in the current study are outlined. Finally, I reflect on my own identities and positioning and its implications for the research.

### 4.1 Feminist Poststructuralist Research

The centrally defining features of feminist research reside in the philosophical foundation of the nature of knowledge (epistemology) and the process by which research is created (methodology) (Campbell and Wasco, 2000). They argue that:

[f]eminist research seeks to respect, understand, and empower women. Therefore, feminist epistemologies accept women's stories of their lives as legitimate sources of knowledge, and feminist methodologies embody an ethic of caring through the process of sharing those stories. (p. 778).

Thus, feminist research has a clear political agenda that centres on the empowerment of women. Feminist criticism of research within the social sciences generally and within psychology specifically argued against the positivist, inherently masculinist and exclusionary nature of research (Oakley, 1981, 1998, 2016) through the development of theories that favour men and that neglect and distort the study and experiences of women (Riger, 1992). Kitzinger (1996) quotes the psychoanalyst, Karl Abraham (1907) to illustrate how psychology's androcentric approach had pathologised lesbianism through its use of masculinist behavioural norms:

...the repressed wish to be male is here found in a sublimated form in the shape of masculine pursuits of an intellectual and professional character and other allied interests.... This type of woman is well represented in the women's movement of today. (p. 123)

In understanding the experiences of women within an oedipal, phallogentric, psychoanalytical framework, psychology ignores the structural, social, historical, cultural and political inequalities that are implicated in the social construct of *gender*. For example, rape, pornography and other forms of sexual coercion are usually framed within consensual heterosexual relationships (Gavey, 1989). This diffuses attention away from systems of oppression (Wilkinson, 1996) by locating pathology within the (female bodied and female identified) individual. Wilkinson (1996) maintains that mainstream psychology has divorced 'science' and 'politics'. Feminist poststructuralism, often synonymously termed 'feminist postmodernism' (or 'social constructionism' within psychology) or 'feminist deconstructionism' offered a theoretical deviation from the inherently essentialist approaches espoused by feminist empiricism and standpoint theory. The interchangeable use of the labels *feminist postmodernism*, *social constructionism* and *feminist deconstructionism* reflect theoretical commonalities in core arguments relating to reality and objectivity, dominant theories, knowledge production, language, power and subjectivities. Feminist poststructuralism derives from post-positivist constructivism and radical feminism and is based on the ontological assumption that refutes the existence of an absolute truth or reality. As conveyed in Chapter Three, poststructuralism calls into question the values upheld by the Enlightenment period and the western metanarratives of humanist liberalism, Marxism, philosophy and science, and argue that while such values and theories may have proved politically appropriate and purposeful at a particular point in history, they are neither

universal nor objective (Weedon, 1997). Instead, poststructuralist thought proposes that those who have power to determine knowledge production offer versions or representations of reality. Language, being socially constituted, becomes a tool through which dominant representations of reality are transmitted.

One of the central questions posed by poststructuralism therefore focuses on competing discourses and the social institutions maintained by dominant discourses (Riger, 1992). Weedon (1997) argues that knowledge and power function to systematically marginalise and ‘other’ women within patriarchal systems. The concept of power is therefore central to poststructuralist thought.

Linked to the critique of knowledge production, feminist poststructuralists questioned the existence of a feminist science or psychology and the notion of an essential woman and feminism. Some feminists interpreted this as opposing central feminist tenets and argued that western enlightenment discourses of subjectivity, historical progress and emancipation were indispensable to feminism (Weedon, 1997). However, given that knowledge (science) is produced and situated within historical and cultural contexts shaped by power, poststructural feminists suggested that feminism may be regarded as documenting “many stories that different women tell about the different knowledge they have” (Harding, 1987, p. 188). Poststructuralism therefore attempted to deconstruct the concept of women and through this deconstruction, focused on how language and the discourses that it produces, is used to construct realities. Research tends to favour qualitative methods that enable the exploration of subjective and lived experiences of women in a multitude of social contexts and which reveal the discursive constructions of realities as well as women’s positioning to (dominant and oppressive) discourses. Reflexivity, on the part of the researcher is viewed as an integral part of the research process and recognises the social component in how we make meaning of our lived experiences (Gergen, 2001), and how we define the conditions of production in our

analyses of women, gender and subjectivities (Hollway, 1989). To this end, the use of feminist qualitative methodologies presents as germane. Willig (2008) defines qualitative research as concerning itself with "... the construction and negotiation of meaning, and the quality and texture of experience..." (p.15).

#### **4.2 Qualitative Methodologies**

Both feminism and poststructuralism have important implications for qualitative methodologies in psychology (Parker, 2005). The linkage between a feminist poststructuralist theoretical framework and qualitative methodologies is particularly strong in relation to psychology's 'turn to language'. Feminism has revealed the differences in knowledge construction between the powerful and the oppressed, while poststructuralism promotes a critical stance of the knowledge and 'truth claims' produced within psychology. *How* we come to arrive at what we know and therefore also, the *process* of research are as important as the objects of study (Parker, 2005). It is this *process* and the *how* that makes some qualitative methods feminist in their approaches since no distinctly feminist qualitative methods exist (Kitzinger, 1996) in much the same way that no distinctly qualitative theoretical and methodological paradigms exist (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Qualitative research and the study of sexuality, especially same-sex sexuality, share a close affiliation (Gamson, 2003). Gamson (2003) argues that as the lesbian subject appears, so too does she disappear. He elucidates further by arguing that qualitative research, especially those informed by poststructuralist thought and deconstruction, have created the discursive space to bring new voices, previously hidden and marginalised, to the fore. At the same time, it also creates a lesbian subject that is harder to define and more elusive to research as multiple narratives of sexual subjectivities are documented. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) make eloquent



use of the analogies of a *bricoleur* or quilt maker and of *montage* to convey the interpretative, situated nature and textual depth of qualitative research:

The qualitative researcher who uses montage is like a quilt maker ....this process creates and brings psychological and emotional unity to an interpretative experience...using multiple voices, different textual formats to weave a complex text ...[that] simultaneously create[s] and enact[s] moral reasoning. They move from the personal to the political, the local to the historical and the cultural. These are dialogical texts. They presume an active audience. (p.7)

Through the creation of a new 'textual format', qualitative research makes visible (oppressive) practices that may otherwise be obscured. It rests on the ontological assumption that there is no unitary reality but rather changing historical and socially constructed realities. Epistemologically, this allows for multiple and often contradictory interpretations and subject positionings within a single analysis. Drawn from various disciplines, the actual methods that are favoured in qualitative research are ones that permit the discursive construction of multiple meanings and readings of phenomena, and which necessitate a paradigmatic shift in the conceptualisation of the role of the researcher, the history and values that the researcher brings into the enquiry, and of how power is performed within the research process. These shifts may be central to feminist qualitative research. Legard, Keegan and Ward (2003) posit that a feminist approach is one that positions the researcher and participant in less hierarchical roles. The researcher-participant dyad is no longer one of researcher as the expert in knowledge production and the participant as the passive object of analysis. Instead, knowledge production is a collaborative process. This requires that the researcher adopt a more interactive and reflexive approach in which the reciprocal nature of the interaction and collaboration is acknowledged (Legard et al., 2003). Implied also is the acknowledgement that the research process is not neutral or value-free. Both the researcher and the participant

bring their own histories into the interaction which may impact on how knowledge is produced. Thus, research is constituted within the dynamic processes and interactions between the researcher and the participants (Browne, 2005). These processes are explored further by examining two qualitative methodologies that were used in this study and that may be argued to support a feminist agenda and poststructural epistemology, namely: focus groups and in-depth interviews. I outline their merits for feminist research before describing the methodologies and reflections that were involved in the current study.

**4.2.1 Focus groups.** Focus groups, although only recently emerging as a popular method of data collection in feminist research (Montell, 1999; Pini, 2002; Wilkinson, 1998, 1999), advances broad feminist principles and is particularly useful in the exploration of gender and sexuality (Montell, 1999). Focus groups locate the person in the social context through its reliance on social interaction and the co-construction and negotiation of meaning (Wilkinson, 1998). Focus groups were employed in this study because of its potential power to reveal the social processes involved in the construction of subjectivities and the opportunity it afforded to understand the person in context (Wilkinson, 1998). They were particularly significant as the dynamic negotiation and co-construction of meaning within contexts was made more explicit (Wilkinson, 1998).

Focus groups encourage a more egalitarian approach, primarily through the social processes inherent in group participation (Montell, 1999; Wilkinson, 1998, 1999). Unlike semi-structured interviews, which require answers, focus groups initiate conversations (Montell, 1999). The interactive data generated from focus group discussions (Wilkinson, 1998) is one of the primary distinguishing strengths that set it apart from individual interviews. Through their interactions with other group members, participants reveal their own frame of reference but are also able to review their frame of reference against alternate frames. This approach is argued to be empowering through the participants' roles as 'experts'

in the discussions of *their* subjective experiences, and through the consciousness-raising effect of being exposed to alternate constructions and new ways of thinking that challenge existing meanings and oppressive practices (Montell, 1999). This process has benefits for the researcher as well as discussions often introduce new categories of meaning that may not have been considered by the researcher. In a doctoral study exploring women's involvement in the Australian sugar industry, Pini (2002) conducted 16 focus groups with 80 women farm workers and showed how participation in the focus groups empowered the women, primarily because no fixed meanings were imposed on the group. Through the interactive processes inherent within the group, participants were able to arrive at their own meanings, and make connections between their individual experiences and the collective experiences of the group. Överlien, Aronsson, and Hydén (2005) add that focus groups may be used effectively with "high-involvement topics" (p. 332) or sensitive topics with marginalised groups to generate rich data similar to that generated from in-depth methodologies. This is due to processes such as the co-construction of meaning between the researcher and participants, and between the participants themselves, including different meanings constructed through discursive arguments, empathetic support among participants; and the responsibility of the role of moderator to ensure the protection of participants in the context of sharing sensitive information, not being limited to the researcher alone, but extending to the group through "group self-censorship" (pp. 340-341).

Throughout the current study, I had observed the power of focus groups as a feminist methodology. Discussions were undertaken with ease, and were at times, even playful in nature. The fact that many participants from the various focus groups knew each other or belonged to the same friendship or social circles might have contributed to this. In those instances, my involvement was minimal. Conversations were more guarded when the focus shifted from general aspects of their lives that was perceived to be less threatening to topics

that are more sensitive. For example, I had also observed that dialogue around violent practices, when it was spoken about in focus groups, were largely generalised, detached and reticent. Many participants positioned themselves away from violent practices and as never having experienced any form of violence unless someone else spoke about it first. Sentences were often prefaced with words such as “If it were me...” or “I would never...” Överlien et al. (2005) assert that this form of “linguistic *impersonal constructions*” (p. 337) affords the participant discursive anonymity to distance herself from sensitive or personal issues. While I concur with the case made by Överlien et al. (2005), I qualify that this also depends on the composition of the focus groups and the relationship dynamics among participants that exist beyond the context of the focus group. This is especially salient when participants are sampled from small, close-knit communities.

Clearly, trust is an important group dynamic that must be established if a participant is to disclose highly personal information. In the current study, one woman who had participated in an in-depth interview stated that she wouldn't participate in a focus group because everyone knew each other and she was concerned that what would be shared in a focus group would be shared beyond. Nonetheless, a few women did openly acknowledge experiences of violence and abuse. In those instances, other participants were able share their own experiences, through responding and adding to a collective narrative, and through a comparison with other participant experiences. For example, one of the participants was motivated to share her own experiences of abuse after listening to another participant's experiences of being in an abusive relationship. She began by stating, “If we understand it like that, then I have been in an abusive relationship as well”. I argue this example of making visible what was previously invisible and being able to locate personal experiences within collective experiences allowed the research process to extend beyond an academic exercise to also have the potential to be an empowering experience.

**4.2.2 In-depth interviews.** In-depth face-to-face interviews represent a popular qualitative methodology within feminist research (Oakley, 2016) as it creates the discursive space to validate participant knowledge and experiences as authentic and credible (Wilkinson, 1996). Oakley's (1981, 1998, 2016) assertion that research is gendered, with qualitative methodologies being associated with a more 'feminine' approach, may be extended to argue that in-depth interviews, in recognising the social processes involved in conversation and dialogue, move the participant from a position of 'object of research inquiry' to a person in context/s. Kvale (1996) cautions that the objectives and roles of the researcher and participant distinguish in-depth interviews from normal conversations. He argues that an interview is a site of knowledge construction with both the researcher and the participant involved in the co-production of the interview. Kvale (1996) uses the metaphor of a traveller to convey how knowledge is negotiated and co-constructed by the researcher and participant who embark on a journey through their conversation, with new meanings and insights being discovered on the journey. In-depth interviews have the potential to generate rich data due to the private nature of the interview, the potential fluidity of the conversation, and the reciprocal relationship encouraged by feminist approaches. Guided by open-ended prompt questions, in-depth interviews offer an effective qualitative methodology in directing focus on the issues of enquiry while simultaneously creating the discursive space for participants to determine the depth of the focus. It also enables the researcher to probe new and emerging themes.

Thus, in-depth interviews mark a significant departure from traditional forms of interviewing which position the researcher as authoritative and powerful, and the participant as vulnerable and passive. Oakley (2016) maintains that traditional ways of teaching successful interviews requires a balance between establishing warm rapport and "...the detachment necessary to see the interviewee as an object under surveillance..." (p. 33).

Traditional forms of psychotherapy may be argued to resonate with the same balance. Essentially, this type of ‘balanced’ approach still locates power primarily in the researcher who is socially distant. As Oakley (1981, 2016) has argued, traditional positivist approaches to interviewing that are characterised by a distant researcher/interviewer who decides on the questions and thus dictates the direction of the interview reflect masculinist, hierarchical and power-based approaches to research which go against the feminist epistemologies that privilege women’s experiences as authentic and valuable. Interviews facilitate the objectification of participants if conducted with the sole purpose to produce scientific objective data that ignores the social aspects within the interview dyad (Oakley, 1981, 1998). Feminist approaches to in-depth interviews have questioned the objectification of the participant and the hierarchical form of the researcher-participant dyad (Burman, 1990) and advocate more collaborative and interactive approaches that recognises the social processes and interactions between the researcher and the participant. Oakley (1998, 2016) suggests that if knowledge is to be co-constructed, then the role of the interviewer has to change in that power is relinquished to the person being interviewed. Reflexivity and reciprocity are essential processes in achieving a less hierarchical interviewing format.

However, the less hierarchical relationship between researcher and participant within in-depth interviews also raises some ethical concerns. Power within the interview dyad is complex, even in the context of co-construction of knowledge, as questions around the ownership of a study, its narratives, and how it is presented, all shape how power is enacted (Oakley, 1998). Participants have agency and power in how they answer and to what extent. Kvale (2007) acknowledges the potentially progressive and empowering nature of interviews in some contexts, in which persons can give meaning to their lived experiences in their own words. However, he also emphasises that for an interview to be ethical and objective, there must be an acknowledgement of the inherent power differentials contained in the interview

process. The intimacy of a caring, democratic interviewing style has the potential to be exploitative and manipulative through the establishment of a quasi-therapeutic interview context that may create the fantasy of trust. This suggests that while the nature of in-depth interviews seek to create an equal balance of power between researcher and participant, a false sense of safety and trust might potentially reduce the participant's power and increase vulnerability, as the intimate dynamic encourages the sharing of highly personal or sensitive information which might otherwise not be divulged. Reciprocity, in the form of the researcher answering participant questions, may offer a way to counter this vulnerability, by exposing the vulnerability of the researcher as well. However, not all researchers might feel comfortable enough to do this or consider it professional practice.

To summarise, qualitative methodologies informed by a feminist poststructuralist framework have the potential to generate rich, meaningful data. While focus groups have been argued to achieve the same textual depth as that generated from in-depth methodologies (Överlien et al, 2005), in-depth interviews have been argued to have the potential to mirror the social processes inherent in group discussions (Oakley, 2016). Such methodologies aim to create more egalitarian and reciprocal researcher-participant relationships. However, the power within the researcher-participant dyad which such methodologies aim to disrupt, presents with other ethical concerns. I now turn to the current study and the processes that unfolded in its undertaking and completion. In doing so, I reflect on some of the concerns and arguments raised in this section.

### **4.3 The Current Study: Process and Limitations**

The current study explored South African black lesbian's subjective experiences of power and violence in their public and private lives. The research questions enquired about

the nature of the power differentials that impact black lesbian women in their interactions in the public and private domains, and the implications thereof for black lesbian identities and the enactment of violence? The following sections provide an overview of the research processes that unfolded in undertaking and completing this study. They are presented in a linear format for theoretical ease and convenience. In reality, the study unfolded in more multiplex ways.

**4.3.1 Sampling from a ‘hidden’ population: The participants and the ‘participating organisations’.** Research in the area of IPV is challenging due to the social nature of violence. Challenges are compounded when researching sensitive topics with minority populations (Browne, 2005; Gamson, 2003; G. Sullivan & Losberg, 2003) and specifically topics around IPV that might not be congruent with the participants own understanding of the relationship dynamics (Hester & Donovan, 2009). The challenges associated with accessing participants from hidden and marginalised populations are well documented (Gamson, 2003; G. Sullivan & Losberg, 2003). Even though legislative reform has resulted in greater visibility of queer identities, the stigma attached to sexually and gender diverse people and the accompanying fear of disclosure and social isolation still presents as problematic in South Africa, and indeed, the world over.

As argued in Chapter One, homophobic acts and hate crimes against persons who identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual reflect the high levels of social discrimination endured by this minority group. This meant that the protection of the participants’ identities and their physical safety was a high priority throughout this study. I therefore decided that the ‘safest’ way to recruit participants from a ‘hidden’ population was through organisations that offered services to LGBTQ persons, since many LGBTQ persons mobilised through community organisations, and such organisations represented relatively safe access points. Convenience



sampling, including the snowball approach, a popular method when conducting research with 'hidden' populations and the associated challenges with societal stigmatisation and disclosure (Browne, 2005), was used to recruit participants for this study. Convenience sampling has been criticised for excluding many lesbian women from the general population by being biased towards certain groups of women. For example, it may be argued that the sampling strategies employed in this study favoured women who were already 'out', and/or women who were affiliated to the targeted NGOs, and/or women who formed part of certain social networks. However, a truly representative sample of a 'hidden' population is not only an arduous task to accomplish, but also near impossible (Renzetti, 1992). I used the NGO in my hometown to network with other NGOs in the country to recruit participants.

Organisations were located mainly in urban, metropolitan areas in the provinces of KwaZulu-Natal, Gauteng and the Western Cape and I decided to target two organisations per province. A study conducted by Vetten and Dladla (2000) revealed that women considered it safer to live more openly as lesbian women in urban areas (Johannesburg in the case of their study) than in rural areas. Swarr (2009) posits that cultural restrictions on sexuality may be more severely imposed in rural settings with a result that fewer lesbian women disclose their sexual orientation in these contexts. This suggests that urban areas may possess a greater population from which to draw participants. However, I was aware that this theoretically excluded potential participants from semi-rural and rural areas. Nonetheless, all the organisations had various outreach programmes and I had hoped that this would increase the likelihood of recruiting participants from non-urban areas as well. At the end of the recruitment stages, participant demographics revealed that although, participants were primarily recruited from NGOs that were located in urban areas in the provinces of KwaZulu-Natal, Gauteng and the Western Cape; many participants grew up and hailed from rural township areas in these provinces, as well as the Eastern Cape and Mpumalanga provinces. As with all qualitative

research methodologies generally, the use of convenience sampling meant that results would not be generalised to the whole lesbian population (G. Sullivan & Losberg, 2003). However, having drawn participants from multiple sites had to some extent, strengthened the textual breadth and depth of the research study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Letters were e-mailed to NGOs in which information about the proposed study was provided (Appendix 1). Cognisant of the debate surrounding the use of the label ‘lesbian’<sup>15</sup>, I referred to the target group as ‘women in same-sex relationships’ in the letters to avoid excluding potential participants who did not identify as ‘lesbian’. Weston (2009) cautions that an operational definition of ‘lesbian’ that requires participants to be in a same-sex relationship may exclude celibate women who self-identify as lesbian, as well as women whose erotic experiences do not take the form of conventional relationships. However, because power is a relational concept, I considered it necessary to include the criterion of being in a relationship. To minimise potential exclusions, intimate relationships implied those of an emotional and/or sexual nature, and no time frame (duration) for relationships was stipulated. Of the six organisations that I had initially approached, four responded favourably and two did not respond at all, although through snowballing, women who were affiliated to the two non-responsive NGOs participated in the study. Invitations (Appendix 2) were then sent to potential participants via their respective organisations, inviting participation. Participation in the study was voluntary and participants could stop participating at any point. Confidentiality and anonymity were critical in protecting the identity of participants who were drawn from ‘hidden’ populations (Platzer & James, 1997). Participants were allowed to use pseudonyms when consenting to participate and during the focus groups and interviews.

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<sup>15</sup> Discussed in Chapter One and Chapter Three.

The decision to participate was not always an easy one. One woman withdrew after consenting to participate in a depth interview. We had agreed to meet on three separate occasions, and in each instant she requested a reschedule just before the scheduled time. As I had perceived, she had felt some unease in participating. We spoke about this after her third request to reschedule. She confided that although she had disclosed her sexual orientation to some of her friends; her family and colleagues were not aware that she had been in a relationship with a woman for the past two years. She was afraid that her participation in the study might compromise her hidden status and had decided to withdraw. Valentine, Butler and Skelton (2001) have highlighted the ethical challenges that are posed by space and location in relation to sexual identity when accessing participants from spaces such as the work or school environment. I understood her need to protect her identity, and the importance for her to feel safe and comfortable with participation. This particular case highlighted the complex issues entailed in the decision to participate in a study of this nature and its potential implications in the lives of the participants.

A total of 40 women participated in the study, of which 13 participated in both the depth interviews and the focus groups (Appendix 3). The ages ranged from 17 to 36, with a mean age of 23 years. All participants had completed their matric (Grade 12) with the exception of one participant who was in Grade twelve at the time of the study. Seven participants had a post matric diploma, 12 were registered for undergraduate studies, and four had completed Honours degrees, of which two were registered for Masters Degrees. Eleven participants were unemployed, with most of the unemployed participants coming from KwaZulu-Natal. All participants reported having been involved in at least one intimate same-sex relationship. The number of years in a relationship ranged from less than six months to five years, with an average of two years in length. At the time of the study, 23 of the 40

participants reported being single and one participant was married<sup>16</sup>. Five participants were living with their partners and six had children of their own, two of whom had become pregnant as a result of being raped because of their sexual orientation.

The three geographical regions from which participants were drawn have differing demographic distributions and at first, I had anticipated a relatively racially mixed sample. Inadvertently, the research focus was narrowed to the subjective experiences of *black* lesbian women as all the participants were black<sup>17</sup>. The politicised and racialised nature of gender in the South African context cannot be repudiated and I thus interpreted the noticeable absence of white lesbian women as conveying something about how post-colonial privilege shapes white sexuality, and the idea that ‘violence is a black thing’. The racialised nature of lesbian subjective experiences as it emerged in the women’s narratives is explored in Chapter Six. The first criterion that all participants had to meet was that they had to be women who were or had been in at least one intimate same sex relationship. Participants who met this criteria were invited to participate in the focus groups which aimed to explore the power dynamics of lesbian identities and subjectivities within various contexts, without necessarily focusing on violence in lesbian relationships. Participants in the depth interviews had to meet an additional criterion of having experienced some form of violence in one or more lesbian relationships, since in-depth interviews aimed specifically to explore the subjective experiences of power and violence in intimate relationships.

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<sup>16</sup> This was actually the first same-sex marriage in the town.

<sup>17</sup> As discussed in Chapter One, ‘black’ is inclusive of persons currently classified by Statistics South Africa as being ‘black African’, ‘Asian’/ ‘Indian’ and ‘coloured’. Under the Population registration Act (Act No 30 of 1950) which formed part of Apartheid law, South African citizens were classified into one of four racial groups which were ‘white’ ‘native’ or ‘black’, ‘Indian’ and ‘coloured’, with the latter two categories having consisted of further subcategories such as ‘other Asian’ and ‘other coloured’ respectively. Although Apartheid is no longer in existence, the racial categories used during Apartheid continue to be used by Statistics South Africa; one of the reasons being to track progress on the transformation agenda. In addition, individuals may also identify as ‘black’ as a political identity.

**4.3.2 Data collection.** I conducted all focus groups and in-depth interviews and in doing so, excluded potential participants who were not conversant in English. I was reluctant to use the services of a translator due to issues of confidentiality and the need to protect the identities of participants. I was also wary of the potential impact that a third party might introduce to the dynamics within the researcher-participant dyad. Since the pool of participants was limited and I did not want to exclude potentially rich cases on the basis of language, I resolved to use a translator should the need arise. This was communicated to participants during the recruitment stage. All the participants were proficient in English and opted to converse in English. All focus groups and interviews were conducted on site at LGBT NGO offices or in venues at universities that had LGBT student organisations, with the exception of two participants who were interviewed at their homes, and one at her workplace after working hours. At the start of each focus group and interview, I thanked the participants for their participation and reiterated the voluntary and confidential nature of participation, and that participation could be terminated at any stage. I explained that sessions would be audio-recorded and that all cassettes would be stored in a locked cabinet that only I would have access to. I would do all transcriptions and all names would be coded during analysis and replaced with pseudonyms during the write-up. Opportunity was also provided to discuss and clarify issues and any other concerns participants may have had that related to their participation.

**4.3.2.1 Focus groups.** Five audio-recorded focus groups, which lasted between 1- 1 ½ hours, were conducted with an average of five participants each. Willig (2008) recommends a size not exceeding six participants to ensure maximum involvement of all participants, although this was not always the case. When I reflected on the quality of the engagement and narratives, both small and large groups elicited rich narratives. Focus groups were conducted prior to the individual in-depth interviews. This enabled participation in both a focus group

and an in-depth interview without the risk of participants perceiving that the issues discussed in a group were ‘their’ personal issues. After introductions, I began each focus group with an introductory comment in which I outlined the study focus areas and that I was interested in knowing about their experiences as women in same-sex relationships in their various contexts. I invited conversation around this. In keeping with the feminist principles of focus groups, I allowed participants to determine the depth of exploration of issues as far as possible.

**4.3.2.2 In-depth interviews.** Twenty-three women were interviewed individually, 13 of whom had also participated in a focus group discussion. Interviews lasted one to two hours. Similar to focus groups, I began the interview with an introductory account of the study and purpose of the interview to encourage a more fluid and conversational approach. This included some information about myself and my interest in the topic. I was cognisant of the ethical concerns relating to power within interviews. Given my professional training in psychology, I was mindful not to turn the interview into a therapy session (Kvale, 2007), although my training did allow me to engage in an empathetic manner when required. I did not regard this as a weakness in the research process but rather as a reflection of my genuine interest in and respect for the participants as persons, and as a conscious attempt to destabilise the hierarchical researcher-participant relationship in some ways.

**4.3.3 Discourse, subjectivities and discourse analysis.** Language unfolds in discourse (Parker, 1992) which draws upon shared and collective meanings, revealing the social and collective basis of language (Burman & Parker, 1993). Discourse is therefore multiple and changing over historical periods (Foucault, 1972), with discourses varying in their importance over time and context/s. Individuals position themselves in relation to multiple discourses and forms of power and in so doing, define their subjective experiences (Gavey, 1989; Weedon, 1997). Discourse analysis is an umbrella term, encompassing

multiple approaches that maintain that language constitutes the most basic categories that we use to make meaning of ourselves and the world around us (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008; Burman & Parker, 1993). Discourse analysis challenges the traditional notion that psychological phenomena originates within a person. Instead language is understood as reflecting a person's *internal* processes and subjective constructions. Parker (1998) argues that the power of discourse analysis lies in its potential to provide alternative constructions to oppressive practices. Cheek (2004) argues that to stipulate with certainty the steps or ways in which discourse analysis should be conducted as opposed to why it is done, runs the risk of not recognising the plurality of approaches to discourse analysis and assumes a value-free methodology. She proposes that discourse analysis needs to resist becoming mainstreamed by remaining on the margins because it is this positionality at the margins that enable a qualitative research methodology that may be interrogated with heightened reflexivity at all points in the research.

There are various approaches and philosophical underpinnings to discourse analysis in psychology, although they share common characteristics. These include the attention to the significance of language, attention to the structuring effects of language, the interpretive style of analysis, the reflexive style of analysis, and the ways in which language produces and constrains meaning (Parker, 1992). A poststructuralist approach to discourse analysis is well-matched (Gavey, 1989) as meanings are multiple and shifting, with emphasis being placed on structure and the subject (Burman & Parker, 1993). A poststructuralist approach also provides a coherent framework to explore the role of discourse in the construction of gendered subjectivities in relation to Butler's (1990a, 2004) concept of 'performativity' and 'performative agency' and Foucault's genealogical notion of power (Parker & Shotter, 1990). Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine (2008) proposed some methodological guidelines for FDA which include selecting a corpus of statements, problematisations, technologies, subject

positions, and subjectification. Burman and Parker (1993) provide a lengthy list of problems associated with discourse analysis, many of which highlight the difficulties relating to methodological issues and issues of politics. On a more technical level, Parker's (1992) conventions for transcriptions were used to transcribe interviews and focus group discussions verbatim. In order to protect the identity of participants, the names of all participants and NGOs were allocated an alpha-numerical code prior to the process of transcription and data analysis. In the write-up of the analyses, codes were replaced with pseudonyms. In a few cases, a single participant was given more than one name in order to protect the identity of the participant, and to avoid a profile being developed which might be identifiable in the smaller communities from which some participants were drawn.

The initial process of analysis involved careful and repeated reading of the texts, sorting texts into thematic chunks, and making notes on the themes using the feminist post-structural theoretical framework of this study. All interview transcripts were individually analysed for discursive patterns and inconsistencies and grouped into themes. Likewise all focus group discussions were individually analysed and then grouped into themes. Thereafter 'interview' themes were compared to 'focus group' themes. The technical process of discourse analysis proved to be an arduous and frustrating task at times. I discovered that a flexible approach was essential as discourses straddled multiple contexts and were "...not mutually exclusive" (Bowleg, 2008, p. 312). This necessitated a process of re-visiting earlier constructions in light of new meanings and interpretations. Since none of the discourses that had emerged could be treated as stand-alone discourses, the task of integrating the discourses in a manner that accurately reflected their intersections became a crucial one. Thus, re-working represented an effort to (re)frame and (re)present the analyses as a meaningful whole (Bowleg, 2008). I acknowledge that other discursive permutations are also possible and



interpret as an illustration of the intersectional nature of the dynamics and factors inherent in violence.

**4.3.4 Ethical considerations.** The sensitive nature of the experiences and issues that were explored and the fact that the participants were accessed from a ‘hidden’ population (Platzer & James, 1997) posed potential ethical and methodological concerns throughout the research process. The overarching ethical principles that guided this study were ones of autonomy, respect, dignity, non-maleficence, beneficence and justice (Wassenaar, 2006). I was mindful of my role in the knowledge that was produced and how such knowledge should be presented in an authentic manner that benefitted the participants and lesbian women generally. The reflexive and iterative nature of this study formed an essential foundation from which to approach specific ethical and methodological issues, and which acknowledged the historical and politicised choices and subjectivities of myself as the researcher and the participants. My role in the production of knowledge also set up a power dynamic between myself as researcher and the participants. In sharing their intimate lives with me, the participants assumed positions of vulnerability through the various degrees of discursive exposure. I elaborate on the experience of power within the study in the following section.

**4.3.4.1 Power within the study.** Power is a relational concept and while it may be argued that the relationship between researcher and participant may never truly be equal due to the researcher’s control over critical processes such as selection of research questions and participants, and methods of data analysis, a feminist approach aims to destabilise such power imbalances. Apart from the issue of sexuality itself, issues of “...power and abuse within gay [and lesbian] relationships is politically sensitive and challenging, considering the broader context of homophobia and the oppression of both partners that predates their relationship” (Henderson & Shefer, 2008, p. 1). It was therefore important for me to not have any preconceived ideas about what the shape of power and violence within lesbian relationships

might look like. In other words, seeing each woman as an individual with her own subjective experiences and understandings was an important process in this study. However, in as much as experiences of violence presented potentially rich data, they also presented potentially negative psychological implications for participants who may have felt vulnerable, compromised or less empowered by virtue of their participation. In keeping with the feminist approach to this study, my role as researcher was grounded in the principles of respect, value and the preservation of dignity. Although I have professional training in psychology, my role within this study was defined and limited to that of feminist researcher in order to avoid the ethical risks associated with using a quasi-therapeutic frame (Kvale, 2007). Participants were invited to contact me after the interview if they required any post-interview support. I had arranged with service providers in each area to provide counselling services to participants should they be required. No requests were received.

In order to disrupt the construction of the participant as object, I was prepared to share information about myself and therefore answered questions from participants as they arose. A few questions were posed about my interest in gender and LGBTQ issues and two questions were asked specifically about my own sexual orientation. I answered all questions in an open manner as I believed that by engaging with participants in a more reciprocal and less clinical manner, my involvement and responses communicated a more genuine interest in and a respect for the participants as individuals and not as mere objects of study.<sup>18</sup> I was also aware that I was external to many of the NGOs through which participants were drawn from and I therefore did not share a history with most of the participants. It was therefore possible that I may have been perceived with a certain degree of suspicion and mistrust. My willingness to answer questions about myself in an honest and open manner was therefore also motivated by

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<sup>18</sup> I reflect on the impact of my own identities and positioning on the research process in the following section.

a need to earn the participants' trust and to establish rapport, two very important pre-conditions to conversations around sensitive topics.

#### ***4.3.4.2 'Outside in' and 'inside out': Self-reflexivity as central to the research***

*study.* Carstensen-Egwuom (2014) argued that “[i]ntersectional approaches to social positionalities have stressed the interdependence between different kinds of social divisions as well as the relational nature of social categories. In empirical research practice, these complexities require a high level of methodological reflexivity” (p.267). In reflecting on my own positionality in this study and how my multiple identities might have shaped the research process and the kinds of knowledge that has been produced, I draw from bell hooks’ (1984) argument that critical analysis requires that we look “both from the outside in and from the inside out’ (p. ix). This approach recognises the positions of privilege and power produced through the intersections of identities of sameness and difference between the researcher and the participants in knowledge production (hooks, 1984). There were some aspects of sameness between myself and the participants that might have created a sense of connectedness with the participant. I considered my own political positioning to be the most significant, but of course, this was my perception. I have always been politically invested in human rights and women’s issues in particular, mainly due to my own lived experiences of growing up during Apartheid. I identify as black, but am racially classified as ‘Indian’. My identity as black gave me a sense of connectedness to the women, and I was able to relate to accounts that spoke of discrimination and oppression. This sense of connectedness might have also been attributed to my gender and to some extent, class, if education is taken to be an indicator. As a black woman, I found that my shared identities with the women not only increased my sense of empathy, but also may have contributed to the participants feeling more at ease with me. There were instances when the participants had pointed to a shared cultural understanding when they had asked, “you know?” This was especially in reference

to difficult experiences in intimate relationships. At times, I had also found myself confirming a shared understanding with a simple “mhm” and/or a nod of my head. Upon reflection, I realised that these affirmations signalled a shared understanding that was based on the categories of gender, race and class. However, while I was aware of how categories of sameness might have shaped the co-construction of knowledge in particular ways, I was also aware the potential danger of endorsing an essentialist approach to identities (Carstensen-Egwuom, 2014) through the performativity of gendered and cultural scripts (Butler, 1990a). I was mindful that I resist labels and categories that impose particular meanings to my behaviour and positioning in various contexts. Yet, I found myself subscribing to the very practice when I aligned to particular social categories.

I also experienced some degree of ‘outsider’ status. The category of difference that caused me the most unease was my own sexual orientation. Within dominant cultural discourses of sexuality, certain external markers present me as heterosexual. I was concerned with how my perceived heterosexuality would impact the research process, and how the perceived heterosexual/lesbian sexual binary might impact the co-construction of knowledge, especially in relation to the potential mirroring of power dynamics between heterosexual/homosexual identities. This outsider status may be described as a reversal of the heterosexual/lesbian social status and gave me some degree of insight into a sense of alienation that the lesbian women spoke of. I generally did not disclose too many personal details about myself, including my sexual orientation, although I was open to answer questions about myself that participants had. My ‘distance’ might have been influenced by my professional training in psychology and the emphasis placed on maintaining boundaries within therapeutic relationships with clients, in an effort to maintain a kind of ‘objective’ reflexivity (Parker, 1994). I think though that my non-disclosure was also partly due to my fear that my heterosexuality would negatively impact the research process, or that I would be

seen as reinforcing heterosexual scrutiny of lesbian/homosexual lives. This visibility/invisibility of sexuality and subjectivities within the researcher-participant dyad in a study such as this may be argued to shape a particular kind of interpretation and representation of the participants' discourses (Weatherall, Gavey, & Potts, 2002) which lends to the process of co-construction of knowledge (Kitzinger, 1996; Wilkinson, 1998). There were instances though when sexual orientation might have been deployed as a way to destabilise the power between researcher and participant. Two women asked me out after I had disclosed my heterosexual orientation. One woman in particular, flirted with me throughout the interview and made several remarks about the sexual prowess of lesbian women. While I admit that the advances appealed to my own flirtatious nature, I found myself not knowing how to respond to the remarks within the context of the study. Instead I tried to establish some kind of researcher-participant boundary by re-directing the participant to previous 'on-study' narratives. During my post-interview reflections, I wondered about the extent to which the participant may have attempted to consciously destabilise the inherent power imbalance between me and her. Was my attempt to re-establish boundaries an indication of my difficulty as researcher to relinquish power to the participant? I realised that bringing in the personal certainly also brings in a positioning of vulnerability. I also wondered whether I would have reacted differently had the participant been male. Would I have been as accommodating of the advances, especially those of a sexualised nature? This led me to also consider the extent to which my feeble rejection of the advances reflected my own ambivalence in trying to negate the gendered and often sexed nature of social interactions, including those that are undertaken under the guise of a research study, with its (weak or strong) associations with scientific rigour and objectivity. I contend that those interactions and moments of unease provided me with a glimpse of the subtle and nuanced ways in which (sexualised) power unfolded within lesbian relationships.

Another point of difference might have been my anonymous status at NGOs. While I enjoyed the privilege of having an established relationship with the hometown NGO, my positioning at other NGOs might have been that of ‘outsider’. It was plausible that participants might have viewed me with some degree of suspicion, although the anonymity of not knowing me in other contexts might have also contributed to less restrictive researcher-participant dynamics. When I had commenced the study, I was mindful of the power of my status as psychologist and role as consultant at the NGO where I had worked. While my professional training as a psychologist might have encouraged members of the NGO to share their stories with me, I was reluctant to define myself accordingly for the rest of the research process. Upon reflection, I think that the uneasy positioning of the ‘scientific’ and ‘pathological discourses associated with psychology juxtaposed with the activist nature of NGOs might have influenced this decision. Because of the sensitive nature of the research focus, and the vulnerability that participants might have experienced in sharing their stories with me, I was also mindful not to create a false sense of safety (Kvale, 2007) by assuming a role of therapist. Nonetheless, the micro-skills of listening did lend to the interview and focus group processes, and generally, dialogue was easy and flowing.

#### **4.4 Chapter Conclusion**

This chapter presented the rationale for the use of feminist methodologies informed by poststructural-intersectional approaches in undertaking the current study, which involved marginalised and stigmatised groups. Poststructuralist approaches recognise the fluidity and multiplicity of subjectivities, as well as the intersections of historical, political, social and cultural contexts on subjective experiences. This is particularly salient implications for research undertaken in the context of post-apartheid South Africa. The dynamics and

processes inherent in the research context cannot be divorced from the broader social, historical and political contexts in which it is undertaken and is part of. Because of this, historical ideologies and often oppressive practices within society are likely to reflect in the intersections that impact the research study and its processes. In presenting the processes that were involved in the current study, I have attempted also to reflect on such intersections and the methodological and ethical implications of such intersections for the role of both the researcher and the participants and the knowledge that is created through their engagement. Central to these issues is the issue of power. I was mindful that my involvement in the production of knowledge was a politicised one, occurring within a specific historical and cultural context, motivated by the 'truths' that I uphold. The same holds true for the participants of the study. Feminist views on how to disrupt such power imbalances include not only recognising and valuing the participant as being actively involved in the co-construction of knowledge, but also the ways in which the co-constructed knowledge is presented in a manner that is authentic. The following two analytical chapters represents an attempt to do this.

## Chapter Five: The Contexts of Power and Abuse

This is the first of two analytical chapters that examine how power and violence are discursively and materially constituted and enacted in the lives of black lesbian women in South Africa. I adopt a ‘macro to micro’ approach, focusing on the broader historical, social, cultural, political and institutional contexts in this chapter before examining intimate lesbian relationships more closely in Chapter Seven. This chapter considers the ways in which power is localised and enacted in the everyday lives of black lesbian women at this particular point in South Africa’s political history; and how contexts and spaces constrain or enable the micro-physics of power (Foucault, 1978; Foucault, 1982; Foucault, 1995; Foucault & Gordon, 1980; Foucault & Rabinow, 1984).

Although a Foucauldian analysis implies an objective critique of how power is constituted and resisted (Kendall & Wickham, 1999), it is difficult to separate one’s political position entirely from the process of discourse analysis. I am aware that to some extent, my readings of the discourses produced by the participants were shaped by my own subjective experiences and positionings. Nonetheless, a Foucauldian poststructural reading is particularly useful for revealing that which is invisible and insidious (Graham, 2011). Analyses are presented in three discursive groupings, each with its own set of regulated discourses. I draw attention to the exclusionary nature of discourse in which discourse produces and resists power through “...a complex set of practices which try to keep them in circulation and other practices which try to fence them off from others and keep those other statements out of circulation” (Mills, 2003, p. 54). I deliberately present the ‘discourses of difference’ first as it is closely linked to the enactment of exclusion. Although it is presented as a distinct discursive grouping, it should also be read as undergirding and permeating other discourses. The three interwoven discursive groupings which I examine in this chapter are *discourses of difference*, *discourses of citizenship*, and, *discourses of competition*.



## 5.1 Discourses of Difference

Discourses of difference served to position lesbian women as ‘othered’ in two distinct ways. Firstly, it positioned lesbian women as being *outside* of the dominant (heteropatriarchal) society, as being excluded and as being isolated. Social and cultural isolation and alienation have been shown to be prevalent among adolescents (Sullivan & Wodarski, 2008) as well as adults and older persons who identify as queer (Wilkins, 2015) and is closely interwoven with the discourse and subjective experiences of belonging and citizenship in South Africa (Mkhize, Bennett, Reddy, & Moletsane, 2010; Moreau, 2015). In the current study, lesbian women’s accounts of their interactions with the heterosexual community were generally negative with only a few instances which indicated supportive and accepting relationships. In many ways this form of ‘othering’ served to maintain and reproduce heteropatriarchal power and thus also worked against the full citizenship of lesbian women who continue to be subjected to various forms of violence and oppression despite the existence of progressive legislation (Mkhize et al., 2010; Judge, 2018). All the women described at least one account that illustrated power differentials between heterosexual people and lesbian women, with the latter being positioned in less powerful and more vulnerable positions. Their accounts showed how heterosexuality is privileged and how heterosexual power is produced and maintained within society. In addition, their accounts brought into view knowledge and practices that are otherwise obscured in the banal happenings of everyday life, and in particular, the post-colonial effects that continue in democratic South Africa. The women employed a range of discourses that reflected the contradictory positioning that arise from the ambiguity of progressive legislation and the continued homophobic injustices imposed on lesbian women.

Secondly, ‘othering’ also served to position lesbian women as *different* to the dominant heterosexual community (Reddy, 2001). However, this difference indicated points

of resistance as women challenged dominant perceptions and constructions of lesbian women. Thus, lesbian sexuality and the lesbian body became sites in which the notion of normative heterosexuality was contested and resisted, and in doing so, signified a political struggle for full citizenship in democratic South Africa. The discourses revealed how lesbian women resisted hegemonic forms of power. Their narratives also highlighted the paradoxical nature of their positioning as ‘othered’ in a society where progressive legislation advocates tolerance and acceptance of diversity, yet is fraught with often violent intolerance and non-acceptance of diverse sexualities (Mkhize, et al., 2010; Judge, 2018). ‘Othering’ as a means of establishing difference was also evident among sub-groups or sub-cultures within the lesbian community. Here it was closely linked to identity and served to distinguish between groups and consequently, located power within certain groups. This is examined in Chapter Seven when discussing discourses of identity. I now explore the discourses of difference in more depth. I look specifically at how lesbian women are ‘othered’ by being constructed as sexually deviant objects and as being un-African and un-Christian.

**5.1.1 The ‘sexing’ of lesbian women.** Sexuality and sexual identity represented sites through which lesbian women were defined, disciplined and punished. Sexuality also offered points of resistance to disrupt the categorisation and othering of lesbian identity and lesbian women.

**5.1.1.1 Lesbian women as sexually deviant post-colonial objects.** The women’s narratives revealed that lesbian women were often constructed as being sexually deviant and were positioned as objects of heterosexual scrutiny. The objectification of the lesbian body functioned in several ways to uphold heteronormative values that delegitimised lesbian identity and lesbian sexuality (Kitzinger, 1987). The essentialist and reductionist way of

marking sexuality as the primary identity for lesbian women not only reflected a “dividing practice” (Foucault, 1982, p.777) that established a sexual dichotomy between heterosexuality/homosexuality in which heterosexuality was privileged, but was also reminiscent of colonial fixation on the African body (Boonzaier, 2017; Tamale, 2011). The disregard of the multiple dimensions and complexities of lesbian women’ identities created and perpetuated a one-dimensional ‘truth’ that reduced women to their sexuality, and had the effect of producing a ‘hypersexualised lesbian’ for the (colonial) heterosexual gaze. While colonial representations of the female African body also included constructions of sexual deviance and sexual excess (Tamale, 2011), embedded within the post-colonial gendered and racialised constructions of black lesbian sexuality, were colonial constructions of black male sexuality and desire which function to justify the extreme forms of violence enacted upon on the black lesbian body. It may be argued that this resembles public spectacles of colonial violence inflicted on the black male body (Tamale, 2011).

The role and agency of the media in perpetuating or challenging post-colonial practices is also called into question. Feminist critique of media reporting that overlooks certain types of violence and victims, especially violence against women, and in particular, black women, argue that media reporting increases the visibility of these incidents of violence. If they are not reported by the media, they are rendered invisible. In this way media reporting can help raise public consciousness around violence. Notwithstanding the potential agency of the media, it is important to locate media reporting within the historical and social contexts that shape societal perceptions of particular groups of people, and from that which is obscured from view. In the South African context in particular, the focus on black lesbian women, coupled with the stark absence of white lesbian women, may be argued to perpetuate social stereotypes such as the idea that black people are inherently violent, and that positions black lesbian women (and black women generally) as helpless victims. In viewing

homophobic violence as forms of disciplinary power, media reporting <sup>19</sup> of such violence works to heighten the visibility of the public spectacle of punishment, and additionally, as Sanger (2010) argued, works to sensationalise the act of violence against black lesbian women in particular. I argue that the latter effect allows the public a voyeuristic view of the violence and a sense of psychological detachment from such violence, which absolves society at large from any responsibility for the social locatedness of such violence (Foucault, 1995).

An abstruse tension is set up through the juxta-positioning of this post-colonial fixation on lesbian sexuality, its perceived threat to heterosexuality and the proliferation of sexuality (Posel, 2005a) that characterises democratic South Africa. As Foucault (1978; Foucault & Gordon, 1980) argued, sexuality is also politicised. One way in which citizenship has been proclaimed in democratic South Africa is through the constitutional and legal recognition of all sexual orientations. One of its ironic effects has been the creation of conditions of possibilities that enable a post-colonial fixation on the sexuality of the ‘other’, as well as the emergence of an ‘othered’ citizen that is more amenable to surveillance and control (Foucault, 1995); practices that are at once reinforced and obscured in daily activities. Although a human rights discourse in South Africa speaks to sexual and gender diversity, heterosexual persons are not subjected to the same sexualised imprinting as lesbian women are. This problematic establishes heterosexuality as the “true original” against which other sexualities and genders are performed (Butler, 1990a). Heterosexuality signifies the norm against which same-sex sexuality is defined (Cannon, Lauve-Moon, & Buttell, 2015). It is

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<sup>19</sup> For an overview of media representations of the pervasiveness of violent acts against black lesbian women, see the article by Attwood, V. (2011, May 22). The stain on our rainbow nation: Hate crimes against black lesbian women are becoming endemic in South Africa. *Sunday Tribune*. <https://www.pressreader.com/south-africa/sunday-tribune/20110522/281801395551405>

through this awkward tension and contradictory positioning of “paradoxical hypervisibility” (Gqola, 2008, p. 47), that the ‘lesbian’ and ‘lesbian sexuality’, as objects of scrutiny, come to be constituted in post-apartheid, post-colonial South Africa – evident in the women’s narratives:

So for me it was to be in a public [place] mostly that let’s say we are holding hands and then like people you see people like chatting about you and like they trying to find out what’s happening between you two. Because maybe others they can see it in us, these are not friends or whatever. (Rose, DI<sup>20</sup>)

Yes, you see the looks that you get. There was a case where I was standing with my ex-girlfriend in town. And we were just embracing each other, holding each other. And everybody was just looking at us like we were objects. Like what the hell is going on? We tend to become shy. We shy away from who you are. You don’t even know how to behave anymore because the looks that you get. You don’t even know how to behave around your partner anymore. For the feminine ones it might be ok cos they don’t show they’re lesbian women. But for us butch who cross dress it is quite obvious that this person is lesbian, so we tend to be scared of the community that you surrounded by. (Sonny, DI)

Post-colonial heterosexual surveillance served to regulate and govern lesbian behaviours, especially in public spaces. Public spaces became transformed into heterosexual spaces in which heterosexual relationships were privileged, and in which lesbian women modified their behaviours to conform to what were considered to be acceptable to the heterosexual gaze. The historical-political specificity of a rights-based democracy that remains underpinned by strong heterosexual public discourses and institutional practices produces the discursive and political possibilities for the public expression of same-sex desire; and its concurrent regulation and discipline (Foucault, 1995). The women’s accounts highlighted the intense focus on their behaviours despite the fact that the behaviours described, such as “holding hands” and “embracing”, were, in themselves, innocuous. As

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<sup>20</sup> DI denotes a depth interview

argued earlier, this heightened heterosexual focus on the physical and the external is reminiscent of the “hyper-embodied African” colonial “objectification” (Gqola, 2008, p. 47) of the African body. This brings into being, ‘the hyper-sexualised lesbian’ where seemingly mundane, everyday behaviours between two women were constructed as deviant in relation to heteronormative constructions of opposite-gender intimate relationships (Cannon, et al., 2015). The constant panopticon of the heterosexual gaze resulted in a high level of self-surveillance and self-regulation on the part of lesbian women (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983; Foucault, 1995), and brought into effect the ‘deviant lesbian’ as *subject*. Women became uncertain of the kinds of behaviours that were considered acceptable in heterosexual spaces, which represented a material threat of being cast as other or deviant, as Sonny explained:

...we shy away from who we are. You don't even know how to behave anymore because the looks you get...so we tend to be scared of the community that you surrounded by. (Sonny, FG) <sup>21</sup>

The threat of being cast as other or deviant functioned to govern lesbian women through the suppression and regulation of their behaviours and to maintain heterosexual practices and heteronormative notions of sexuality. The construction of lesbian women as ‘hypersexualised’, linked to colonial constructions of black sexuality as a threat (Gqola, 2008; Posel, 2004) conveyed the idea that lesbian women were undiscerning, predatory and excessive in nature. Phindi explained how many of her heterosexual female friends distanced themselves from her when she had disclosed that she was lesbian, even though the motivation for disclosure was often motivated by a need to be understood as Letti explained:

Some friends erm they like when I came out to them, they feel like I'm going to ask them out. Most of them just distance themselves from me. So I only have my gay and lesbian friends now and my bisexual friends cos my straight friends, they all just distant. (Phindi, DI)

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<sup>21</sup> FG denotes a focus group discussion

Most of the times when we tell when we do come out, the girls will react that way. Then we try to make them understand that no, we have our own types also. We're not coming out to you because we want to ask you out. We're just coming out to you so that you know. So that you understand that when I talk about my girlfriend, you do understand. (Letti, FG)

*5.1.1.2 Lesbian sexuality as natural.* However, not all women conformed to heterosexual power. One of the salient contributions of Foucault's (1978) ideas on power is its productive potential - the potential to bring about new ways of being and doing. Many women used naturalising discourses that asserted their identity and citizenship to disrupt the notion that same-sex sexuality is unnatural. Anele resisted such a construction through her affirmation of lesbian sexuality and the implied freedom to "...do whatever we gonna do..." by locating it as part of the "natural" and therefore "right" way of doing sexuality:

Umm... when I say do the right thing I mean like you know let's date, let's do whatever we gonna do you know ...but I don't know ...umm I guess to most people, like generally in society it is seen as wrong on some level being a lesbian. Some people don't want to see it. Some people won't consider it as nature or natural rather ...but it's pretty natural. ...Yeah, but to me it's natural. (Anele, FG)

Anele's thinking disrupted the notion of heterosexuality through a strong 'born this way' discourse (Boonzaier & Zway, 2015) that questioned heteronormative constructions of what constituted "right" and "natural" (Butler, 1990a, 2004). In other words, she challenged the established sex/gender binary (Butler, 1990a, 2004) that, through various social structures and institutions, established a truth regime that positioned heterosexual relationships as natural and right and lesbian relationships as different and deviant. Many women destabilised the identity of the 'other' through a reframing of what constituted "natural" to include lesbian sexuality, through the use of humanising, naturalising, and normalising discourses that affirmed lesbian sexuality and minimised differences between heterosexual and lesbian persons:

You can't just decide that you want to be different from other people. If it's who you are, it's who you are. There's nothing that you can do about it. I've been attracted to girls from since an early age you know? [Angeline:mhm]. It's who I am you know. So I don't feel it's different because I feel most comfortable with a woman you know. (Fikile, DI)

From my perspective relationships are... I won't say any different between heterosexual relationships and lesbian relationships because if you really love someone and you break up with that person, it's going to hurt. /.../ I love the person. I'm physically attracted to the person, emotionally attracted to the person and there's nothing different about it because it's the same as any other partner that you get involved with. (Joyce, DI)

I think people should not be afraid to say who they are. I mean I was born in the same way that you were born. It's not like I was born in a different way. Your mum went into labour. My mum went into labour. We have the same blood, everything. It's just that we have different feelings and a very different view of life. So I don't know, if people can stop being so stereotype and accept other people as they are. It should make a difference. ...Life is very tough I think. It's really, to want to be something and you trying to cover up with something else. It is very stressful. (Sne, DI)

Throughout history, religious institutions, as mechanisms of disciplinary and regulatory power, have been instrumental in crafting certain 'truths' (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983; Foucault, 1995) about masculinity and femininity in relation to sexuality, in ways that privilege heterosexual relationships and maintain hegemonic gender binaries (Jewkes et al., 2015). The biblical story of Adam and Eve, in which Eve comes to be literally constituted through Adam, may be cited as an example of the gender/sex binary that is also imbued with patriarchal notions of hegemonic masculinity. In contesting such a 'truth', Simangele drew upon a Christian religious discourse that centred on the word 'blood' and its biblical connotations to morality, sin and the idea of Christian brotherhood and sisterhood, to explain the naturalness of diverse sexualities. Thus, the very same power/knowledge modalities that are deployed in framing lesbian sexuality as deviant and sinful, produced modes of resistance to such framing (Foucault, 1978).



Because we are born of the same blood whether we know that blood or agree that it is the same blood. But whoever created us; he knew that he was creating all of us to be different. In colour we would be different, in sexual orientation we would be different, difference in gender. But at the end of the day, we are all brothers and sisters. (Simangele, DI)

Simangele went on to talk about the rigidity of heterosexual scripts that were embedded in both mundane and important acts that are continuously repeated (Butler, 1990a). In talking about the inflexibility in shifting perceptions within the heterosexual community, Simangele illuminated the technologies of the power/knowledge nexus that permeated everyday life, whereby historically and socially constructed epistemes were ascribed with the credibility and status of scientific facts (Foucault, 1978). However, perhaps more importantly, she challenged the heteronormative ideology that men and women are naturally destined to be (intimate sexual) partners because of their biological anatomy (Butler, 1990a). She instead argued that we have been socialised into thinking that male-female relationships are the only forms of intimate relationships. Male-female relationships and the ways in which sex and gender are evoked through the anatomical features of the material body, are ‘naturalised’ through the enactment of rituals and practices such as marriage and procreation (Butler, 1990a). Heterosexual subjects and ‘deviant’ lesbian subjects come into being through the continuous performativity of culturally, socially and historically scripted norms for male-female/masculine-feminine gender dichotomies (Yuval-Davis, 2010), and wherein heteronormative hegemonic structures of power are maintained through repeated gender performances that present the sex/gender binary as normal and as natural:

I think the brain is a very complex thing. I don't think it is a matter of biology now. I think it is a matter of the brain. The whole lesbian not accepting sexual thing. Because it is what we have been told. We have been told that in society there is a man and a woman. And a man and a woman are supposed to sleep and lie together and form families and be married and be intimate with one another. So we have that instilled in our brain. Now it is very difficult to just say to your brain, snap, [clicks

fingers] change. Kind of like when you are an addict. You can't just say I'm quitting drinking. Even if you try but as soon as you see that bottle, the bottle is gonna call on you. It's I think it's the same thing with us as well. A lot of people actually are trying to be open to, they just, they can't get themselves to really understand. And for me, I don't want to be understood. I don't want to be assisted. I want to be treated like everybody else. I want it to be normal. Let's normalise it. But it is very difficult to normalise it because that would mean that now we are erasing everything that people would have known. (Simangele, DI)

**5.1.1.3 The 'un-sexing' of the lesbian women.** Lesbian women contested the reductionist and dehumanising effects of being 'othered' and objectified, and challenged the idea that sexuality was the primary defining identity of lesbian women that took. The "paradoxical hypervisibility" of lesbian women has resulted in heightened focused on their *sexuality*, and not on their subjectivities and personhood (Gqola, 2008,). Lesbian sexuality Lesedi was forthright about her positioning as a "person" and as a "woman" before any other imposed category:

I'm not sure why if I'm going to a place, why the fact that I'm lesbian, should be there. Should be the first thing that people are seeing. They should be seeing that this is a human being, this is a person, this is a woman who comes or if I'm going to a shop; I'm here as a customer. This is a customer. Serve the customer, not a lesbian. You know. Because I find it even now, even at police stations, your sexual orientation becomes more of an issue. At the end of the day, my name is not lesbian. My name is Lesedi and I'm a woman. (Lesedi, FG)

Lesedi's words, "My name is Lesedi and I'm a woman" reflected a powerful positioning of her gendered citizenship and subjective positioning. In contesting her socially prescribed primary identity as a sexed being ('lesbian'), Lesedi indirectly referenced the boundaries of identities and the inclusivity/exclusivity of subjective belonging that such boundaries establish (Yuval-Davis, 2010). Each identity ('lesbian', 'human being', 'person', 'customer' and 'woman') signified various degrees of inclusion and exclusion within collective subjectivities. In declaring her identity as "human being", "woman" and "person",

Lesedi not only rejected the notions of difference invoked through the identity of the othered ('lesbian') and the (heterosexual) collective, but also affirmed her positioning as a citizen and as an individual. This strong statement of individuality and personhood marked a significantly different enactment of resistance in comparison to other disruptions that affirmed lesbian sexuality through normalising discourses. Discourses of normalcy that foreground similarities between same-sex and heterosexual identities; while representing a troubling of the 'other as different' discourse might also be argued to represent an embodiment of the naturalising effects of heterosexuality as the normative signifier, by virtue of its definition of lesbian sexuality as those aspects of identity that are the same as heterosexuality (Yuval-Davis, 2010).

In this section, I have shown how power intersected with sexual citizenship through dominant post-colonial and gendered constructions of the lesbian body as hyper-sexualised and deviant. While the post-colonial gaze has othered lesbian women through its fixation on a sexed lesbian body, women, like Lesedi, had also actively subverted dominant ideologies and cultural practices that positioned lesbian women as lesser citizens. Everyday spaces and interactions became sites where facile constructions of lesbian women were contested and resisted. Women became agents in the production of power through the assertion of affirmative stances that positioned lesbian women as humans first and foremost. In this way, the lesbian body and lesbian sexuality served to destabilise established heteronormative values and practices, through the deployment of discourses of citizenship. Citizenship is explored again later on. For now, I turn to a second way in which lesbian women were othered within cultural spaces.

**5.1.2 Lesbian relationships as un-African and unchristian.** In Chapter One, it was argued that the perceived incongruences and tensions between traditional African cultures and same-sex sexualities represented a form of cultural othering of lesbian women (Cock,

2003; Croucher, 2002; Dlamini, 2006; Morgan & Reid, 2003). This othering was premised on particular understandings of gender and sexuality within fundamentally patriarchal cultural milieus and the gendered subjective positionings that are taken up within these particular constructions, as well as the ostensible assimilation of western colonial practices and values (Croucher, 2002; Morgan & Reid, 2003). As Promise confirmed:

The thing that I don't like about /.../ the cultural ways, they say that we're too westernised. So being westernised means the whole gay and lesbian thing it's a white thing. (Promise, FG)

However, the women's discourses revealed that the idea of lesbian sexuality as being unAfrican was not only linked to the ideas of cultural transgression and colonialism, but was also closely interwoven with beliefs of being unchristian, in which cultural discourses were subsumed with the notions of sin, of good and evil, and of belonging/not belonging to family and community. The women's accounts showed how localised forms of patriarchal and heterosexual power were enacted through cultural and religious scripts which were nested within the daily, mundane activities of the women's closest contexts – family and community. It is posited that what makes such scripts and discourses so powerful is their enactment within the intimate contexts of family and community, to shape children's behaviours from an early age. Scripts become naturalised and familiar, and may elicit feelings of belonging and emotional security within these contexts. Although scripts were located within the cultural and religious spheres, they were informed by dominant heterosexual constructions of gender, sexuality, masculinity and femininity. Thus, hegemonic heterosexual power was enacted through cultural and religious scripts which functioned to maintain normative heterosexuality. As will be elucidated, lesbian women were particularly conflicted when they tried to make sense of their own sexuality which appeared to go against what was familiar, secure and accepted.

**5.1.2.1 The ‘threat’ of lesbian sexuality.** The women’s narratives suggested that lesbian sexuality was perceived to pose a threat to African tradition through the erosion of cultural rituals and practices. For example, the institution of marriage is associated with important cultural rituals that require the approval of the ancestors. The status of marriage in cultural, legal and social contexts was articulated through the Constitutional Court’s notion of marriage as being a “profound symbolic, emotional and political power in our culture that gives it a special status” (De Vos & Barnard, 2007, p. 810). Accordingly, the denial of the right to access the institution of ‘marriage’, and I argue whether through legal or cultural restrictions, implied also a denial to the status associated with the institution of ‘marriage’ (De Vos & Barnard, 2007). Within the cultural context, lesbian women were regarded as cultural transgressors that hindered the full observation of traditional rituals and were consequently subjected to multiple forms of punishment. While the practice of ‘corrective rape’ may be understood to represent a public spectacle of violent punishment enacted upon the material body (Foucault, 1978), other covert and less visible forms of punishment were dispersed within the capillaries of family and community life. In this way, families and communities sought to control and discipline lesbian sexuality:

And with some parents they could be asked. But with other parents, they don’t want to accept anything. And some get killed. Some get killed. So with us Africans, it’s something that, especially when it comes to marriage, even if the guy is paying *labola*, they have to introduce your boyfriend or your husband to be to your ancestors. Now they can’t introduce another woman. They can’t say it’s a woman. The ancestors will be mad with them. The parents then can’t follow the rituals. (Hlengiwe, FG)

Interestingly the above narrative clearly positions me as an outsider.

Well it depends on what kind of parents you have. Sometimes some say, no you don’t have to pay *labola*. You can just get married. But some, no you can’t unless you just elope and get married wherever. [Laughs]. But you can’t. They’ll just disown you. (Sethu, FG)

But I never get like that some kind of thing assaulted by the public. You just, they can just call you names, especially when you are like in African places, *ja*, they do. (Rose, DI)

Although the constitution allows for diverse family configurations, Stacey and Meadow (2009) argue that cultural practices and ideologies and racialised historical practices work against lesbian and gay persons from attaining the family diversity promised by the Constitution. Through the framing of lesbian women as ‘sinful’, the community assumed a role similar to that of colonial missionaries. The women’s accounts showed how family and the community deployed the regime of Christianity to justify interventions to ‘help’ lesbian women. The dichotomous splitting used to differentiate between male and female based on normative ideas around gendered identities is replicated through discourses of good and evil which set-up heterosexuality and same-sex sexuality as two distinctly different ways of being - each with its own set of identities. Lesbian relationships were regarded as being sinful and lesbian women were positioned as ungodly, unnatural sinners who were “cursed” and possessed by “demons” (Sanger & Clowes, 2006). In contrast, the (Christian) heterosexual community was positioned as good and therefore possessed the authority to pray over lesbian women in an effort to rid them of their demons. Ironically, Christianity itself was not recognised as a western import but was instead used as a means to govern and regulate what was considered to be immoral and unnatural African practices:

*Ja* and the pastor come to pray cos then some people think being less on lesbian [Meg = A demon, *ja*]. *Ja*, so they call a pastor to pray [Angeline = mhm]. Maybe they got that thing out. [Laughs]. I doubt it’s a demon. I doubt. [Laughs] (Thobeka, FG)

[They] are very prejudice. Like in certain communities, like you can’t be open about your status. You can’t say you’re a lesbian and be proud. It’s just a sin. It’s something people look down on. You are discriminated in communities. (Pinky, FG)

Whenever there are main meetings or whatever, they don’t want there. You can’t be friends with their children because either you’re cursed or you’re going to bring it upon their children to also be what you are. It’s not allowed. (Noni, DI)

And now my mom, she is a Christian. Now she does not believe in all of that [being a lesbian]. She says it's a sinful life. She's forever preaching, telling me about the Bible and all that. [Laughs]. Same old, same old. (Zanele, DI)

Likewise, Letti described how she was asked to leave home when she had disclosed her sexual orientation to her parents as her sexual identity did not reconcile with their Christian identity. Here again, identities and subject positions reflected the dimensions of inclusivity and exclusivity that are interconnected with conceptual understandings of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2010), which acted as powerful mechanisms that regulated behaviour and practices:

Yes I told them. My dad kicked me out of the house. [laughs]. He was like, no way. Well they're born again Christians. There's no way I'm going to raise a lesbian. /.../ It was really hard for me. /.../ They have always been my idols. /.../ When I told them my dad kicked me out of the house. But then I didn't go anywhere. I just stood out there until about around eleven 'o clock. He could see I wasn't going anywhere, so he said ok it's fine, I can come in. But we never talked about it. (Letti, DI)

**5.1.2.2 Investments in cultural selves.** Some of the ways in which lesbian women responded to family and community pressure was through conformity to cultural and religious practices, and normative gendered behaviours. Hollway (1984) used the idea of an 'investment' to argue that people may assume various subject positions in competing and contradictory discourses if those subject positions are experienced as rewarding in some way/s, even if those subject positions are considered to be subordinate in relation to other positionalities. Many women took up various subject positions that appeared to conform to dominant traditional/stereotypical social practices around gender and sexuality. Tigert (2001) argues that cultural homophobia and heterosexism are interconnected with religious scripts to produce feelings of sexual shame among lesbian women. Nontobeko, whose sexual orientation was known to her family and community, maintained that she was more accepted within her community because she was a Christian. Her positioning as a Christian within her

community marks an investment in a cultural self that may also be argued to possibly reflect a response to sexual shame. Christianity and the church offered her a form of sanctuary and reprieve from potential family and community sanctions. Furthermore, her behaviours complied with accepted cultural standards for what it meant to be female or woman. She had stated that she did not engage in any behaviours such as “partying”, “smoking” and “drinking” which were associated with lesbian women and, as she stated, gave lesbian women “a bad name”. Tamale (2014) argues that religious doctrines such as Christianity has transformed African sexualities into a more accepted universalised and essentialised cultural form. This “relabeling” (p.712) of the lesbian identity within a heteronormative frame functioned to desexualise the lesbian identity and lesbian relationship (Glass & Few-Demo, 2013). Nontobeko, thus, differentiated herself from lesbian women as a collective and behaviours that were considered to be culturally deviant and illegitimate (Tamale, 2014). Within heteropatriarchal frameworks of gender, such behaviours are traditionally associated with maleness and masculinity and are not necessarily negatively perceived when performed by men. Although she had self-identified as a lesbian and her family had accepted her sexual orientation, she actively distanced herself from behaviours and practices that the community deployed in its construction of a lesbian identity. Although Nontobeko had her family’s approval to marry her lesbian partner, she did not engage in any physical form of affection such as “holding” and “cuddling” in public. Nontobeko’s conformity to accepted cultural, gender and religious roles and positionings enabled a higher level of involvement and acceptance in community life and, revealed the ways in which power was inscribed in very gendered and political ways in everyday relations, which were mediated through the spatial-identity relationship (Valentine, 1993):

[The] community don’t have a problem with me. I think the main reason is that I go to church. I’m a Christian. Not a born again Christian, but a Christian. [Laughs]. So I think they are more accepting. They like me. Although I wear men’s clothes I don’t



wear skinny jeans that show my structure. When I go to church I wear skirts and I greet my elders. Whenever someone passes away, I go, I pray. I do everything and then I go home. (Nontobeko, FG)

In a similar way, Sma used a discourse of invisibility to reflect her positioning at home as the ‘dutiful, unsexed daughter’, despite her family being aware of her sexual orientation. The inconspicuousness of her lesbian identity and sexual subjectivity revealed the hidden power of heterosexuality, through the dismissal of a significant aspect of Sma’s subjective experiences and identity:

I don’t rub it in their faces that I’m a lesbian at home. And I don’t bring up the topics. And I don’t bring the girls over. And I don’t date a lot. I don’t flash it in Whatsapp for example. Cos my mum’s on Whatsapp. I don’t write statuses that may trigger certain thoughts. So we don’t have to talk about it in my house. (Sma, DI)

Despite the apparent acceptance between family-community and lesbian women, there were tensions and conflicts. Given the fluid and dynamic nature of identities and subject positions, lesbian women negotiated multiple subject positions in relation to others and competing discourses. Particular subject positions were adopted within particular contexts. I argue that this reflected the political implications of social and cultural locatedness for subjectivities. For example, Nontobeko positioned herself as community member, Christian, and lesbian, at various points. She had conceded that she usually carried a set of men’s clothes to change into, especially if there was a high probability of meeting other lesbian women<sup>22</sup>. She maintained that other lesbian women would not consider her “lesbian enough” if they had seen her dressed in a skirt. The Christian community and the lesbian community presented with competing discourses for lesbian subjectivities. The competing discourses and subject positions became problematic when lesbian women attempted to negotiate their identities within the respective communities, especially so if they attempted to conform to

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<sup>22</sup> Nontobeko self-identified as a butch lesbian

both communities in an effort to be integrated into and accepted by both communities. The pressure to conform brought with it a level of surveillance in both communities as non-compliance carried the risk of punishment in the form of social alienation and discrimination (Nduna & Jewkes, 2013). Sometimes compliance with traditional practices translated to double standards as conformity involved practices that negated same-sex sexuality and subjectivities (Valentine, 1993). Nolwazi elucidated how she felt vulnerable and exposed to men when she had to wear red beads after reaching puberty:

So for me, I'm not liking being here. Being a black lesbian especially. You've got a lot of culture and I'm a mix of Swati and Zulu. So being a mixture of these two cultures, the Swati culture is mostly about being a virgin and marrying a man. ... The minute that we reach puberty, the minute that you have your period, that's the minute that you even when I wear my normal clothes, I have to wear the red beads meaning that I'm a virgin. I don't find it cool cos you're marketing yourself to the men. (Nolwazi, FG)

In a similar account, Khetiwe described her conflicted state when she participated in an annual Swazi reed dance<sup>23</sup> when she went to her family home, which was located in a more rural setting. Increased homophobic victimisation is reported in rural settings, with a need to maintain an increased invisible lesbian identity as a coping strategy (Yarbrough, 2003). Khetiwe had not disclosed her sexual orientation to her family for fear of their reactions, especially since her family was highly respected in their community. To protect her lesbian identity, and to protect the respectability of her family within the community, she had conformed to all behaviours and practices that were expected of her as a woman when she was at home, one of which was to participate in the annual reed dance. She recalled how she felt violated at having to dance for men and did not feel true to herself. Yet, she felt

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<sup>23</sup> The Reed Dance is an annual Swazi and Zulu ceremony, in which young women dance bare-breasted for the Swazi or Zulu King, who is permitted to select a new bride from the dancers. The young women wear traditional attire, including beadwork which is symbolic of their virginity and chastity. The ceremonies have received considerable criticism for its practice of virginity testing and its broad aim to reduce HIV transmission through targeting women only (Mkasi & Rafudeen, 2016).

compelled to participate in the ceremony in order to protect her sexual identity and to uphold her family name and dignity. Although she understood and accepted her sexuality, she nonetheless expressed a sense of guilt and responsibility towards her family. “But then there’s that space, *eish*, maybe I’m disappointing my elders and stuff like that. There’s nothing that I can do about it”. She later added:

It is very hard. It’s like I have two personalities. I live this [openly identifying as a lesbian at university] here. When I go home, I am this lady. I even like dress like her. I wear women skirts. Well back home, you don’t wear pants. (Khetiwe, DI)

The fragmented and fractured experiences of lesbian subjectivities, embodied in the metaphysical dislocation of “that [subjective] space”, reflected a tension between collective and individual identities and commitments. ‘Belonging’ required that lesbian women assumed subject positions that adhered to cultural norms around gender and sexuality. Many lesbian women presented as heterosexual in ‘heterosexual’ spaces and admitted that they had also dated men in order to protect their lesbian identity (Valentine, 1993). In some instances, heterosexual ideology, framed within a cultural imperative that centred on reproduction and family, represented a powerful force that compelled a choice between conforming to “cultural beliefs” and one’s lesbian sexuality:

But you know in our society, even though I was dating her, I still had to date men. Because I didn’t know. I was trying to close that fact that I was dating her. No, this is not right. This is not what it is because this is how I’m taught. This is how my cultural beliefs are. And in time, I broke up with her. I said, ay, I just can’t do this. Loving her though. You know. Broke up with her, moved on. (Zodwa, DI)

However, certain cultural subject positionings allowed for the emergence of lesbian identities but without referencing or acknowledging same-sex relationships between women

as such. Lesbian sexuality was accommodated through the construction of a lesbian woman as a *sangoma*<sup>24</sup> who was possessed by a male spirit:

I'm going to draw this example from my mentor, my traditional mentor. The sangoma that helped me. She was, she is what we normally refer to, if she was living in this generation, she would be a lesbian. But she is not a lesbian. She is straight. She has a male ancestor who is ruling her but she's still straight. There has been people who are able to be straight. So I don't know whether being a lesbian, is traditional, or religious or I don't know or genetic or biological [laugh] I don't know. (Zanele, DI)

Thus, cultural technologies appeared to accommodate lesbian sexuality when reframed as masculine desire. Zanele described how her mother asked her to end "it" as she did not want a "lesbian for a child" when she first found out that Zanele was a lesbian. However, Zanele's mother became more accepting of her sexual orientation after she had commenced training to become a sangoma, although her mother still did not openly acknowledge her lesbian identity. Sigamoney and Epprecht (2013) contend that certain cultural ways signify attempts to recognise the same-sex subject as an African subject. Hence the unnamed "it" became accepted when named as "sangoma". Zanele explained the cultural 'truths' that rationalised lesbian identity within a cultural framework.

**5.1.2.3 Reframing cultural selves.** Lesbian women also contested cultural and religious scripts that inscribed a heterosexual framework and masculine identity on lesbian sexuality and lesbian women respectively:

So most of the time it actually goes to the extent that you have to be a sangoma because they say that there is a male spirit in you, that's why you acting like this. At first at home, they were saying that. Yes, they took me to a sangoma and the sangoma obviously did not find anything not wrong with me. *Ja*, you need to come to our school here and be a student sangoma and I was not interested at all. I told the sangoma I'm not interested, I don't want to do this. They were like, you have to do this otherwise you will have bad luck for the rest of your life. That's why you leading

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<sup>24</sup> A *sangoma* refers to a traditional/spiritual healer. A person receives a calling to become a sangoma.

this kind of life. It's because of the male spirit. I was not interested. I stood up and left the room. I told my mom I will not do this and I walked out. (Naledi, DI)

There were other ways in which lesbian women deployed existing cultural and religious sites to subvert negative constructions of lesbian women. The church represented a site where women experienced victimisation and prejudice (Mkhize et al., 2010; Reddy, Potgieter & Mkhize, 2007), but also a site of resistance and offered a platform to challenge constructions of lesbian identity by raising awareness of the everyday experiences of lesbian women. Penelope explained how she challenged the church's view that lesbian women were sinners when she highlighted the difficulties endured by lesbian women living in a heteropatriarchal society that shaped lesbian identities through the ubiquitous fear of rape (Gqola, 2015):

Being a lesbian is like a death sentence in disguise. /.../ there was once in church because I do go to church. Erm at the youth, ok, everybody knows that I'm lesbian because I came out. /.../ So the lady came to me and she's like erm, don't you think that this is a sinful life that you are living? I'm like ok, it may be a sinful life as you put it, as the Bible puts it but nobody, who wants to really wake up one day and say hey, today I want to be a lesbian so that I can be beaten up, so that I can be raped, so that I can be sworn at, so that I can be laughed at, so that I can be judged in every [↑] single thing that I do. Now who would really want to wake up and do that? She didn't have an answer for me at all. Because really, this is our life. It's difficult. Every day is difficult for us. We try and make everything better by being with people that are like us and who understand us and who accept us. But at the end of the day, there are those people who do not understand. We try to make them understand but they just say, no. (Penelope, FG)

Other women disrupted hegemonic power within cultural and religious contexts in ways that were more public. Two women were also pastors. Their identities as 'lesbian' and as 'women pastors' disrupted patriarchal, religious and cultural beliefs that privileged male dominance and pointed to the intersections of gender and sexuality within particular historically and politically located contexts. The number of LGBTQ affirming churches are

increasing in South Africa. Given that culture and religion are not static but shaped by historical specificities and contexts, I argue that the current context of democracy and the discourse of human rights functions politically to create the conditions of possibility in which lesbian subjects as religious leaders and producers of new knowledge/power may emerge. Such spaces allow for the discursive ‘confessional’ of ‘coming out’; in other words, the lesbian subject discloses her lesbian identity to the congregation. In addition, it also allows lesbian women as pastors, to speak about the subject(s) that are lesbian women (Foucault, 1995). In adopting subject positions that have been traditionally reserved for males, lesbian pastors deploy religion as political power and as a “technology of the self” to disrupt conceptualisations of lesbian women as ‘sinners’ and as ‘transgressors’. Thus, the shifting social, historical and political contexts created the possibility for a reframing of orthodox Christian ideology and practices, and established new definitions and discursive spaces for belonging, community and gendered subjectivities.

Throughout their talk, the women spoke of the tensions that arose from the intersections of culture, religion, gender and sexuality. In this section, I have shown how cultural and religious ideologies and practices were enmeshed in powerful ways that functioned to regulate and govern same-sex desire and the lesbian body. I have also shown how lesbian women’ subjective experiences were not only influenced by such tensions, but were also multiple, fluid and changing in spaces that were considered traditional and African, as well as those that were considered modern and western. While several women described how they adopted subject positions that conformed to prevailing discourses around gender and sexuality, as a way of establishing a sense of belonging or self-preservation of a hidden identity; others deployed the very same modes of power to disrupt well-established cultural perceptions by offering new constructions of cultural and subjective identities. In attempting to make meaning of collective and individual identities, the women’s narratives foregrounded

the material manifestations of the “...intermingling of the past with the present in ways that illuminate how power relations of the present are embedded in colonial history” (Macleod & Bhatia, 2008, p. 2). From this perspective, although the focus of this section has been on what is termed ‘African’ culture, the material implications for subject positioning and subjective experiences are not limited to any one specific cultural context. For example, the discourses of blame, causality (evocative of a medical model discourse that pathologises same-sex sexuality) and shame as punitive regulation of lesbian sexuality was deployed across racial and cultural settings, as revealed in the narratives of Pearl, who identified as ‘African’ and Mishka, who identified as ‘Indian’, who were both subjected to forms of ridicule and judgement. Chow and Cheng (2010) reported similar experiences of shame and lesbian identity among women from Mainland China and Hong Kong. Hence, the discourse of same-sex sexuality as degenerative and stagnant was not culture-specific, but instead reflected broader political and ideological constructions within society at large:

They didn’t take it good. They still don’t take it nicely. And I’m 21 now. And they still not taking it good. Sometimes they swear at me. Like my brother calls me *stabane*<sup>25</sup>. It’s a bad name for lesbian women. If I do something stupid, they’ll say *ja*, it’s your *stabane* doing that. (Pearl, DI)

Er, *ja* like I said they disowned me and I don’t think I can ever forgive them for that. /.../ They think it is because of my lifestyle that I’m not getting anywhere in my life. *Ja* so I’m still trying to prove them wrong. (Mishka, DI)

The significant othering of lesbian women did not exist within a cultural vacuum but instead unfolded within the broader social contexts. Hence violence and discrimination against lesbian women within cultural and community levels unfolded against the backdrop of national tolerance of violence in South Africa:

Because they [members of the African community] are the ones that who always talk about the whole issue and they are the ones who like maybe end up assaulting other

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<sup>25</sup> *Stabane* is an isiZulu word that refers to an intersex person. However, it is used in a derogatory way to refer to lesbian women (Swarr, 2009).

lesbian women though I've never had that kind of challenge but I've found that in most cases there are those Africans. I think it's because maybe of the lack of information or... as there is a motto which they are using. Being a lesbian or a gay is unAfrican. (Lolly, FG)

They call you *stabane* or *inkonene*. Yeah and you can see like from the way they are saying it, like maybe that they are homophobic, they are not, they are totally against whatever they are seeing. Let's say, as I am a Christian, let's say we go to church with my partner and you'll find people at church talking about it. (Nelisiwe, FG)

In the following section, I explore the women's narratives to reflect on how the broader social and political contexts have shaped their subjective experiences of citizenship.

## **5.2. Discourses of Citizenship**

The notion of citizenship is an important construct in post-apartheid South Africa that is characterised by a shift away from the past system of formalised discrimination. In 1996 South Africa became the first country in the world to formally prohibit any discrimination based on sexual orientation. The South African Constitution, framed within a human rights discourse, has been lauded for being one of the most progressive and pioneering constitutions in the world for its recognition of diverse sexualities and sexual orientations. One of the consequences of constitutional and legislative recognition of diverse sexual orientations has been the increased visibility of lesbian women. While it may be argued that increased visibility has several benefits for lesbian women as citizens of South Africa, it has simultaneously increased their vulnerability to discrimination, homophobic acts and hate crimes. Although many women acknowledged the positive changes that have occurred at the constitutional and legislative levels, their discourses revealed marked dissatisfaction with the lack of transformation at a grassroots level where various forms of discrimination continue. Zanele's dissatisfaction at the lack of change "out there" despite "getting better by ourselves inside" exposed the disjuncture between 'on paper' constitutional reform and the everyday



lived experiences of lesbian women (De Vos & Barnard, 2007). The alienating and othering discourse of “us” and “them”/“they” featured as a consistent theme in the women’s talk and served to establish discursive boundaries of identities that positioned lesbian women as the “better people” in relation to the ‘othered’ heterosexual society:

So right now being in South Africa as a lesbian woman, I’m not liking it at all. I don’t see anything getting better. We are getting better by ourselves inside. We are trying to be better people. But out there, nothing’s changing. (Zanele, FG)

In light of the continued vulnerability and discrimination of lesbian women, one has to critically assess the extent to which post-apartheid South Africa affords full citizenship to lesbian women. Potgieter (2006) maintains that full citizenship goes beyond mere constitutional recognition. She argues that full citizenship is closely linked to issues of access and the freedom to construct oneself as lesbian, gay, transgender or bisexual without fear of discrimination, and the omnipresent fear of homophobic violence and rape (Gqola, 2015):

I’m happy that everybody is allowed to get married now. But still I’m not happy about the rapes that are happening, the murders. Our friends getting killed. I don’t know how many friends of mine have been murdered now. Here [Pietermaritzburg] and in Joburg and Soweto. (Shado, FG)

In this section, I examine how the women’s discourses speak to this disjuncture between constitutional reform and the full citizenship of lesbian women. I do this by considering the gendered and racialised nature of citizenship in the lives of lesbian women in South Africa and the ways in which lesbian women trouble heteropatriarchal authority over citizenship, through their engagement with and negotiation of spaces and identities.

**5.2.1. The gendered nature of citizenship.** In an interview with Elaine Salo (2001), Amina Mama cautioned about the danger of treating gender as something that has been dealt with and that we can move beyond. The saliency of gendered identities as a discursive theme

in the women's talk confirms that gender continues to present challenges and points of resistance.

*5.2.1.1 Sexuality as a non-gender issue.* Women and gender issues have been identified as national imperatives in South Africa (Seidman, 1999). However, Seidman's (1999) account of the processes that had led to the current gendered state in South Africa illuminates how gender issues were conceptualised along race and class intersections only. Issues that centred on women's sexuality did not feature in discussions. I maintain that this significant oversight of women's sexuality, denoted a "dividing practice" which situated women's sexuality as separate from gender issues. This has resulted in lesbian women denied access to full citizenship through the continued enactment of institutional homophobia, societal discrimination and hate crimes. This was powerfully captured in the following account:

Like this month is women and children's month. We are fighting against the abuse against women and children but still I mean I think it's still going to take a very long time for men to get it through their heads that we all equal now. I can't really see that equality. ... especially with butch lesbian women. You know you find that they get discriminated a lot. We're [femme presenting lesbian women] better because you can't really tell. With butch lesbian women they swear them. They call them men just because of the way they dress. ... So not much has changed. Women still get pressurised. They still get beat. So I do think it's going to take a long time for people to accept that we're equal and that we are lesbian women. We're here. We are not going to go anywhere. (Ayanda, FG)

Ayanda adopted a highly gendered stance when she spoke about her sexuality and the rights of lesbian women in South Africa. Her sexuality, framed within a women's rights discourse, located and constructed her right to her sexuality as a human rights one in which lesbian sexuality was intertwined with women's rights and gender rights. In this way, she foregrounded sexuality as a transformation imperative in post-apartheid South Africa and in doing so, called into question narrow definitions of transformation that focused primarily on

race and to some extent, gender as part of historical and political redress. Thus her statement that “We’re here. We are not going to go anywhere” signifies a powerful contestation and political statement in which she claims citizenship and belonging within the public and political spheres (Stevenson, Hopkins, Luyt & Dixon, 2015). The account revealed how citizenship (and the lack thereof) was gendered along traditional notions of masculinity and femininity, which functioned to maintain heterosexuality and patriarchy in post-apartheid South Africa. While constitutional recognition might infer a degree of abstract disconnect between lesbian women and what the constitution symbolically and politically represents and upholds, those that punish lesbian women were explicitly identified as “men”:

The minute that you are out, the minute that they see you in the gay pride, like there was a Soweto gay pride recently. The minute that they see you there because they will be, the men especially, there will be those men they won’t come there to watch this beautiful pride. They will be there to see who and who and who. This girl lives by my house. Oh she’s lesbian. I’m going to sort her out. That kind of thing. So erm that makes more and more lesbian women to be in the closet. And they will not [↑] tell you that they are gay. /.../ that’s fine that the law is trying to make everything equal. But not everything is, you can’t make the people. (Pinky, DI)

The naming of oppressors, perpetrators and “officials” of violence as “men”, reflected the gendered nature of disciplinary techniques in two distinct ways. Firstly, it reflected the ways in which perceived sexual deviancy (i.e. woman loving woman) was punished. Secondly, it reflected the ways in which gender non-conformity (i.e. woman demonstrating masculine behaviours) was punished. Furthermore, Pinky’s reference to the associated risks of public disclosure that nullify the kind of subjective freedom of full citizenship that Potgieter (2006) had described, marked an important observation of the ways in which race intersected with subjective experiences of sexuality and citizenship in South Africa. Constitutional reform impacted the lives of black lesbian women differently to how it impacted the lives of white lesbian women and white gay men. The social construct of ‘race’

is established through a range of discursive and material (class) formations that determine various levels of access to constitution benefits. The process of ‘coming out’ for black lesbian women entails a different set of decisions and consequences in comparison to white lesbian women and white gay men. I argue that even seemingly progressive advances continue to privilege whiteness. I will explore the racialised nature of citizenship in more detail in the next section. For now, I focus on the material realities of the women’s experiences of constitutional protection or lack thereof. The women’s accounts revealed that harsher forms of control were used to govern lesbian behaviour in instances where the threat was perceived to be more explicit. Five women reported being raped because of their sexual orientation. Nontobeko described how she was raped because she dressed in men’s clothes and continued to buy men’s clothes despite threats from men in her community who insisted that she needed to dress like a woman. Meg, who self-identified as a femme lesbian, was raped because she refused the sexual advances of a man whom she had met at a party and to whom she had disclosed that she was lesbian as a way of explaining that she was not sexually interested in him or men in general. She recounted how she was abandoned in a deserted area of an unfamiliar neighbourhood in the early hours of the morning after accepting a lift home from the man. Two other men whom she believed were sent by the man who was meant to give her a lift soon approached her. The two men held her at knifepoint and then took turns to rape her. Her pained words and pained expression are etched in my memory, “Angeline, the rape had left me totally violated and devastated”. I remember not knowing how to respond to this painful account. Despite my experience in psychotherapy, at that moment I felt helpless and exposed. Upon reflection, I think my sense of helplessness and vulnerability might have reflected the sense of helplessness that lesbian women may experience in the context of inadequate legal and social protection for lesbian women.

Hate crimes that specifically target lesbian women who are perceived to disrupt traditional constructions of masculinity and femininity represent brutal attempts to retain male authority and male power, thus enforcing gender inequalities. The focus on the dehumanising physical nature of the crime often shifts the gaze away from individual subjective experiences of rape as a hate crime. It is evident that the paradoxes contained in the social and political spheres have tangible implications for the everyday lived experiences of lesbian women. The women's accounts revealed that black lesbian women do not have the freedom to construct their sexual and gender identities as full citizens. Their narratives indicated that despite advances in legislation, women continued to be abused and "still get beat". While the many forms of homophobic violence and discrimination enacted upon the lesbian body functioned to delegitimise lesbian sexuality and governed lesbian behaviour, and thus reproduced the disparities in citizenship between lesbian women and (heterosexual) men; from a post-colonial view, it also portrayed the ways in which power was enacted within patriarchal society to maintain and reproduce the disparities in citizenship between black lesbian women on the one hand, and white lesbian women and white gay men on the other.

**5.2.1.2 *Feminine/masculine identities and access.*** Dominant understandings of lesbian sexuality as gendered were manipulated and deployed in discourses of shame and morality, as a disciplinary technique (Foucault, 1995). The shaming of the lesbian body represented a less visible form of punishment than the physical brutality of rape and murder, and exposed how power was dispersed in more subtle ways. Institutions enabled the enactment of violence and discrimination at micro levels by situating power within key institutions which controlled access to support such as police protection, a fair justice system and legal and social services. The United Nations Human Rights (2012) division argues that from a legal and citizenship perspective, state responsibilities include an obligation to protect

LGBT persons based on human rights, and not any other category, including sexual orientation. Yet, as illustrated by the narratives below, state protection from violence and access to support services was determined by gender and sexuality. “Officials” who controlled access to services vacillated in their interpretations of gender and lesbian identity to justify forms of discrimination. Several women reported incidents that illustrated how members of the police used notions of masculinity and femininity to discriminate against lesbian women, particularly lesbian women who presented as more masculine, who had attempted to report cases of IPV. Ntombi elaborated:

If a butch lesbian had to get beat up by a man, they [i.e. the police] will tell the lesbian, but why didn't you beat him up too because you're a man? That's crap. It really is. It is messed up. (Ntombi, FG)

Nonhlanhla recalled a similar incident of discrimination and harassment at a club where her lesbian friend who was dressed in men's attire, was denied free access to the club even though it was ladies' night:

It was ladies night and my friend, my best friend is butch. And then the bouncer says that I can go in for free but she must pay. So she's like why should I pay? And he's like no, cos you're a guy. And she's like what do you mean I'm a guy? What are you talking about that she's a guy? She hasn't told him that she's lesbian. He's just judging by how she was dressed. I was wearing heels that night and a dress. So they took it as a couple. (Nonhlanhla, DI)

The above accounts highlighted how the social construct of 'masculinity as male' was deployed as a disciplinary measure to punish gender deviation. Although the heterosexual community ascribed a masculine identity to women who presented as more masculine, those women did not enjoy male privilege (as in the case of the assault charge), nor did they enjoy female privilege (as in the case of access to the nightclub). Bartky (1988) argues that female disruption of *femininity* embodied in the physical body of (masculine presenting) woman may be one of the reasons for homophobia. In a separate incident at another club, Sethu described

how she and a lesbian friend, both femme presenting, were seated in a car that had empty beer bottles. They were approached by police and arrested for public drinking even though they were not drinking any alcohol. When they had tried to explain to the police officer that the bottles were not their own:

...the guy started telling me how we think we are men. Because he was going on and on about how we think we are men. And how he is going to prove to us on that day that we are women. We must start behaving like women. He actually took the both of us and put us in a cell and booked us for public drinking. (Sethu, DI)

These accounts described how the disruption of traditional constructions of gender and heterosexuality represented by lesbian sexuality were met with forms of punishment that rested on discourses of shame and morality. Violence and censorship, both explicit and covert, were deployed as disciplinary mechanisms to police gender and sexuality (Foucault, 1995). Through the selective focus on masculinity and femininity at particular points, lesbian bodies were constructed as shameful by virtue of their sexual and gender non-conformity. Imbued within this discourse of shame, was the inferred sense of immorality around sexual deviance that positioned lesbian women as lesser citizens in relation to the morally righteous heterosexual community represented by those that controlled access (Kitzinger, 1987).

In other instances, institutional discrimination rested on traditional constructions of femininity to prevent lesbian women from accessing support and services. The DVA, discussed in Chapter One, aims to afford legal protection to all individuals. Many women admitted to experiences of IPV, including physical abuse, in their relationships. Yet despite the inclusiveness of the DVA, many women reported that it was difficult to access support. Although police are also known to discount cases of heterosexual IPV, usually on understanding that it constitutes a domestic/private affair, IPV between two women in same-sex relationships are dismissed precisely because it involves two women. As Asande conceded below:

It's hard hey cos now if you're beaten up by someone like a girl and you go to the police and you say I want to open a case, they say, geez, but it's a girl. Why didn't you beat her back? Beat her up. Hit her too. Why are you going to come here and tell me about you cos you're a girl and she's a girl, you know. (Asande, FG)

By dismissing the case on grounds that both partners were women, the police drew upon the common myth and discourses that IPV is specific to heterosexual relationships, and that any violence involving women had to be trivial. Their thinking and actions reinforced the idea that women issues were unimportant and that lesbian violence did not warrant the same attention as heterosexual violence. Sethu, who had been in an abusive heterosexual relationship, showed how heterosexual relationships were privileged in such cases. Being in a same-sex relationship eroded her power to exercise her right to access support as she had been able to do in her previous heterosexual relationship:

You know what, with the father of my child I could. I chose not to because of my child. I left. I chose not to get him arrested. But I had that option. And that gave me a certain amount of power. Now I'm not going to be able to go to some police station and say my lesbian partner beat me up. They are going to laugh at me. But you go in there. I don't know if you've seen how abusive these cops are I mean. For argument sake, I've been arrested for being with a woman. (Sethu, DI)

So if you've had an experience like that, how do you start going to a police station and saying, and you see the cases that are happening around the country. Last year at Pride they picked some girls up and just abused them for no reason. So there's actually nowhere to go. Absolutely nowhere to go. And that's why there's so much abuse. (Nonhlanhla, DI)

Nonhlanhla's words signaled a profound mistrust of the police and a knowing acceptance of police victimisation (Wells & Polders, 2006). This mistrust of institutions bestowed with the responsibility and authority to protect citizenship, extended to other state avenues in South Africa. Hence even when cases of violence were reported (implied trust in the judicial system), fairness in the justice system was not guaranteed. In one of the focus



groups, the women spoke about a rape case<sup>26</sup> which they believed was dismissed by the judge because the victim was a lesbian woman. The participants described how the woman's sexual orientation had a negative bearing on the case once she had disclosed that she was a lesbian:

I think the case just changed when she started saying, I told you, he knows about me. They [i.e. the judge] said what about you? Is that I don't, I'm not interested in men. I date women. I'm a lesbian. *Aiyike* [I don't know. I give up]. Everything just changed. Because even the translator, when he was saying that 'he raped me' he said '*uyangidla*' because even the way he was explaining the Zulu.... But in Zulu you cannot say when someone is saying rape me and then saying '*uyangidla*'. You know? Because you should be saying he forced himself on me. '*Ukudlwengulwa*'. [I was raped]. But you know, but the way he was saying it, everything was just a joke to them. (Mandisa, FG)

The above extract revealed how language was used to enact the de-legitimation of lesbian identity. The isiZulu word '*uyangidla*' used in the translation is a slang word that refers to the act of having sex. The use of slang in the context of a formal legal process conveyed the idea that the charge and the proceedings were not taken seriously. The word itself referred to the act of consensual sex as opposed to sex that was forced upon the woman without her consent. In this way, language was used to discredit the validity of the woman's claim that she was raped. Similar to Bennett (2011), Tuerkheimer (2017, p. 1) has argued that "[c]redibility is central to the legal treatment of sexual violence, as epitomized by the iconic 'he said/she said' contest" in which the veracity of what is true and what is false in the competing reports of the accuser (usually female) and the accused (usually male) is undergirded with a discourse of "consent-based understandings of sexual assault" (p. 4) which favour the accused (usually male). The masculine overtones inherent in the skepticism directed to (female) rape accusers has led to the practice of "credibility discounting" (p. 3) that extends beyond the legal domains to other social contexts. Bennett (2011) has argued further that the practice of discrediting the narratives and experiences of women victims of

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<sup>26</sup> This case was not covered by the media.

sexual violence is deeply interwoven with “the politics of gender” (p. 15) and how cultural and social constructions of the ‘confession’ (Foucault, 1995) of personal sexualised experiences exposes “...the stigmatised zones of femininity, proof of lost honour, a soiled sexuality, and the cause of deeply private shame” (p. 15). In the case described in the focus groups, the woman’s credibility was further discounted by her lesbian sexuality and the fact that she had three children. The judge drew upon existing knowledge and discourses around sexuality, reproduction, motherhood and family to evaluate how plausible the woman’s account was (Gqola, 2015). Within the public discourse of rape, ‘lesbian’ and ‘motherhood’ were considered mutually exclusive categories that discounted the credibility of a lesbian woman with children as a victim of rape (Gqola, 2015). Reproduction and motherhood was viewed as a privilege of heterosexual relationships and consequently excluded lesbian women (Chabot & Ames, 2004). Thus, pregnancy and motherhood were regarded as products of heterosexual desire only, and established a set of moral values through the linkage with family. The law enforces such values. Accordingly, the judge interpreted the woman’s identity as a mother as evidence of her heterosexuality and further inferred that she could not have been raped as she had claimed since having children was interpreted as evidence for consensual sex with a man:

You decided to be lesbian [Thuli = in court] after having three kids? You decided. You saying you have three kids but you lesbian? Therefore, I don’t see any reason why I should say, I think, he’s guilty. I’m dismissing the case. That’s what the judge said. So, therefore if you lesbian... if you get raped, don’t go into court, you deserve it; you’ve got kids. So...or you cannot be lesbian and have kids. (Lesedi, FG)

**5.2.1.3 Contesting gendered ‘truths’.** It was evident that dominant cultural notions around motherhood and family were premised on the assumption that sexuality is fixed. Such an understanding rendered the lesbian identity as incompatible with dominant constructions

of motherhood and family, and the consequent punishing of the identity as criminal instead of the crime of rape (Foucault, 1995; Schwan & Shapiro, 2011), as Thuli had exclaimed:

It's not about her having children. It's about her being raped. It's not about her being a lesbian or whatever. It's just about her being raped. (Thuli, FG)

The above accounts reflected how dominant assumptions around family and motherhood were applied to lesbian women in ways that denied lesbian women access to their rights as full citizens. Having children and parenting were viewed as part of a 'natural' system of heterosexual nuclear families. Discourses around parenthood and motherhood privileged heterosexuality and heterosexual women and constrained lesbian identity. Sanger (2013) illustrated through an analysis of a statement made by President Jacob Zuma who suggested a link between marriage, reproduction, motherhood, sexuality, and being a woman, how such conflation allowed for a woman to become socially intelligible (Butler, 2004). Sexuality was divorced from motherhood and reinforced the idea of a good (heterosexual) mother. In other words, it was assumed that women in same-sex relationships were unlikely to make good mothers or to have a desire to want to have children. In this way, knowledge about sexuality, reproduction and family, functioned to regulate sexual morality. Yet, several women in the current study were single parents or co-parents or had expressed a wish to establish a family with their partners either through a process of legal adoption or artificial insemination. Lesbian parents disrupt the gendered nature of dominant cultural constructions around family, parenthood and motherhood (Lubbe, 2008). Reed, Miller and Timm (2011) argued that to establish a family with a partner signals an indication of commitment to the person and relationship as well as congruency with one's sexual identity. Lesbian women who choose to become parents may be argued to assert their sexual and reproductive agency. In this way too, they convey the fluidity of masculine and feminine identities in which families may be constituted without conforming to a binary father-mother structure. Lesbian

parents also challenged the gendered constructions around motherhood and the assumption that women who are parents or who wish to be parents also want to be ‘mothers’ (Padavic & Butterfield, 2011). As Phindi indicated, not all women who wished to be parents fitted the cultural stereotype of feminine mother. Thus, lesbian women who disturbed dominant cultural scripts of ‘mother’ offered new ways of doing gender<sup>27</sup>:

Like in case two er people wanna have, well two females wanna have kids so then you gonna have to think about who’s gonna be the one responsible for carrying the child cos like maybe the butch one would want to actually carry the child. There’s nothing wrong with that. So er so I guess only in terms of that actually cos everything else er I believe that erm if you’re in a same-sex relationship then it means greater equality for partners but erm it’s quite sad when we actually tend to assume heterosexual roles. (Phindi, DI)

Despite the challenges many women expressed a desire to be integrated into society but conceded that fear prevented such integration:

And yet we would like to interact with the whole community. The vast community. The heterosexual community and the bisexual community. We also want to be more accepting. But we live in fear. That much I can say. We live in fear. As much as we act all masculine, we actually scared of hate crimes cos we see all this horrific stuff. (Refiloe, DI)

Dialogue around sexuality and gender was seen as one way of facilitating such integration. Walsh (2012) argues that public debate has the potential to influence the quality of democracy and a range of outcomes for the rights of marginalised groups. There was recognition that although LGBT issues were included in the Constitution, more advocacy was still required to advance the LGBT project. NGOs and individuals were seen as potential catalysts in bringing about shifts in dominant ideologies that constrained lesbian behaviours. For example, a group of women who belonged to a local LGBT NGO described how they, under the auspices of the NGO, had organised a public forum in their local community to share experiences and deepen understanding around sexuality. It had not been an easy process

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<sup>27</sup> How lesbian women negotiate parenting in their intimate relationships is explored in Chapter Six.

as many members of the community openly condemned same-sex relationships and accused the LGBT NGO of encouraging same-sex relationships. However, the lesbian women felt that the community knew more about them as people after the public forum. Furthermore, they felt that that such dialogue would help break down barriers in the long run. As Lesedi remarked, “Maybe through those workshops people will be able to say ok, this is who I am”. There was an awareness that new ways of conceptualising differences needed to be established and ‘new truths’ still needed to emerge. Lesbian sexuality and the lesbian body were sites of resistance, as lesbian women challenged normative binary male/female constructions and actively engaged in constructing their sexuality in ways that were more fluid:

And you know people really need to be informed about these things cos I mean they obviously going to see that and they going to think oh my gosh. You know what these people are strange. They just playing with us. You know, so I really think that, ja, people need to be educated about these things. They need to know that there are people like this and they just think, even with bisexual people, they think that they confused, they don’t know what they want. And you know, because I mean we are all different. People just need to know there is variety of sexual orientations. Ja.  
(Nqobile, FG)

To summarise, the women’s narratives revealed how constitutional recognition of diverse sexualities did not guarantee protection and full citizenship of lesbian women who continued to be discriminated against based on their sexual orientation. Lesbian women carried the burden of risk as a result of this disjuncture. Their accounts also revealed the gendered ways in which masculinities and femininities intersected with sexualities.

Masculine and feminine identities continued to be dichotomised and treated as fixed in democratic South Africa. Thus, particular qualities are linked to an essential masculine or feminine identity which play out in family and social life. Hence, the censorship of lesbian sexuality is enacted along notably gendered lines which was made possible by concurrent public and less visible techniques of disciplinary control. Prejudicial attitudes around gender

and sexuality coupled with the absence of adequate legal and social support for lesbian women allowed for the continued discrimination of lesbian women. Institutions of law in the form of the court and police form a grid of control that regulates sexuality in democratic South Africa through the establishment and reproduction of knowledge and values on sexual morality that positions lesbian sexuality as shameful and immoral. The linking of morality to traditional notions of family and the discourse of 'sex as productive' (as opposed to sex as pleasure) created a moral ambiguity in which lesbian sexuality is constructed as immoral, while the immorality of violence enacted upon the lesbian body is made invisible. Lesbian women were positioned as lesser citizens as they did not have the freedom to openly construct their sexuality and identities in fluid ways. At the same time, the legal recognition of diverse sexual orientations, albeit on paper, has created the possibilities for the disruption of traditional conceptualisations around motherhood, family and sexuality as lesbian women assume subject positions of mother and lover.

Of course while this section has focused on the gendered nature of citizenship and lesbian identities, gender intersects with other salient social and structural factors in multiple and salient ways. In this section, I have already pointed to the intersections of race with gender in the subjective experiences of citizenship. In the section below, I undertake a deeper analysis of the raced nature of lesbian citizenship.

### **5.2.2 Black lesbian women as raced 'others'**

In this section, I explore the women's subjective experiences of racialised sexuality in relation to white gay men, and white lesbian women. Not only did these discourses draw attention to the heterogeneity of LGBTQ identities (Irwin, 2008); but perhaps more significantly, drew attention to how social and historical experiences of race itself continues

to shape subjective experiences and positionings in relation to sexuality and citizenship. In my analysis of the racial discourses around citizenship, I use Dixon and Durrheim's (2000) thesis for the “intimate” link between the questions of “who we are” and “where we are”. Dixon and Durrheim (2000) have argued for the “located nature of subjectivity” (p. 27) and the “political dimension of one's representations of place and of how one locates oneself and others” (p. 29). In conceptualising the place-identity nexus, they have argued for a collective group identity, forged upon the collective nature of the relations between persons, identities and material settings. I posit that in the absence of formalised racial segregation, locality, space and identity intersect in ways that alienate and exclude black lesbian woman from gay and lesbian spaces that continue to endorse whiteness as normative. Locality and space draw upon past and current racial and class divides and become modes through which racial divisions are enacted in nuanced and subtle ways. I explore how black lesbian women negotiate their subjective experiences and identities within these intersecting contexts and the ways in which these contexts constrain or liberate them.

**5.2.2.1 *The invisibility of black identities in white spaces.*** As South Africa heralded in democracy in 1994, Gevisser and Cameron (1995) asked several important questions about gay identity and gay spaces in South Africa. Of particular relevance to the current analysis were their questions around the exclusion of black women from mainstream gay culture and the existence of a common gay identity in South Africa. Gevisser and Cameron (1995) had conceded that the gay identity in South Africa has largely been narrowly defined to refer almost exclusively to “...white, middle-class urban men...” (p.4). The experiences of black lesbian women suggested that white privilege continues to dominate gay identity and gay spaces in post-apartheid South Africa as Ami pointed out:

Truly, truly. It's like you're invisible because [↑] you're a woman. You're invisible because you're a gay [↑] woman. You're invisible even in the gay spaces because

you're a gay woman [↑] and then [↑] you're invisible because you're a black [↑] gay woman. (Ami, FG)

Ami's account reflected the multiple positioning of black lesbian women and the multiple permutations of oppression (Collins, 2000, 2004; Crenshaw, 1991) in a society that privileges heterosexuality, masculinity and whiteness. However, this does not suggest that her multiple identities and positionings were layered or additive in nature (Bowleg, 2008; Yuval-Davis, 2006a). Instead they intersected in complex and nuanced ways with Ami's own historical experiences and political positioning, and constituted Ami's subjective experiences in these spaces. Ami reported that she had experienced a sense of invisibility even in gay spaces where male privilege and racial history dictated that such spaces continued to be dominated by white men. 'White' and 'male' were criteria for group membership within prime urban gay spaces; an apartheid inheritance that may be argued to remain largely unchanged. In South Africa, the intersections between geographical locations and LGBT social spaces is both raced and gendered. Williams (2008), in her exploration of queer social spaces in Cape Town, South Africa, reflected on how apartheid's racialised spaces continue to exist in gay social spaces. Central, urbanised spaces are most frequented by white gay men while black gay men and lesbian women remain in the townships on the periphery of central Cape Town. Thus while formalised racial divisions are no longer apparent in South Africa; racial histories, classist/material divisions, and socio-geographic locatedness, intersect in complex ways to produce multiple "dividing practices" (Foucault, 1982) that construct black same-sex sexuality as different to white same-sex sexuality.

Language plays an important role in keeping boundaries in place. Ami went on to expound on the exclusionary effects of discursive constructions around gender and racial binaries which functioned to keep dominant ideologies in circulation and keep other discourses and knowledge away (Foucault & Gordon, 1980; Mills, 2003):



University A doesn't have a very visible community of same-gender loving women of colour that I can identify with and even this LGBT 4 organisation is predominantly white men and they're very gay-centred in their events and in the language that they use. (Ami, FG)

Ami began by drawing attention to the importance of group membership when she spoke about a "...community of same-gender loving women of colour" that she could identify with. She then went on to explain her experience of being in the out-group:

I use the term 'gay' to identify myself but actually most people don't think of me when they think gay and that's not what you're thinking about. You're thinking about gay men and it's so frustrating to like be excluded even in the gay community. (Ami, FG)

The term 'gay-centred' was used in the first extract to refer specifically to men in same-sex relationships, although previously Ami used the term 'gay' as an umbrella term to refer to men and women in same-sex relationships. The discursive ambiguities demonstrated in the usage of the word 'gay' reflected how discourse itself reflected modes of micro-power that maintained the dominance of certain groups through inclusionary or exclusionary practices. While the term 'gay' was accepted as an inclusive umbrella term referring to all persons in same-sex relationships, making 'gay' visible, it was also used specifically in some instances to refer exclusively to homosexual men. In doing so, it served to exclude, alienate and invisibilise lesbian women from 'gay' identities. The discursive constructions deployed in social spaces that served to exclude black lesbian women must be considered as an extension of macro ideologies and institutional practices (Diamond & Quinby, 1988).

**5.2.2.2 Race, class and black citizenship.** The discourse of 'black lesbian women as othered' featured in the women's narratives about their interactions with white lesbian women as well. In the absence of a gender marker, the intersections of race and class were foregrounded. Janice and Ridwana's experiences at two separate social events organised by

one particular lesbian organisation whose membership was predominantly white

foregrounded how race and class are powerful points of intersection:

Like we went to an event and we were completely cloaked, we did not belong there. ... It was a braai<sup>28</sup>. *Ja*, the focus was on lesbian women. They [i.e. the organisation] organise these events to get on with women, but when you get there, everyone, everything is completely white. We just did not fit in, we felt totally excluded. So I don't know....I don't know, I'm not comfortable with it. (Janice, FG)

Although Janice had regarded all the women at the party to be lesbian women, she felt that she did not belong in that lesbian space because of her blackness. As a black woman, Janice felt invisible and “completely cloaked” in a space where “...everything is completely white” appeared to be the normative lesbian identity. Janice’s experience highlighted the “spatio-temporal” (Durrheim, 2005, p. 445) dynamics that characterise intergroup relations in historically white places and that reflect a racial codification and hierarchy that is historically specific (Durrheim, 2005). I argue that such spatio-temporal dynamics and its racial representations (Durrheim, 2005) extend beyond physical space to include in this instance, social space as privilege. The discourse of invisibility suggested that the experiences of oppression as lesbian women affects black women and white women differently, and their respective representations to the other (hooks, 1992). McIntosh (2012, 2015) asserts that a key feature of privilege is that it goes unnoticed. In this way, white lesbian women become invisible to social scrutiny and may be afforded more protection as a result of social acceptance (McIntosh, 2012, 2015). Black women on the other hand are invisible in lesbian spaces because of their blackness. Within the South African context, privilege is closely linked to class and material privilege. Ridwana touched upon this intersection when she described the sense of alienation that she felt when she attended a “plush” picnic organised by the same lesbian organisation:

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<sup>28</sup> South Africa word of Afrikaans origin to mean the same as a ‘barbeque’ in western countries.

When we got there, they were already eating. We just kept to ourselves. We were not used to it because we don't go to plush parties. (Ridwana, FG)

Ridwana lived in an area known as the Cape Flats; a residential township that was demarcated for persons racially categorised as 'coloured' and 'African' under the apartheid system. Although some areas may be categorised as middle class, many areas in the township are portrayed for its harsh social and economic challenges including poverty, crime, rival gang fights, substance abuse and partner violence. Black lesbian women who did not share the same class and material privileges as the dominant white group may felt excluded from lesbian spaces that are defined on the basis of material and class privilege. However as Ntombi clarified, class was more nuanced and was not simply associated with certain racial groupings. Instead class intersected with language, identity, culture and coloniality in ways that produced particular racial subjectivities and certain levels of 'blackness' or 'whiteness':

...OK let's say you go to LGBT2 and there's this one black girl and then you hear her speak. She doesn't sound you know, like all the other black girls (laughter from the group). OK, and they're just there because they fit in a certain social class right and someone else from the townships won't really fit in....even if I see someone with the same colour as me at LGBT2, they don't sound like me and I'm not going to be comfortable with them. (Ntombi, FG)

Ratele (2009) has argued for the significance of the 'self-in-community' – an African concept that has been eroded by colonialism, racism, the Apartheid system and western ideologies that favour individualism (Krog, Mpolweni-Zantsi, & Ratele, 2009). I maintain that Ntombi might have made reference to a sense of belonging and shared identity – of 'self-in-community'. Articulated differently, Ntombi's words reflected the enactment of the place-identity intersections (Dixon & Durrheim, 2000). However, the changing nature of historical and political contexts suggests that the place-identity nexus is also shifting in nature. As a result, the black lesbian women in this focus group assumed contradictory positions in different contexts. Although they were university students, university education as an

indicator of social class and privilege may be argued to represent only one dimension of class. The tensions between group identities, localities and material settings were illustrated in their accounts of the differences in focus between white lesbian organisations, usually based in central urban areas and black lesbian organisations, usually based in townships and more rural or peripheral areas. The women felt disconnected with the predominantly white lesbian organisations and the predominantly black lesbian organisations. Their accounts suggested that the white lesbian organisations were concerned with the creation of opportunities for social interaction while the black organisations were more political in their approach and concerned with issues of support of marginalised groups. Kazyak (2011) argues that urban and rural spaces influence the construction of sexual identities in different ways as persons draw upon interpretations of that space in their own identity constructions. As Promise had explained:

I think these organisations (i.e. the LGBT organisations located in the townships) are like societies that focus on abused women. It is still thought to exclude us. (Promise, FG)

Promise seemed to suggest that within the framework of 'township organisations', black lesbian women were positioned as helpless victims and in need. In this sense, township lesbian organisations were associated with the discourse of stigmatisation and marginalisation of black women; in which their positioning as working class discursively constituted them as 'bad object' in relation to upper class white lesbian women (Walkerline, 1996). However, the reference to the disparity between black and white lesbian organisations also pointed to the discourse of gender and women's empowerment that allow for the continued non-empowerment of the most marginalised groups of women and the continued enactment of violent masculinities (Gqola, 2007). While these two events were located in Cape Town, Western Cape, the tensions that exist between 'black' and 'white' LGBTQ organisations in

South Africa and their respective political agendas were also accentuated in the 2013 hosting of the Soweto and Johannesburg Pride marches. The scheduling of the Soweto Pride by predominantly black organisations and the Johannesburg Pride by a predominantly white organisation, referred to as "...a black pride and a white pride..." (*Mambaonline*, May 27, 2013) on the same day set into motion a furore of exchanges between both organisations that reflected very real racial and political divisions in the LGBTQ constituencies that supported the respective marches. Dikeledi Deekay Sibanda from the organisation *Forum for the Empowerment of Women* (FEW), was quoted as saying "that the issue was discussed with the Johannesburg Pride organisers, but that 'they don't want to engage with our issues as black queer people who are affected by hate crimes and other social issues'" (*Mambaonline*, May 27, 2013). The differences in the political/activist agendas associated with black LGBT organisations and the social agendas of white LGBT organisations were elucidated in similar comments from membership:

Also, having to 'choose' one pride to attend that day is about what we value more. Do we go to Soweto and protest against rape and murder or do we go to Joburg to party? The pride we attend that day will say what we as a community value more. I just have one thing to say about Joburg 'pride' HELL NO, I WONT GO! Soweto is a true PRIDE. (*Mambaonline*, May 27, 2013)

White organisations were seen to have social agendas rooted in classist and material privilege, and black organisations were seen to have political agendas that were rooted in their experiences of class and race oppressions. The disconnect between black and white LGBTQ organisations and their respective membership illustrated the micro forms of power that sustained the perpetuation of white privilege through discourses that linked black sexuality with political struggle only:

Yeah, well I mean...umm you have a history you know and some kind of an understanding. I identify as a feminist and I am aware of the struggle that I am subjected to growing up as a woman in a patriarchal society. Being black adds to that struggle and then you are also a lesbian. So somehow when you are in a group with other black lesbian women, there is this...almost...almost like an unspoken acknowledgement of this shared struggle ...umm that binds you somehow. Well yeah, it is...you have others you can turn to, go out with, share your life with. (Sophie, FG)

Yeah, well in City A I think I mean I think anywhere you go, at least in my experience, communities of black lesbian women tend to be very insular. So it's about who you know can get you into where you know. So in that sense because I was dating other black lesbian women, I was already in the circle so to speak. Umm but there's also a lot more access because you can find groups similar to your own you know. And there's this sense of shared identity because you're black and you're lesbian...you could do things together. (Rose, DI)

While the shared histories might lend to the creation of a bond among black lesbian women; it also has the effect of essentialising black and white groups and sexualities which establish particular subject positionings and levels of privilege. In the current study, the contradictory positioning of black lesbian women implied that they often felt a sense of alienation in both 'black' and 'white' contexts. As Zinzi had stated, there were very few places where identities and histories intersected in ways that made them feel accepted:

I'm with Promise on all the class and a separation from race, particularly when you're talking about all City A lesbian organisations ...umm but I mean I don't know where else people go. Like where do you people go to? Where do you all go? [Directed to group members] (Zinzi, FG)

In summary, the women's narratives revealed the ways in which their subjective experiences of citizenship were rooted in South Africa's political and colonial histories and, in its classist/material contexts. Race and gender intersected with citizenship and sexuality in complex ways that produced several 'us'/ 'we' and 'them'/'they' divides. These reproduced and maintained existing discourses of masculinity and whiteness as privileged and entitled, and which had corporeal effects on the lesbian body and experiences of discrimination and violence. Social divisions were enmeshed with and produced by the socio-political historical

contexts within which they unfolded, and in the boundaries that were established in the discourses of belonging and alienation in the subjective experiences of citizenship. In the following section, I explore the ‘us’/ ‘them’ dichotomy further through an analysis of discourses of competition in relation to heterosexual women and men.

### **5.3 Discourses of Competition**

Discourses of competition featured prominently in the women’s narratives and were closely linked to understandings of identity, gender and sexuality. Discourses of competition were also politicised. I examine the discourses of competition between lesbian women and heterosexual women and men<sup>29</sup> and the inherent relational tensions reflected within these discourses. Lesbian women, simultaneously positioned as potential lover and potential competitor, were divided on how they viewed the impact of relationships with heterosexual women and men on lesbian identity. I attempt to elucidate these tensions and contradictions in the analyses that follow.

**5.3.1 “How can you call yourself straight but sleep with other women?”** Many lesbian women stated that they had dated women who had identified as heterosexual<sup>30</sup>. Samu had suggested that the availability of potential partners was limited, “I’ve dated different women /.../ cos sometimes it’s like you don’t have a choice. /.../ Here we have limited choices.” This denoted a valid explanation in the context of homophobic responses to

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<sup>29</sup> Discourses of competition among lesbian women is explored in Chapter Seven.

<sup>30</sup> Lesbian women differentiated between women who identified as ‘straight’ or heterosexual but who also had intimate relationships with women, and women who identified as bisexual. Bisexual women represented a distinct identity category in relation to women who identified as heterosexual. Although both categories of women were viewed to undermine lesbian identity; lesbian women were more amenable to heterosexual women as potential partners than bisexual women. The perceived threat of bisexuality, as a distinct identity category to lesbian identity is discussed in Chapter Seven in the analyses of ‘Discourses of identity’.

disclosure of non-heterosexual sexual orientations (Herek, 2000; 2004). However, for others, the decision to date 'heterosexual' women was a choice that reflected particular positionings:

Well my history is that I have dated a bisexual girl. I have dated a butch; *ja* we sort of dressed the same. I have dated straight women. I'm saying straight but once you've moved over that means you are no longer straight. You may be promiscuous, you may be flexible, or dynamic, or whatever [laughs]. And *ja*, it's weird. So I've kind of had a bit of everything. (Lolly, DI)

Lolly pointed to the fluidity of gender and sexuality as "flexible" and "dynamic" when she spoke about the women that she had dated. Lesbian women and lesbian sexuality trouble traditional notions of the gender/sex binary as fixed and stable (Butler, 1990a). An intimate relationship between two women disrupts traditional notions of compulsory heterosexuality (A. Rich, 1980), especially when the act of sex is not linked to sexual identity. Conversely, many lesbian women also reported a growing trend among heterosexual women to want to date lesbian women:

Er and especially now that most women, I don't know if it is just in City B but here everybody wants to try out a lesbian woman. They all want to date a lesbian at some point. You go somewhere and heterosexual women, I don't know what it is but as soon as they see lesbian women coming through, no, I wouldn't mind trying a lesbian. So such things they just tend to confuse. Then it becomes someone will say no, she said she's straight. And I say, can you do that? It's kind of silly when you think about it. (Zanele, DI)

Maybe you're like a student right. And then you're in a community. You stay with your street friends. And they are so curious about you. Wow, you are a lesbian. Ok, you are a lesbian no, what not and what not. Ok, fine you always chill with your friends and they're always curious about the fact that you are a lesbian. And you always be in the centre and people want to find out what's happening. You find you are involved and what not and then there's this thing now; all of them, they want to know and then they start you know; when you bringing friends and they start flirting [A= and these are straight people?]. These are straight people and then ... somehow they find they [are] into girls now. You know, they start seeing girls. Now she's dating girls and it's because of that. (Pinky, FG)



The above narratives pointed to the sexual and identity fluidity among heterosexual women and lesbian women (Butler, 1990a, 1990b). As illustrated in earlier analyses, heterosexual male interest in lesbian women were often linked to enactments of violence, in which lesbian women were positioned as targets of that violence, fuelled by cultural notions of masculinity and a perceived threat of lesbian sexuality to such masculinity and heterosexuality. Although sexual violence was usually directed towards lesbian expressions of masculine identities (Swarr, 2012), this was not always the case. Heterosexual female interest in lesbian women centred on the sexuality of lesbian women and a positioning of lesbian women as potential sexual/intimate partners. The body, as sexed and gendered, thus signified a site where power was enacted and resisted (Foucault & Gordon, 1980), not only in relation to heterosexuality as a truth regime, but in relation to women's sexual subjectivities as multiple and situated (Foucault, 1986). This implied a distinction between sex and sexuality, in which sex and sexuality were not equated, and based on the assumption of a natural link between the body and particular sexual positionings. Rather sexuality (and the body) has to be understood as being historically, culturally and politically constructed (McHoul & Grace, 1993; Mills, 2003). I argue that the advancement in women's rights and agency, coupled with the heightened focus on sexuality in democratic South Africa, and the increased visibility of lesbian women and lesbian sexuality, constructs lesbian women as sexed and gendered objects of curiosity; and has created possibilities for the pursuit of intimate relationships with the 'other'. Embedded within the discourses of competition and curiosity, was the discourse of conquest, which resonated with colonialist and masculinist ideologies and practices. In identifying as women and representing socially marginalised and oppressed groups, but concurrently assimilating practices that have been traditionally associated with masculine and colonial identities, I argue that this has created a power dynamic within the possibilities of lesbian-heterosexual relationships, with both groups of

women being simultaneously positioned as the pursuer and the object of pursuit. This reflected a disruption not only of heteronormativity, but also of traditional gender roles in intimate/sexual relationships – a disruption that offered possibilities for the discursive constitution of other/multiple sexual identities to become intelligible and the performative possibilities of such identities (Butler, 1990a). Thus, in dating, lesbian and heterosexual women negotiated various subject positionings and identities. Several lesbian women reported that they had known of heterosexual women who had come to identify as lesbian *after* being in relationships with lesbian women. Anele had remarked, “[S]ometimes some heterosexuals just end up turning lesbian. /.../ So ja, it’s fifty-fifty. Some judge us, some fall for us.” (FG)

While some lesbian women viewed heterosexual conversion to a lesbian identity as a feather in their cap, other women found it to be problematic. Women who had identified as lesbian after first having been in heterosexual relationships were regarded as being dismissive of a true lesbian identity and lesbian experience. A distinction was made between “authentic” (Eves, 2004) lesbian women whose identity was validated by their personal struggles and journeys and those women who had identified as *lesbian* after having first engaged in heterosexual relationships. Zinzi questioned the genuineness and authenticity of lesbian women who had been in heterosexual relationships prior to being in a lesbian relationship (Eves, 2004):

“/.../ women who later on, after being in a heterosexual relationship and the longer, the worse it is. How can they really be lesbian? And because of that they are not fully accepted as lesbian women. (Angeline: So they are not seen as genuine lesbian women?). There is a lot of judgment within the lesbian community. That is just one of them. And personally, I don’t judge people. I just think that what they do is inappropriate because it makes it harder for us who are actually, and I will say this with pride, who are actually genuinely lesbian; who are not thinking of changing to anything in the long run. Who have taken the time to discover themselves really and giving themselves the chance to say, ok, this I honestly do not like. This is what I like and have had to deal with the struggle within themselves of changing. Cos now, it’s

just cool to be lesbian. Everyone can be lesbian without people actually understanding the depth of what it means to be lesbian. (Zinzi, FG)

Although Zinzi was careful to distance herself from the “judgment within the lesbian community”, she disapproved of women who identified as lesbian post heterosexual relationships. Zinzi’s positioning as an authentic and genuine lesbian in relation to lesbian women who had had previous heterosexual relationships highlighted the divisions among lesbian women, characterised by a reversal of the ‘other’ in which access and belonging to the lesbian community was controlled by “genuine” lesbian women. Zinzi’s words suggested that a salient dimension of an authentic lesbian identity centred on the distinction between emotional investment versus implied sexual fantasy inherent in same-sex relationships. The implied association between sex and sexual identity in this instance introduced a sense of sexual morality, which was used to govern entry into and membership of ‘authentic’ lesbian sub-cultures. The thinking that heterosexual women’s sexual interest in lesbian women and their subsequent identification as lesbian centred on their sexuality built into and reinforced broad reductionist constructions of the one-dimensional (sexed) nature of lesbian identity. Instead, lesbian subjective experiences and lesbian identities encompass multiple dimensions of subjectivity. For example, Noni had spoken about the emotional pain that she had endured because “people” did not understand that she was not just physically attracted to women but also emotionally invested in her relationships with women:

So I’ve been in lesbian relationships. I’ve been comfortable with myself and it’s painful because some people don’t accept you know why you love the woman. Why you don’t want a man and they look at the other side. They don’t understand what’s happening in between. They don’t understand the emotional part. (Noni, DI)

Zinzi’s annoyance, “...now, it’s just cool to be lesbian” and Anele’s statement that heterosexual women “just end up turning lesbian” conveyed the impression of lesbian identity as a trend, as transient and as fleeting. Implied was the idea of choice for

heterosexual women who thereafter identified as lesbian, in contrast to lesbian women who were ‘naturally’ ‘born’ lesbian. This served to devalue the subjective experiences of lesbian women:

You can't just decide that you want to be different from other people. If it's who you are, it's who you are. There's nothing that you can do about it. I've been attracted to girls from since an early age you know. [Angeline=mhm]. And I can't decide you know. It's who I am you know. (Prudence, DI)

Thus while some lesbian women considered it an acceptable practice to date ‘straight’ women, others viewed the practice as delegitimising lesbian identity and lesbian sexuality. As Trudy asked, “How can you call yourself straight but sleep with other women? What kind of straight is that?” Lesbian women were generally sceptical of women who identified as lesbian after having first been in a heterosexual relationship. This despite the fact that many lesbian women admitted to having had relationships with men before they had fully accepted their sexual orientation, or that some women continued to have relationships with men as a way of protecting their lesbian identity. Tshepo had explained:

I think female sexuality is quite fluid. If you feel that strongly about someone you know. But nevertheless I am attracted to women. I have always been attracted to women. But that was not expected of me. I dated the father of my child. We were together for seven years but within that seven years, I had sexual relationships with women. It was very difficult because you would have to I would have to go somewhere at lunch or at night and make sure I am out of there before anyone sees me. And stuff like that. (Sethu, DI)

In claiming an ‘authentic’ identity, lesbian women also implied that the nature of lesbian sexuality was fixed, stable and permanent. As revealed in previous analyses, naturalising and ‘born this way’ (Boonzaier & Zway, 2015) discourses featured strongly in the women’s narratives to convey the voraciousness of their sexual identities as natural in the same way that heterosexuality was assumed to be natural. In summary, lesbian relationships with women who identified as heterosexual revealed several tensions relating to lesbian

identity and sexuality. These relationships represented a troubling of traditional notions of gendered roles within intimate relationships. Perceived differences between groups of lesbian women, informed by the absence or presence of prior relationships with heterosexual men, pointed to tensions in the conceptualisations of sexual identities as fluid or fixed. While some lesbian women embodied more fluid sexual identities, other lesbian women viewed heterosexual-lesbian relationships as a disruption of an authentic lesbian identity, which, through naturalising discourses, was constructed as stable and fixed. Throughout the women's accounts, there was an ever-present male and coalesced sense of an underling masculinity, which governed lesbian identities and lesbian relationships in several ways. These are explored in the following section.

**5.3.2 “*The temptation is the men*”.** Lesbian women assumed contradictory and ambiguous positions in relation to heterosexual men as both groups vied for the attention of women. Dating heterosexual women offered certain privileges to some lesbian women who embodied masculine identities:

You'll find that a straight woman, they give more love. They don't intend to overpower you. So you're like a butch lesbian, you play a role of a man. That straight woman will treat you as a man. But femme lesbian and butch lesbian they tend to like, I'm a femme, you're a woman, I'm a woman so you must clean, you must do whatever. So they tend to be bossy because they know they are dating women. But to the straight girls, they think that in their minds, you are still my man. I will treat her as my man cos she is my man. She's providing and she's doing this. But with a femme in a lesbian relationship, it doesn't go like that. Cos you are a woman, you must do this, you must do that. I do this. I do that. (Sonny, FG)

The above account of a same-sex relationship that involved a self-identified butch lesbian woman and a self-identified heterosexual woman may be argued to have mirrored traditional heterosexual relationships in the positioning of the self-identified butch lesbian woman as a masculine identity in the relationship, and as conveyed the provider and decision maker. The discourse of ‘men as material providers’ marked a dominant social discourse that

has endured even in the face of significant progressive political changes. In referencing this discourse to masculine identities in relationships with heterosexual women, it discursively reinforced several other ideas. These included the idea that heterosexual women were not emotionally invested in same-sex relationships, as well as the discursive construction of heterosexual male superiority. Relationally, these discourses initiated a constant sense of competition and threat:

You see sometimes the straight women, they come to you because they think you've got a lot of money; you've got money. So when you try to do things for them like buy them material things they would think that you've got money. So every time you need to prove, improve yourself in that cos when the men comes and if the men comes and buys her maybe like a cell phone, she would expect you to buy her more than a cell phone or the better brand than what she has at the moment. So it's all about material love in terms of straight women and lesbian women. (Anele, FG)

Despite being positioned in less powerful positions as black lesbian women in society, some butch lesbian women disrupted traditional constructions of masculinity and power through the embodiment of traditional male roles and the assimilation of masculine privileges, much like the *tombois* of Indonesia (Blackwood, 2009). Normative gender roles were subverted in same-sex relationships between women through the performance of masculinities that are traditionally associated with men, but now performed by women in relationships in which they identify as masculine and usually also present as outwardly masculine (Swarr, 2012). Swarr (2012, p. 962) argues that “[b]utch lesbian women’ relationships with straight women also both paradoxically affirm and undermine masculinities and claims to male bodies” since butch lesbian expressions of masculinity and its normative behaviours that link it to control over women, disrupt the performance of gendered heterosexual roles. In the above account for example, Sonny alluded to the trade-off between masculine materiality (“she’s providing and she’s doing this”) and feminine sexuality (“they give more love”). Yet, such a trade-off did not involve opposite-sex genders.

However, Halberstam (1998) asserts that it is this very adoption of masculine identities, linked to power and privilege over women, that contributes to the perpetuation of patriarchal practices that oppress and control women. The gendered nature of power within same-sex relationships that were seen to reproduce masculine privilege was contested by some lesbian women who felt that relationships with heterosexual women worked against more egalitarian approaches to same-sex relationships. In making sense of the gendered power dynamics within relationships, and more egalitarian approaches, some women drew on a discourse of gendered sameness in reference to a more democratic distribution of household labour:

Yes, yes it does. Erm what I love about girls, we understand each other. There are those clashes of course. Cos there comes a time especially if you do date a girl that has come out from a heterosexual relationship, she'll see you as being the guy. Cos she's so used to being under. So she wants you to be the person who's on top. So in other words, you do this and I'll do this. Like being used to saying no I'll cook today and I'll do the dishes and stuff and I'll clean and I'll do your laundry. But I'm not used to that. I like it to be just a fifty-fifty relationship where we'll compromise in some ways. We'll say babe, today I'll do this and you do this. (Asande, DI)

Egalitarian relationships were often defined in the form of domestic chores, as opposed to other tasks and roles that are not traditionally associated with women. Lesbian women inferred that relationships with heterosexual women impeded more egalitarian approaches, precisely because butch lesbian women were ascribed traditional roles that are assigned to men in patriarchal systems. In this way, butch identities and traditional ways of doing gender that associated domestic labour with women and economic labour with men functioned to maintain gendered inequities. At the same time, the above account may be read as a reflecting a contestation of traditional gendered roles through the recognition of domestic chores as an important aspect of relationship quality and in the involvement of a masculine identity in the negotiation of more equitable domestic chores. As will be shown in Chapter Six, the idea that egalitarian relationships may only be achieved through economic, domestic

and childrearing domains may represent a white, western middle-class feminist notion (Wong, 2012). Other spheres within specific social, cultural and historical contexts may offer alternate narratives to contesting gendered power differentials and constructing more egalitarian relationships (Wong, 2012).<sup>31</sup>

The above accounts exposed the ways in which lesbian sexuality was seen to pose a threat to heteronormative constructions of masculinity, while heterosexual men were seen to pose a threat to lesbian sexuality through the dominant representation of heterosexuality and heterosexual men as the ‘original’ (Butler, 1990a). This underlying discourse further sustained a discourse of masculine omnipotence that marked a perceived though powerful established norm against which lesbian women defined and judged their own behaviours and roles in relationships, particularly those with heterosexual women. As a result, despite their masculine identities, butch lesbian women were often positioned as weaker in relation to men, and were vulnerable to exploitation:

And sometimes, also let’s also bear in mind that butch lesbian women they not only dating femme lesbian women. Because sometimes they date straight women. And then you’ll find most of the time *uti* even then it becomes more worse if you dating a straight woman. [Tshepo=*Ja, Ja*]. Because she is familiar with the fact that men are stronger, more manly, dominating and therefore, if she finds you sweeter, they’ll take advantage. (Joyce, FG)

The discourse of perceived inadequacy permeated sexual intimacy as well. Although many lesbian women spoke with confidence about their sexuality, they were also wary of the threat of heterosexual men’s ‘sexual virility’ (Hollway, 1984). This perceived threat was particularly strong when potential partners had identified as heterosexual and had engaged in prior sexual relationships with men. Anele had remarked:

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<sup>31</sup> The impact of historical and cultural specificity on the construction and negotiation of gendered power is explored further in Chapter Seven.



Women are very hard to get. [Group laughter]. Ay, they are very hard. So, the temptation is the men ...you can throw yourself at her but when the men say come. (Anele, FG)

The discursive construction of masculine sexuality as masculine omnipotence had significant truth effects for the performance of sexuality. Perhaps the single most powerful discourse was that of the 'coital imperative' that suggested that sexual gratification could only be attained through sexual intimacy with a man that involved penile penetrative sex (Gavey, 2005; Vares, & Braun, 2006). This featured as a dominant discourse even within supportive and accepting networks:

My friends in particular are more supportive. I have learnt to interact with people who are more understanding. Not the ones who are full of stereotypes. But then they will jokingly say to you ah, don't you miss having sex with a man? Or something like that. (Sma, DI)

I've dated quite a few girls and some are straight women and some are lesbian women. *Ja*, with straight women, for me it was quite like easy to date a straight woman but sometimes you feel like it is difficult sometimes because you cannot satisfy a straight woman in a number of things because they think that you are a man. But what a man give them, you cannot also give that to them. (Thandi, DI)

The discursive construction of lesbian sexuality as different, deficient and inadequate to heterosexual male sexuality was used to justify acts of infidelity:

And there's a lot of cheating sometimes, *ja*. Cos sometimes we'll think that that person I think that they always... they don't want to call themselves bisexuals but they like to call themselves straight because they say they are dating lesbian women, they not... they don't fall under homosexuality under homosexuals. So I, they do certain things, while they dating you, they will date some other man. And what you do, in terms of sex I would say *ja*, it's not cos they would require you to do things which you cannot do cos we don't have what a man has. *Ja*. (Phindi, FG)

Lesbian women drew upon existing heterosexual discourses that positioned male sexuality as superior and therefore a threat to lesbian sexuality and a particular lesbian identity that also centred on the idea of a powerful lesbian sexuality:

And it's like a threat. Like I'll go back to my man or tell him. So obviously I'll just make sure that because I don't want people to say, ok, she's dating a woman and you know it was bad. Usually it is said that once you date a lesbian, you never go back to men you know. So I think they just try by all means...to do everything in their power to keep the person so they don't go back and embarrass them. (Sonny, FG)

If we break up just don't go to a guy. I don't know if you want to kill me, just do something with a girl, but not with a guy. (Shado, DI)

In summary, the tension between heterosexual male sexuality and lesbian sexuality positioned lesbian women in contradictory and ambiguous positions in which the lesbian body and lesbian sexuality became sites in which male sexuality as superior was reinforced and contested. Although male sexuality was positioned as superior to lesbian sexuality in many instances, it was often referenced in obscure ways. Vague references were made to “a number of things” and “certain things” that heterosexual men can do because of “what a man has”. In this way, male sexuality was made invisible. However, this tension also reflected a political struggle around gender and sexuality where male sexuality was representative of male dominance in a patriarchal society. Although some lesbian women drew upon dominant scripts of hegemonic masculinity when defining lesbian identity in relationships with heterosexual women, others also actively resisted traditional constructions of masculinity by constituting lesbian sexuality as superior and by offering new ways of conceptualising gendered sexuality and same-sex relationships. Female sexuality and female same-sex relationships disrupted constructions of male sexual potency and power. Although Jenny acknowledged the threat of male sexuality, she also spoke of lesbian sexuality as having an appeal that was even more potent than male sexuality. In this way, lesbian sexuality was positioned as being more powerful through the usurping of sexuality itself.

## 5.4 Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown the ways in which localised forms of power are enacted in implicit and explicit ways in the everyday lives of lesbian women, through a reading of lesbian subjective experiences as both a part of and an effect of the intersections of gender, sexuality, race and culture in the production and enactment of violence upon the lesbian body. This chapter has revealed how dominant cultural discourses and practices that continue to privilege heterosexuality and masculine hegemony construct lesbian women as ‘othered’ in multiple contexts. Such constructions drew upon religious and cultural discourses around sin, heterosexuality and gendered subjectivities. Within the South African political and historical context, race and gender are entwined with cultural discourses in ways that continue to reproduce and maintain post-colonial practices that objectify and hypersexualise the lesbian body. The discourse of masculine omnipotence that rests on the truth regime that heterosexuality is the ‘original’ (Butler, 1990a) has underpinned much of these discourses.

However, as Foucault has asserted, “discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also...a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy” (Foucault, 1978, p. 100). Lesbian women disrupted long-standing dominant discourses and cultural constructions around motherhood, parenthood, family, gendered identities, and in doing so, offered new ways of doing gender and of belonging. Further they contested, in explicit and less direct ways, the relationship and nature between the ‘original’ and the ‘copy’ (Butler, 1990a, 2004) through knowledge/power truths around gendered identities and subjectivities as singular/multiple, fixed/fluid and stable/transient. In the next chapter, I will explore how the tensions that have arisen from these knowledge/power truth regimes within these contexts impact the lesbian community and lesbian relationships. I will look specifically at how these tensions and contradictions manifest in subtle and explicit forms of power within lesbian relationships. I revealed the multiple and often obscure ways in which

the micro-physics of power (Foucault, 1978, 1982, 1995; Foucault & Gordon, 1980; Foucault & Rabinow, 1984) that were enacted and embedded within and through dominant societal and cultural ideologies and practices, shaped and governed (Foucault, 1978, 1995) the behaviours of lesbian women. I also reflected on the women's agency and showed the ways in which lesbian women contested taken-for- granted practices that have become naturalised forms of control and, in this way, produced new forms of knowledge and power.

## Chapter Six

### Power and Violence in Lesbian Relationships

Chapter Five examined how power was dispersed within the broader social and cultural contexts in which lesbian relationships were enacted. I now turn the analytical gaze towards the situated subjective experiences of power and violence within the lesbian community and within lesbian intimate relationships. This analysis centres on the women's constructions of identities and how such constructions underpin the manner in which gender and sexuality were performed, with a specific focus on the 'power/knowledge' (Foucault & Gordon, 1980) nexus and on the ways in which power was enacted, reproduced and resisted. Woven into the primary interlinked discourses around identities, gender and sexuality, are the secondary discourses around femininity, womanhood, motherhood, and masculinity. These discursive themes were introduced in the previous chapter when the micro forms of power and resistance within the broader social and cultural contexts were considered. In this chapter, they are specifically developed through a reading of lesbian subjectivities and the lesbian body as a site through which power is enacted, maintained and resisted within lesbian relationships. The analyses are presented in three broad, interrelated discursive themes, namely: *constructing identities*, *constructing power*, and *discourses of power and abuse*. While some degree of repetition is inevitable; I maintain that this reflects the dynamic interconnectedness of 'micro' and 'macro' contexts in lesbian subjectivities. Similar to the previous chapter, I adopt a fluid approach and traverse across the discourses in multiple subsections, which I believe reflects the complex intersections more accurately.

## **6.1. Constructing Identities: “...I see myself evolving all the time. I see myself in every one of them”**

An analysis of the women’s talk revealed that the ways in which they had constructed their identities positioned them in dynamic and sometimes contradictory ways in their relationships, and pointed to the multiplicity and instability of subjectivities (Gavey, 2005; Weedon, 1997). The women drew upon various dominant heteronormative constructions of gender and gender roles, sexuality, femininity, masculinity, womanhood, and motherhood in constructing their identities - many of which demonstrated how heterosexuality as a dominant discourse (Butler, 1990a; Gavey, 2005), shaped lesbian identities and subjectivities. However, many women also expressed an awareness of the ways in which their constructions mirrored heteronormative thinking and practices, and contested such constructions, which were viewed as an impediment to an authentic lesbian identity. The notion of an ideal or ‘authentic lesbian identity’ itself was contemplated and challenged by some women. Although the women spoke of an identity that would be free of imposed definitions and pre-conceived expectations, in many instances defining a lesbian identity was still done in relation to an established heterosexual norm which represented the ‘original’ (Butler, 1990a) and consequent ‘ideal’ standard and accepted ‘truth regime’ against which lesbian identity was forged and maintained. Because lesbian identities were understood within a discursive framework of normative and compulsory heterosexuality (A. Rich, 1980), they were often positioned within mainstream society as a lesser or inferior alternative or copy of the original (Butler, 1990a, 2004). To some extent, this hierarchical structuring was reproduced within the lesbian community as well in which particular lesbian sub-identities were positioned in particular ways and vested with varying degrees of power. Many women used discourses of individuality and personhood to challenge the established heterosexual ‘ideal’ (Sanger, 2013). Discourses of identity, articulated using various identity labels, had discursive, divisive and

material effects within the lesbian community where it strengthened the cohesiveness of particular sub-groups while it simultaneously excluded and othered other groups of lesbian women (Butler, 1990a; Foucault, 1982; Namaste, 1994, Yuval-Davis, 2010). When the women explained what the labels meant to them, they articulated several limitations associated with the use of labels in their everyday interactions (Walker et al., 2012), but also certain privileges associated with particular labels.

**6.1.1 Labels as empowering.** The use of labels as a way of understanding and normalising behaviours and sexuality had a stabilising and liberating effect for some women, especially during emotionally trying experiences related to self-acceptance and disclosure. Education and knowledge about diverse sexual identities is argued to contribute to more positive views of such identities, coupled with an acceptance of a non-heterosexual identity (Ford, 2003). Despite the emotional turmoil associated with enacting same-sex sexuality in homophobic contexts, labels served to normalise behaviours that were otherwise framed as being gender and sexually deviant, pathological and abnormal in comparison to heterosexuality. This finding was consistent with McCormick's (2013) study of the coming out discourses in South Africa. McCormick (2013) argued that this reframing of negative discourses into positive discourses marks a stand against homophobia and conservative cultural norms. Thirty-two of the forty women who had participated in the current study self-identified as 'lesbian'<sup>32</sup> in constructing their identities. Nelisiwe's remark, "I've been a lesbian for as long as I have known about lesbianism" suggested that she had come into being as a lesbian after learning the name that had described, defined and categorised her

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<sup>32</sup> This included lesbian sub-cultures such as 'femme', 'lipstick femme', 'butch', 'soft butch', and 'tom'.

behaviours, and which functioned to solidify her as a socially intelligible identity. Nelisiwe's account revealed how the process of naming and identification of the 'lesbian' brought the lesbian into being and created the possibilities for sense-making and the subsequent acceptance and disclosure of sexual identity (Butler, 1993):

I've been lesbian for as long as I have known about lesbianism. Since I was 13 years old. But before that there was like, how can I put it? I did do stuff with girls like kissing especially. But I didn't know that there was such a name as lesbian. I only knew that by finding out myself because I was noticing that I was different and my friends aren't doing it. Then there must be a problem with me. So I went to my LO [Life Orientation] teacher and she was the one who said I must just go out there and search. Basically I was searching myself. So erm after finding myself at thirteen, I was ok, that's it. Now I know where I stand. I am a lesbian. And that's when I told my family. And my friends. (Nelisiwe, FG)

Likewise Jothika described how learning about "being called a lesbian" helped her to make sense of her confusion and provided a sense of relief as knowledge about lesbian identity shifted her thinking from one which pathologised her behaviour to one of normalcy. In talking about lesbian identity as something that had already existed (but that she was not knowledgeable about), the recognition and naming of the particular identity represented a hailing effect through which the 'lesbian' came to be socially constituted (Butler, 1990a). In the account below, Jothika's thinking that something was wrong with her or different about her in relation to an unspoken heterosexual ideal, was inferred to have been subsequently righted when she had realised that "...it was called being a lesbian", which demonstrated the performative functioning of interpellation that marked the lesbian within a heterosexual ideology (Butler, 1993). The discursive constitution of the lesbian as similar to other lesbian women evoked a sense of belonging, while the discursive constitution as different to heterosexual women evoked a sense of outsider alienation:

When I was growing up erm I always realised that there was something different about me but I just didn't know what the hell it was. So I used to find myself being attracted to my high school female teachers [Laughs]. [A=OK]. And I used to think something is wrong with me [Laughs]. *Ja*. So it was actually quite a confusing



process for me and erm cos obviously there I was thinking something is wrong or different about me and I didn't know what it was. /.../ I didn't know at that point it was called being a lesbian [Laughed]. (Jothika, DI)

In other instances, learning about same-sex sexuality and the subsequent identification as a lesbian had a life-changing, liberating, and anchoring effect, as was the case with Elaine who had experienced significant emotional pain during her years of identifying as a heterosexual woman while having had relationships with women:

I was dating girls on and off, on and off but I kept on... I had a lot of self-hatred. And when I finally decided no, it's after I tried to commit suicide and I was really, really, really alone. When I had time to say 'No!' I need to now be true to myself. /.../ I was hurting, I wasn't coping anymore and I really needed now to be true to myself. I first did a lot of research on my own. I went to the library. I did searches on Google. I really researched everything and I went for counselling and stuff like that.... And then I came out. It weren't easy at first because /.../ having to sit your kids down and tell them look, this is me after them having seen you in another way. So it was like taking off a mask that I had worn for many, many years. For 32 years. (Elaine,DI)

The lesbian as subject was brought into being through the processes of "search" and "research" into "lesbianism" and its implication as, and association with, scientific discourse (Foucault & Faubion, 2000). Through this process of pseudo-scientific association, the identity of 'lesbian' was elevated to a truth status and the person, in this case Elaine, was objectified into a subject, open to (lesbian) community, (heterosexual) public and scientific scrutiny (Foucault & Faubion, 2000). In actively identifying as a lesbian, Elaine had also turned herself into a subject (Rabinow, 1998). The processes of 'scientific classification' and 'subjectification' (Rabinow, 1998) articulated the constitutive functioning of the power/knowledge nexus wherein the assimilation of the label 'lesbian' produced a particular knowledge and truth regime about lesbian identities and subjectivities. Further, the performative identification as 'lesbian' signified a dividing practice (Foucault, 1982) that recognised the social intelligibility of the lesbian /heterosexual binary. In Elaine's case, knowledge about lesbian identity enabled her to firstly symbolically discard her previous

heterosexual identity that she had used to keep her lesbian identity hidden, and to secondly, embody her lesbian identity through the material and discursive acts of naming and revealing (McCormick, 2013).

When the women spoke about disclosure and coming out, they also spoke about how difficult it was to identify other lesbian women and potential partners, as not all women were publicly out (Drescher, 2015; Herek, 2000, 2004; Renzetti, 1997). In the previous chapter, I had discussed the ways in which the largely homophobic heterosexual society imposed severe restrictions and punishments on lesbian women in the form of social and family isolation, verbal harassment, physical and sexual violence, and murder (Herek, 2000, 2004). I showed how the women's fears and anxieties that stemmed from such punishment resulted in a heightened sense of surveillance of self and others in which the motive was self-preservation and protection of identity, achieved through non-disclosure or partial disclosure (Muholi, 2004; Polders, et al., 2008; Sanger, 2010; Judge, 2018). This heightened uncertainty around exposure and the need to protect their own and other lesbian women's identities was evident even at the start of one of the focus groups, despite the fact that the invitation to participate had only targeted women who had identified as lesbian or who were in same-sex relationships. Ford (2003) maintained that the process of disclosure and coming-out is "never-ending" (p.94) for queer persons as each new context presents with a new set of decisions around disclosure of sexual orientation, which may be a source of psychological distress (Lannert, 2015). One woman shared:

I was just thinking as I walked into this room [that] I know some of the women here. Is it ok to acknowledge that I know you or that sort of says that you're not heterosexual? (Asande, FG)

Not knowing who was lesbian influenced how lesbian women negotiated relationships with other women (Eves, 2004). Such negotiation was considered to be more challenging

compared to heterosexual relationships (Phelan, 1993), because the dynamics and expected behaviours around same-sex relationships were different and not clearly defined within safe and knowable parameters (Duke & Davidson, 2009; McClennen, 2005):

[I]t's probably harder [for lesbian women] than women in straight relationships. It's probably harder to be in a relationship with another umm another woman because I think the rules are a little bit different. Like in terms of the way women sort of engage with each other and the people they're interested in. So a girl generally is not going to, well in my experience, come and like buy you a drink like guys do you know...to let you know they're interested in you, you know. You're gonna have to figure it out yourself. (Lesedi, FG)

Well I agree with her when she says it is difficult. If you find someone you like, you know, do you approach or not approach? It's difficult even to that point of getting a girlfriend and all the other stuff that comes with it. Ja, its very different from heterosexual relationships. (Clara, FG)

It's not like guy meets girl. It's more like I'm not sure. So you have your own issues with it. You are like should I? Should I not? And even if you have an inclination, you're not 100% sure unless the person says ok, you know I like women. So there are certain difficulties you know. (Andiswa, FG)

One way of increasing the visibility of lesbian women to other lesbian women was through the use of sub-identities or categories that produced and defined knowledge that was specific to particular lesbian sub-cultures. Talburt (2000) argues that to invoke a lesbian identity to increase lesbian visibility represents a “contingent, illusory knowledge” which “invoke[s] a disciplining mark of difference” (p. 194). In addition to constructing themselves as lesbian women, some women further qualified their identities with sub-identities or categories. In other words the label ‘lesbian’ did not constitute a singular construct, but instead comprised various sub-identities, each with its own set of identity markers and behavioural descriptors (Swarr, 2009, 2012). Some women identified as ‘femme’, ‘lipstick femme’, ‘high femme’ or ‘hard femme’. A few women identified as ‘tom’ or ‘futch’ and other women identified as ‘butch’ and ‘soft butch’. Although none of the women identified as ‘studs’, some women spoke of stud lesbian women who were considered ‘hard-core’ butch

lesbian women. The women went on to talk about how identifying as a lesbian or as a particular type of lesbian such as *soft butch* or *tom*, functioned to express who they were to other lesbian women and helped to communicate that they were emotionally and/or sexually interested in women or certain types of women. This pointed to the production and existence of knowledge that delineated particular ways of being and doing for particular groups of lesbian women and that discursively regulated how one would negotiate relationships with other lesbian women (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004). In this way, labels, especially the sub-identities, were not intended for the benefit of the heterosexual society, nor were they governed by heterosexual society, but rather served the needs of lesbian women to identify and position themselves within lesbian sub-cultures and/or communities.<sup>33</sup> Thus, the nature of this disclosure and coming out marked a deviation from that of a confessional declaration in response to a discourse of lesbian as sinner. Instead, labels facilitated a coming out to other lesbian women, which helped to identify potential partners and allowed entry into lesbian sub-cultures - the norms and scripts that were governed by lesbian women themselves (Valentine, 1993). Sub-categories also challenged and extended the traditional gender binary of man/woman by offering other gender permutations that capture, to some extent, the variability, fluidity, and nuances of gender performativity (Butler, 1990a). In this way, labels as discourse discursively constructed lesbian identities as heterogeneous and multiple, and may be argued to have lent to the construction of a wider spectrum of gender identities and gender permutations that enabled new ways of enacting gender. However, labels were also experienced as limiting lesbian subjectification in multiple ways. These are explored in the following section.

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<sup>33</sup> The notion of 'community' has different meanings across cultural and historical contexts. It may be argued that the idea of a 'lesbian community' is contentious as it implies the existence of a homogenous group. On the other hand, lesbian community is also linked to a feminist political agenda that is founded on shared identity, meaning and history. The notion of a lesbian community is explored in more detail further on in this chapter.

**6.1.2 Labels as limiting.** Not all women were comfortable with the use of labels. They regarded labels as negative and were associated with heterosexual constructions of lesbian identity (G. Valentine, 1993). Many women reported to have experienced labels as being restricting and confusing. They maintained that the labels were inadequate in articulating the fluidity and complexity of their identities and subjective experiences, and that they were thus reluctant to use them:

I don't like giving myself names, giving myself a certain category cos I see myself evolving all the time. I see myself in every one of them. (Mandisa, FG)

Mandisa's words conveyed a powerful representation of identities as fluid and variable. In talking about her identities as "evolving all the time", she articulated the multiple and changing nature of her identities and subjectivities. Further, in stating that she saw herself in "every one of them" she simultaneously positioned herself as both insider and outsider – belonging in part to all sub-identities, but to none in their completeness. This created the possibilities for Mandisa (and other women) to occupy multiple and contradictory positions and for the constant reconstitution of identities (Weedon, 1997). As will be shown in later discussions, this was often the case, even though at times, women were not consciously aware of their multiple and contradictory positionings. As argued earlier, the historical specificity of a democracy that is immersed in a human rights discourse has created the political possibilities for the emergence of multiple, non-gender conforming 'queer' identities in South Africa. However, as Judith Butler reasoned in an interview with Sara Ahmed, in its inception 'queer' was not intended to "... be an identity, but should name something of the uncapturable or unpredictable trajectory of a sexual life" (Ahmed, 2016). Queer marked a political transgression against dominant conceptual binaries through the recognition and acceptance of diverse sexual identities that resisted categorisation (Halperin, 2003; Spargo, 1999) as "confrontational gay/lesbian politics" (Walters, 1996). Yet, as Butler further

elaborated, the very appropriation of the word ‘queer’ transformed it into a label that induced certain categorisations and exclusionary boundaries that differentiated not only between queer and non-queer identities, but between ‘queer’ groups along multiple nodes of power around race, class, politics, gender and sexuality (Ahmed, 2016). Halperin (2003) argues that the institutionalisation of queer theory and queer identities into mainstream academia has introduced a new set of challenges. Thus ironically and paradoxically, in an attempt to not pin down an essence to fluid, non-conformist ways of being, the very discourse employed to articulate such fragmentary and changing subjectivities, functioned to structure identities and created ways of doing ‘queer’ that may be argued to have essentialised queer identities.

I argue that the above quandary resonated with Mandisa’s articulations of constantly evolving subjectivities that required an absence of labels and names for the possibilities of fluid subjectivities to emerge. However, as Mandisa had implied, labels, as discourse defined and imposed particular ways of knowing lesbian identities and of doing ‘lesbian’. This discursive articulation functioned to ascribe particular meanings to particular identities that required subsequent conformity to the prescripts of the selected identity. Butler (1990b) argued that when we adopt a particular identity category, such as *woman*, *lesbian*, or *mother*, we produce a particular kind of subject, a particular kind of *I* which signifies something about the kind of subject we are. However, in doing so, this enactment also restricts the *I* as the identity category does not explain the subject in her totality given that it also precludes other subjective possibilities. Labels as identity markers thus prescribed the boundaries of identities and by implication, subjectivities. Therefore, subscription to *lesbian* as *identity* signified something about lesbian experience, desire and sexuality that simultaneously presumed and produced a particular dominant truth about lesbian identity, and precluded others (Foucault & Gordon, 1980; Mills, 2003). Walters (1996) argued that labels representing a “queer sensibility” (p. 831) shift uneasily in and out of mainstream discourse and reflect a

reconfiguration of such discourse, which despite their limitations, also offer new possibilities that may challenge certain social categories as oppressed identities. One of the constitutive truth effects of such conceptualisations (knowledge) is the (flawed) idea that lesbian experience, desire and sexuality is the same for all women who identify as lesbian. From this perspective, the earlier accounts from Nelisiwe, Jothika, and Elaine, which outlined the processes of learning and research about being lesbian, may be argued to have demonstrated the constitutive and disciplinary functioning of the power/knowledge nexus in which gendered, sexed, classed and raced scripts were already determined. Moreover, these operated within regulatory frameworks that governed the doing of 'lesbian' within particular performative boundaries. Through the stylised repetition of this doing (Butler, 1990b), a particular truth regime about lesbian identity was produced and maintained (Foucault, 1972, 1995). As such, while the label *lesbian* might have been deployed in ways that signified a political contestation that differentiated queer identities from heterosexual ones, its usage also served to fix queer identities as stable, unchanging and definable, and in this way limited the kinds of lesbian subjectivities that Nelisiwe spoke about.

The effects of this truth regime was observed in other ways. Sub-identities and their associated behaviours were often assumed on the basis of superficial external markers such as dress code, hairstyle and gait. For example, it was common practice to categorise women who appeared more masculine (short hair, baggy jeans, men's clothes) as *butch* and those who appeared more feminine (long hair, dresses, make-up) as *femme*. Many women found this problematic as their external appearances did not necessarily reflect how they had constructed their identities nor did their external appearances reflect their subjective positioning and experiences:

You calling me butch. You calling yourself femme or tom or whatever. For some people it's actually insulting to call someone a butch. Cos you just judging her by the

way she dresses. You find out, no, she's not butch. She's actually femme. (Mandisa, FG)

I think for some people those terms mean gender presentation – what I wear when I walk down, what people see externally is not necessarily gendered behaviour. So I am a femme presenting woman but that says nothing about what it looks like when I have sex with another woman. Umm, yes, when some people enter sexual relationships, the butch is on top and the femme is at the bottom and do those sorts of things. But for other people it doesn't mean that and I think that brings in another complication with figuring it out what people are and what they do and stuff. (Phindi, FG)

Phindi's narrative above foregrounded a disconnect between gender presentation and subjectivity and in doing so, highlighted the performative aspect of gender identity. In her account, she revealed how gender presentation was assumed to be naturally linked to gender identity and sexuality. However, as Walker et al. (2012) demonstrated in their study of lesbian stereotypes, identity labels did not account for any significant difference in sexual behaviour. This assumed natural link between physical appearance and gender identity stems from the sex/gender and male/female binary that presents physical presentation and gender identity as natural and mutually exclusive through the stylised repetition of behaviours (Butler, 1990a, 1990b). Noni, who did not explicitly use any labels in constructing her identity, conceded that she was labelled a 'butch' both within the lesbian community and the heterosexual community because of her preference for wearing men's clothes.

No, I'm just a woman. I don't see myself as a guy. I don't present myself as a guy. I am a woman. Just that when I'm sitting with my friends, they say I'm butch and I say whatever. Cos of the dress code. (Noni, DI)

Through the word "whatever", Noni seemed to suggest a tacit acceptance of the imposed 'butch' identity. It might be argued that her tacit acceptance of the imposed identity label signified a social investment in group membership (Hollway, 1984). However, Noni's account also pointed to the power of a group in assigning a particular identity to a person.



This argument was reinforced and extended in Sethu's frustrated statement below, which pointed to the deployment of labels as coercive disciplinary mechanisms in the policing of identities. Her reference to an anonymous but present "they" pointed to a powerful governing of individual subjectivity, which compelled one to mark and reveal one's identity:

I also found I can't relate. *Mena* personally that is why I don't want to engage with other people. They want you to say I'm lesbian, I'm bisexual. I'm what, I'm what. I don't even know what to say. (Sethu, DI)

Group identities and group membership featured as a consistent theme throughout the women's narratives. Mandisa had conveyed the discursive power of the 'lesbian women as community' discourse:

I see them [labels and categories] as a nuisance. I don't believe that we have to be categorised because we are all one. We are the same thing. /.../ I don't like them. I believe in the lesbian world, it's like that. (Mandisa, FG)

However, labels themselves were invested with particular gendered values, meanings and power for particular group identities, which positioned groups within a gendered hierarchy. Using labels to gain access to groups also implied that labels served to reproduce and maintain the differences between groups that kept particular group members (subjects) in their places. Thus, identifying Noni as a 'butch' lesbian carried with it certain unspoken expectations of 'butch' or masculine behaviours, which, as will be shown in later sections, at times, introduced power dynamics that mimicked traditional gendered relationships. Although labels may have been used to strengthen the identity of the lesbian community, they may also be argued to have functioned as a dividing practice through the positioning of groups as different (Foucault, 1982). Group identities often filtered into intimate relationships, which represented a powerful site for the reproduction of gendered differences. This highlighted the disciplinary power of discourses around sexuality and gender (Foucault, 1978), which I argue, were often governed by the sex/gender, male/female binary. In taking

up labels that contested mainstream, heterosexual identities; and that asserted a particular identity among queer identities, lesbian women paradoxically became docile bodies through which gendered and sexed differences were regulated and governed. Dominant gender constructions that were associated with particular labels provided the women with limited gender choices (Butler, 1990a, 1990b). Despite several nuances and variations in sub-identities, traditional sex/gender, male/female, and masculine/feminine dichotomies scripted within heteropatriarchal frameworks still formed the basis of most of these sub-identities, such as *soft butch* or *lipstick femme*. Labels, especially those that sought to describe a particular sub-group or identity based on external markers, were potentially constraining and inaccurate. As regulatory frameworks that governed the performativity of lesbian identities, labels had the potential to exclude women as non-compliance to the pre-determined (often heterosexual) scripts carried the risk of punishment in the form of social alienation and exclusion from groups and the lesbian community in general. Here again, the lesbian/heterosexual tension within a primarily heterosexual framework appeared to be a salient and ambiguous factor. Two groups of women in particular were regarded with suspicion within the lesbian community due to their implied relationships with heterosexual men. These groups were women who were mothers and women who either identified as bisexual or who were considered to be bisexual:

And then when you come to the our society, they will treat you different cos when you are a lesbian who has a child and you are a butch lesbian they will call you names. They will say you know what you're not butch enough, you are bisexual. They will call you names. (Sizani, DI)

The “names” that women with children were called included the label ‘bisexual’, which was used in such cases in a derogatory manner. Women who had children were often assumed to be bisexual because of their implied sexual relationships with heterosexual men. Such an understanding pointed to an assumed natural link between reproduction, and

gendered and sexual identities and thus rendered the construction of motherhood itself as gendered and sexed. The latter argument is addressed later on in the chapter when I explore the performativity of doing woman and the censorship within the lesbian community. At this point, I wish to draw attention to the inter-connectedness between labels as discourse, the knowledge that it produced and kept in circulation, group power and individual subjectification (Foucault, 1978). Lesbian women who were mothers were not considered true lesbian women due to their perceived bisexual identity, and consequently, were excluded from social or friendship circles that were made up of ‘true’ lesbian women. Thus, children, motherhood and womanhood served to devalue a lesbian identity (hooks, 1981). The divisive and disciplinary power of the group, articulated in the word “they”, revealed a high level of group surveillance of individual identities and behaviours. Non-conformity was punished through social alienation and group exclusion, which marked a significantly harsh punishment within marginalised groups where group membership also symbolised a form of support and psychological belonging.

In maintaining a ‘truth’ about lesbian identity as meaning same-sex relationships with women only, other subject possibilities and meanings were precluded. This resulted in a significant amount of tension that centred on perceived differences between individual and group identities, as suggested by the words “our society” and “I believe in the lesbian world” juxtaposed with the panopticon governance of the “they”. I argue that the identities *mother* and *bisexual* represented two significant themes in which lesbian identity was contested through the insider/outsider status evoked by both labels/identities through their constructions within heterosexual paradigms. These were ideas around lesbian identities as fluid versus stable, and an authentic lesbian identity. In the section below, I explore the tension around identities as fluid or stable through an analysis of bisexual and lesbian identities. The relationships between heterosexual women and lesbian women has been explored in the

previous chapter. While heterosexual women shared some characteristics with bisexual women, bisexual women represented a distinct identity category that posed a different set of challenges to lesbian identity and the lesbian community. I will explore the gendered meanings and notion of motherhood in more detail further on when I examine lesbian identities as authentic.

**6.1.3 Identities as stable or fluid: The politics of subjectivities?** Two participants in this study had identified as bisexual, one of whom had participated in a focus group discussion. When she had introduced herself to the focus group participants, she had disclosed that she had identified as bisexual and had added that the identity label she used depended on the context that she was in:

I usually identify myself based on a situation...umm sometimes I say I'm a bisexual but then I usually take the term 'lesbian' when I...when it's political for me to do it. (Ayesha, FG)

Ayesha's words pointed to the constitutive interaction between historical, political and spatial contexts, knowledge production and meaning, and subjective experiences in which self-surveillance and internalised control regulated the subject positionings that were perceived to be appropriate for particular contexts (Swarr, 2009). This pointed to the operations of group dynamics and norms that were at times obscure. Although Ayesha seemed to have judged the focus group to have been socially, politically and spatially safe enough for her to disclose her bisexual identity (Valentine, 1993), perhaps because it was conducted at a liberal university context, her introduction was received with a fair amount of disparaging remarks from the other focus group participants, all of whom had identified as lesbian. The exchange that followed articulated the tensions between the social and political construction of lesbian and bisexual identities and the saliency of political and historical

impact on how identities were constructed and the meanings attached to such identities, as indicated by Ayesha when she had stated, “when it is political for me to do it”. Sophie’s introduction had followed immediately after Ayesha’s introduction:

I am Sophie. I am an Honours student. I am a lesbian (↑). Umm always (↑) ((Laughter from the group)). It’s more fun that way ((Laughter from the group)). It’s so much fun being a lesbian. (Sophie, FG)

The above two accounts reflected two opposing approaches to the construction of identity— Ayesha’s more fluid and flexible identities which oscillated between lesbian and bisexual as the social and political contexts and spaces changed, and Sophie’s which conveyed the idea of a fixed, definitive and stable identity when she emphasised that she was “always” a lesbian. In her declaration about the permanency of her identity as a lesbian, Sophie had affixed a particular meaning to lesbian identity. I argue that Ayesha’s more flexible identities were regarded as a form of non-commitment to a lesbian identity and therefore posed a threat to a stable lesbian identity, not only because of the competition and threat posed by heterosexual men, but perhaps more so because the transient nature of unstable identities undermined the political stance of lesbian identities. As I had argued in the previous chapter when I had explored relationships between lesbian and heterosexual women, many lesbian women regarded the trend among heterosexual women to experiment with lesbian relationships as undermining the political significance of establishing lesbian identity as an authentic and enduring identity. What differentiated bisexual women from heterosexual women was the positioning of bisexual women as undecided and uncommitted in relation to lesbian identities. In Ayesha’s case, this indecisiveness was even more conspicuous as she had admitted that she did also label herself ‘lesbian’ at times, which might have conveyed the idea that a lesbian identity was appropriated and subsequently exploited when it was advantageous to do so. Such strategic positioning, however, did not yield the

desired investment in group membership (Hollway 1984) as it would have functioned to delegitimise the personal, social, community, political and historical struggles that were associated with being a lesbian. Thus, although lesbian women regarded heterosexual women as women to seduce with the power of lesbian sexuality; bisexual women were required to make a (political) choice to commit to a lesbian identity which reflected the obscure and diffused modernisation of disciplinary power exerted over the bisexual body as an object to be manipulated (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983; Foucault, 1978):

We want to know, they should, you know, just make up your mind already you know. What is your problem? ((Directed to Ayesha)) ((Laughter from the group)) Just tell us which side you are picking. You know we are witnesses on the inside so to speak. (Thando, FG)

In the narrative above, Thando had deployed several strategies that conveyed particular understandings of lesbian identity which positioned lesbian women as having ‘insider’ group membership. Bisexuality has always been a marginalised discourse within queer theory, which tends to primarily focus on the deconstruction of the gay/lesbian-heterosexual binary (Callis, 2009). This political and discursive positioning of bisexuality on the periphery of queer identities is not limited to political activism and academia but, as illustrated in this particular focus group exchange, is observed in social contexts as well. Thando’s use of the words “we”, “they” and “which side” functioned to establish rigid boundaries of inclusion/exclusion and of insider/outsider status between lesbian and bisexual women, and reflected the political imperative within the context of democracy to establish an authentic and credible lesbian identity. The discursively ambiguous positioning of bisexual identity as being ‘on the fence’, coupled with the active positioning of lesbian identities as different to bisexual identity; constitutively brought into being, lesbian identity as stable and authentic (Butler, 1990a, 1990b). Ironically, the lesbian as a socially and politically intelligible subject was brought into being (Butler, 1990a, 1990b) through the forcing of a

lesbian/heterosexual binary in the conceptualisation of the lesbian/bisexual interplay. In other words, the relational construction of lesbian-bisexual identities signified lesbian as stable and enduring, and bisexual as fluctuating and erratic. As such, the political demarcation of lesbian-bisexual identities centred on the notion of identities as stable versus those that were fluid and what such knowledge conveyed about the genuineness and authenticity of such identities.

The strong discourse of ‘us’ and ‘them’ worked in tandem with the discourse of lesbian women as gatekeepers and controllers of entry into lesbian communities, who governed and regulated the subscription to an identity label. As Yuval-Davis (2010) asserted:

[B]elonging tends to be naturalized and becomes articulated and politicized only when it is threatened in some way. Belonging assumes boundaries of belonging and is thus exclusive as well as inclusive. The politics of belonging are comprised of specific political projects aimed at constructing belonging in particular ways to particular collectivities that are at the same time, themselves being constructed by these projects in very specific ways. [p.266].

The pressure exerted on bisexual women to commit to one particular identity reflected the power of binary conceptualisations such as male/female; masculine/feminine; and heterosexual/homosexual, and the ways in which the lesbian-bisexual power dynamics replicate, through a reversal of positioning, the heterosexual-lesbian power dynamics. The identification of lesbian women as “witnesses on the inside” resonated with a Christian discourse in which lesbian women were vested with the power to enforce disciplinary governance over group norms, identity and membership (Foucault, 1995). This Christian discourse served also to introduce an obligation for bisexual women to make a morally right

choice. Ayesha had noticed this perceived transgression of bisexuality as “not being legal” when she had retaliated with the following response:

You're selfish! ((Laughter from the group)). You're selfish! ((Laughter from the group)). It's as though you can almost feel as if you're not really lesbian; not legal by being with another guy than with another girl. If you see that the person really loves you, then you must just.... Why should you have that wall that says no bisexuals allowed on this side? What if you fall in love with that bisexual? And you could be with that girl for the rest of your life. (Ayesha, FG)

Ayesha's comments above powerfully evoked several salient issues around identities and how entry and exclusion into identity sub-groups were policed and regulated through the enactment of group ideologies and norms. Bisexual women seemed to pose a threat to a lesbian identity due to their (sinful and transgressive) relationships with men. Their relationships with men symbolised a heterosexual alliance, which defined the parameters of same-sex attraction and precluded the possibility of attraction (and love) that was fluid and unscripted:

Andiswa: Ja, but it's not bruising if you're with a guy?=  
Ayesha: = Ja but then=  
Andiswa: =(inaudible overlap of speech)) It hurts us when women do display those kinds of behaviours.

Ayesha: Well it hurts us too you know. ((Muffled group laughter)). The fact that you think that we are waiting for some man ...If we genuinely love you, then we won't leave.

In sum, I argue that bisexuality was recognised for what it took away from a lesbian identity and the notion of a lesbian community. Because lesbian identity as a collective identity also signified a political positioning, bisexuality was seen to undermine such a political identity. Through a rejection of bisexuality as not being lesbian, a lesbian identity was asserted and validated as being stable and enduring. However, in doing so, lesbian identity was constructed as a fixed, coherent and stable identity, which may be argued to have mirrored gendered and sexed binaries within heterosexual paradigms. Ironically, in deploying a heterosexual/lesbian binary to force a lesbian/bisexual commitment, lesbian women



inadvertently presented lesbian identity as unstable since binaries are in themselves unstable due to their relational constructions (Cannon et al., 2015). Bisexuality represented an embodiment of the ‘other’ in many ways, but primarily in a way that negated an authentic lesbian identity through the tension around identity as stable versus fleeting. In addition to the notion of stability as authentic lesbian identity, the ubiquitous presence of masculinity represented another salient point of tension in defining such authenticity. I now turn briefly to this theme in the section below as a way of concluding the current examination of the women’s discursive constructions of a lesbian identity, and as a way of introducing the second major discursive theme that explores the women’s discursive constructions of gendered power relationships embodied in the enactments of masculinity and femininity.

**6.1.4 Masculine as generic lesbian identity?** In this section, I briefly explore masculinist notions of an authentic lesbian identity as embedded within cultural and political enactments of the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990a, 1990b). Personal constructions of self were often nested within and in relation to an assumed generic ‘lesbian identity’ that centred on the heterosexual binary of masculine/feminine identities. More specifically, a generic lesbian identity was assumed masculine. The subversion and destabilisation of an idealised “feminine morphology” (Butler, 1993) embedded within the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990a) facilitated a lesbian incitement to masculinity, which simultaneously upheld the pervasive power/knowledge truth effects (Foucault, 1995) of the heterosexual matrix, and revealed its instability. The heterosexual matrix functioned politically to present heterosexual binaries as natural and compulsory through the hierarchical and oppositional structuring of gender in ways that positioned maleness and masculinity as superior. The relational construction of femininity as defined through and in opposition to masculinity served to uphold masculinity and maleness as privileged and superior. Thus a subversion of the

feminine, as signified by a lesbian identity, was often enacted through the performativity of masculinity. Sophie and Thuli had suggested that the ‘lesbian as masculine’ discourse represented a dominant understanding within heterosexual constructions of a lesbian identity:

Cos I find that straight people, if you tell them you’re gay, a lesbian, they are like, oh really? I think they expect lesbian women to only be like butch. (Sophie, FG)

I think it’s because as soon as we find ourselves, feminine roles are usually quiet. So when you say that you are lesbian, they expect somehow more masculine behaviours. (Thuli, DI)

Social stereotypes of lesbian women reflect both positive and negative social attitudes towards lesbian women that are often constructed along particular gendered lines (Geiger, Harwood, & Hummert, 2006). Stereotypical perceptions of lesbian women as masculine was not confined to the heterosexual community. Ayesha, who had identified as bisexual and as lesbian, had expressed her disappointment with other lesbian women who were surprised to learn that she was lesbian even though she had dressed in a way that was more masculine:

She’s like, “Oh, you can’t be gay?” and then she’s like “No!” [Said in disbelief, drawn out]. It’s like, I don’t get that. And that’s from in the community. I can get it from straight people – everybody knows I’m gay because I’m this butch woman. There’s the boots, the baggy jeans, etc. But from fellow lesbian women? It’s ridiculous! I don’t know! (Ayesha, FG)

While it was plausible that Ayesha’s bisexual identity might have stymied her social and cultural intelligibility as a lesbian within the lesbian community despite her outwardly masculine markers, the discourse of ‘lesbian as masculine’ was prevalent among lesbian women as well. Zodwa had recalled the changes that her first girlfriend in high school had undergone. At that time, her girlfriend was not certain of her sexuality and had wondered if her same-sex attraction was an experimental phase. However, when she had fully embraced her identity as a lesbian and had come out as a lesbian, she had changed several external

markers as part of her transformation. The external markers were those that were typically associated with a male identity:

She changed. She changed her name. I remember that was the first thing she changed about her[self]. She changed her name into a boyish name. Then she changed her style. She started wearing boy clothes. I remember arguing about it with her. I was like, what's wrong with you? You've changed. Why you're changing into a boy? And she's laughing. And she's like why you telling me this? Cos I'm just dressing how I feel. That's what she told me. I'm like, whoa, I'm not liking this new you. ... She did. She started hanging out with boys at school. She started playing soccer. She started smoking. She was doing, was having fights at school. So I was like, no, no, no! (Zodwa, DI)

The above accounts showed how the discourse of 'lesbian as masculine' within lesbian and heterosexual communities revealed the ways in which dominant knowledges of gendered identities shaped the performativity of what was perceived to be transgressive genders. Even in accounts that had alluded to a lesbian identity that was more elusive and encrypted, the deterministic nature of a masculine identity seemed evident:

There are some who are, I don't know, more obvious than others that they are lesbian. It's their attitude. [Angeline: How do you mean their attitude?] I think it's everything. Their attitude. If you speak to them you pick up that they might be. They've got this attitude. [Group laughter]. I think it's definitely their attitude [more] than their dress or walk or anything. (Pinky, FG)

The systems do have their stereotypes of who's gay or not – their own special groupings. (Sma, FG)

The conceptualisation of transgressive identities within heterosexual binaries were embedded within historical, cultural and political contexts. It might be argued that the discourse of 'lesbian as masculine' may be rooted in the rise of feminism in the early 1960s in which dominant public discourses discursively constructed feminists as being lesbian, or as women expressing the desire to be men. However, the historical and political link between feminism and lesbianism might lead to several false assumptions about lesbian (and feminist) women. These might include common misnomers that all lesbian women are feminists or that

all masculine presenting women are lesbian women. Constructions that are in themselves myopic are likely to be enacted through regulated sets of behaviours which constrain new ways of doing gender and sexuality. To extend the argument above, lesbian women who believe that lesbianism is synonymous with feminism might engage in behaviours that they think embody such an identity, such as dressing in a certain (masculine) way or belonging to certain (butch identified) groups, but without actually engaging critically with issues that would advance women's rights. Thus, an inverse reading of a 'lesbian as masculine' discourse within the heterosexual matrix might point to the level of social and cultural unease with same-sex relationships between women in particular. It may be argued that lesbian women who appear more masculine represent a more socially acceptable transgressive identity as such deviancy from the norm still conforms to and replicates the masculine/feminine gender dichotomy. Feminine presenting lesbian women conformed outwardly to heterosexual gender presentations but disrupted traditional constructions of heterosexuality through their emotional and sexual attraction to other women. They thus destabilised women's 'naturalised' emotional and sexual dependency on masculine sexuality within a heterosexual matrix.

In summary, the above accounts in the current, as well as earlier sections, foregrounded the powerful ways in which the "...grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized" (Butler, 1990a, p. 151, n.6) functioned to discursively produce lesbian identities and subjectivities that constrained and enabled ways of doing gender and desire. Constructions of self were nested within constructions of lesbian women as a community, but also within stratified groupings of sub-identities. Against the political imperative to establish an authentic lesbian identity as stable and enduring, and as different to (as opposed to in relation to) heterosexual identities; the tension between individual-group identities was underpinned by a pervasive notion of compulsory

heterosexuality. Therefore the act of naming an identity signaled "...a performative utterance that henceforth compel[led] the ['lesbian'] to cite both sexual and gendered norms in order to qualify for subjecthood within the heterosexual matrix that 'hail[ed]' her" (Salih, 2002, p. 89). The enactment of and resistance to heterosexual constructions of the compulsory feminine/masculine dyad enacted in the forging of lesbian identities produced several discursive ways in which normative power relations of gender and sexuality were reproduced and contested. How power relations are discursively constituted through normative gendered and sexed ways of being and doing among lesbian women is explored further in the following section.

## **6.2 Constructing Power**

In this section, I explore the power relations embedded in the doing of femininities and masculinities through a reading of the butch-femme identities and their relational constructions. The butch-femme dyad has been argued to represent an imitation of heterosexual relationships (Hiestand & Levitt, 2005), and a disruption to the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990a). The ambiguities and tensions that arose through the negotiation of individual and collective group identities produced particular power relations that simultaneously reproduced and contested gendered relationships. These are explored below.

**6.2.1 The butch/femme dyad: Enacting or subverting heterosexuality?** Although, as suggested in the account below, the women sometimes struggled to define particular identity categories or subcultures in the absence of explicitly fixed rules or descriptors that demarcated the boundaries among the various categories - the two most common identity categories that the women referred to were that of *butch* and *femme*. Notwithstanding that

other hybrid identities were mentioned, the butch and femme identities were regarded as the primary identity polarities on the identity continuum:

There are different dynamics...umm... in how we think. Obviously within the more feminine and the more masculine spheres. That means we all assess the situation. Generally the femmes are the more feminine presenting women and the and umm...and then 'butch', 'stud', 'dyke', these are the more masculine terms that are used to describe women who are more obviously masculine you know. But then there are androgynous women who sometimes play with what gender looks like and feels like to them. [Angeline: yes?] So that's where you'll find the tomboys and I and then *phew*, I don't know, I've heard like these hybrid terms used that are like soft-butch [Laughter from group]. (Asande, DI)

The above account revealed the powerful workings of the knowledge/power nexus in which knowledge that was considered to be true and 'obvious' was juxtaposed with knowledge that was considered unstable and slippery. The discursive and social embeddedness of truth regimes, evident in the words, "how we think" and "obviously", presented socially constructed identities and categories as natural and true (Foucault, 1978). Moreover, the social and cognitive distancing conveyed in the words "I don't know, I've heard like these hybrid terms used..." suggested a less knowable and less definable knowledge that pointed to the status of marginalised discourses as that which lacked the authority and credibility to constitute 'true' knowledge (Foucault, 1978). While the apparent awkwardness demonstrated in the thinking around other "hybrid" identities might have conveyed a certain degree of conceptual and social difficulty to shift away from dominant constructions of gender binaries in which more fluid identities were forced into what were considered to be fixed categories, the slippery nature of the hybrid identities not only served to contest the notion of gender binaries as stable, but also revealed the instability of the notion of compulsory heterosexuality itself (Butler, 1990a). Nonetheless, the institution of compulsory heterosexuality as a truth regime did represent a powerful form of governance in how lesbian women constructed their own gendered identities and positioning in relation to

and in accordance with the heterosexual binary of feminine/masculine. Lesbian women held varied views about the butch/femme constructions, some of which revealed the extent to which dichotomous constructions of gender were entrenched in lesbian identities and subjectivities. Mishka, who had stated that she did not use any particular labels to self-identify but was categorised as a *soft-butch* by other lesbian women, described how she had oscillated between feminine or masculine identities which were assumed in relation to her partner's identity:

Ja, so I'm actually quite flexible. If I date somebody who's more the femme type, then I would be more boyish but if I date somebody who's more masculine than me then I tend to be more femme. So a slight reversal. (Mishka, DI)

Mishka appeared to have demonstrated some degree of fluidity in her gender positioning and "slight reversal" of gendered identities, which signified some disruption of a truth regime that regulated the sex/gender binary. When she had described her last relationship, she had pointed to the performative nature of doing gender and the taking on of gendered roles (Butler, 1990a, 1990b) when she had stated, "We did tend to assume roles. I was the femme role [slight laughter] and she was obviously the masculine role". Thus, Mishka had still subscribed to the notion that couples had to be constituted of masculine and feminine partners. The approach to gender as oppositional and relational reflected the powerful institution of compulsory heterosexuality through which lesbian sexuality was experienced and enacted (A. Rich, 1980). Some women understood the butch/femme dichotomy as stemming from this dominant heterosexual context, wherein knowledge of how masculine-feminine identities were constructed in heterosexual relationships shaped lesbian relationships in similar ways, as Sonny, a self-identified butch lesbian, had explained:

I will say because of the way the heterosexual people behave. I think that it comes from that way cos we always know that there is a woman and a man. So I think that when you do things what men do, like go outside, do the garden, you will think, automatically you will think that you are a man and you will do things that the man do

so you see yourself as a man. I think it's all about – it came from the heterosexuals cos we try to copy what they doing. (Sonny, DI)

Sonny deployed a discourse of naturalisation when she spoke about gendered identities as being “automatically” something that is known “cos we always know that there is a woman and a man”. Through her discursive construction of lesbian relationships as a copy of what heterosexuals do, she had in effect constructed lesbian sexuality as a copy of the heterosexual original (Butler, 1990a, 1990b, 2004), and had positioned lesbian sexuality as an imitation of heterosexuality. This kind of positioning worked to reinforce cultural arguments that lesbian sexuality was unnatural. In addition, her linking of particular gendered identities with particular ‘gendered’ activities through a naturalisation discourse, revealed an assumed link between being male and masculinity, and being female and femininity. The rigidity of the sex/gender ontology reflected the power of discursive constructions of gender on behaviours that were imbued with power relations.

The dichotomous sex role prescriptions for men and women were not only assumed to be ‘automatic’ and natural, but also positioned men as being more powerful and active than women within the institution of compulsory heterosexuality (A. Rich, 1980). As Rich (1980) argued, “we have been stalled in a maze of false dichotomies which prevents our apprehending the institution as a whole...” (p. 659). Paechter (2006) had elaborated further by stating “we have become seduced by the ‘obviousness’ of a particular term or its use in a specific context” (p. 254). As already argued in the previous chapter, the power and privilege linked to masculine identities were often enacted in the doing of masculinities, and thus reinforced and perpetuated the oppression of women (Halberstam, 1998). Some women indicated an awareness of the oppressive nature of heterosexual constructions of lesbian sexuality and lesbian relationships but felt coerced or pressured into adopting gender stereotypical identities and roles that conformed to heterosexual relationships. Subsequently,



despite being cognisant of the limitations, many women felt compelled to draw upon dominant heterosexual discourses in their constructions of lesbian sexuality and lesbian couples:

Because now it's gonna all look like fashion you know? Like everybody's like no, I'm a man. That is why I think most people, like even heterosexual people, they normally ask who's who? Who's the man? Because I think most, especially with guys, because with girls, you don't normally find them asking who's the man or whatever. It is the guys. (Nontobeko, DI)

Because I think it is the guys that mostly sit with butch people and then they talking like we men and everybody is like, 'I'm a man, I'm a man' you know when they're there and that is why when they come to us and then they find that you know maybe two femmes are dating or whatever and they ask them who's the man, you know. I think that's *ja* I think that's why there's that confusion. (Letti, FG)

[When] I say I'm in a relationship with a woman, people would ask me, who's the man and who's the woman in this relationship and therefore you'll find other people that they want to follow that route that there should be a woman and a man. But then as Letti explained you'll find in other relationships, ok, we both women, we [are] the same gender. (Lesedi, FG)

Adrienne Rich (1980) argued that "...the act of choosing a woman lover or a life partner in the face of institutionalized heterosexuality..." (p. 659) had the potential to be politically liberating for all women. As Lesedi indicted in the extract above, some women challenged the butch-femme dichotomy which conceptualised couples as constituting one masculine and one feminine partner by appealing to the fact that both partners were women. Likewise, other women had also referenced their identities as women in a same-sex relationship as important:

For me it doesn't matter if you're butch or femme. If you're a woman, you're a woman cos I mean when you say sexual preference [Laughs] *Ja* for me if you're a woman, you're a woman. If you are somebody who has the qualities and characteristics that are like actually not going to limit myself or lock myself. (Meg, DI)

However, as Butler (1990a) had pointed out, the label *woman* brought certain gendered prescripts into play. The historical and social specificity of doing woman within a post-apartheid, rights-based democracy produced particular tensions between traditional conceptualisations of womanhood and alternate constructions that recognised the political and social agency of women as unfixed and unstable gendered identities. These tensions in the women's conceptual understandings and their doing of 'woman' are explored in more detail further on in this section. Some women recognised the othering and divisive effects in the deployment of binary identity categories, including that of the identity category *woman*, and appealed instead to a sense of individual personhood as opposed to a sense of womanhood. Moolman (2013) maintains that in current day South Africa, notions of freedom and equality are enmeshed in definitions of citizenship and personhood:

I hate this whole categorising thing because I've seen the separation inside the lesbian world if I can put it that way. Being butch and femme is like making two split worlds in another way. So I don't really like categorising in any way. I'm just Noni and that's just me. (Noni, DI)

But it's just that I don't know when can it be the same where we won't be... we won't be boxed in this way...heterosex culture way where we have to be men, we have to be women with regards to our lives. You know so that we just be who we are. (Lesedi, FG)

In the above accounts, the women expressed their frustration at having to conform to cultural and social scripts around gender. In talking about the notion of gender-free subjectivities – an idea that resonated with de Beauvoir's (1988) infamous statement that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (p. 295) which points to the social and cultural shaping of normative genders – they contested the constitutive power of labels that “boxed” gender performativity in restricting ways. Of course, “who we are” are products of the complex web of social, cultural and historical constructions around gender and how we choose to respond to such constructions in political and personal ways through our

performativity of gender and our positioning within gendered relationships. Thus individual subjective experiences may be restricted and governed by dominant cultural scripts that boxed how lesbian women should be. Lesedi's questioning to some extent captured subjectivity as a *process* of becoming (Gavey, 2005) and the possibilities of disrupting hegemonic notions of personhood (Sanger, 2013).

This section briefly introduced how the women responded to the institution of heterosexuality. The narratives above illustrated the tensions that were evident among lesbian women who were confronted with the doing of lesbian sexuality within strong heterosexual cultural contexts. Discursive constructions of heterosexuality as normative sexuality impacted the construction and performativity of lesbian sexuality in relation to gender binaries. While some women regarded the gender binary as part of a natural configuration, others understood it as limiting and oppressive. Nonetheless, the gender binary of masculine and feminine identities was central to how women positioned themselves in their intimate relationships and within the lesbian community. I now turn to these identities in more detail, and the power relations inherent in the enactment of these identities. While I explore masculine and feminine identities separately, the power relations inherent within intimate relationships were not fixed according to particular identities. The enactment of power not only shifted between partners, but also was often relational and co-constructed.

**6.2.2 Masculinity and doing 'butch'.** Women's performativity of masculine identities in the context of entrenched heterosexuality may be argued to signify a troubling of regulatory regimes (Butler, 1990a). Since femininity is constructed as a series of negations of what is masculine within the gender hierarchy (Connell, 1987), a distancing from traditional notions of femininity as represented in butch (or tomboy) identities may instead convey "...a claiming of power" (Paechter, 2006, p.257) that marks a disruption of the disempowered positioning of femininity within traditional patriarchal societies (Paechter, 2006). However,

masculine identities within traditional patriarchal contexts are also infused with varying degrees of power and privilege that keep women disempowered. The claiming of power through a disruption of regulated gendered roles, and the embodiment and enactment of masculine power and privileges by women, who took on masculine identities, set up several points of contestation and conflict within intimate relationships. This was particularly salient when considering the ambiguous positioning of butch lesbian women who may embody primarily subordinate masculinities in the context of hegemonic masculinities (Connell, 1987). Differences were noted in how women who had identified as femme and those who had identified as butch, constructed butch identities. The former group based their accounts on their experiences with butch women and on observations within the lesbian community. The women's accounts centred on masculinity, sexuality, patriarchal norms and control in which the positioning of butch women oscillated between positions of power and powerlessness within a context of heterosexism and societal discrimination. Inherent in their accounts was the discourse of othering, which positioned partners as different to and in opposition to the self.

**6.2.2.1 Masculinity and control.** Women who had self-identified as butch were described as consciously taking on masculine identities through the appropriation of labels and behaviours that were typically associated with men. Shado, a self-identified butch lesbian, explained that butch women referred to other butch women with masculine labels only. The use of masculine labels, such as “dude” and “man” served to entrench a male identity while simultaneously severed ties to a female identity. In addition, butch women usually assumed external behaviours that were typically associated with and allowed of men in a patriarchal society:

I think most of us drink, smoke. I say butches, most of us, they smoke and drink because men do that. You feel like ok if I drink and smoke, then I'll be seen as a male figure. (Shado, DI)

The performativity of masculinity was not limited to the behaviours described above, but extended to the performativity of masculinity *in relation to* women who embodied identities that were more feminine. Inherent in the narratives of the women who had shared their experiences of being in relationships with butch-identified lesbian, was the discourse of control which exposed an assumed link between being masculine/male, and control and power. Women who had identified as butch were usually considered more powerful and more controlling within intimate relationships because of their masculinity:

When they [butch lesbian women] go around, they usually call themselves ‘*bru*’<sup>34</sup> or ‘my man’. They call each other men at times. You know they have that dominance because they feel like oh, that’s my lady, that’s my woman. *Ja* that’s how they define themselves. (Sizani, DI)

I’ve had butch partners but they’ve never really been my cup of tea. [Laughs] /.../ Because you do get some butch who act all manly. They want to be treated as men in a relationship. They want to control you. You can’t go out with your friends. You have to be here at this certain time. Why you late? They just want to act like men all the time. /.../ Butch they always get into fights. Others, they hit their girlfriends and whatever. (Ayanda, DI)

Sizani’s account illustrated the constitutive effects of labels in the establishment of power relations that reinforced cultural scripts of masculine performativity in relation to the femme body. The label “man” signified “dominance” and may be argued to have reproduced heteronormative gendered roles which positioned women, represented here by femme lesbian women, as less powerful. Implied was the idea that (femme identifying) women were not dominant partners in a relationship or that they would not possess any desire for power and control in a relationship (Little & Terrance, 2010).<sup>35</sup> The positioning of femme women as subordinate and less powerful in relation to butch women found expression in other forms as

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<sup>34</sup><sup>34</sup> *Bru* is a slang word derived from the Afrikaans ‘broer’, meaning brother; often used to signify a sense of comradeship.

<sup>35</sup> However, this was not always the case. In the following section, I show how femme bodies were also deployed in ways that positioned femme women as powerful in intimate relationships and within the lesbian community generally.

well and were intertwined with heterosexual discourses and practices that were associated with male power, coercion and violence in sexual relationships (Wood & Jewkes, 1997). These included the objectification of femme women as possessions that belonged to, were acted upon, and were controlled by the dominant other. Interestingly, this subscription to traditional (dominant) masculine and (subordinate) feminine roles was perpetuated and maintained by both butch and femme-identifying women. Through the mutually reinforcing discourses that spoke to the 'rights that men were entitled to' and 'the obligations that women had to uphold' embedded in the women's narratives, the positioning and co-construction of butch and femme lesbian women as 'powerful man' and 'subordinate woman' in which men determined the timing of sex from women who had to be sexually available (Wood & Jewkes, 1997), were made explicit:

In terms of sex, maybe if after the femme lesbian wants to have sex today and the butch lesbian don't feel like I wanna have sex, so like that. But when a butch lesbian wants to have sex and a femme lesbian don't want to have sex, they will force themselves like men on the femme. The femme lesbian women always have to say yes all the time even though they don't feel like it and they will make excuses like they don't want to do it at all but sometimes they force themselves. They even tell this person is forcing themselves because you wanna have this sex. *Ja* you force this person to have the sex but when it comes to you, you have the right to say no, but then they don't have the right to say no. (Mandla, a self-identified butch lesbian, DI)

You are in a way sometimes forced to have sex. Even if you don't want to. Or even if it's not like physically forcing you to have sex but you're a woman, so you have to provide sex. Even if you don't feel that good, you know. So *ja*. (Pinky, a self-identified femme lesbian, DI)

The association of domesticity and femme roles and, that of butch roles and economically productive activities, highlighted another way in which roles within relationships were enacted using traditional heteronormative scripts that positioned masculine identities as being more powerful. Heintz and Melendez (2006) reported that negotiating safe sex practices in sexually abusive relationships is difficult for persons in same-sex

relationships, including lesbian women. Domestic activities were linked to an unequal distribution of power and a lack of mutual respect between partners:

She was more butch. *Ja*, she was always in control, always in control. She was. She bullied me a lot. Always made sure I knew where I stood. I did the cooking. I don't mind cooking. That's like I love cooking and I love cleaning. But that's what I did do. She never did anything. She would come back from work. And obviously food would be ready for her and things like that. And I'd do her laundry and things like that. (Zinzi, DI)

But personally I always feel *uti* butch women, most, there are butch women who are so dominant. Who are so, their voice should be heard you know. *Ja*, they are always using their power you know. So it means then in the household then we will be having that you know. So no one to respect another one. Because no, you should listen to me. Listen to me. /.../ I always say ok you know. And I tried it before. It didn't work for me. That's why I know I won't be comfortable dating a butch anymore. (Nqobile, FG)

However, there were also femme identifying women who had attempted to challenge the taken-for-granted hierarchical arrangement between butch and femme women. As discussed in the previous chapter, particular spatial arrangements intersected with political history and social identities to produce particular gendered (and racialised) subjectivities and positionings (Williams, 2008). As Williams (2008) argued in her paper exploring gay and lesbian spaces in South Africa, such spatial configurations also offered opportunities to challenge racial and classist divides. From a Foucauldian perspective, spatial arrangements were informed by particular knowledges that established particular power relations that regulated and governed behaviours through multiple disciplinary strategies such as surveillance and self-surveillance that produced particular subjects and subjectivities (Foucault, 1995). Thus social and cultural spatial arrangements also offered dynamic points of resistance where women challenged dominant discursive and material gendered and cultural power/knowledge intersections with the body. An example of such a disruption was provided by Refiloe who had described her experience at a braai that she had attended with

her butch partner, where she had observed that the butch lesbian women had sat outside drinking beer while the femme lesbian women had sat in the kitchen chatting:

You know erm [laughs briefly] there was a time that I had visited Soweto at some point and there was a group of very, very butch lesbian women [Angeline=mhm] and [pause] the lady I was dating at that time was a friend of theirs but she wasn't like that. Now I got there and erm it was we were told that ladies should be the kitchen while they sitting there drinking their beer. And I'm like, no, [↑ laughs] I can't do that [laughs] you know. (Refiloe, DI)

She had decided to disrupt the gendered spatial arrangements, went outside, sat with the butch lesbian women, and had a beer. However, her presence was not well received, as she had explained, "They were a bit funny and they wouldn't say certain things in front of me because they regarded me as the woman and they are the guys".<sup>36</sup> However, this discomfort with the power relations embedded in butch/femme enactments was not shared by all femme women. Some femme lesbian women stated that they preferred butch partners precisely because of their masculinity, which afforded some degree of protection in the relationship:

I prefer butch lesbian women. I tried the femme but it didn't work for me. [Laughs]. I prefer the butch. I prefer more masculine women. More, *ja* that's what I prefer basically. (Zodwa, DI)

At least there has to be somebody who's, you know, in control of everything, who provides everything and makes sure everybody is ok, you understand. I think that's where it lies with as being more masculine. (Hlengiwe, FG)

The discourse of vulnerability and strength seemed to rest on two core ideas. Firstly, that all relationships necessitated one stronger partner and secondly, the assumption that emotionally stronger partners were the masculine ones. The construction of butch women as strong and that of femme women as emotionally and materially dependent upon the other was co-constructed and maintained by both butch and femme women:

[I]n a sense I can understand why she would say that they she feels that butch and toms are stronger. Not to say /.../ that they are stronger but that they have to take

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<sup>36</sup> Other instances in which femme women challenged the power dynamics within butch/femme relationships are discussed in the following section.



that power and be strong because somebody does need to be strong. Somebody has to be strong. We can't both be weak, you know. (Zinhle, FG)

Yes. Because I feel that inside she's the strongest person you know. She can right all these bad things. Cause like you know femmes, they feminine, you know, they emotional. (Sizani, DI)

The notion that butch lesbian women, through their embodiment of masculine identities, were emotionally stronger partners, posed particular challenges for some butch lesbian women due to the conflicting positionalities of perceived strength and their lived experiences of perceived vulnerability. I explore this further in the next section.

**6.2.2.2 Masculinity and vulnerability.** Despite the claims by some femme identifying women of the power of butch women, some butch lesbian women spoke about the restrictions imposed by such an identity due to the pressure to conform to 'normative' masculine behaviours. Anele, who identified as a butch, shared the advice that she had received from other older butch women, "Dude, you have to be hard-core. You have to be strong so that your partner can take you seriously". However, the need to be "hard-core" so that "your partner can take you seriously" hinted at an unspoken sense of coercion and vulnerability that permeated their lived experiences. It is argued that some butch women may have felt compelled to demonstrate what they had considered to be masculine strength or an emotionally tough façade, as this was considered the accepted way for the person in control to gain respect in a relationship. The pressure to adhere to a "hard-core" male identity however, did not permit the expression of emotions and behaviours that were typically associated with being a woman or a femme identity. As Ntswaki, who had identified as butch, stated:

You see as a butch they believe you are a ... you have to be strong. You don't cry. You don't have emotions. You don't have feelings. You just have to be hard-core. (Ntswaki, DI)

However as Anele had questioned, surely even the toughest hard-core butch lesbian women had a point "...where [they] just ha[d]to let go"?

Everybody has a certain point where you just have to let go. You have to cry. Cos most of the times, if you were a hard-core butch even if you've been hurt, you just have to move on. You have to carry on, don't have to talk about it. That's something that needs to be adjusted. (Anele, DI)

Lolly, a woman who had identified as a butch, and who had been in a highly abusive relationship explained how she had considered herself the less powerful partner in her previous relationship even though her partner was femme. She reported that she had cried on several occasions because of the abuses she had endured. However, she would only cry when she was alone as she had believed that to cry in a public space or in the company of other lesbian women would have exposed her perceived vulnerability and would have compromised her identity as a lesbian. As Lolly had explained:

As a butch lesbian, they expect you to be strong. Don't cry you know. So if you can't do that, then they'll say uh-uh, no. I can't represent lesbian women. (Lolly, DI)

The rigidity of social and identity boundaries inherent in labels was conveyed in another account by a self-identified butch lesbian, Nontobeko, the mother of a two-year-old child at the time of the study. She had shared that she had always identified as a lesbian and had always preferred to dress in men's clothes. Her perceived gender deviance was often punished with frequent verbal harassment and threats from some men who had lived in the same community as she did. On one occasion, she was gang raped by this group of men and had become pregnant as a result. Despite the fact that she had become pregnant after having been subjected to a brutal masculine violation of her body because of her gender and sexual non-conformity, her identity as a mother was understood to be incongruent with her identity as a butch lesbian in particular. Consequently, although her child lived with her, she did not make frequent references to her child in lesbian spaces and lesbian interactions. This account

illustrated how the femme/female body was not constructed as powerful, but rather associated with vulnerability. Thus butch lesbian women who displayed behaviours that were considered feminine were positioned as vulnerable and often hid such perceived vulnerability. This regimented and stratified way of ordering types of lesbian identities in ways that exercised power over the body and lived experiences represented a form of biopower (Foucault & Rabinow, 1984). The accounts illuminated several tensions in lesbian relationships that arose from how identities were constructed. Firstly, the version of masculinity that “hard-core” butch women aspired to, appeared to be aligned to traditional constructions of masculinity that are characteristic of repressive, patriarchal societies. Such an approach may negate the existence of multiple masculinities (Connell, 1987) that open up the personal, political and discursive space for a more fluid traversal across gendered behaviours that are not gender prescriptive. Secondly, it pointed to the limited, though popular, notion of masculine identity as an authentic lesbian identity, illustrating the power of hegemonic forms of masculinity within society generally and within the lesbian community. Lolly was not permitted to cry publicly as that would brought her lesbian identity into question. Thirdly, and related to the first two points, significant tension revolved around the social and political construct of *woman* and how this related to lesbian identities. Although popular public discourse constructed a lesbian identity as being masculine/butch; femme women regarded the butch identity as being in defiance to same-sex sexuality between women which was considered to be central to a lesbian identity. The extent to which masculinity permeated lesbian relationships resulted in significant tension. This is examined further in the following section.

**6.2.3 Doing ‘woman’.** Despite the discrepancies in definitions and understandings, a strong discourse that underpinned the construction of a lesbian identity was the discourse of ‘being woman’. A deceptively simple statement made by several of the women revealed the complex intersections between gender identity and sexual identity: “I am just a woman in

love with another woman.” This statement belied the nuanced complexities of the construct of gender itself since identifying as a *woman* required delineation of what this label signified. Like other social constructions, *woman* and *lesbian* as gendered constructs, are embedded within historical, political and cultural contexts. How the women defined *lesbian* and *woman* was also essentially a human rights issue as it had implications for access, citizenship and social justice. Consequently, definitions of ‘woman’ and of ‘lesbian’ had implications for the everyday lived experiences of women who identified as lesbian and who negotiated the political, social and cultural intersections of everyday life.

**6.2.3.1 *The femme (woman) body as a site of resistance.*** Many women felt that a lesbian identity necessitated an acknowledgement of being a woman irrespective of physical appearances and behaviours. In other words, being ‘woman’ was assumed to be the primary identity that took precedence over other identities:

I like tall and skinny women. [Angeline: Tall and skinny?] Yes. And dark in complexion. Butch. Ja but I prefer someone who is like a guy /.../ but with bums [Laughs]. (Simangele, DI)

Masculine identities were seen to encroach upon feminine identities within relationships and became a source of frustration in interactions. The varied and often conflicting discursive constructions of *man* and *masculinity* that pervaded lesbian identities was captured in the account below:

Cos when she likes, she will say no, you’re my man. [Laughs]. If I do something nice for her, she’ll say I’m her man. And then if I do something not nice, she’ll say, ay, you’re a typical man! She’s whatever she does do. And sometimes she does it in a playful way but I don’t like saying I don’t like it when she says when I do do something nice for her, she puts it in a manner, you know what I’m saying? I don’t like that. Why would she say that? [::] How, why doesn’t she just say I’m doing it cos I’m a girl? [Said with irritation]. Why she’s calling me a guy? (Meg, DI)

As was shown in the previous chapter, some women questioned why their sexual identity as *lesbian* should have to feature at all, since their primary identity was that of *woman*. The subscription to the notion of an essential womanhood resulted in a fair degree of tension between those women who embraced or acknowledged their identity as women and those who were considered to disregard this part of their identity. As a result, some women understood butch identities, especially those that were described as “hard-core”, to represent a denial of womanhood and a disruption of the notion of lesbianism as woman to woman relationships:

Butch, I can't date a butch. Cos they just think they are men. If I wanted to date a man, I can go date a man. Not a woman who thinks she's a man. (Pearl, D1)

Fikile: I have a huge problem with butches. [A: What do you mean when you say butch?] They look like men. They act, they do everything like men. They have this thing that they are men [Rose=Ja.] which they are not. Quite a few, they have this mentality that everything we do; we have to do it as if we are men. So they don't have this thing that we are all women.

Rose: We are women. We menstruate every month.

Fikile: So I have a problem with butches. A serious problem.

Rose: They overdo it.

Fikile: With toms, it's easy. Cos I'm a tom. Like I do accept that I'm a woman.

The above exchange from one of the focus groups referenced a woman's body as a powerful objection to butch identities. The woman's body thus became the primary site for resistance to butch identities, which were considered to negate the identity of woman. Historically, cultural discourses around menstruation have centred on ambiguous and conflicting constructions. While common public perceptions of menstruation as a shameful and unhygienic feminine process that necessitates discreet and clandestine management reflects a dominant construction; menstruation as a celebration of fertility and procreation represent more marginalised cultural discourses. Although the commercialisation and medicalisation of menstrual practices have shifted menstruation from the private to the public sphere (Patterson, 2014), menstruation remains a stigmatised discourse. Therefore it may be

argued that for butch women who embody a masculine identity, menstruation, and its association with sexuality and reproduction, were bound up with feelings of shame, guilt and denial. In the above extract, the proclamation of menstruation as central to the identity of woman, not only challenged the stigma and secrecy around menstruation, but also served as a deliberate provocation and simultaneous confessional (by the other) of the complex social, political and material (gendered, sexed) intersections implicit in butch/woman identities. Through the conflicting discourses of concealment and visibility embedded in the narrative around menstruation, *woman as identity* and *subject* came into being (Butler, 1993; Foucault & Faubion, 2000) through the panoptical surveillance of the gendered identities of butch women by other lesbian women who did not identify as such (Foucault, 1995). Thus, a ‘true’ knowledge about lesbian/gendered identity was asserted and revealed about butch lesbian women as women.

The discomfort and disconnect with *woman* as primary identity that butch women were reported to negate, filtered into sexual relationships as well. Many women spoke about their challenges when they described their sexual relationships with butch women, and pointed to a disruption of the association of gendered identity and genitals (Braun & Wilkinson, 2005) in their ownership of their physically sexed bodies as women in a same-sex sexual relationship:

It is a very big issue because my girlfriend, we struggled with it tremendously because I don't see the point why. Cos basically what being a lesbian is, being in love with a woman and loving everything about being a woman. You should know that she's going to have breasts, not expect to see a chest you know. [Laughs]. I kind of eased her into it. I've eased her into this. This is who you are. And I don't want you to be hiding in your clothes. You should be comfortable with your body in every way possible. But it's hard. It's still hard talking about sex and taking off clothes. (Zodwa, DI)

Erm some butch don't want to be touched. /.../ You can't do anything to them. Don't touch them anywhere. Not their boobs. Not their vaginas. They really don't want to be touched at all. But then maybe a person gives in after maybe a year of knowing you. Then maybe they will start to loosen up or whatever. But some of them you end up breaking up with them. (Ayanda, DI)

More often than not the very butch lesbian women don't wanna be touched in a certain way. You can't do what they do to you to them cos they wanna have that manly ...they wanna play that manly role in a relationship. And it goes with sex and emotionally as well. (Penelope, DI)

The above accounts by women who self-identified as femme, reflected a positioning of the femme body as sexually powerful through the confidence and comfort displayed between identity, material body and sexuality. The construction of the femme lesbian as 'knowledgeable other' who acted as guide to the butch lesbian served to reinforce the idea that butch lesbian women were psychologically and sexually disconnected from their bodies. This positioning of the femme body as sexually powerful, an illustration of the 'permissive discourse' (Hollway, 1984) was also strengthened through the 'have/hold discourse' (Hollway, 1984) in the positioning of the femme body (woman) as sexual object of butch (masculine) desire. However, in this instance, the lesbian body was sexualised by other lesbian women and not the heterosexual male. Some lesbian women viewed this as a source of power where sex was used to negotiate conflict:

Because I've seen even I've witnessed in my relationships, the three lesbian relationships, even in the current; if we were in an argument and you want sex, I'm using that as a tool....to regain power because you are going to become passive, you are going to beg, and you are going to say sorry at the end of the day because I know you wanting it [laughs]. (Elaine, DI)

There were other instances in which the sexualisation of femme women elevated their positions of power within the lesbian community, especially within the context of competition and butch hyper-sexuality:

I think that there is. Erm the other thing is that in the community is that there are very few femme. There are not as many femme as there are toms and butches. [A:Ok]. So, we tend to actually feel in a way that, you know what, we hold the power. Because you go to a party and there's ten of us [A: So there's competition for femme women?] Yes, so there's a bit of a competition for us I guess so [Laughs]. So I guess it's only normal that you would feel that you actually control certain things because you know that erm most butch and toms are attracted to femmes so and there are so few of us. (Zinhle, DI)

What the above accounts obscured though was a dominant perception among femme women of a fixed and essential nature of gender and sexuality. Women who identified as femme were regarded as being congruent with their ‘true’ identity and were generally dismissive of other non-normative gendered identities, such as butch and bisexual identities, which may be argued to denote more fluid identities. Despite this resistance, femme women were more accepting of women who had identified as *tom*<sup>37</sup>, another more fluid identity. *Tom* identities were described as “...something between being femme and being butch and it also applies sexually as well”. Thus tom identities, in their recognition of the identity of woman, represented a more acceptable instability. However, although *tom* identities represented a range of masculinities, as Blackwood (2009) had argued in her study of the *tombois* of West Sumatra, Indonesia:

...their self-positioning as men is not uncomplicated. ...[T]ombois take up different subject positions in different spaces, engaging with and reproducing a version of femininity when they move within family and community spaces. (p. 454)

This was evident in the narratives of the women in this study as well and will be explored further when I examine the discourses of power and violence and instances where identities associated with being woman obscured acts of violence. Because of the perceived power differentials associated with masculine identities in relation to femme identities, many women regarded the femme identity and the femme couple as the epitome of a true lesbian identity. I explore this in the following section.

**6.2.3.2 The 50/50 seduction: “You do me, I do you”.** There were a few femme women who were uncomfortable with this degree of sameness and spoke of the disadvantages of being in same-identity relationships:

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<sup>37</sup> *Tom* identities are referred to by other names which include *tomboy*, *thom*, or *tombois*.



I just don't find them [femme lesbian women] attractive at all. I'm...to me it would feel like I'm sleeping with my sisters [Laughs]. Firstly, it's a physical thing and in fact /.../ I'm just not attracted to...to that type. For me that's /.../ like my friend, or my mother or my sister or that, nothing beyond that. (Zinhle, DI)

Based on the understanding that differences in identities implied power imbalances, some lesbian women inferred that power differentials would not exist in 'same-identity' couples. In other words, the enactment of power and control would only be possible through variance in identities. In the account below, Promise seemed not to recognise the individual agency of partners in the production of power or control, and suggested instead that partners with similar identities would enjoy a greater degree of understanding:

You can find femme to femme which she explained [Angeline= mhm, yeah] two femmes. You can find butch-butch. You can find femme-tom or whatever. But then the thing is we all look at things differently, right? And for some people, like I said, they understand each other completely. If you both are femme it's because you understand each other completely. If you are butch, both of you guys, you understand each other. If you are a femme and a butch or a femme and a tom, obviously there's gonna be somebody who wants to control things, who wants to be the upper hand, who wants to make decisions and what not. So it's gonna be different you see. (Promise, DI)

In accordance with the reasoning above, some femme women spoke of a shared understanding precisely because both partners identified as femme lesbian women. The discourse of '50/50' revealed how sameness was linked to egalitarian ideas around equality in relationships and reciprocity in sexual intimacy (Braun, Gavey, & McPhillips, 2003). Ussher and Perz (2008) in their study of the construction and experience of Premenstrual Syndrome (PMS) among lesbian women argued that the level of inter-subjectivity as women in same-sex relationships contributed to increased empathy, support, understanding and communication among partners and less feelings of guilt, rejection and self-blame. Connolly (2006) maintains that this mutuality and the synchronization of lesbian identity is a form of relational resiliency which protects lesbian women from social stressors:

And with femmes, that's where it actually differs. When it comes to sex. With sex it's actually very good with femmes because we understand. She understands my body; I understand her body. And I'm aware that she wants to be touched and she knows I want to be touched. With butch women, you don't know. (Ayanda, DI)

I think as women we understand each other a bit more you know than the heterosexuals. I will understand when my partner is going through her menstrual cycle. You know how they are going to feel. So in that regard it becomes easier and in regards that erm we tend to understand where one is coming from whether it be emotional or when they acting crazy and what not. We tend to understand a bit [↑] more than we would understand a man. (Penelope, DI)

Although women in same sex relationships disrupted heterosexuality through their gender and sexual non-conformity, women who had advocated for a strong woman/feminine identity ironically often subscribed to roles that were characteristic of heterosexual relationships. Thus, feminine identities or those that most closely resembled heterosexual constructions of 'woman' also reproduced dominant heterosexual practices. When speaking about a '50/50' relationship, women usually made reference to the division of domestic chores and did not reference decision making or economic activities as constituting a 50/50 relationship. In these instances, social and economic roles traditionally associated with being woman in a heterosexual context was often reproduced and perpetuated:

Yes, yes it does. Erm what I love about girls, we understand each other. There are those clashes of course. Cos there comes a time especially if you do date a girl that has come out from a heterosexual relationship, she'll see you as being the guy. Cos she's so used to being under. So she wants you to be the person who's on top. So in other words, you do this and I'll do this. Like being used to saying no I'll cook today and I'll do the dishes and stuff and I'll clean and I'll do your laundry. But I'm not used to that. I like it to be just a fifty-fifty relationship where we'll compromise in some ways. We'll say babe, today I'll do this and you do this. (Zanele, DI)

You are supposed to be helping each other 50/50. If I'm washing dishes, you must cook; if you're cooking, I'm washing dishes, I'm mopping the floor, I'm doing the laundry. (Noni, DI)

Other instances revealed more traditional conceptualisations of the social construct of woman. This included the idea that women are nurturing, caring and loyal friends who are

emotionally invested in relationships. Some women found it hard to accept that a woman could have sex with another woman without any emotional bonds:

But don't you think that with at least women it's like... maybe... OK... maybe it's a generational thing because I'm assuming I'm older (laughter from group). It's really different in a sense because even if you're just having sex and you're not in a relationship there's still like an element of you'll be friends and then you'll hang out, and so then it's not just sex because there's like other kinds of intimacy happening which will be different if you were sleeping with a guy who like would just fuck you and then leave you and go home and that's it. But like is that not your ex-, I'm trying to understand like, is it really just that stark? Like I only meet up with you and we just have sex or is it like we hang out sometimes and then when things are good, we have sex and sex is good so that's all we're doing. Like don't things get murky? (Ami, FG)

In summary, this section considered how the construction of femme and butch identities produced various forms of micro-power. The analysis revealed how constructions of butch and femme identities conformed to and disrupted dominant scripts around gender, sexuality and the enactment of power. Within the context of lesbian relationships, the sexualised body, symbolic of a dividing practice within the lesbian community, became a site of resistance and a site in which power was enacted. Masculine identities were seen to control sexual practices, spaces and bodies. However, the accounts by butch women offered a different construction of butch identities, which revealed both vulnerability and a sense of coercion to subscribe to dominant masculine scripts. Likewise, the women's accounts reflected constructions of femininity that reproduced dominant heterosexual constructions of femininity. Implicit in the construction of femininity and femme identities was the assumption of a 'natural' link between femininity and being a woman. Despite being in a same-sex relationship, femme women were often positioned in ways that reproduced the gender imbalances that are characteristic of many heterosexual relationships in a patriarchal society (Little & Terrance, 2010). However, the sexualised femme body also offered points of resistance that produced new forms of power within intimate relationships and within the

lesbian community. This served to challenge traditional constructions of femininity and women as submissive and passive. It may be argued that dominant heterosexual perceptions of gendered inequities also governed the way in which lesbian women naturalised masculine-feminine identities and the differences in power vested in these identities, which reinforced the assumption that power differentials did not exist in relationships in which both partners subscribed to similar identities. As will be shown in the following section which focuses specifically on the women's subjective experiences of power and violence, the tension that stemmed from perceptions around identities, positioning and power was a source of conflict for many women.

### **6.3 The Discursive and Material Enactment of Power and Violence**

I begin this analysis by with a participant monologue that provides a powerful commentary on some of the complexities, nuances and intersections that underpin intimate partner violence (IPV) in lesbian relationships.

It started with her just being all [::] *erm* jealous you know and just possessive. You can't have friends. You know, didn't- [::] it started like that. You can't have butch friends, you know, you can't be talking to butch people. You can't have you know any, any type of, of connection with butch people. Ok, it was that. I understood that. And then, now it was femme people. Because before her I'd dated a femme person. So now, after that it was femme people. She had a problem with that. So I ended up not having friends. Even I had to actually withdraw from my friends for... like two years and in the third year, I kinda like you know what, I need to see them even though it was a hidden thing. Like I couldn't like really see them when I was around her or even if she heard that I was with whoever. I stopped going out with friends, like with friends, I would never go out with friends, only with her. And then after it was like that if she would like hear that I was with somebody, *erm* she would start shouting at me and not nice and I would say you know what, ok, I will change, I will change. I will. But then I was like ok, you know what, no, I still need my friends and what not. /.../ So when it started from that, and then it was it started with like a slap. Like you know, she would hear that I was with maybe somebody somewhere or maybe at the mall or whatever. What were you doing there with her? Why wasn't I informed and what not. You know so it was I had to lie. I had to hide things from her for her to actually be happy and for me to you know, be happy as well. *Erm* so it started with that and [::] then [...] and then *erm* [..] it started with the slaps and what

not ok. *Er* she would say sorry afterwards and I'd actually believe her. And then mmm it got to [...] when I like she wanted me to actually quit the NGO1. And I was like I can't. So like I couldn't. You know I couldn't. And she would actually get angry and she would actually beat me then. Like she didn't drink, she didn't flirt. She was just [...] she was just [...] jealous and so possessive. *Erm* so I didn't and she would beat me up. *Erm* so it was just the beatings after that. (Letti, DI)

Letti's monologue provided a graphic account of several forms of power and violence that were reported by many women. Power and violence was enacted and mediated through several ways, including, jealousy and possessiveness, social control, social isolation, the escalation of the severity of verbal, psychological and physical abuse, competition within the lesbian community, infidelity, the performance of masculinity, high levels of mistrust, denial and rationalisation of abuse and violence, lack of support within the community, and feelings of shame and guilt. The production of power and violence reflected complex, shifting and multiple intersections around individual, dyad and cultural (community and societal) performativity of sexuality and gender, as well as historical and political practices around patriarchy, class and race. The capillaries of power meant that women, as subjects and objects of violence, occupied multiple positions in different contexts. Letti's account illustrated how many women's positioning oscillated between that of 'powerless battered woman' and 'powerful agent of resistance' (van Schalkwyk, Boonzaier & Gobodo-Madikizela, 2014). In the section that follows, I use the previous analyses as a backdrop to explore the women's subjective experiences of nuanced and explicit forms of power and violence in their intimate relationships.

**6.3.1 Dismantling dominant binaries.** The incidence of IPV among women in same-sex relationships may be argued to disrupt the male/female, heterosexual/homosexual conceptual binaries (Westlund, 1999) that usually frame IPV as involving male perpetrators and female victims (Murray et al., 2007; Peterman & Dixon, 2003). With reference to lesbian IPV, women occupied ambiguous and contradictory positions as perpetrators and victims.

The historical specificity of the current political system of democracy and the subsequent legal and political recognition of same-sex relationships has created the conditions for a particular ‘truth effect’ that suggests that same-sex relationships are in themselves democratic and egalitarian (Foucault, 1972). Thus, democracy as a discursive formation may be argued to represent “both an instrument and an effect of power” (Foucault, 1978, p. 100) in which rights-based discourses have created the opportunities for both progressive advancement as well as for oppressive practices for women in particular. The account below, from a woman whose marriage to her partner was the first same-sex marriage in that particular city, captured on a physical and metaphorical level, the multiple and enduring disfiguring effects of violence and abuse. I had learnt later from her that the marriage had ended, largely due to the violence and abuse:

*Eish, I [was] hit from [by] this one person. ... Ay, I never have even one scar on my body or face or whatever. But ay now when I see and look at myself, I’m full of scars, all over. All over. And from one person. That’s why I’m saying I hate her. She does that. (Zanele, DI)*

The tensions that arose from the positioning and construction of same-sex relationships as being different to heterosexual relationships, specifically in the perception that same-sex relationships between women were devoid of gendered power inequities and forms of violence, was evident in the account below. The narrative revealed how perceptions about permissible behaviours were embedded in a need to prove and show the ‘truth’ about lesbian relationships to be correct. Accordingly, Nelisiwe simultaneously constructed herself as a particular kind of lesbian subject (one who upholds the truth about lesbian relationships as being non-violent and/or as a non-violent lesbian woman), and became the object of lesbian violence in ‘allowing’ her partner to hit her (Foucault, 1972). Nelisiwe’s perception about the truth of same-sex relationships as not mimicking IPV in heterosexual relationships regulated and controlled her own behaviours in what she could and could not do, disciplined through the

practice of surveillance and self-surveillance, and which were performed for an invisible lesbian and heterosexual community:

The abuse that I, *eish*...it's kind of physical abuse. *Er cos* sometimes you feel like you don't wanna do what the heterosexual couple do. You don't wanna hit your partner, but your partner is allowed to hit you and then you allow that. It's not that you are afraid of hitting her or you...it's kinda like you trying to show your partner that you not that type of person who likes to fight. (Nelisiwe, DI)

One of the ways in which the 'truth' about lesbian relationships as being non-violent was kept in circulation was through the reinforcement of perceived gendered divisions around the IPV and masculinity in lesbian and heterosexual relationships. As already shown in previous analyses, many women associated masculinity with heterosexuality and constructed masculinity as powerful and violent. In explaining violence and abuse in intimate relationships, many women's narratives reflected an othering of the perpetrator as masculine, which simultaneously suggested a positioning of the self as non-masculine without explicitly claiming a feminine identity:

*Erm*, butch have this thing; when they cheat you just look and you cry and they expect you to be over it. But then when you [↑] cheat, you know, that's when they'll beat you up. And when they find out, then you gonna get beaten. So that's how they get physical. (Meg, DI)

As I think most people know abuse comes in different forms and also within the lesbian community there is your emotional abuse or I will not shy away from the fact that most butch do have more power in a relationship. You know when they do wrong, they do wrong. They don't want to acknowledge it. In a relationship, there is no communication. Femme are inferior and the butches are more superior. (Shado, DI)

**6.3.2 The 50/50 seduction: Denial and rationalisation.** Through the construction of perpetrators of violence as embodying masculine identities, lesbian women reinforced the discourse of women as non-violent. Ntombi, who had identified as a soft butch, had further explained her reasoning and expectations when she had entered that particular relationship.

Her account illustrated how dominant gender stereotypical constructions of particular sub-cultural lesbian identities influenced decision making:

*Ja* for me it was some kind of [pause...] the way it happened. Cos like for me as I said, *uti* I prefer femme. Like I know they won't be, maybe I've got that mentality; they will be soft people like I am. [A=mhm]. So I better be in that kind of relationship where I find somebody who's more similar like me who'll be able to understand me and share everything with me. Not to be like some [pause...] kind of stronger than me and like *ja* trying to abuse me, *ja*. But in my relationship, as I said, *uti*, *ja*, *er*, she's more stronger. And possessive, abusive, verbally abusive and physically. Not loving I guess. (Ntombi, DI)

In cases where feminine identities were acknowledged as having the propensity to be violent, other causal factors were also attributed, which may have diffused attention and responsibility from women as perpetrators:

For me erm the butch ones, the lesbian women, they the ones that are normally abusive but you do find the feminine ones, they can also be very, very, very abusive. A lot of things I've witnessed erm....I just don't think they taking it serious. I just don't think they taking anything serious. It could be their age group and also alcohol abuse cos there's a lot of that. (Pear, DI)

The gendered dichotomisation of power and violence meant that some women struggled to identify incidents of violence as being violent because it involved another woman:

I think for me the thing that's always important to acknowledge, is that it's already hard being a lesbian. Even if you don't identify as a lesbian, it's already hard being in a relationship with another woman because generally speaking even if your parents approve and you come out to them, will I phone and tell my mum what my girlfriend and I did? You know what I mean? That's just not going to happen. So there's already that barrier to like um accessing like resources from home. (A: mhm) Whereas if I was a heterosexual, that would be possible because my mum has experience being with men. Umm but then on top of that, I'm already being judged because I'm gay and in a relationship with a girl. Now I have to say something about being abused by this girl I'm with?! Like, what do I look like with my girlfriend who covers my thighs? Who just starts abusing me, you know what I mean? Like we're both women. So there's sort of an assumption...umm. There are so many things that make it harder to...to come out with once you figure out what's happening; but even before that it's like it's not abuse because you're both women. (Naledi, DI)



In the account above, Naledi highlighted how difficult it was for a woman to identify and acknowledge violence perpetrated by a woman partner (Brown, 2008), and the consequent invisibility of lesbian IPV (Irwin, 2008). Underling this statement was the implied embedded construction of an essentialist nature of women as gentle and caring. The ‘common understanding’ between women was alluded to when she had asked me, as a woman, “[Y]ou know what I mean?” In addition, Naledi had highlighted the difficulty in accessing support in a heterosexual context, in which the lack of understanding and implied negative judgement of lesbian women discouraged lesbian women from disclosing incidents of violence and abuse. In situating the lack of support at the level of the traditional family system between mother and daughter, Naledi revealed how dominant heterosexual discourses were kept in circulation within everyday family life. This may be argued to have silenced other marginal discourses such as the discourse around lesbian IPV. In linking her experiences of violence to traditional family spaces, Naledi also revealed and troubled the contradictions surrounding the visible and hidden forms of violence that are contained and discursively produced within traditional and non-traditional intimate spaces within democracy. To build upon the earlier argument of democracy as a discursive formation, while the lesbian subject as a sexual being is brought into being, the lesbian subject as perpetrator and victim is obscured. As a result, a common practice among women was the minimisation of some forms of abuse, such as verbal abuse, which was either rationalised as not being serious or it was not regarded as abuse at all:

Yes because it’s another woman. Unlike if it was a guy was saying you bitch, oh my god. But when it’s like more understandable when another women calls you a bitch. But it’s not, it’s really not. (Sne, FG)

Well I won't take crap from men...yes, never! I can't, like I think because for so long like we've been told what is the right way for a guy to behave towards a female that he's dating and I've been told and my mom has told me how I should be treated. (Nqobile, FG)

The conceptual distinctions between masculine (heterosexual) and feminine (same-sex) enactments of various forms of violence and abuse discursively and socially produced ways that influenced how the women understood such distinctions and their own positioning in relation to those distinctions. Often their positioning not only revealed contradictions that were ignored, but also served to maintain the conceptual distinctions. This was clearly illustrated in the account below in which Fawzia compared her experiences of verbal abuse from a male and a female partner. Although both behaviours were similar, the verbal abuse from a woman partner was experienced as attractive and strong:

*Umm* like when I was in a relationship with a guy, I don't know...umm I know it was just one time that he raised his voice at me and I gave him hell for that. And so it wasn't an attractive feature being...but then with a women I, it was very compelling (weak laugh) I think (A: mmm) and also I'm just attracted to strength I mean umm whether it was that time she was doing that or just basically a woman who is strong and umm has I mean whether it's their career or their personal attributes. (Fawzia, FG)

There were other accounts from depth interviews and focus groups in which experiences of abuse and violence were framed as being positive because they involved women partners. Often abuse was justified as a sign of love and desire. In those accounts, the basis of such framing still hinged upon traditional conceptualisations of woman as emotional and fragile. Furthermore, it indicated a lack of knowledge about same-sex IPV, which prevented identification of abuse and violence as such (Calton, Cattaneo, & Gebhard, 2016):

Clara: At first I kind of liked it.

Zinzi: I know right? [...laughter and shrieking in agreement]

Clara: Oh gosh (!) *umm* [Laughter] *eish*...I don't know like ...I thought it was a little irritating kind of, it was it was funny. I didn't think I was in an abusive relationship. I just thought she was really loyal. At that point I was so in love with that girl. I would do anything that she said I must do...so...I would never take that shit from anybody! I wouldn't feel good about it. And like you almost feel like

Zinzi: I'm so special!

Clara: Yeah...

Xoleka: How do you feel good about that?

Clara: It feels good to be desired. And before you have an experience just like that, [Zinzi: mhmm] you say what you're saying right now [Zinzi: hmm] 'cos I... always used to tell my friends umm that I would never take that kind of shit from anybody

[Zinzi: mmm] but then when it was happening, I was so attracted to this strength that was being that she exuded, you know when she was doing all that, I was, it was so drawing, and it was like a magnetic force. [Zinzi: mhmm, in agreement]

Sometimes when you're in a relationship that that kind of stuff is happening, either it feels good at the time because it feels like 'oh she must really love me' it's like she doesn't want me to talk to anybody because she loves me so much' or in my experience, it was like 'oh there's something not right, that this should not be happening but (drawn out) I'm not going to deal with this right now because once I call it an abusive relationship, now I have to do something about it. so now there's , I, er, um, you know, there's probably an obligation to like address what that means... But I think, yeah, there's like... that's probably why it's so hard to talk about it because... you almost feel guilty that it felt good to you a little bit while it's happening. (Sophie, DI)

The above accounts exposed the material effects of power relations on the women's bodies. The body, subjected to cultural disciplinary techniques and technologies of power (Foucault, 1995) that governed gendered responses to IPV, represented a site on which traditional notions of IPV were enacted and contested. Many of the complications around defining the violence as such have also been illustrated in work with women in heterosexual abusive relationships (Aldridge, 2013; Bloom, Gielen & Glass, 2016; Choice & Lamke, 1999). The emotional confusion that the women alluded to may represent ways in which women, as subjects were divided within themselves and from others (Foucault, 1982). Sophie was not only divided within herself through her own internal conflict, but also through the realisation that to acknowledge her experience as abusive would have divided her from the 'non-violent' lesbian community, while it heightened a perceived similarity with the heterosexual community. To have assumed the subject position of victim would have meant that she would have had to acknowledge the truth about lesbian violence (Foucault, 1978), which might not have been congruent with the discourse and political positioning of lesbian women within the new democratic era. Women were subsequently positioned paradoxically as objects of desire and violence. This is explored in the next section.

**6.3.3 Constructing objects of desire and violence.** In talking about their experiences of violence and abuse, the women's narratives reflected how they came into being as objects of desire and violence. Jealousy and possessiveness, embedded in discourses of competition and high levels of mistrust and surveillance, emerged as strong inter-related themes throughout the women's accounts and were not specific to any lesbian subculture or identity. Kanuha (2013) argues that jealousy within lesbian relationships must be understood within intersections of race, LGBTQ identity, and political-legal factors. I argue that the discourses around jealousy and possessiveness symbolised complex forms of disciplinary techniques and technologies of power (Foucault, 1995):

In our relationship, I had a very jealous partner. Oh she was very jealous! I don't know. Sometimes she will want to get physical and stuff like that. So I had to end it. (Sne, DI)

Noni: I'm quite happy with her. Everything for me so far is going good. It's just that I'm jealous and she's jealous. [Laughs].

Angeline: What are you jealous about?

Noni: Er I don't want to see her with anyone and she also doesn't want to see me with anyone. And if I'm on my phone, she gets angry and she takes it. (DI)

Jealousy and possessiveness were not always viewed as negative behaviours when the women tried to make sense of the violence. Violence and power dynamics within the relationship was often downplayed in the absence of a male partner (Brown, 2008):

No, she's a very sweet person. She's, you know it was just that and no, she would just do that. And I would be like, ok, you know what, maybe I'm wrong. Maybe I shouldn't be where she doesn't want me to be or whatever. And erm [...] ja, I would just say that and maybe she she just wants me. You know when you, when somebody does that you actually thinking ok, maybe it's cos they really love me you know and erm they not cheating on you. It's just you. And what not, what not. And you actually thinking you know what, this is the perfect person for me. All I need to do is just to not anger her you know. And then she hits you. And you think ok you know what, that's enough. I've had it. I'm going to break up with her. Then she comes back to you and then she explained that no, you made her angry. I wasn't going to do it. You know I love you and I'm jealous over you. And ja, you know things like that. And then you end up forgiving them. Again and again and again. (Thandi, DI)

Although none of the women suggested that jealousy was an emotional attribute that was associated with women or femininity, Hollway's (1984) 'have/hold' discourse and its tandem working with the male sexual drive discourse offered an understanding of a common cultural script linked to the gendered performativity of competition among girls/women as objects of masculine desire. The discursive construction of the male sexuality through the above discourses offered a powerful positioning of male sexuality (Gavey, 2005) which was perceived as a threat to lesbian sexuality (also discussed in the previous chapter):

With friends I have seen. It has, they quite jealous people. I don't know. Maybe they feel intimidated by men or they feel as though you might end up going back to dating men or whatever. They just get ticked off very easily. Erm they are someone who will get really quite hectic and beat you up and what. I don't know why. Maybe they want to act all manly and show that I'm I've got the power or whatever. (Zodwa, FG)

There's too much jealousy. I think it's because they know that they are women and sometimes they feel that they can't really satisfy you sexually or what like men. Especially if you have dated a guy before them, then it becomes a problem with them. It's understandable when you're always been with women and you've never been with men and you're femme. It is fine with them. With some it is fine. But some it's not. They just do not want us to be friends with guys at all. At all. But some do understand. Some understand so much that they don't mind. But yo, I think mine, they were too jealous and possessive. (Ayanda, DI)

The discourse of masculine threat to same-sex sexuality not only endorsed dominant cultural scripts of masculine sexual omnipotence, but also positioned lesbian women as being sexually inadequate and vulnerable. Ussher and Mooney-Somers (2000) argue that lesbian desire is central to lesbian sexuality and subjectivity. However, a phallogentric culture renders lesbian desire invisible. Lesbian women may have reinforced public discourses that lesbian sexuality was lacking due to the absence of the penis. Intimate relationships were therefore positioned as unstable and vulnerable to the threat of masculine sexuality. Consequently, many women described relationships in which partners had attempted to control and minimise contact with males, sometimes with violent acts:

/.../ when I had my first girlfriend as well I had a boyfriend before that and she was always so possessive because of the fact that I had a boyfriend before her /.../ ja and umm...she would do things like that. Take my phone and bash it against the wall because (laugh) (Jesus! another participant) because my ex was calling me or I wasn't

allowed to talk to her male friends and her female friends as well. The lesbian women, she was very wary about that. A lot of things man... (Thobeka, FG)

Umm...well OK my first girlfriend, which was in high school, she made me buy a new skirt because my skirt was too short. I was not allowed to stand with any boys. I could not stay after school ummm... she would check my phone...(inaudible comment made by one of the other participants). I was not that bad [loud laughter from group]...that was generally that was you know some... some I think...and she was butch and so umm...ja so that's my experiences with butch people. So I think for me it differs, because I know there are some butches that are politically correct but this is I know there are some lesbian women who can be quite controlling. (Zinhle, FG)

Other women attributed jealousy to high levels of competitiveness within the lesbian community itself and a need to 'outperform' other women. In the positioning of lesbian women as a threat to intimate relationships, the body still represented a central site where power was enacted and resisted:

It's just that because we [are] jealous of each other that you can't have a beautiful girlfriend cos we undermine each other. You can't have a beautiful girlfriend. I can have your [↑] girlfriend and show you [↑] that I'm the man than you even... you know that... I don't know how to put that but it's kinda like jealousy to each other that you cannot own the world – good things, big things. You cannot have a girlfriend that...if I want that girlfriend, I'll get your girlfriend, and it's nobody's business. It will be like that. /.../ when you see the new face, everybody wants that new face. Even they know that person is your girlfriend but they wanna get, they wanna show you that they can ... ja get you. (Noni, FG)

It's needing to prove a point to my friends. I can have any girl, anywhere, anytime. Not bothered about my partner. So your status. It's to put yourself out there. There's a certain person by the name of, she's very, very fond of girls. Even, if you don't play the game, nobody will know about you. (Nelisiwe, FG)

We [are] such a small community especially here in City D. We basically know each other and we know what's going on in each other's lives. And if I see that you can do it, I also do it. I feel like in most of the relationships I see there's this competitiveness that if Leonie is doing this, that and the other, why can't I? And if I say today, ay my partner is /.../ talking about proposing, all of a sudden tomorrow Angeline is engaged. So there is this competitiveness about. It gets to me a lot. (Joyce, FG)

There's this thing where you're gonna date a person. You're not dating the person because they [are] good people. They want to date the person cos she's pretty or she's the prettiest. Most of the time it's very physical. But the majority of, especially the butch, the majority of lesbian women, they are just like 'ay, did you see my girl? Ay, she's hot'. Then the girls come, oh your girlfriend is hot. They play her and stuff like that. So it's sort of like erm the way that I've seen they're like, they're like guys. My girlfriend is hotter than your girlfriend. Also yourself you have to look nice in order

for the girls to look at you in that way. You have to have money. You have to work. You have to have name brands that you must wear. In order for that girl to have an attraction to you. (Mandla, FG)

The above accounts revealed several discourses that were embedded in the discursive construction of competition, femininity and masculinity. The body represented a site of power through the various forms of elaborate disciplinary practices that compelled adherence to feminine and masculine scripts which produced docile bodies inscribed with (feminine) inferior status and (masculine) superior status (Bartky, 1988). The discourse of competition, as a cultural script, was usually considered a masculine imperative within traditional patriarchal societies and suggested that, in contemporary times, subjectivity is linked to consumerism, individual competitiveness and advancement (Bhana & Pattman, 2011). Shefer and Strebel (2012) argue, through a deconstruction of the phenomenon of the 'sugar daddy', that relationships formed on unequal material resources go beyond the material to also indicate something about the performance of masculinity, the positioning of men, and status. Notwithstanding the gendered 'truth' about competition being masculine is in itself problematic, the performativity of 'masculine' competitiveness by lesbian women may be argued to represent a troubling of dominant patriarchal knowledge and practices. Thus, masculine competition offered a point of resistance to dominant forms of male power as lesbian women engaged in the performativity of 'masculine competition' (as conveyed by the words "I'm the man", "they're like guys") in their pursuit of female objects of desire. The discourse of competition was upheld by the mutually reinforcing discourses around the objectification of women, and the hyper-sexualisation of the masculine subject ("I can have any girl, anywhere, anytime"). Ironically, the underlying narrative of conquest, ownership and manipulation embedded in their talk was also reminiscent of colonial conquest on the African body. Thus, "beautiful", "pretty" girlfriends were constructed as trophy conquests

who were de-personalised and detached (“that new face”, “it’s very physical”) from being recognised as “good people” and subjected to the disciplinary techniques of surveillance, scrutiny and manipulation (“they play her”). The de-personalisation of the subject and the objectification of the body was reinforced by the intertwined nature of competitive performance with materiality and economics (D. Lewis & Hames, 2011) as suggested by the statement, “You have to have money. You have to work. You have to have name brands that you must wear”. Eves (2004) argues that this “lesbian aesthetics” (p. 492) functions to demonstrate lesbian pride and lesbian sub-cultural identities. However, the narratives in this study suggested that the pressure to perform through the projection of a particular material subject pointed to a constant sense of surveillance of the self and the lesbian community. This theme is explored in the next section.

**6.3.4 Permanent visibility: Surveillance and panoptic control.** The high level of competition that was reported among the women implied a high level of surveillance within the lesbian community as well. Surveillance took many forms and was linked to mistrust, infidelity, and controlling behaviours:

Why are you talking to that boy? Why are you, I saw you. Like stupid stuff. When I am on social networks, I cannot have male friends. Anytime. Even when someone is talking on Facebook. Why is that guy talking to you? Blah, blah, blah. Why is he saying comments like that? Maybe you seeing each other in private. (Sne, DI)

*Ja* well the one ((inaudible)) one that I had that was actually a two and a half year relationship. *Phew*, she was just, she was only just possessive and jealous. So, if I took longer or an extra five minutes in the bathroom, then it would actually become an issue. She would want to know why I took longer in the bath. Gosh, that’s like ridiculous. Erm I couldn’t erm...*ja* she used to call me like fifty times a day just to check up what I’m doing or where I am and erm I couldn’t like erm *ja* I had to chat to her all the time so that she knows what I’m actually doing. (Pearl, DI)

*Ja*, I’d go out, maybe at night with my friends, maybe we’d just go out for drinks and she would call me. ‘Where am I? It is, Ok, it is \_’. She would call me where am I. I would say where I am and she would come there. She would actually drag me out and she would hit me. (Thuli, DI)



The high level of control described by the women reflected a network of localised power capillaries, which operated in their everyday lives. Given that the lesbian community was relatively small in the sense that most women knew others in the community, the community became symbolic of the panopticon with a consequent heightened sense of permanent visibility (Foucault, 1995). The women's narratives conveyed a strong discourse of mistrust within the lesbian community that served to regulate their behaviours in response to the panoptic surveillance by other lesbian women. This might represent a salient restriction as lesbian women mobilise socially around sexual identity and gender (Logan, 2013). In the account below, several contradictory positions were revealed. As was shown in the previous section, the practice of pursuing multiple partners was inferred to be socially acceptable 'truth' within the lesbian community. In maintaining that particular 'truth' about lesbian sexuality, intimate lesbian relationships may be argued to have come under the constant threat of infidelity by either or both partners:

She cheated on me. Well I was also cheating. [Laughs]. She never found out. So I was the only one who always caught her. [Laughs]. *Ja*. Cheating is the main reason cos some feel having one partner is not enough. Maybe three or four. (Tshepo, DI)

Lesbian women were positioned both as friends and as potential foes within the lesbian community, divided within and divided from the lesbian community (Foucault, 1978). The intersections of competition, infidelity, mistrust and surveillance at times produced violent enactments of power:

She strangled me. Ok, somebody had actually lied that I had kissed somebody. A friend of hers that asked me out at some place together and I, I...she saw me there and she came up to me and she started[...] she started approaching me. I told her that ok you know what, since she was my girlfriend's friend, I'll tell her. It was only fair that I do that, because I mean I don't understand how you can ask me out and then, that minute, after I turned, she called my girlfriend, my ex-girlfriend and she told her that I'm cheating on her. She said she saw me kissing somebody. And that was the time that she actually nearly killed me. (Andiswa, DI)

The women's accounts also reflected a sense of emotional vulnerability and fragility. Many women considered the emotional abuse that they had experienced as the most difficult form of violence. Vulnerability was not limited to particular lesbian sub-cultures, and in this way disrupted traditional gendered knowledges that attributed emotional vulnerability to femme lesbian women only:

Because there was a time that we she had cheated and I stopped trusting her. Besides everything else, she said she would never cheat on me but she did and I found out. I started becoming very I don't know, not obsessive. I would worry when she picked up the phone, who's she talking to, when she gets and an SMS or what not. (Hlengiwe, DI)

Mmm. It's a circular thing. Trying to get to every girl. [Deep breath] My word! Like I'll be telling someone about a relationship and they're like, oh you're telling me about her? I've been there. Can't you just find someone who you can just say, ok. And I don't know why? They very vulnerable and they easily taken away. It's like easy for you to see a person and a girl would just go, some girls don't care. They just go up to a person and kiss. It happens. That is the hardest part, especially if you really love that person. (Zodwa, DI)

An underlying discourse that permeated the above accounts of vulnerability was the notion of guilt and responsibility, which stemmed from the knowledge of practices within the lesbian community. This pointed to the co-construction of violence through the multiple and shifting ways in which power was exercised within the lesbian community. However, as a disciplinary technique, blame and responsibility for acts of violence against the self, may be argued to have reinforced public perceptions of lesbian women as vulnerable to violence. In those instances though, violence was produced within the lesbian community itself. As revealed in earlier analyses, the divide between the lesbian and heterosexual communities played a central role in the political, cultural and social positioning of lesbian women both within mainstream society and within the lesbian community. While earlier analyses showed how lesbian women often actively sought to establish a positive lesbian identity within the broader heterosexual community, the lesbian/heterosexual binary was also deployed as a disciplinary technique to regulate behaviour through the performativity of the public spectacle.

**6.3.5 The power of the public spectacle.** The primarily heterosexist and homophobic spaces in which lesbian relationships were enacted created opportunities for the public display of violence and power to be deployed as a form of punishment to regulate behaviour. This form of punishment may be regarded as examples of internalised homophobia (M.K. Sullivan, 2003). Many women had reported that they had not disclosed their sexual orientation to family and friends. While the hidden nature of their intimate relationships enabled the pursuit of intimate relationships within the security of private spaces, it also positioned lesbian women who had not disclosed their sexual orientation, as vulnerable, through the threat of visibility and public display of same-sex sexuality. In some instances the power of this threat and public display required recognition of the space as a ‘heterosexual’ one, in which lesbian women were othered:

Are you ashamed of me? You want to hold me in public. Well, I didn't mind. But sometimes you know, it's inappropriate. She'll say no, why don't you want to hold me? Are you embarrassed of us? Blah, blah, blah. So we'll start fighting. About stupid stuff. It was unhealthy. (Sne, DI)

At the stadium in front of like so many people. At the 2010 world cup. So I decided, no you know what, I have to end this. But we are dating and we are women. The next thing she is hitting me in public. So I couldn't take it anymore. (Joyce, DI)

Shouting at me in public [↓, crying], [...pause] physical abuse me. [A=mhm]. I think she took advantage of it. (Khetiwe, DI)

Sometimes other butch they do hit their femmes in public but some they, mostly the femmes do it. And most of the straight girls they do it, they want to show you that you are not a man, you are a woman. (Pinky, DI)

In other instances, however, the power of the spectacle did not reside within a heterosexual space, but rather in the act itself within a lesbian space. Lesbian space was utilised in ways to claim ownership and possession of the object of desire, and/or to pursue an object of desire:

Sne: Even with other women, yes. And I even remember the other night when we went to this club in South beach. It's like a lesbian club. So I was just dancing with this other lady. I [↑] went to the lady. It was like that.

Angeline: What did she do?

Sne: She went and confronted the other woman. Why are you dancing with my girl?  
[Laughs] Just like that. (DI)

It's the cheating where she actually brought girls and physically, in front of me like, would fondle these girls and kiss them and do stuff like that. (Thobeka, DI)

#### **6.4 Chapter Conclusion**

This chapter explored the situated, subjective experiences of power and violence in the lives of lesbian women. I have shown how nuanced and explicit forms of violence and abuse were embedded and enacted in the everyday interactions in the women's lives. The women's narratives revealed that such enactments were often co-constructed and were both shaped and maintained by dominant and marginalised discourses within lesbian sub-cultures and heterosexual society. I have shown how the ways in which identities were constructed and framed resulted in dynamic and contradictory positioning. Differences in how identity, gender and sexuality were conceptualised and accordingly enacted created certain tensions within the lesbian community and within lesbian relationships. Such constructions reflected several tensions around the adherence to heteronormative constructions of gender on the one hand, and an attempt to forge unique lesbian identities on the other hand. This tension was both liberating and restrictive. On the one hand, some lesbian women understood identity, gender and sexuality in ways that mirrored established and dominant heteronormative thinking. On the other hand, other lesbian women challenged traditional constructions of gender and sexuality. Within the latter group, further divisions were noted between those who advocated for new categories and new labels to replace the old, and those who advocated for the fluidity and freedom to exist without definitions and without labels. The tensions among these groups were further exacerbated by the tensions from the broader contexts. While there was evidence to show how dominant constructions of femininity and masculinity were reproduced, there were also instances when identities were constructed in ways that disrupted

dominant gender constructions. Perhaps more significant in the context of this study, this tension created opportunities for the enactment of power among the women and may in some instances, lead to violent acts.

## **Chapter Seven: Conclusion**

This study examined women's subjective experiences of power and violence in same-sex relationships in South Africa through a reading of the lesbian body as a site through which social identities and power was produced, maintained, contested and reframed. Given that a Foucauldian analysis cannot speak of 'findings' (Hook, 2001), what I present in this final chapter is a truths of sorts that foregrounds the key theoretical, methodological and practical contributions of the study. In doing so, I will attempt to highlight how the study has exposed and troubled the material effects of discourse, knowledge and power in the lives of black lesbian women in post-colonial South Africa. By highlighting the material, political and historical aspects of multiple enactments of nuanced and explicit forms of power and violence, I hope to demonstrate how and why a study of intimate partner violence implicates gendered subjectivities and identities.

### **7.1 Methodological Strengths**

Two important methodological strengths need to be foregrounded first as they underpin the quality of this study. To my knowledge, this is the first South African study that has attempted to explore the nuanced and complex intersections that are implicated in the enactment of power and violence in the public and private lives of black lesbian women. This is a salient point as much of the current local scholarship in the area of lesbian sexuality focuses on homophobic violence. In similar vein, the bulk of lesbian IPV scholarship originates from the global North with limited applicability to the South African context. While such studies have generated beneficial knowledge, it is also important to understand and document the complex intersections that are created and shaped by the unique historical, political, social and cultural contexts in South Africa. Notwithstanding the limitations

associated with snowball sampling (Browne, 2015) from selected LGBT NGOs and the challenges associated with research on sensitive topics with minority populations (Browne, 2005; Gamson, 2003; G. Sullivan & Losberg, 2003), the current study drew a large number of participants (40 lesbian women) from across the country. Most qualitative work in the area of same-sex sexuality, where it exists, is based on smaller scale localised samples. I contend that the national reach of this multi-site study that drew participants from 5 of the 9 provinces in South Africa and with many participants having dual residency in urban and rural areas, has strengthened the validity and credibility of the analyses, and provides some important insights into the complex and nuanced intersections of power, violence, black lesbian sexuality, race, class, gender, and citizenship.

Secondly, informed by a feminist poststructural-intersectional approach, the analytic gaze was cast outward and inward on the contexts within which power and violence unfolded in the women's lives. Intersectionality as an analytical and theoretical tool (Hancock, 2008; Yuval-Davis, 2006a, 2006b) proved particularly useful in revealing nuanced interconnections that are often obscured in quantitative studies, while feminist poststructuralism proffered an appropriate theoretical and political (Bhavnani & Coulson, 2005) framework to examine discursive constructions and meanings, and subjective experiences, that are dynamic, changing and historically specific (Gavey, 1989, 2011; Weedon, 1997). The women's narratives have demonstrated how positioning, identities and subjective experiences were fluid, changing, ambiguous and contradictory at times and reflected complex intersections that were themselves, not static. These methodological strengths have contributed to current lesbian scholarship in South Africa and internationally through its focus on the dynamic interplay of subjective and contextual factors that are implicated in the discursive construction, lived experience and material production of power and violence in lesbian lives. The study has demonstrated that an examination of power and violence in lesbian

relationships has to extend beyond the relational dynamics within the dyad to consider the multiple intersections with the social, cultural, political, material and historical contexts and identities (Bowleg, 2008). Below I offer a summary of the key theoretical insights and contributions of the study.

## **7.2 Disrupting ‘Violence’**

In Chapter One, I had expressed my initial reservations regarding the political and social implications of exploring power and violence among lesbian women, an already marginalised group in society (Aulivola, 2004; Knauer, 1999). I had also argued that the silence around lesbian IPV represented a material effect of a largely heteropatriarchal society. How we conceptualise lesbian sexuality and lesbian IPV in particular, reflects something about the cultural and social contexts that shape sexuality and violence (Foucault, 1978). This study has shown that the discursive construction and material production of power and violence in lesbian experiences and relationships is embedded within a particular network of knowledge that produces particular kinds of power (Foucault, 1978, 1982). The study has exposed the discursive and material links between knowledge and power and violence and has shown how the highly violent South African context keeps particular heteropatriarchal knowledges and power relations in place and has desensitised public perceptions and responses to violence against women, to the extent that violence against lesbian women constitute mundane, banal occurrences in life. The women’s talk showed how such perceptions and responses are framed within homophobic discourses that construct lesbian sexuality as deviant and pathological (Foucault, 1995; Gqola, 2008; Tamale, 2011). An important material effect of such constructions is the obscuring of forms of violence that are not easily readable as being violent, with only more graphic and explicit forms of violence



being labelled as ‘violent’ – both against lesbian women and within lesbian relationships. The public spectacle of violence against lesbian women reinforces existing heteropatriarchal and homophobic discourses and practices, and hides powerful forms of violence that operate in less explicit, more subjective, and somewhat metaphorical levels. Of significance, the women’s narratives revealed the dynamic and shifting interplay between multiple factors (institutions, contexts, ideologies, norms, persons, practices) in the enactment of violence. In this study, cultural practices and norms, sub-cultural, raced, classist and gendered identities; social and political imperatives, and spatial configurations featured prominently in how violence was enacted and experienced within communities and within relationships, and showed that what happens ‘in here’ were interrelated in complex and changing ways with what happens ‘out there’. Hence the analyses was not limited to individual and dyad dynamics, but included subjective experiences of power and violence within cultural, social, and community spaces. The study showed that analyses of power and violence within lesbian relationships cannot be separated from power and violence within broader contexts. This clearly indicates that a ‘victim-perpetrator’ framework that feeds into a medico-legal model of allocating responsibility and ascribing blame for the violence within a dyad, is markedly limited in understanding lesbian IPV. This study therefore makes an important contribution in foregrounding the complex nature of (same-sex) violence, as well as the hidden forms of power and violence, and points to the need to broaden definitions of violence as one way of identifying and increasing the visibility of its more nuanced forms.

### **7.3 Disrupting the Notion of ‘Lesbian Community’**

Western lesbian scholarship often refers to a lesbian ‘community’. A salient finding and contribution of this study is that the notion of *lesbian community* in the South African

context is not only different to western notions of lesbian community (Visser, 2013), but is a complex and dynamic one that takes multiple forms and has multiple meanings. The women's references to community showed that *community* is not merely about a lesbian 'sisterhood' in a particular geographical location, but is defined by and interwoven with sexed, raced, gendered and cultural identities, political history and spatial relations, and is closely linked to notions of citizenship. The women did not talk about community along the lines of demarcated residential spaces (which also pointed to the material nature of historical and political geographical disparities along race and class during the apartheid era), but rather of metaphorical and relational communities based on racial histories, political activism and mobilisation, classist and material divisions, multiple identities and sub-cultures, and socio-cultural geographic locatedness, that intersected in complex ways to produce multiple lesbian communities with multiple meanings and multiple forms. Their narratives showed how the notion of black lesbian community in South Africa is deeply shaped by its political history along gender, race and spatial divides; with the women occupying changing and multiple positions in different lesbian communities within the juxta-positioning of post-colonial practices and democracy (Tamale, 2014). While black lesbian women may be grouped in the broad category LGBT in South African scholarship and discourse, the women's talk revealed marked differences in how they perceived and experienced the subjective experiences and sense of community between black and white lesbian women, and between lesbian women and (mainly white) gay men. The women also reported ambiguous positionings within other 'community' spaces and contexts. While black lesbian women reported feeling invisible in 'white' social spaces, their (hyper) visibility as black lesbian women in other public and cultural spaces increased their risk to homophobic discrimination (Gqola, 2008). Their multiple positioning as black, lesbian women signaled different levels of belonging and competition in different communities, and multiple permutations of oppression (Bowleg,

2008; Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991). The women's narratives thus disrupted notions of lesbian community as homogenous and stable, and suggested that the notion of lesbian community is a slippery one in the South African context. This insight has important implications for research, policy and practice, especially programmes that target particular 'communities'. The study points to the need to consider differences and experiences of citizenship (Cole, 2009) among lesbian women in conceptualising lesbian women as *community*.

#### **7.4 Discourses of Difference**

Another key discursive theme that has important implications for policy and practice relates to the ways in which lesbian women are constructed as different and deviant. The discourse of difference featured prominently in the women's narratives and was subsumed in several other discourses around citizenship, sexuality, and identity. Their narratives highlighted the paradoxical nature of their positioning as 'othered' in a society where progressive legislation advances diversity and tolerance on the one hand, but is fraught with violent intolerance and non-acceptance of diverse sexualities on the other (Collins, 2004). The women described multiple forms of disciplinary techniques that they were subjected to. These ranged from family and community alienation and rejection to harsh public spectacles that involved the sexualised demeaning of the lesbian body in the form of hate crimes, which included brutal acts of rape and murder. Such punishment unfolded within the context of the voyeuristic public gaze of sensationalised media reporting of lesbian violence (Sanger, 2010) which further positioned the black lesbian body as sexualised object for public scrutiny and the spectacle of public punishment. The women's narratives have provided important insights into how passive participation and consumption of 'lesbian violence' (Judge, 2018) has contributed to an enabling social and political homophobic environment in which black

lesbian women in particular are discursively constructed as powerless (Morrissey, 2013) and as “perpetual victims” (Boonzaier & Zway, 2015, p. 8). This perpetuates colonial discourses of the disempowered, disenfranchised black subject who lacks agency (Tamale, 2011). These insights call into question the ideals of democracy and democratic citizenship, against which national imperatives such gender and sexuality rights, IPV and GBV are situated.

Posel (2004, 2005a) has argued that one of the effects of rights-based democratic discourses has been the heightened public focus on sexuality. While increased visibility of sexuality may be argued to signal a move away from past repressive ideologies and practices that governed sexuality, it may also have created the possibilities for the emergence of the sexualised lesbian subject. The women’s accounts have revealed how lesbian sexuality and the lesbian body as sexed object have become the primary sites through which lesbian women are defined in reductionist ways and targeted as objects of scrutiny and punishment. This sexual discourse, closely bound with discourses of morality and cultural preservation and interwoven with religious and cultural scripts, served to ‘other’ lesbian women from the dominant heterosexual society, and in doing so, worked to maintain heteropatriarchal and post-colonial power through the reproduction of several macro discourses that perpetuated the idea of heterosexuality as natural.

Thus, what the discourse of difference highlights is the need for policy and practice to be cognisant of the social and discursive production of difference and the ‘other’ and how these relate to national imperatives and democratic citizenship. Furthermore, and very importantly, the discourse of difference points to the need to also acknowledge differences may indeed exist (Cole, 2009). I argue that such differences need to be deployed in ways that create new possibilities that challenge GBV, (lesbian) IPV, and societal discrimination and marginalisation of lesbian women and other marginalised groups.

## 7.5 Contexts, Paradoxes and Ambiguities

The pervasiveness of the discourse of difference also revealed the multiple, ambiguous and contradictory positioning of lesbian women in current day South Africa, in which the discourse of the 'other' as different was perpetuated within the macro discourses of democracy and rights. Despite the progress made in the areas of women's rights, LGBTQ rights, sexuality and diversity, the women's narratives revealed a strong sense of being othered and marginalised (Gqola, 2015). Their talk has highlighted the links between the current context and the historical past, and the historical specificity of a rights-based discourse, and the power relations that are constituted through this discourse (Foucault, 1978; Gavey, 2011). The analyses has shown that despite the significant changes in the political and legal systems, which on paper, advances progressive changes for lesbian women, a strong heteropatriarchal culture with post-colonial effects has continued to persist in South Africa. This dynamic reflects the enduring presence and effects of particular dominant knowledge and 'truths' which kept particular discourses in circulation and particular power relations in play (Mills, 2003).

The juxta-positioning of the ideals of democracy with heteropatriarchal and post-colonial practices has resulted in the politicisation of sexuality and gender in ways that are contradictory to the discourse of full citizenship and democratisation. Several apparent contradictions and ambiguities in relation to lesbian women found expression in the discursive themes around visibility/invisibility, (hyper) sexuality of the black lesbian body, citizenship and cultural belonging versus alienation and deviancy, gender rights and patriarchal norms, and through the negotiation of gendered and sexed identities informed by the feminine/masculine dichotomy. These ambiguities and contradictions point to the complexities inherent in lesbian IPV and suggest that programmes and policies that aim to address the invisibility of lesbian IPV will need to engage with such ambiguities and

contradictions at multiple levels, including political activism and governance, and institutional and community structures.

## **7.6 Discourses of Citizenship: Identities and Subjects in a Post-Colonial, Post-Apartheid Democratic South Africa**

Raced and gendered citizenship as discourse and lived experience was a pervasive theme in the women's narratives. The women's accounts revealed how their everyday experiences in various contexts reflected struggles for full citizenship due to the disjuncture between constitutional reform, a primarily heteropatriarchal society, and continued homophobic discrimination. Accounts of raced and gendered citizenship were largely framed within activist, rights-based discourses. Of particular significance, their narratives foreground the ways in which citizenship and sexuality intersects with race and gender in complex ways to keep post-colonial practices hidden, and that reproduce and maintain existing discourses of whiteness and masculinity as privileged and entitled. Their narratives reveal how black lesbian women, as raced subjects, are positioned as different and as other in spaces that are also occupied by white gay men or white lesbian women, in which punishment is more nuanced through the discourses of alienation and invisibility. The women's positioning as other was interwoven with the perceived differences in political/activist positionings between black and white lesbian women, as well as the material differences due to classist disparities that have a historical basis. Their narratives show that the subjective experiences and identities of black lesbian women are significantly defined by their historical oppression and continued political mobilising, which is perceived to be different to white lesbian women and gay men who are perceived to pursue a more social agenda in the absence of experiences of racial and material oppression. The absence of white lesbian women in a study that examines power and violence may be argued to reflect the continued protected and privileged invisibility of white

sexuality in South Africa, an absence that is also noted in media reports of homophobic lesbian violence. Historically, geographical location and space had been used during the apartheid era in a divisive manner to maintain certain ideologies (knowledge) and power relations. The women's accounts have indicated that spatial arrangements within democratic South Africa continue to be imbued with power differentials that privilege some groups (heterosexual and white) while marginalising other groups (lesbian/same-sex and black). Moreover, these accounts have revealed how cultural, social and public spaces have presented with opportunities for the increased visibility of lesbian women in day-to day life, but with the concurrent explicit and nuanced forms of punishment and sanctions that encourage invisibility. This finding reflects how lesbian sexuality itself represents a highly politicised and contested subject (as citizen, knowledge and discourse) within the current historical and political context in South Africa. It points to the continued impact of racial divisions on black lesbian women's subjective and material experiences of citizenship in South Africa, and suggests that experiences of citizenship and invisibility might be different for black and white lesbian women. This political positioning sets black lesbian sexuality apart from the perceived social positioning of white lesbian (and gay) sexuality, and indeed from lesbian sexuality in the global north, and has implications for programmes and support that are based on western models or white, middle-class women.

In addition to their gendered and raced invisibility as black lesbian women in relation to white lesbian women and white gay men, the women's narratives also highlighted how gendered identities, defined and constructed around traditional notions of femininity and masculinity, were deployed as disciplinary techniques that restricted access to full citizenship. Disciplinary techniques were enacted through explicit and subtle cultural and institutional practices that served to maintain heterosexual and patriarchal power relations within society at large (Foucault, 1995). The women had described several experiences in

which access to legal, social and police services were not only skewed towards heterosexual women, but were also highly discriminatory in nature. Lesbian women were punished for their gender non-conformity evidenced in their sexual interest in women, and also for the embodiment of masculine behaviours that are traditionally reserved for men only. In fact, the women's accounts suggested that harsher forms of control and punishment were used for lesbian women who displayed more explicit forms of masculine behaviours that were perceived to disrupt traditional and relational constructions of femininity and masculinity.

These insights foreground how race and gender continue to be deployed in ways that marginalise black lesbian women through the construction of black lesbian sexuality as different to white lesbian sexuality. Current programmes that target gender, often negate race; and those that target GBV and IPV often negate the intersections of race, class, gender and sexuality through its focus on heterosexual families. Those that do consider race are often framed and implemented in ways that perpetuate the racial othering of groups – which may be argued to maintain hidden post-colonial practices. The intersections of racial and gendered othering and citizenship provides important insights into current gaps in policy and programme implementation around gender and sexuality.

### **7.7 The Performativity of Sexed and Gendered Binaries: The Feminine/Masculine Split**

The study revealed that the gendered dichotomy of feminine and masculine identities were enacted upon the lesbian body in ways that maintained or contested gendered power relations. The embodiment and enactment of feminine and masculine identities, as well as other hybrid identities, were bound up in a strong discourse of competition among lesbian women and heterosexual women and men. The study showed how dominant gendered knowledge and discourses, through powerful cultural scripts, shaped the performance of traditional and non-traditional feminine and masculine identities, sexualities and desires.



Within these enactments and discourses, lesbian women assumed multiple and ambiguous positions as potential lover and as potential competitor. The study revealed how the feminine/masculine dichotomy, through the enactment of femme and butch identities within the lesbian community and within intimate lesbian relationships, reproduced gendered power relations that were often constructed as naturalised. In adopting particular labels that sought to name and define particular gendered identities, certain gendered power differentials were brought into play. This dynamic had introduced several points of tension within relationships which found expression in both nuanced and explicit forms of power and violence. In particular traditional constructions of feminine identities as passive and subordinate; and masculine identities as powerful and aggressive, produced several forms of violence within relationships that were characterised by high levels of control and vulnerability. However, although the women's narratives constructed violence as a largely masculine enactment of power, there were also instances in which femme identities were the perpetrators of violent acts. While lesbian embodiment of feminine/masculine identities and sexualities offered a disruption of hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity, it also introduced points of tension among lesbian women through the notion of an authentic, stable lesbian identity versus more fluid and multiple sexualities and identities – which in itself contested the notion of queer identities (Halperin, 2003; Spargo, 1999). Given that identities were invested with particular forms of power, even overt forms of violence, were not easily identified as being violent. In addition, the study showed how identities might be invested with different kinds or levels of power in different spaces and contexts, and points to the challenges associated with the social construction of *woman* as gendered identity within feminine/masculine dichotomies in lesbian relationships, and has important implications for how violence within lesbian relationships are identified and responded to. It points to the need to disrupt the notion

of gendered identities, their meanings, and enactments in ways that acknowledge other gendered possibilities and the multiple forms of power that these may embody.

### **7.8 Discourses of Resistance and Disruption**

The study provided some important insights into the ways in which the women resisted and disrupted forms of power and oppression within social and community spaces, and within their intimate relationships. The women's narratives revealed the ways in which lesbian sexuality and the lesbian body represented sites in which the notion of heterosexuality as normative was contested and resisted. The women challenged dominant perceptions and practices that delegitimised lesbian sexuality and simultaneously upheld heterosexual and patriarchal discourses and practices in their everyday interactions. Lesbian relationships represented a disruption of heterosexuality and the assumed naturalness of the female/male binary in intimate relationships. Subsequently, lesbian women, through their enactment of same-sex sexuality and the embodiment of various forms of feminine and masculine identities, contested dominant constructions around gender, femininity, masculinity, sexuality, motherhood and personhood. Furthermore, lesbian sexuality also represented a disruption of the system of patriarchy and the gendered power relations inherent in such a system. The significance of this disruption and the perceived threat to heterosexuality and patriarchy (Kitzinger, 1987) was evident in the women's narratives which described several forms of punishment across multiple contexts that sought to regulate and govern lesbian sexuality. One of the ways in which lesbian women contested the dominant cultural discourse that constructed lesbian sexuality as unnatural was through the use of naturalising, humanising and normalising discourses which drew upon Christian, cultural and 'born this way' meta-discourses. The women destabilised the notion of the 'other' through a strong

assertion of their primary identity as person as opposed to sexed object. This statement of personhood marked an important claim to citizenship.

The embodiment and performativity of feminine and masculine identities and subjectivities signified an important point of resistance within the domain of sexuality itself as well. The femme body as signifying 'woman' marked an important site of resistance through the positioning of the femme body as sexually powerful. Lesbian women who embodied overtly traditional masculine identities represented a more explicit troubling of patriarchy, hegemonic masculinity and masculine privilege. Sexuality itself, through the discourse of the hypersexualised butch lesbian, reflected an enactment of masculine omnipotence and the male sex drive by the female other. Male privilege was also disrupted in more public spaces as demonstrated by lesbian women who were pastors. Through their multiple positioning as religious leaders, women, and lesbian, lesbian women reframed lesbian sexuality within Christian discourses and practices, and produced new knowledge that merged lesbian sexuality and Christianity.

Finally, labels and identity categories, or their absence, were deployed in ways that some women had found to be liberating and empowering. For some women, the claiming of a lesbian identity using labels marked self-acceptance and disclosure within the lesbian community, while for others, the absence of labels proved to be liberating and empowering. Women spoke about identities that were changing and fluid and thus challenged the notion of identities as stable, which labels, through the gendered prescriptions that were attached to them, reinforced. Bisexuality, however, was regarded as not representing a fluid identity, but instead represented a political undermining of the lesbian identity through implied sexual relationships with men. The discourse around labels and identities point to the danger of making assumptions about lesbian gendered identities and subjectivities. The study has shown quite markedly that lesbian women, and black lesbian women specifically, do not

represent a homogenous grouping, despite their shared histories which does shape their social and political positionings.

## **7. 9 Reflections and Recommendations for Practice and Policy**

This study examined women's subjective experiences of power and violence in same-sex relationships in South Africa through a reading of the lesbian body as a site through which social identities and power was produced, maintained, contested and reframed. It is the first local study to examine power and violence within lesbian relationships. To my knowledge, at the time of writing this dissertation, no other study in South Africa has explored, in this depth, how lesbian women experience power and violence within their lives that is not limited to homophobic violence. By including IPV in this focus, I have attempted to show that the public and the personal are always intertwined and are always political in nature. In focusing on lesbian women in the South African context, this multi-site, qualitative study has made a valuable contribution to the lacuna in South African LGBTQ and psychological scholarship as there is scant research that explores power and violence within lesbian relationships in South Africa. In addition, the focus on the South African context has also highlighted factors that are unique to the South African context. It has highlighted the importance of considering the intersections of historical, political, social, and cultural contexts with lesbian subjectivities, and how such intersections shape the enactment of power and violence within society at large, within lesbian 'communities' and within intimate lesbian relationships. The key discursive themes that have been presented in the previous sections provide salient insights into these complex intersections and has implications for how we understand and respond to sexual diversity, lesbian sexuality, identities, subjectivities, and experiences of power and violence in a democratic South Africa.

Overall, the study has revealed how the prevailing ‘macro’ discourses of democracy, human rights, heterosexism and patriarchy, has produced a context that is characterised by ambiguities and paradoxes. These paradoxes have intersected with and shaped lesbian identities and subjectivities through a strong overarching discourses of difference and the ‘other’, and citizenship. The inadvertent focus on black lesbian women only in this study is argued to reflect this othered positioning and brings into focus enduring post-colonial practices and privileges that impinge on access to full citizenship. Thus, this study also marks a disruption of such othering, as well as the silences that surround the multiple forms of power and violence. The study has shown that black lesbian sexuality is regulated and governed by macro discourses and post-colonial practices, which find expression in overt and nuanced forms of punishment. The power of dominant macro discourses may also be observed within intimate lesbian relationships in which traditional gendered roles produce several points of tension, sometimes resulting in acts of violence. However, lesbian women also disrupt dominant discourses and practices through their assertion of personhood and citizenship, and through the political positioning of lesbian identities and lesbian sexuality within the discourse of human rights (Tamale, 2014).

**7.9.1 Limitations and recommendations for future research.** When I had first conceptualised this research project, I had planned to examine the discourses that are used and produced by LGBT NGOs. This was largely influenced by my work with the hometown NGO and my observations of the central role that the NGO had played in the women’s lives. Further, given that NGOs had played a pivotal role in the political struggle for democracy and sexuality rights, I had identified NGOs as an important context in the lives of lesbian women. This study confirmed that. I had planned to undertake a discursive analysis of the written texts that NGOs published or had made available to their membership. However, once I started to engage with the data collection process and the analytical stage, I had realised that

the sheer magnitude of the task would have extended the scope of the study beyond manageable proportions. However, in light of the significance of citizenship as a discursive theme that had emerged in the women's narratives, a triangulation of data collection methodologies that include an examination of the NGO context and the ways in which NGO discourses shape lesbian subjectivities is likely to be useful in revealing further significant intersections and points of intervention. Research in this area is likely to enhance understanding of lesbian subjectivities, especially as it relates to the politicised nature of black lesbian identities.

I have argued that the absence of white lesbian women in this study pointed to the privilege of invisibility that white lesbian women enjoy in South Africa. As revealed in the current study, I argued further that their absence also highlights that racial (and class) divides continue to persist in South Africa despite the significant political changes. The absence of white women might be argued to reinforce the idea that violence is a 'black thing' or that violence is characteristic of marginalised groups, thus increasing the stigma associated with particular groups. The absence of the experiences of white lesbian women in South Africa marks a visible gap in scholarship, especially in the area of lesbian IPV. Further research in this area will not only broaden understanding of lesbian subjectivities, but is also likely to disrupt public discourses and constructions of the black 'other'. Finally, Foucault and Butler may be critiqued for their lack of attention to issues of race and how race shapes subjectivities. A study that uses a more critical race theoretical framework to understand the intersections between violence in public and private domains might reveal nuanced complexities that have been missed in this study.

Despite the merits of a discourse analytic approach, it may be that the focus on the discursive has been at the expense of embodiment and materiality. This is an area that may be explored in future work around this topic.

One of the limitations in the current study was the lack of attention to the social processes and group dynamics within the focus group. Most participants knew fellow participants in the focus groups. I would have liked to have spent more time observing participant engagement with each other as this may have provided insights into relationships and dynamics outside the context of the focus group. However, I found that I had focused more on what was being said during the focus groups even though I said very little. Future studies that focus more on the psychological and social processes to go beyond the scope of the kind of analysis that I had aimed to do in this study.

**7.9.2 Concluding Remarks.** I conclude this chapter and this dissertation with a juxtapositioning of the ‘out there’ and ‘in here’ talk, which I argue, captures the tensions and contradictions that black lesbian women experience. The talk below also raises important questions around citizenship, black lesbian sexuality, and violence. In the narrative below, Prudence highlights the contradictions and gaps within the current South African context and its material, social and psychological effects on lesbian women:

It’s a let-down. It is a let-down how the government and the constitution is supposedly supposed to help us. The rules and the way they should handle it is not how they doing it. It’s just taken us... they don’t care. Oh God, you’re lesbian you know. It’s better for me I have to say cos I’m a feminine lesbian. It’s worse if you’re a butch lesbian and they come and tell you why you didn’t fight cos you’re a man. Just because I dress up the way I do doesn’t mean that I’m a man. It’s hard. It’s hard. You get slandered out in communities. They swear at you. They hit you because you are walking with your partner. They throw all sorts of hatred and bad remarks that will surely leave a bruise within you. *Ja*, I don’t think the law or the government’s law are doing anything about it. There are a lot or people who are being killed and raped. And there are a lot of cases that are just being shut down. Coming from gays and lesbian women. So I just think my country is failing us. The law is failing us. No matter how much you speak to the officials and say this is how it is supposed to be but it is not. (Prudence)

While Prudence spoke of the public, macro sphere, Khetiwe spoke of how she envisaged her future:

Maybe [:::] married. [Laughs] I don't know. I just have that idea of getting married and having a family, adopt or doing whatever. I wish to have my own kids. But I don't know. My partner doesn't feel that way. She feels that marriage and whatever [pause, laugh] is just not for her. I even fantasise about it. (Khetiwe)

Read together, both accounts reveal in a very honest and unembellished manner, the injustices that black lesbian women face in current day South Africa. The fantasies that Khetiwe spoke about –marriage, children, and family – reflect commonplace realities within heterosexual relationships and society at large. Yet, these ‘basics’ present as challenges that lesbian women have to continuously navigate in multiple contexts. Visibility and outness has both positive and negative effects for the well-being of lesbian women (Feldman & Wright, 2013). I concur with Stevenson et al (2015) who argued for the development of citizenship scholarship in three broad areas in relation to recognition, public space (locality and spatial relations), and coexistence in everyday life - all of which extend current theorisations on the psychology of “identity, place and discourse respectively, but also enrich these traditions with more critical ideas from the social psychology of citizenship” (p. 203). I maintain that this study marks a contribution to such scholarship. More importantly, it signals a change in how lesbian IPV (and any form of IPV for that matter) has to be reframed and re-read within the discourse and enactment of citizenship. Such a reorientation would encourage a move away from individualistic approaches to IPV. Stevenson et al (2015) argue further that research into citizenship that considers the relationship between social psychological processes and the political structures and institutions of society; will enhance and improve the fabric of society through the active engagement of individuals and groups in social, economic and political life, an appreciation of how the moral and political concerns of social psychology reflect and enact those of the society in which it is conducted. Black lesbian sexuality is a marginalised discourse in current day South Africa and lesbian sexuality has been argued to be positioned at the margins of mainstream society. This argument itself needs to be troubled as it suggests



a possible integration and assimilation into mainstream heterosexual culture (Richardson, 2000). What the women have shown is a diversity of identities and experiences, shaped by and situated by specific historical and political contexts. This study advances that sexual diversities need to be re-engaged with in the current context, so that new possibilities for citizenship may be explored and redefined in ways that challenge oppressive forms of power and violence within society at large and within intimate relationships – since they cannot be separated.

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## Appendix 1: Letter to Directors of NGOs

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

Name of NGO \_\_\_\_\_

### **PhD Research Study into Gendered Subjectivities, Power and Violence among Woman in Same-Sex Relationships in South Africa**

I currently work as a consultant to \_\_\_\_\_ (Name of NGO) and am a PhD candidate in Psychology at the University of Cape Town. I wish to conduct research with women in same-sex relationships. I am interested in how women construct and understand their subjective experiences within their relationships and within the broader community. I am also interested in how their identities and subjectivities relate to issues of power and violence within these contexts and relationships. The current lack of scholarship, especially within the South African context, that documents issues that are unique to women in same-sex relationships impacts on the type and quality of support services (social, community, legal) that are accessible to women in same-sex relationships.

This study therefore aims to broaden understanding of same-sex relationships among women. Focus groups and semi-structured interviews will be conducted with voluntary participants drawn via NGOs that work with LGBTI communities. I am hoping that I may use your organisation as an entry point to access participants for this study. Confidentiality and anonymity of participants will be a high priority at all times and participants may withdraw from the study at any time. There are no cost implications for the NGOs.

Please indicate your willingness to ‘participate’ in this study on the following page and email back to me. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Yours sincerely

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Angeline Stephens

UCT Student Number: STPANG002

Supervisor: Dr F Boonzaier

Supervisor e-mail address: [floretta.boonzaier@uct.ac.za](mailto:floretta.boonzaier@uct.ac.za)

**RESPONSE: NGO PARTICIPATION IN PHD STUDY:**

**PhD Research Study into Power and Violence among Woman in Same-Sex Relationships in South Africa**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Organisation: \_\_\_\_\_

Position: \_\_\_\_\_

*Please delete which is not applicable.*

I am willing / not willing for this organisation to act as an entry point for the afore-stated study.

I am willing/ not willing to make available any literature (pamphlets, booklets, etc.) that is distributed to the LGBTI community via the organisation.

The following person/s and/or organisation/s may be contacted for further information.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Organisation: \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone: \_\_\_\_\_

Email address: \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for your time and co-operation. Please send your responses to me, using any of the following means:

Fax: 033 342 7779

Email address: [angelines@telkomsa.net](mailto:angelines@telkomsa.net)

Post (self-addressed self-stamped envelope enclosed)



## Appendix 2: Letter of Invitation to Potential Participants

Dear Potential Participant

### PhD Research Study into Study into Gendered Subjectivities, Power and Violence among Woman in Same-Sex Relationships in South Africa

Hello, my name is Angeline Stephens. I have worked with the LGBTI community for about 3 years and I am currently a PhD candidate in Psychology at the University of Cape Town. I wish to conduct research with women in same-sex relationships. I am interested in how women construct and understand their subjective experiences within their relationships and within the broader community. I am also interested in how their identities and subjectivities relate to issues of power and violence within these contexts and within their relationships. The current lack of scholarship, especially within the South African context, that explores issues that are unique to women in same-sex relationships impacts on the type and quality of support services (social, community, legal) that are accessible to women in same-sex relationships. This study therefore aims to broaden understanding of same-sex relationships among women.

My study will be broken into two parts; focus groups and semi-structured interviews:

Audio-taped focus groups (group discussions with a maximum of 6 participants, lasting between 1 – 1 ½ hours) with women in same sex relationships to discuss lesbian identities, subjectivities and experiences in current day South Africa.

AND

Semi-structured one-to-one interviews (lasting between 1-2 hours) with women in same sex relationships who have experienced any form of abuse or violence (physical, emotional, psychological, material/financial) in their past and/or current relationships.

ALL participation is **voluntary and participants may withdraw from the study at any time. Participants will be required to sign a consent form, although pseudonyms may be used if preferred. Confidentiality and anonymity will be a high priority throughout the research process.** All transcriptions will be done by me. Transcriptions and cassettes will be stored in a locked cabinet and access to which will be limited to me. Given the sensitive nature of this research focus, should you need to talk to a professional counsellor after your participation, please let me know.

If you are willing to participate in this study, please complete the reply form on the next page.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Yours sincerely

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Angeline Stephens  
UCT Student Number: STPANG002

Supervisor: Dr F Boonzaier  
Supervisor email: floretta.boonzaier@uct.ac.za

**REPLY: VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION IN STUDY: Gendered Subjectivities, Power and Violence among Woman in Same-Sex Relationships in South Africa**

Yes, I voluntarily consent to participate in this study. I understand that I can stop participating at any time and that this will not affect my existing relationship with any organisation.

I voluntarily consent to participate in (please tick applicable box):

- a focus group (1-1 ½ hours, with a maximum of 6 participants)
- a semi-structured interviews (1-2 hours, one-to-one) (This is only for women who have experienced some form of abuse or violence in their intimate relationship/s).
- both, a focus group and a semi-structured interview (You can only participate in both the focus group and the semi-structured interview if you have experienced some form of abuse or violence in your past and/or current relationship/s).

I understand that the researcher will initiate contact with me and provide me with further details.

My contact details are:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone: \_\_\_\_\_

Email address: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Please send your reply to me using any of the following means:

Email: [angelines@telkomsa.net](mailto:angelines@telkomsa.net)

Fax: 033 342 779

Post (self-addressed self-stamped envelope enclosed)

OR you can drop off your completed, sealed envelope with \_\_\_\_\_ ( name of contact person) at \_\_\_\_\_ ( name of NGO)

Thank you

### Appendix 3: Participant Demographics

Category	Description	Number of participants
Focus groups	Durban and Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal x 2	6; 10
	Johannesburg and Pretoria, Gauteng Province x 2	4; 2
	Cape Town, Western Cape x 1	8
Depth Interviews	Durban and Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal	11
	Johannesburg and Pretoria, Gauteng Province	7
	Cape Town, Western Cape	5
Age	17-20 years	7
	21-30 years	29
	31-40 years	4
Race	Black African	33
	Black 'coloured' (mixed race)	5
	Black Indian	2
Education	Grade 11	1
	Matric	26
	Post matric diploma	7
	Undergraduate degree	2
	Post graduate degree - Honours	4
Employment	Student – school	1
	Student – university, college	16
	Employed – part-time	5
	Employed – full-time	7
	Unemployed	11
Relationship status at the time of the study	Single	23
	In a same-sex relationship at the time of the study	16
	Married – same-sex	1
Children	Own	6
	Partner's	3