

Exploring the Lives of Aging Lesbians on the North Shore of Lake Superior

A DISSERTATION
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
BY

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

Dr. Mary Ann Marchel, Advisor

April 2013

Acknowledgements

During the course of this study, I encountered many people who contributed to the scholarly work contained herein. First and foremost, I owe a debt of gratitude to my dissertation committee. I thank Dr. Mary Ann Marchel for her staunch leadership and professionalism, giving so much time and attention to every detail of the dissertation process and also for being a strong, steady, supportive mentor along the way; Dr. Lynn Brice to whom I am grateful for her helpful insights and experience with ethnography, bracketing assistance, and critique; Dr. Helen Mongan-Rallis whom I appreciate for her astute insider cultural observations and passionate encouragement of my ability to write and tell the story, especially while I was in the field; and Dr. Mitra Emad for her anthropological expertise, assistance with research design, and heartening inspiration to find the right spin on the unexpected, ever so positive and reassuring. I feel truly blessed to have been guided by these accomplished, respected women.

In addition to my committee members, there is one person in particular who has given an enormous amount of energy and time advising me on the side during this study: Kathleen Gates shared her own historical knowledge and personal experiences with me. She also served as a topic specialist, and firsthand witness of what it is like to be an aging lesbian in this day and age. My gratitude extends far beyond this study.

Further, I am thankful to the faculty of the Ed.D. Program for sharing their teachings and personal experiences; I am appreciative of the support from my colleagues and chain of command at UMD over the past four years for supporting my passion, and last but not least I am both grateful and proud to have studied alongside the other members of Cohort 2 whose intellectual prowess combined with their fun-loving humor

always kept things interesting. Individual thanks are in order to my friend and classmate, Rev, for teaching from his heart, always.

I am especially humbled and thankful to have met the seven women who participated in this study as well as their friends, community members, and other kindred spirits of the beloved wilderness, human and animal alike. Among them, I found an open door to their community and an offering of friendship; they also helped me rejuvenate my spirit as they breathed life into this ethnographic study. I thank the Creator for the excitement and wonder in the ever-changing colorful skies, the calm wisdom of tall old trees, and for keeping me safe with my two dogs during our journey on the North Shore of Lake Superior.

This work is dedicated to my grandfather,
Ralph Waldo Emerson Sweatland (1909-2000).

To All My Relations—Chi Miigwetch!

Abstract

This ethnographic study explored the lived experiences of aging lesbians on the North Shore of Lake Superior uniting the demographics of age, rural residence, and sexual orientation. Research methods included semi-structured interviews, grand tour, participant observation, field notes, photography, and group discussion. The analytical framework was biography and used participants' life stories to understand their lived experiences. The results reveal how participants learned to adapt to climate, culture, and community in a unique, isolated place. The study also uncovered emergent themes that reveal how aging lesbians feel supported and unsupported by their community. This study reveals the importance of class status in studies about aging lesbians in rural areas and their own perceptions of acceptance and assimilation. Participants' rural location, social environment, and migration are discussed, along with the uniqueness of place, culture, and class status.

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CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

Among the distinct traditions of people who settled along the northern shores of Lake Superior are stories of generations—stories that include intimate accounts of survival intertwined with geography. The stories demonstrate a living history, a path through which future generations might find their way in a challenging environment as they age. The future is always uncertain. Some believe fate or destiny intervenes. But on this shore, maybe it is neither, or both, depending on who comprises the generation. This study attempts to gather stories that could inform a specific segment of the population on the shore. In this study, the living histories of aging lesbians converge with Lake Superior's North Shore. This is an exploratory study in which place, people, and history all matter.

Purpose of the Study

It is yet unknown how the lived experiences of aging rural lesbians on the North Shore of Lake Superior could inform curriculum for future generations relating to the phenomenon of aging. Due to the fact that the lived experiences of aging rural lesbians on the North Shore of Lake Superior have not been studied, they will be examined through ethnography to uncover what may be elements of yet invisible curriculum or undocumented curriculum as relating to the phenomenon of aging. The location in this study, known as the North Shore of Lake Superior, remains undeniably important historically, and in the present day.

Lake Superior

The vast open space of Lake Superior and its shores have been seen as spiritual places (King, 2002), a freshwater resource (Mills, Leach, Carlton & Secor, 1994), home to recreation and tourism (McCool & Moisey, 2008), and diverse cultural histories (Danzinger, 1979). The lake has been proven to be treacherous, “Lake Superior is one of the most dangerous bodies of water in the world. The jagged rocks, hidden reefs, and fog-shrouded islands compound the danger of navigating...” (Sivertson, 1992, p. 29). Host to the largest body of freshwater in the world, the lake’s temperament is impossible to ignore. According to the indigenous Ojibwe, the ebb and flow of the waves against the shore are the breath of Lake Superior, with her exhale pushing yet another wave to shore, her inhale drawing water inward, carrying the dreams to the center (D. M. Nichols, personal communication, June 12, 2012). Not always calm, Lake Superior has swallowed up entire well-built ships (Daniel, 2008). History records, “In November 1905, a fierce storm damaged or destroyed as many as 30 ships” (O’Hara, 1998, p. 5). Lake Superior is also a companion of local artists. Here, she appears in a poem by Jenkins (1991) in “Restaurant Overlooking Lake Superior”:

One stands for a moment at the far end of the dining room and looks out the window facing the lake. Snow is falling. The lake is completely obscured, but still customers will ask for tables near the window.... (p. 39)

Atop edgy shorelines of Lake Superior are endless opportunities to observe her dramatic steep cliffs, photograph a striking landscape, or climb upon her granite rocks (Morse-Kahn, 2008). From the water, one might view a picturesque shoreline rich with sea caves

or unexplored beaches (Simonowicz, 2004). Its endless horizons (Minnesota Historical Society, 2012b) have inspired artists and other visionaries.

The North Shore

The North Shore of Lake Superior is situated along the northeastern area of the state of Minnesota, approximately 2.5 hours from the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, the closest metropolitan area. By tracing the 150-mile shoreline from Duluth, Minnesota north to the Canadian border, one has traversed the North Shore of Lake Superior. As the heartbeat of the local landscape of the North Shore, Lake Superior unsurprisingly commands respect (Roewekamp, 2011) and teaches harmony (Minnesota Department of Education, n.d.); her shores have served as home to a variety of inhabitants and their lifetime journeys including communities of Anishinabe Indians, fur traders, fishing families, iron ore miners, and people of many identities, including lesbians.

Specific to the purpose of this study, stories of North Shore lesbians include those who were called to the North Shore of Lake Superior to establish a life. “The Lake breeds and supports people who are resilient, independent, and in many cases people who are out of the box or on the fringe historically” (K. P. Gates, personal communication, June 14, 2012). Anecdotal information from a longtime resident suggests that there is a relatively invisible community of older lesbians living on the North Shore. “Most older lesbians have had to learn how to be resilient in order to survive, which can mean they learned anything from carpentry skills to creative career planning; trauma can beget resilience” (K. P. Gates, personal communication, June 14, 2012).

At present, it is unknown what constitutes curricular aspects of the actual lived experiences of rural lesbians on the North Shore, especially as they relate to the experiences of aging in the specific geographical context. This study is justified by the likelihood of undocumented curriculum within the lived experiences of aging lesbians that may inform a larger curriculum to benefit successive generations.

Background of the Study

To understand the experiences of lesbians on the North Shore, one must first examine how the visibility of gay people in society in general is changing. For those who grew up as part of Generation X (born 1965-1979), the coming out experience was likely very different from their elders, who came out at a time when homosexuality was still considered a mental disorder and was illegal (Knauer, 2009). There are currently greater levels of awareness, acceptance, and visibility. There is little question that gay people exist. However, the recent influx of attention paid to growing old and being gay begs the question, “How do you do it?” Gay Generation X doesn’t appear to know who its own role models are, or where to find them (C. Davila, personal communication, June 8, 2012). The growing visibility of gay culture today *does not* include the immediate visibility of the elders who shaped that culture. In actuality, the problems inherent to invisibility are still widespread and may contribute to alienation of gay and lesbian elders while preventing future generations’ access to important learning accrued through the lived experiences of their lesbian and gay elders.

To date, researchers report pervasive invisibility of gay and lesbian elders in general, as well as an absence of rural identities in studies about homosexuality. For elder

lesbians on the North Shore, both age and rural life exist together. Lesbians are mostly invisible in gerontology (Knauer, 2009) and rural studies (McCarthy, 2000). In addition, research has identified that gay culture is dismissive of its elders (Traies, 2009).

According to Kehoe (1989), “The preoccupation with youth in our culture underscores the presumption that these [lesbian] elders have died or been converted in their maturity to heterosexualism [*sic*]” (p. 1). Ageism is experienced by lesbian and gay elders via no formal recognition of their existence as a subculture both outside of and within their communities. Virginia Apuzzo, as the Chair for Leadership at the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force’s (NGLTF) Policy Institute, wrote “A Call to Action,” published as a keynote speech in 2002. Apuzzo (2002) wrote:

If an LGBT organization postures as providing services to “the community” and provides no services especially for the older members of the community and targets no money for older LGBT’s in its budget, how can it claim to serve “the community”? This will not be an easy issue to resolve, but if we do not start talking about this problem, it will never be addressed. This is part of what we mean when we say that older LGBT people are invisible to much of the larger gay movement. (p. 8)

The NGLTF Policy Institute also analyzed over 700 pages of nine gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) East Coast newspapers, finding only five articles making reference to older gay people. Further review of 542 pages of five well-known GLBT magazines yielded zero images of older gay people, limiting most images to roughly 30-somethings. “It’s as if our lives are perceived to be too vacant, our issues too boring, our images too threatening” (Apuzzo, 2002, p. 8). Additional evidence corroborates the pervasive invisibility of lesbian elders in society (Knauer, 2009). The Committee on Lesbian Health Research Priorities of the Institute of Medicine called attention to the

scarcity of research about lesbians in the United States (Solarez, 1999). A study by Fullmer, Shenk, and Eastland (1999) observes that as women age, they are more likely to be seen as asexual beings. Gay culture appears to add to the invisibility through its own age segregation and within the population at large, where heterosexuality is presumed (Knauer, 2009; Merrill, 2010; Traies, 2009).

Furthermore, research about the lived experiences of gay men and lesbians has focused mainly on subjects who live in urban and suburban areas, ignoring rural subjects (McCarthy, 2000). Most research about homosexual populations is based on convenience samples (Penrod, Preston, Cain, & Starks, 2003), meaning participants are already identified and connected to the community. Research has mostly occurred in populations that are *out* to some degree. The experiences of older or rural lesbians would not be reflected in such studies.

Nationally, a review of the literature indicates several gaps across disciplines in understanding the role of non-normative sexuality in rural areas. For example, Bell and Valentine (1995) indicate that research about sexuality in the context of rural lifestyles has been neglected. In “Queer Country: Rural Lesbian and Gay Lives,” the “general neglect” as well as “metrocentrism,” in life history work about homosexuality is highlighted (Bell & Valentine, 1995, p. 114). Bell and Valentine (1995) recognize that a lack of empirical data means “the discussion of rural gay life as *lived* cannot, unfortunately, be that extensive at this time” (p. 116).

Among the few existing studies about rural lesbians, several problems have been indicated as needing to be addressed for this population. Studies report a lack of facilities

and services (e.g., GLBT community centers, bookstores, organizing spaces, programming, advocacy, and culturally competent care), as elders often using invisibility to their advantage to avoid discrimination find themselves isolated without social supports (Adelman, 1986; Bell & Valentine, 1995). Rural lesbians who came out before Stonewall most likely grew up without social supports, a lack of facilities, and services and may have been accustomed to using invisibility to their advantage. Weston (1995) discusses the *great gay migration* of the 1970s and 1980s from small towns to urban centers, mainly San Francisco. “The rural is not only the space of dead-end lives, oppression, and surveillance. It is also a landscape emptied of gay people” (Weston, 1995, p. 285). Weston’s (1995) work does not appear to represent the lesbians on the North Shore of Lake Superior.

Adding to the dearth of research about gay and lesbian subjects’ lived experiences in rural settings, very limited research includes older lesbians (Kehoe, 1989) in rural areas (Comerford, Henson-Stroud, Sionainn, & Wheeler, 2004). Access to rural gay or lesbian communities by researchers may yet be limited due to many factors, even 15 years after Bell and Valentine’s (1995) observations of neglect of rural sexualities in the literature.

To begin, the U.S. Census Bureau does not collect data about people’s sexual orientation (Gates, 2011). Most national population surveys in the United States do not ask questions about sexual orientation (Gates, 2011). The hetero-normativity maintained in population studies reinforces the invisibility of aging lesbians. The continued absence of this demographic variable in research prevents the population from self-disclosing

information, reinforces the variable and subsequent identity as a social taboo (Davies, 1982), and precludes attempts to generate data about people who are not heterosexual. These practices further entrench heterosexism in research, data analysis, and reporting (Dovidio, 2010). As such, data are already limited pertaining to the lives of people other than heterosexuals. Aging GLBT people are further disadvantaged. “Plans are made, surveys conducted, research on the elderly done—all with no awareness of the existence of GLBT seniors, and of their sometimes unique situations” (Vaid, 2010, p. iv).

The population of elders is growing as Baby Boomers enter retirement. There are over 40.3 million adults who are age 65 and over (Werner, 2011). The older GLBT population is estimated at 1 to 3 million adults (Fredriksen-Goldsen & Muraco, 2010). GLBT individuals mirror the overall population in terms of diversity (Schope, 2005). The U.S. Census Bureau does not request data about sexual orientation (Gates, 2011; New York State Health and Human Services Network, 2009), and thus there is no veritable representation of a hidden population (Woolf, 1998), and it is difficult to accurately estimate the size of the GLBT population (Cahill, Spade, & South, 2010).

Among aging populations, there is a wide range of diversity (Dobrof, 2001). “Variation in income, medical care, health, family patterns, long-term relationships, friendship, bereavement, and loneliness are each important to consider” (Dobrof, 2001, p. 16) in successful aging among gay men and lesbians. Lesbians over age 55 are “83 times more likely to be closeted” than those under age 30 (Gates, 2010, p. 5). Lesbians’ racial and ethnic composition is similar to heterosexuals (Gates, 2010).

There have been several studies about GLBT people and aging; their focus has varied through the years. Fredriksen-Goldsen et al. (2010) reviewed 58 articles about LGB aging to examine what is known. They identified three previous waves of research. The first wave focused on dispelling negative stereotypes such as maladjustment to aging, depression, and isolation; the second wave focused on psychosocial adjustment despite pervasive discrimination and inequity; and the third wave focused on identity development in social contexts over time (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2010). Most recently, research aims to understand the “social support and community-based needs and experiences of older LGB adults” (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2010, p. 402). “Very few studies include or examine solely the [lesbian] individual over 60” (Woolf, 1998). One reason LGB older adults are not represented in the research reflects their fears. “Many older LGB adults are apprehensive about having their sexual orientation disclosed in research because they fear being targets of prejudice and discrimination” (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2010, p. 406). Aging rural lesbians face the “triple jeopardy” of having to deal with being female, their sexual orientation and aging in a rural area (Comerford et al., 2004, p. 429).

Lesbian communities along the rural North Shore have not been studied, and it is known that place, especially the unique place of Lake Superior’s rocky shore, remains undeniably important in this study. Just as straight people migrate, lesbian and gay people migrate. There are many stereotypes, however, that inform thinking about gay people living in *gay places*.

In 1995, Weston stated, "...the gay imaginary is spatialized, just as the nation is territorialized. The result is a sexual geography in which the city represents a beacon of tolerance and gay community; the country a locus of persecution and gay absence" (p. 282). In other words, places are given sexually geographic representations, while people have sexual orientations. *San Francisco is the gayest city in the United States* is an example of a place that has been commonly ascribed a sexual orientation in the gay imaginary, however. Weston (1995) intended to study gay men and lesbians from all over the country who commenced their gay lives in San Francisco (as if on a straight-to-gay trajectory). She intended to state that her research failed to account for coming out experiences of rural gay men and lesbians. Weston (1995) ended up studying the coming out stories of *rural* gay men and lesbians through her study's urban subjects. Her urban subjects came from somewhere else. San Francisco has been the destination of many gay migrants seeking to find others like them (Weston, 1995). Coming out, for many gay men and lesbians, means moving from thinking they are the only ones who are gay to realizing that they are not alone, combined with the idea that there is a gay community somewhere out there and one must find it. This was a common identified thread in Weston's (1995) research, which she calls "sexual imaginary" (p. 281), studied essentially in metropolitan areas.

Indeed, there is a myth of "big city queers" in which movement from rural to urban places prevails (Whitlock, 2010, p. 272). Today, big cities are stereotypically considered the hubs of gay culture and community (Knopp & Brown, 2003). In "Queer Diffusions," however, Knopp and Brown (2003) debunk the notion that metropolitan

areas are more “culturally and politically enlightened” and that “resistance happens everywhere” (p. 422). The authors also revealed the fact that migration is not a one-directional rural-to-urban phenomenon.

According to Knopp and Brown (2003), “Spatially fractured sexual subjectivities are extremely common” (p. 419). Their studies suggest that many gay people will leave urban settings for the rural countryside, and some rural residents will maintain part-time residences in urban areas. Living in more than one place or between places that are urban and rural, is a choice that Knopp and Brown (2003) refer to as “hybridity” (p. 419). Other researchers disagree that the choice of rural or urban, or place of residence, is not part of identity. Whitlock (2010) explains, “Rural place as a closet metaphor erases the life stories of those of us whose queer identities are constructed in and by place” (p. 272). Indeed, rural queer identities remain a topic for evolving, suggested research.

As such, the phenomena of aging rural lesbians on the North Shore have not been studied. In Duluth, MN there has been a visible culture of lesbians (Knopp & Brown, 2003). They have “focused much more on creating a distinctly *nonmetropolitan* lesbian identity and politics, one governed by an alternative set of values that are often explicitly anti-urban and antimaterialistic” (Knopp & Brown, 2003, p. 417). Knopp and Brown (2003) point out that more lesbians than gay men tend to be “in-migrants” from “large metropolitan areas”; they tend to live on the outskirts of Duluth, MN and Superior, WI rather than inside the city, and migration appears intentional (p. 417). Yet the experiences and wisdom of *aging* lesbians on the North Shore have yet to be captured, especially north of Duluth, MN.

Anecdotal information suggests some lesbians live in community with one another; specific references to Clover Valley just north of Duluth, MN are prevalent. One Clover Valley resident described her experience living in the Valley as “getting the best of both worlds in the valley, because you have [lesbian] community and country in the same place” (P. O’Keefe, personal communication, May 10, 2012). In recent years, it was reported that there were over 20 lesbian couples living in Clover Valley (Casper, 2011). Anecdotal information also suggests there are many lesbians living on the North Shore older than age 60. However, they are largely invisible as an identified segment of the population. Regional poet Jenkins (1980) describes this in a poem entitled “Invisibility”:

... This phenomena occurs often to children and old people. No one understands exactly how this happens but some people remain invisible for long periods of time. Most of these do so by choice. They have learned to ride the moment like a surfer rides the long curl of a wave. How exhilarating it is to ride like that, a feeling of triumph to move from room to room unseen, only the slightest breeze from your passing. (p. 14)

Insofar as aging lesbians living in rural areas such as the North Shore are concerned, their experiences growing old, their survival skills, and the ways they have learned are largely undocumented in the literature. The identity of populations is intertwined with geography, as stated by Whitlock, “Queer narratives, like any others, can neglect to trouble the intricacies of place and thereby lack critical dimension” (2010, p. 272).

Identity development among lesbian and gay elders has also been studied. There have been two basic camps of thought concerning gay and lesbian identity formation and maintenance. The sociological perspective supports social construction and labeling of groups (Troiden, 1988). Troiden (1988) explains the stages in this process:

Before they can identify themselves in terms of a social condition or category, they must learn that a social category representing the activity or feelings exists (e.g., homosexual preferences or homosexual behavior); discover that other people occupy the social category (e.g., homosexuals exist as a group); and perceive that their own socially constructed needs and interests are more similar to those of persons who occupy that social category than they are different. (p. 2)

People do not instantly become gay or lesbian upon identifying the category that suits them best, but rather, they embark on something more transformative as they leave the socially constructed assumption of dominant culture that everyone is heterosexual (Troiden, 1998).

The biological perspective of homosexual identity formation is called *essentialism* (Robson, 1998). Essentialist identity supports the theory that people are *born gay* and did not choose to be gay; essentialists also support the notion of a gay or lesbian *gene* (Robson, 1998). The essentialist perspective is also one that labels gay people as part of a “discrete and insular minority” who are historically discriminated against and hold little political power (Robson, 1998, p. 13). Essentialism reinforces the notion that homosexuality is an inborn trait, and therefore people should not be discriminated against because of inborn underlying biological differences (Epstein, 1987). It is also the preferred theory of political advocates (Whisman, 1996). The matter of whether being gay is a choice, however, goes beyond politics. Whisman (1996) explains:

Gay men and lesbians understand themselves and their personal histories in these terms, experience their sexual desires as beyond or within their own control. These personal accounts must be respected; neither liberation nor scholarship would be served by dismissing them at the very historical moment when gay and lesbian voices are speaking for themselves. (p. 7)

The context in which gay people experience the debate over nature (essentialist) versus nurture (social construction) perspectives is “heterosexist” in that it is measured against heterosexuality as the default sexuality, or the societal norm (Whisman, 1996, p. 7). The debate, as it concerns the origin of homosexuality “is a measure of our stigmatization,” according to Whisman (1996, p. 7). Whether or not a person ascribes to social constructionist or essentialist theories, escape from isolation, feeling like you are the only gay person, is vitally important. Schmidt (1997) wrote a poem on the theme of isolation. It is entitled “Somewhere I Know There Is Another One Like Me”:

Somehow I know
 there’s another one like me.
 Perhaps so close by that it’s absurd
 that we have no way of finding each other:
 no center, no resources.

Isolation is so hard
 like being a sole survivor
 of a relentless storm
 that crashes
 constant water and wind
 on the tender yearnings
 of my heart to connect.

Where are you sister lesbians?
 Don’t you know I’m here? (Schmidt, 1997, p. 109)

The poem may speak to the invisibility of rural lesbians and to the dire need to break the isolation and connect with others like themselves. “The consequences of isolation include threats to health, mental health and the very survivability of rural gays and lesbians. Information is power” (Smith & Mancoske, 1997, p. xvii). What then is the reality relative to these threats for women on the relatively isolated North Shore?

The maintenance of a lesbian identity can be dependent upon “access to information, community, and a visible social reference group” (McCarthy, 2000, p. 77). Troiden (1988) found that gay and lesbian identity is usually predicated by meaningful association with other gay men and lesbians. Structural supports facilitating contact with other gay people can come in the form of bookstores, bars, coffeehouses, and other meeting places (McCarthy, 2000). Weston (1995), in her urban-based studies, did consider the repeated theme of isolation among her research subjects and their realization that there are others like them, but they just have to find them. As a gay or lesbian person, finding others like you may mean seeking out information in the form of media.

Getting beyond the family dictionary or the television set that projects directly into the privatized realm of the home requires access to facilities such as libraries, bookstores, and movie theatres that disseminate gay-related materials. Equally essential is the proximity to a site—usually an urban area—where these resources are available. (Weston, 1995, p. 259)

Bell and Valentine (1995) found little research about rural gay life and thus concluded that rural areas were isolating places, with “unsupportive social environments and a chronic lack of structural services and facilities leading to eventual or projected emigration to larger (urban) settlements which offer better opportunities” (p. 116). Jones (2001) recognizes “social institutions such as families, the church, and the legal system are less supportive of the LGBT community than they are of straight people” (p. 14). D’Augelli, Collins, and Hart (1987) found that rural lesbians lived in environments vacant of social or organizational spaces. Kramer (1995) described the lives of rural homosexuals in Minot, North Dakota at the turn of the last century as comparative to gay life in the 1950s.

Historically, even urban areas were devoid of the support needed to survive until recent times. Meriam (2012) inquires about the survival of lesbians who came out in the 1950s in an interview with Lillian Faderman, well-known lesbian scholar and historian. Faderman recalls being at her first lesbian bar, “sitting next to a bunch of lesbians who had just gotten back from a funeral for a lesbian friend who had just killed herself. There was just too much pressure out there” (Meriam, 2012, p. 24). When asked about survival, Faderman relays survival tactics such as staying very “hidden,” having a secretive relationship, or engaging in a “front marriage” which was a marriage between a lesbian and a gay man (Meriam, 2012, p. 25). Otherwise, Faderman describes the 1950s as a very difficult time without supports.

Insofar as older gay and lesbian people are concerned, some have found that they lead “complex and rich social lives and have social networks that provide them considerable support” (Grossman, D’Augelli, & Herschberger, 2000, p. 177). Gay people are often estranged from their biological family after coming out. They tend to form *families of choice* (Degges-White, 2012; Fredriksen-Goldsen & Muraco, 2010; Knauer, 2011; Oswald, 2002). These networks include partners, friends, family members, and a greater community of GLBT people (Fredriksen-Goldsen & Muraco, 2010). These families of choice provide emotional and social support and consist of mostly other GLB people (Grossman et al., 2000). These networks are often heterogeneous, with the most important factor being knowledge of older persons’ sexual orientation, rather than the sexual orientation of the support person (Grossman et al., 2000). “It is reasonable that older LGBT adults would develop networks of people who know of, and are supportive

of their sexual orientations. These networks serve to diminish feelings of social and emotional isolation” (Grossman et al., 2000, p. 177). Additionally, as people age, the network “enables them to build complex families that increase the social and material resources available to members” (Oswald, 2002). The creation of such networks, families, and support may or may not be part of the experience of rural North Shore lesbians.

Support networks and families of choice were certainly created when AIDS began to shatter the gay community (K. P. Gates, personal communication, June 14, 2012). The AIDS epidemic had a disproportionate effect of loss on gay populations. As stated by Jones (2001),

AIDS has left many older gay persons with fewer friends in their support networks. This loss will be felt for generations to come... Intergenerational networks—the sharing of generational interests and support across generations—are more difficult in the LGBT community. (p. 14)

Yet, Grossman et al. (2000) point out that older adults who form and maintain their social networks “reflects considerable resilience over the course of their lives, given the stigmatizing conditions that they have faced” (p. 178). How, or if, these communities have formed on the North Shore of Lake Superior, access to them and maintenance are not documented in literature to date. Resilience, stigmatizing conditions, and sharing of support may or may not be the experience for aging lesbians located there.

In sum, today’s lesbian elders came of age at a time when their sexual orientation was illegal; today it is not. Lesbian elders are the living history of a culture whose personal experiences are rarely documented, have proven difficult to research, and they

are classified as invisible in demographics systematically collected. In most cultures, successive generations depend on the knowledge, experience, and survival skills of their elders. Lesbians are no different in this regard; their experiences with aging may be important to curriculum workers to build a common knowledge base to inform upcoming generations. Due to the invisibility of lesbian elders, we cannot know what to teach younger generations of lesbians about aging successfully, especially in populations that seem to be unaligned with current studies—such as the women of the North Shore. Until we gather the stories of those who are living the lives, we cannot begin to document or provide resources to teach those who follow. This study serves to explore the lived experiences of rural lesbians living on the North Shore of Lake Superior as it pertains to the phenomenon of aging, and to gather from them the beginnings of a curriculum source for those who follow.

Statement of the Problem

The focus of this study is rural lesbian elders who live on the North Shore of Lake Superior and who comprise an undocumented population. Their lived experiences through history are not recorded systematically. Therefore, successive generations of younger lesbians do not have access to the knowledge, information, survival skills, and experiences of elders that may serve to empower them and that may contribute to the creation of a form of curriculum. Many older lesbians of the Silent Generation are already deceased; their lived experiences and wisdom that might have been shared with younger generations of lesbians have vanished. It is important to study the lives of aging rural lesbians on the North Shore of Lake Superior to gain insight into the lived

experiences of these women, to increase our understanding of their lives, to inform curriculum, and to share their stories with future generations of lesbians.

Not doing so is an act of injustice. The injustice is felt not only by society at large, but also by future generations of lesbians who seek information and empowerment from elders. At this time, those seeking lesbian elders on the North Shore of the upper Great Lakes can neither find them nor locate information about their lived experiences. The lives of rural lesbian elders living on the North Shore of Lake Superior have not been included in scholarly literature. If the trend continues, more living history will be lost forever; parts of the education for future generations may vanish.

Research Questions

Due to the pervasive invisibility of aging lesbians who live in rural areas, the proposed research intentionally seeks to explore and document the lived experiences of these elders. The following are the primary research questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of aging lesbians on the rural North Shore of Lake Superior relating to the experience of aging?
2. How is the lived experience of aging as a lesbian on the rural North Shore of Lake Superior currently supported by community?
3. How is the lived experience of aging as a lesbian on the rural North Shore of Lake Superior currently unsupported by community?

Significance of the Study

Gay and lesbian elders remain an underrepresented population in research. Most previous research about homosexuality and aging examined participants' ability to adapt

to stigma associated with aging, psychological resiliency, and their identities (Fredriksen-Goldsen & Muraco, 2010; Kimmel, Rose, & David, 2006). Schope (2005) found that lesbians and gay men have fears about growing old and being alone. This is especially salient for those who do not have supportive siblings, or those who do not have children (Schope, 2005). Lesbians who have successfully navigated crises and learned coping mechanisms tend to also cope well with aging (Schope, 2005). According to Parks (1999), “Different generations devise coping strategies for survival resonant with the obstacles and conflicts perceived and encountered. As social change occurs, individuals may or may not make adaptations in these strategies” (p. 359). Lesbian elders face a triple stigma of homophobia, sexism, and ageism (Comerford et al., 2004; Traies, 2009).

Presently there is a lack of understanding of the lived experiences of today’s rural lesbian elders who inhabit the North Shore of Lake Superior. Study of this unique geographical area may or may not reveal elements that support or contradict the current body of literature, and thus the general understanding of aging, being rural, and living as an aging lesbian.

The overall generational characteristics of today’s lesbian elders vary depending on their age (New York State Health and Human Services Network, 2009; Rosenfeld, 1999) and the year and context in which they came out (Parks, 1999; Rosenfeld, 1999). Parks (1999) describes findings about lesbians of the pre- and successive post-Stonewall era:

Women of the pre-Stonewall era confronted a pervasive silence about (homo)sexuality, and an isolation from all things lesbian, as they struggled to define the meaning of their experiences. In subsequent eras, they carried this

legacy of silence even as they felt its protective cloak begin to slip away. Their encounters with liberation and gay rights, while enlightening and exciting for some, provoked new anxieties and a troubling sense of vulnerability among many. (p. 320)

Whereas visibility and acceptance of homosexuality has increased through the generations, it does not translate into immediate safety or comfort with one's identity (Rosenfeld, 1999). Public disclosure of one's homosexuality remains a task to be cautiously managed (Oswald, 2002; Parks, 1999; Rosenfeld, 1999). Generations whose identity is most affiliated with stigma may find little in common with those who affiliate with liberation (Rosenfeld, 1999). This disconnect can limit elders' ability to "pass on their culture to younger generations" (Rosenfeld, 1999, p. 138).

The potential to inform successive generations is one element of the significance to this study. Another element is the potential for generation of scholarly series of place-based studies. "Information about rural lesbians is important because it may provide insight into the challenges faced and overcome by this and other 'alternative' populations" (McCarthy, 2000, p. 76). Thus, the pervasive absence of rural, the invisibility of lesbian, and the practical nonexistence of elder as a unified demographic in the literature calls for the need to study aging lesbians in mostly rural (or non-urban) spaces including their lived experiences of aging. This sharing of knowledge, experience, and survival skills is important. By doing so, not only is it possible to unearth alternatives to knowing, understanding, and learning, not doing so adds to the already existing neglect in scholarly undertakings, possibly further entrenching ageist, sexist, metrocentric, and heterosexist domination, and allows only fiction and fantasy to tell the stories. Until the

lived experiences of aging by rural lesbians on the North Shore of Lake Superior become visible in the literature, it will remain unknown what curriculum could be extracted from elders of this particular geographic space.

Definitions

Ageism—“The internalized feeling of being less desirable, capable, important, and of being ‘on your way out’” (Jones, 2001, p. 14).

Bisexual—A woman, man, or other gendered person who forms their primary loving and sexual relationships with another person, regardless of gender; a person who has a continuing affectional, emotional, romantic, and/or erotic preference for another person, regardless of gender.

Coming Out—Means to disclose one’s sexual orientation (New York State Health and Human Services Network, 2009; Nichols, 1998) or gender identity to someone (New York State Health and Human Services Network, 2009). Coming out is a life-long process, and people may choose to do so at different times in their lives (New York State Health and Human Services Network, 2009).

Culture—“The set of values, conventions, or social practices associated with a particular field, activity, or societal characteristic” (“Culture,” 2013, n.p.).

Cultural Geography—In this study it refers to how people of various classes, genders, and some ethnic groups may be dispersed in the geographic area studied and attributed meanings.

Elder—In some cultural communities, it connotes empowerment and respect. But it is a term that some people do not identify with or associate with very advanced age

(New York State Health and Human Services Network, 2009). In this study, it is used to describe GLBT people over age 60 who also take on the responsibility of teaching the younger generations about their life experiences.

Families of Choice—The social and support networks purposefully created by sexual minorities (Degges-White, 2012; Fredriksen-Goldsen & Muraco, 2010; Oswald, 2002).

Gay—Refers to either a gay man or lesbian, unless specified.

Gay Man—A man who forms his primary loving and sexual relationships with other men; a man who has continuing affectional, emotional, romantic, and/or erotic preference for someone of the same sex (D’Emilio, 1989; Nichols, 1998; Rankin, 1994).

Heterosexism—Refers to a system of behaviors that ignores or denies any non-heterosexual form of behavior, identity, relationship, or community as legitimate, worthy, or *authentic* (New York State Health and Human Services Network, 2009).

Homophobia—Illogical fears and discomforts with people who are gay, lesbian, or bisexual, which often leads to intolerance, bigotry, and violence against those not behaving within heterosexual norms. They are negative attitudes with an affective component (Nichols, 1998; Schreier, 1995).

Homophobia—Refers to “hatred or fear of lesbian, gay, or bisexual people” (New York State Health and Human Services Network, 2009, p. 10).

Internalized Homophobia—Refers to “people who identify or feel LGBT, but hate themselves for feeling these desires or as part of ‘this group’” (New York State Health and Human Services Network, 2009, p. 10).

Lesbian—A woman who forms her primary loving and sexual relationships with other women; a woman who has a continuing affectional, emotional, romantic, and/or erotic preference for someone of the same sex (D’Emilio, 1989; Kitzinger, 1987; Nichols, 1998; Rankin, 1994).

Metrocentric—“A bias in both attitude and practice towards metropolitan cultures and issues in organizing, lobbying, and coalition building” (Knopp & Brown, 2003, p. 421).

Subculture—“An ethnic, regional, economic, or social group exhibiting characteristic patterns of behavior sufficient to distinguish it from others within an embracing culture or society” (“Subculture,” 2013). In this study it emerged as a group of aging lesbian women on the North Shore of Lake Superior.

Transgender—Describes the identities and experiences of those who transgress traditional categories of sex and gender. Unlike *man* and *woman*, where the boundaries of identity are generally understood to have clear and distinct (although contested) definition, the borders of transgender identity necessarily remain nebulous (McCarthy, 2000).

Transphobia—Refers to “hatred or fear of people who are gender non-conforming” (New York State Health and Human Services Network, 2009, p. 10).

Assumptions/Bracketing

This researcher is a lesbian living on the North Shore of Lake Superior. Every day, I professionally work with students, faculty, staff, and community members who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender in my capacity as the Director of GLBT Services

at the University of Minnesota Duluth (UMD). I also teach a course, Introduction to GLBT Studies, at UMD.

As a researcher, I firmly believe that elders have important knowledge and expertise about their own culture. I also believe they have a responsibility to teach younger generations what they need to know in order to make their way in the world. My own valuing of elders was present in my biological family. My maternal grandfather and the knowledge I gained from him has been influential in my own life; in particular his influence is most apparent in my choice to further my own education. I have also investigated my paternal grandfather's roots in Ojibwe culture since moving to Duluth, MN. Consequently, I learned about the importance of elders as teachers to Ojibwe people. In that culture, elders not only hold the cultural knowledge and traditions, but they pass them on to successive generations so that they will not be lost. My personal experiences have strongly influenced my reverence for elders. These experiences have also shaped my own inquiry into the role of lesbian elders in transmitting culture, tradition, and knowledge to successive generations, even though gay culture does not typically refer to its older members as *elders*. I have chosen to use the term as an indication of respect.

I believe it will be very difficult to bracket or filter out my own assumptions and biases for this study that are based on my own lived experiences. As such, those assumptions and biases may be a limitation of this study in that my expectations include the responsibility of elders to teach.

A strength I bring to this study is that I identify as a lesbian who is 41 years old. I work with college students in the Midwest, most of whom do not know their own movement's historical roots, and few personally know an elder in the gay community, but in my experience they clearly enjoy stories of older generations and many yearn to connect with an older gay person as a mentor, teacher, or friend. Just as these young college students yearn for older role models, I do as well. I bring a genuine identification as a lesbian student of lesbian elders to this study, thus reducing prejudice and increasing authenticity, as having investiture in the results of this work.

Finally, my position as the Director of GLBT Services at UMD for over 12 years has given me access to an otherwise more difficult-to-access population of lesbian elders living on the North Shore of Lake Superior. Because of these identities and my consequential involvement in the wider community, I am able to network with other lesbians to find those who may be considered elders along the North Shore, and who will also participate in this study. As a researcher, I will create and adhere to all protocol, probing only as appropriate to this study. I will only engage and solicit participation with persons with whom I have no personal or romantic relations.

Theoretical or Conceptual Framework

Students and teachers, using choices in curriculum and pedagogy, can and do make change in the world every day. In order to be capable of making generational transformation in the world, one must understand its past in order to move from the present into the future. The field of curriculum has evolved through the work of multiple movements and many underpinning theories. Identification of a curriculum, specifically a

curriculum that reflects the lived experience of elders, is the purpose of this study. This type of curriculum development reflects the conceptual framework of humanistic curriculum theorists. Humanistic curriculum development was born as a reaction to curriculum designed by experts far removed from the lives of students. It is part of the continuing evolution of curriculum studies.

In 2010, Pinar stated, “The present state of the [curriculum] field seems sufficiently variegated to conclude that what we curriculum studies scholars have in common is not the present but the past” (p. 528). In the relatively recent past, the curriculum field came under intense scrutiny in 1957 when the Soviets launched the first satellite, Sputnik, into orbit. Upon signing the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) in response to the Sputnik moment, the curriculum of public schools became politicized, infused with science funded by the federal government (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 2008). “The schoolhouse became the dominion of the federal government funders and the foundations, with primary curricular control exercised by non-educators” (Marshall, Sears, Allen, Roberts, & Schubert, 2007, p. 51). These non-educators were psychologists and discipline specialists. Yet, “curriculum dissent was in the air” (Marshall et al., 2007, p. 60). “A sense of being driven by issues and ideals missing in the world around you existed among some within the curriculum field as well during the early 1960’s” (Marshall et al., 2007, p. 69). In 1958, Louise Berman, a graduate student at Teacher’s College and advisee of Alice Miel, entered the curriculum field. She was concerned with “social issues, values, personal responsibility, and real-life situations” (Marshall et al., 2007, p. 62). In 1967, Louise Berman summarized a conference, *The*

Humanities and the Curriculum, in an essay recognizing that learning opportunities must provide access to the *essence of experience* with “new concern for ethical, social, intellectual, and aesthetic values, not merely the content of academic disciplines” (Pinar, 1995, p. 173). Joseph Schwab called for the curriculum field to distance itself from theory to practical, personal matters. He cited the need for a “commitment to deliberation if the field were to emerge from the present crisis” (Pinar, 1995, p. 177). MacDonald and Leeper (1966, as cited in Pinar et al., 2008) challenge the discipline centered movement:

...[T]here is no reason to suspect that the structure of the disciplines can by magic of organization reduce the threat of nuclear holocaust, bring justice and equality to all people or provide a basis for freedom from poverty for all. (pp. 5-6)

These scholars have all been part of the humanist movement, providing a critique of that which and those whom are dehumanized by today’s society. They sought to improve society. The humanist position states there is an “additional need to foresee future necessities, based on past experience and the intention to improve the present situation” (Humanist Movement, 2013, p. 12). Further, humanists believe it is “social experience” and “personal experience” that make the difference between generations (Humanist Movement, 2013, p. 12). It is explained:

Human work, accumulated in the productions of society, is passed on and transformed from one generation to the next in a continuous struggle to improve the existing or natural conditions, even those of the human body itself. Human beings must therefore be defined as historical beings whose mode of social behavior is capable of transforming both the world and their own nature. (Humanist Movement, 2013, p. 12)

Such transformation (and healing) is an interdisciplinary and intergenerational undertaking. One discipline cannot solve the world's problems, or even a community's problems. Van Manen (1990) defines this sentiment on disciplines, stating the following:

Much of educational research tends to pulverize life into minute abstracted fragments and particles that are of little use to practitioners. So it is perhaps not surprising that human science that tries to avoid this fragmentation would be gaining more attention. Its particular appeal is that it tries to understand the phenomena of education by maintaining a view of pedagogy as an expression of the whole, and a view of the experiential situation as the topos of real pedagogic acting. (p. 7)

The community, therefore, can serve as a model that dissolves the fragments of disciplined-centered education into one that emulates a more holistic, integrated concept to translate into curriculum. A community is not just a geographic place, but also a center of history, with a past, present, and future. It can also be a safety net of friends, neighbors, and those who share similar values that shape one's psychology and moral orientation. People, institutions, and environments (and the language that describes them) make up what one might call *community*. Therefore, the understanding of curriculum and community run broad and deep, while truly interdisciplinary.

The theoretical framework for this study is purely ethnographic. Elders are part of the community-based curriculum and were consulted. Current studies about GLBT elders represent populations who live mostly in urban areas. The curriculum of aging in New York City represents the knowledge and skills needed to age in a big city. It is unlikely to be helpful to aging rural lesbians on the North Shore of Lake Superior. A humanistic curriculum should be created with input by those whom it serves, just as humanistic

public education consults its stakeholders such as parents, grandparents, business people, and other community members.

For the purposes of this study, the curriculum provides additional meanings worthy of discussing. It may also provide theory that links the research questions to the methods and design of this study. In this context, humanistic curriculum theory describes socializations that usually occur *in classrooms* in school. Cornbleth (1990) views curriculum as an ongoing process of what actually unfolds in daily routing in classrooms; it is comprised of the interactions of students, teachers, knowledge and milieu. Curriculum is defined as answering three questions: What knowledge, skills and values are most worthwhile? Why are they most worthwhile? And how should the young acquire them? In this study, it is important to note that there is believed to be an invisible curriculum that lies *outside* of the schoolhouse. The curriculum is not only unwritten, it remains unspoken and unheard because the curriculum is being experienced by members of society who are also hidden by nature of their age, geographic residence, and sexual orientation. The unique life stories of aging rural lesbians on the North Shore of Lake Superior may also provide information regarding an invisible curriculum regarding their state of being human. Truly, an invisible curriculum is currently similar to the X on a pirate's treasure map, just off the North Shore of Lake Superior, beckoning the attention of this generation in this place in time. People, history, presence, and place all matter.

Summary

The lives of aging lesbians who inhabit rural areas have rarely been studied. In the few places where rural lesbians have been studied, the phenomenon of successful aging

was not examined. It may well be an act of resistance to dominant culture, as well as to queer theorists, to find enclaves of lesbian women inhabiting the rural North Shore of Lake Superior, calling it home, creating a life, and aging in an unpredictable wilderness as opposed to assimilating to the safety net of a positively queer, networked, *gay ghetto* (Levine, 1997) existing mostly independently of mainstream culture within a metropolitan community. Whitlock (2010) suggests that curriculum studies examine narratives about the lived experiences of rural queers and how such narratives “throw into question what we think we know about queerness and place—thus adding important layers of complexity and disturbance to complicated curriculum conversations” (p. 272).

As such, this study serves to explore and examine the rural lesbians who are aging in a place called the North Shore of Lake Superior. Their geographic location defies the popular cultural representations of rural to urban migration for the purposes of survival. Constructed in the “gay imaginary” that is sometimes discovered through media—is that there is a “place” and one just needs the resources to get there to find other gay people (Weston, 1995, p. 259). The journey to San Francisco and a sense of community is what Weston (1995) refers to as the “Great Gay Migration” that was observed in the 1970s (p. 253). If the migration pattern from rural to urban as documented in most of the existing research remains true, then the lesbian residents of the North Shore of Lake Superior certainly have not followed that trajectory. What then, is the specific call to the North Shore of Lake Superior? What character lies in the imaginary and then the reality of the experience as lesbian settlers on the North Shore grow old?

The following chapters respond to the research questions at hand: “What are the lived experiences of aging lesbians on the rural North Shore of Lake Superior relating to the experience of aging?,” “How is the lived experience of aging as a lesbian on the rural North Shore of Lake Superior currently supported by community?,” and “How is the lived experience of aging as a lesbian on the rural North Shore of Lake Superior currently unsupported by community?” Chapter II presents a review of the literature on aging among members of the GLBT community. Themes include (a) concerns among aging GLBT people, (b) characteristics differentiating two generations of aging GLBT people (traditionalists and Baby Boomers) along two distinct time periods (pre-Stonewall and post-Stonewall), (c) GLBT movement history and law with some specificity toward Minnesota’s laws and role in the larger historical panorama, (d) the role of violence and the significance of hate crimes legislation, (e) religion and its relationship to politics and social change, (f) demographics of coming out, and finally (g) census reports *adjusted* to track GLBT population estimates and geographic representations. Chapter III delineates the ethnographic methodology and instrumentation of this study. Chapter IV identifies the themes determined and the results of the qualitative analysis of the data gathered. Chapter V examines the implications and impacts of the study and introduces needs for future study.

CHAPTER II. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

It is currently unknown the extent to which common themes presently in the literature pertain to an aging population of lesbians living in non-urban or even rural areas. The focus of this study is to explore the lived experiences of aging lesbian women who currently live on the North Shore of Lake Superior. Geographically, this area includes northeastern Cook, Lake, and St. Louis counties in Minnesota.

This chapter provides an overview of two generations of elders who blazed the trail in the movement toward equality for people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender in the United States. Themes currently dominating the literature about aging GLBT people relate to assessments about their needs as aging people. Their needs are framed in an historical context drawing attention to a range of issues often similar to mainstream aging culture such as caregiving concerns, financial preparedness, and end-of-life decision making. Other themes in the literature underscore the consequences of inequality under the law, insufficient resources to support vulnerable, aging GLBT populations, and a history of violence.

Studies on GLBT Aging

There has been a surge of interest in the needs of aging GLBT people. Over the past five years, national studies released presented research findings about the needs and experiences of GLBT people. One study in particular, *Still Out, Still Aging: The MetLife Study of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Baby Boomers* (MetLife Mature

Market Institute, 2010), made a significant impact on understanding the needs of GLBT Baby Boomers. MetLife built upon their initial study, *Out and Aging* (2006), which was conducted with the American Society on Aging's (ASA) LGBT Aging Issues Network (LAIN) (MetLife Mature Market Institute, 2006). The difference between these two studies is MetLife's 2010 study compares the findings about GLBT Boomers with the general population.

Findings reveal Baby Boomers' attitudes about aging, major concerns, predictions about financial preparedness, and how well they have planned for their future (MetLife Mature Market Institute, 2010). Similarities across the two groups include their concerns about aging, end-of-life decisions and previous caregiving experiences. There were also numerous differences between the groups. The GLBT Boomers were much more likely to have prepared documents that communicate who will make decisions for them if they are incapacitated, use durable power of attorney specifically related to health care, and form partner agreements establishing visitation rights (MetLife Mature Market Institute, 2010). Finally, the study also described the GLBT Boomer generation as activists who are more visible and more accepted by society than the previous generation.

There are also studies about the Silent Generation which came before the Baby Boomers. Elders of the Silent Generation were born between 1925 and 1945. They are also known as "traditionalists." Today, these elders are 67-87 years old. Knauer (2009) discusses some of the characteristics of the Silent Generation. They came of age in the *pre-Stonewall* era. This pre-Stonewall cohort did not enjoy the social acceptance and visibility of today's younger generations. They were mostly closeted; they probably did

not talk openly about their sexuality as it was still criminalized and treated as a mental illness. Treatments included shock and conversion therapy, and many were institutionalized for being homosexual (Knauer, 2009). The American Psychiatric Association (APA) did not remove homosexuality from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual-II (DSM-II) until 1973. The APA reaffirmed their position on homosexuality in 2011 (APA, 1993). Despite the APA's determination that homosexuals are not mentally ill, society treats them as such (Knauer, 2009). Even so, GLBT people continue to fight for social justice and equality under the law.

GLBT Movement History and Law

The history of the GLBT movement toward equality contains numerous legal battles. This section outlines relevant legal cases within the context of history. Despite GLBT Baby Boomers' activist history and increased societal acceptance, laws in the United States continue to discriminate against GLBT people and their families (MetLife Mature Market Institute, 2010). Most states do not recognize same-sex relationships in the same way that states recognize opposite-sex relationships.

Consequently, GLBT people who are in same-sex relationships are not afforded the same protections under the law as people who are heterosexual and legally married. Same-sex partners who may have been given the opportunity to legally marry in one state are not recognized in other states. The Constitution of the United States was amended in 1996 to outlaw recognition of same-sex marriages (The Defense of Marriage Act [DOMA], 1996). The DOMA amendment of 1996 reads as follows:

In determining the meaning of any Act of Congress, or of any ruling, regulation, or interpretation of the various administrative bureaus and agencies of the United States, the word “marriage” means only a legal union between one man and one woman as husband and wife, and the word “spouse” refers only to a person of the opposite sex who is a husband or a wife. (n.p.)

Historically, amendments to the U.S. Constitution were made to create opportunities and lift previously discriminating practices (e.g., Civil Rights Act, Americans with Disabilities Act, G.I. Bill). In this case, the Constitution was amended to further discriminate against a group of people based on their sexual orientation. Regardless of federal prohibition to recognize same-sex couples, states are permitted to extend their own benefits to same-sex couples. States do not have to recognize benefits extended to same-sex couples in other states.

Minnesota, as it relates to the geographic scope of the proposed research, has its own history addressing the issue of marriage equality. In 1971 the Minnesota Supreme Court heard the case of *Baker v. Nelson* (291 Minn. 310, 191 N.W.2d 185) and upheld the Hennepin County District court decision that Minnesota state law prohibiting marriage between members of the same sex did not violate the state’s Constitution. The appeal made it to the U.S. Supreme Court which upheld the Minnesota Supreme Court’s decision on February 11, 1972, establishing precedent for denying marriage to same-sex couples today (U.S. Supreme Court, 1972).

In 1977 the state amended the Minnesota Statute (517.01) stating that marriage is by law a civil contract, but added “between a man and a woman” to the end of the sentence (Minnesota Legislative Reference Library, 2013, n.p.). Following the 1996 passage of DOMA at the federal level, Minnesota amended its state statute (517.01) in

1997, recognizing only members of the opposite sex (The Office of the Revisor of Statutes, n.d.).

In Minnesota, Project 515's report "Unequal Under the Law," (2007) found at least 515 state statutes that provide legal rights and responsibilities to married couples. Because gay and lesbian couples, even those in domestic partnerships, are not legally considered *married*, they are not afforded access to the same rights as married heterosexual couples. The 2007 report clarifies the myth that unmarried couples can create their own legal documents to gain the same rights as untrue. Project 515 commissioned follow-up research to their 2007 report. The most recent report, "Still Unequal Under the Law: 2007-2010: Two Steps Forward and Two Steps Back" (Project 515, 2010) discusses changes in these statutes:

12 of the original 515 statutes were repealed without being replaced by successor statutes. Two more were repealed and replaced by successor statutes that did not continue distinct discrimination. Still three more have been amended to eliminate discrimination on the basis of marital status. Thus, a total of 17 statutes (of the original 515) have either been repealed or altered in a way that eliminates discrimination. At the same time, however, eight new statutes were enacted that discriminate on the basis of marital status. (p. 3)

While this may seem like progress for those seeking equality under the law, there are also nine other statutes that were amended in Minnesota using language that actually made the amendments discriminatory (Project 515, 2010).

At the time of this literature review, the Minnesota state legislature also added a measure to the 2012 election ballot to further amend the state's Constitution defining marriage between one man and one woman. Passage of the ballot initiative to ban same-sex marriage would not have changed the fact that same-sex couples cannot marry in the

state of Minnesota. The proposed amendment was redundant and paradoxical because the proposed amendment would not change the status of marriage. It did not pass. Turner (2007) validates the illogical nature of states that have already passed nondiscrimination clauses protecting people on the basis of sexual orientation and now insist upon passing anti-gay marriage legislation. Turner's report, "The Gay Rights State: Wisconsin's Pioneering Legislation to Prohibit Discrimination Based on Sexual Orientation," published in the *Wisconsin Women's Law Journal* (2007), expands on the illogical nature of the legislation:

The story of the Wisconsin statute prohibiting sexual-orientation discrimination is inherently interesting and important. But it also helps illustrate the ongoing paradox of lesbian and gay civil rights in the United States. Wisconsin law in this area only grew more perplexing on November 7, 2006, when 59% of the state's voters approved a state constitutional amendment prohibiting recognition of same-sex marriages. (p. 91)

In order to understand the impact of Wisconsin voters' refusal to recognize same-sex marriages and legislative efforts to do the same in other states (as attempted in Minnesota), one must recognize these two states are not alone.

Marriage Equality, U.S.A. maintains a state-by-state map illustrating the status of same-sex couples. Maps by Flaherty (2013) identify the only states granting state-level marriage equality are Washington, Iowa, Vermont, York, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Maryland, Connecticut, Maine, and Washington, DC. A handful of other states offer civil unions or domestic partnerships, but do not grant the same rights as marriage does for heterosexual couples (Flaherty, 2013). The status of marriage equality in the United States plays a massive role in benefit allocation for elders, and it is

constantly in flux. On May 8, 2012, North Carolina voted to amend the Constitution to ban civil unions and same-sex marriage (Robertson, 2012). The next day, President Barack Obama became the first U.S. President to publicly announce his support for legalizing same-sex marriage (Calmes & Baker, 2012). In an election year, the President's support for legalizing same-sex marriage could come with risks. It remains to be seen what political outcomes will be affected by President Obama's explicit stance on such a politically charged issue.

Violence

The GLBT elder population has not only faced a lifetime of discrimination and oppression because of their sexual and gender identities, but also violence. Societal attitudes are influential forces in the treatment of GLBT people. These forces are embedded in an historical context (Morrow, 2001). The Stonewall Riots, which began on June 27, 1969 in New York City, mark the beginning of the modern gay rights movement in the United States. According to Morrow (2001), "it [Stonewall Riots] signifies movement from submission to active resistance in responding to institutionalized anti-gay violence" (p. 153). This is important because the generation of gay and lesbian elders who are in their 80s today were about 40 at the time of the Stonewall Riots (Morrow, 2001). Active resistance is not a characteristic of the Silent Generation's GLBT cohort. The pre-Stonewall era was filled with negativity and hatred toward homosexuals.

Hate crimes laws did not exist for the pre-Stonewall era. The likelihood of repeated threats of violence, harassment, and intimidation brings renewed understandings of why this generation sought invisibility for survival. "The limited data available on gay-

hate crimes likely underestimate the severity and pervasiveness of hate and violence endured over a lifetime for the current cohort of older gays and lesbians” (Morrow, 2001, p. 157). Hate crimes were not recognized by Congress until 1990.

The Hate Crimes Statistics Act of 1990 “required the Attorney General to collect data about crimes that manifest evidence of prejudice based on race, religion, sexual orientation, or ethnicity” (U.S. Department of Justice [DOJ], 2007, n.p.). The Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 was also passed, enhancing sentences of perpetrators of hate crimes committed against someone due to their “race, color, religion, national origin, ethnicity, gender, disability, or sexual orientation” (U.S. DOJ, 2012). In 2009, The Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act was signed into law. It reads as follows:

The Act creates a new criminal code provision, which criminalizes willfully causing bodily injury (or attempting to do so with fire, firearm, or other dangerous weapon) when (1) the crime was committed because of the actual or perceived race, color, religion, national origin of any person or (2) the crime was committed because of the actual or perceived religion, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, or disability of any person and the crime affected interstate or foreign commerce or occurred within federal special maritime and territorial jurisdiction. (U.S. DOJ, 2012)

This law is important for two reasons. It is the first time that gender identity is included in federal hate crimes legislation, and it contains *actual or perceived* as language in the Act. Sometimes victims of hate crimes are targeted not because they are gay, but because someone thinks they are gay. The naming of the law is significant for two reasons. First, Matthew Shepard was a young gay male college student who was murdered for being gay, in Laramie, Wyoming in 1998. James Byrd, Jr. was an African-American male who

was murdered by three White men who dragged him to his death with a pickup truck in 1998 in Jasper, Texas. These are just two examples of hate crimes committed against people on the basis of their sexual orientation or racial identity.

The National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs (NCAVP) collects data on hate crimes, survivors, police responses to crimes, and so forth. That data used by NCAVP are more comprehensive than the Bureau of Justice Statistics because NCAVP include data collected from statewide GLBT organizations, where a victim may not have filed a police report (New York City Anti-Violence Project, 2011). People who are GLBT often do not report hate crimes for fear of further victimization, as they usually *come out* to report the biased crime. Guidelines for federal hate crime reports require classification by the type of bias for each crime. This means that a gay person of color who is attacked is either recorded as a racist or anti-gay incident, but not both (New York City Anti-Violence Project, 2011). This complicates the issue when someone is victimized. The inability to report multiple types of bias in a crime appears to call into question its accuracy.

OutFront Minnesota (OFM), the state's GLBT advocacy group, is one of many statewide organizations that funnel their own organizational field reports to the NCAVP. According to OFM's Anti-Violence Program report to NCAVP, over half of the hate violence was directed at people who were transgender, just over a third based on sexual-orientation, and just under 10% were due to HIV-related status (New York City Anti-Violence Project, 2011). The number of incidents was not listed.

According to the U.S. DOJ and the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) report, "Hate Crime Statistics 2010" (FBI, 2010a, 2010b), Duluth, MN reported a total of four incidents in 2010. One of these hateful incidents was motivated by the victim's sexual orientation. State colleges and universities are also responsible for filing quarterly reports. In 2010, the University of Minnesota Duluth reported zero incidents for 2010, but failed to provide reports for the second, third, and fourth quarters (FBI, 2010a, 2010b). In the state of Wisconsin, Douglas and Bayfield counties filed reports all four quarters with zero incidents. The University of Wisconsin Superior also reported zero hate crimes all four quarters, consistent with the University of Wisconsin system (FBI, 2010c, 2010d). It appears as though there are problems with reporting hate crimes with one or more level of bias, documenting accurate statewide data, and maintaining compliance accounts even at local levels.

Religion

Religious beliefs also play an important role in expressing support or oppressive views toward people based on their sexual orientation. There are denominational variations that tend to determine the levels of oppression or support (Sherkat, Powell-Williams, Maddox, & deVries, 2011). According to Adamczyk and Pitt (2009), countries with a "strong self-expressive cultural orientation" are most affected by personal religious beliefs and have a greater effect on attitudes about homosexuality (p. 338). The United States is characterized as having this strong self-expressive cultural orientation (Adamczyk & Pitt, 2009). Religious institutions in the United States have thus become influential players in political issues that address the civil rights of GLBT people.

Over time, however, public opinions are shifting more positively in support of civil rights for GLBT people. This shift in attitude is evidenced in Sherkat et al. (2011) and their analysis of the General Social Survey (GSS) results comparing religious denominational attitudes and their support of same-sex marriage between 1988 and 2008. Conservative religious views and opposition toward the ever-politicized same-sex marriage debate and legislation continue to be affiliated with right-wing conservative political views (Sherkat et al., 2011).

Depending on their religious and denominational affiliation, some GLBT people may face continued effects of stigma, prejudice, and discrimination. Coming out in a religious institution may also mean they are no longer welcome to worship or affiliate with that particular group.

Coming Out

Coming out to others about one's sexual orientation can be challenging. The stigma associated with being a sexual minority is still prevalent today, despite growing awareness, visibility, and legal and political gains. However, demographic variables seem to impact both identity as a sexual minority as well as coming out. According to Gates' *Sexual Minorities in the 2008 General Social Survey: Coming Out and Demographic Characteristics* (2010), gender and age are significant factors in terms of who self-identifies as gay, lesbian, or bisexual.

Women are 1.7 times more likely to be gay, lesbian, or bisexual than men with similar age, racial/ethnic, and educational characteristics... Those aged 18-29 are nearly 7 times more likely and those aged 30-54 are nearly 3 times more likely than those aged 55 and older to be LGB. (Gates, 2010, p. 8)

Although women tend to identify nearly twice as often as men as GLB, the older a person is, the less likely they are to self-identify. The survey gives further evidence of the significance of sexual identity and age as coming out factors.

People who identify as bisexual are nearly 8 times more likely to be closeted than gay men and lesbians with similar age, racial/ethnic, and educational characteristics...relative to those under age 30, adults aged 30-54 are more than 16 times more likely to be closeted and those over age 55 are 83 times more likely to be closeted. (Gates, 2010, p. 5)

Finding lesbians over age 55, who are the most likely of any age group to be closeted, adds to the complexity in learning about their experiences with aging. The finding related to age might be helpful in understanding the invisibility of lesbians of the Silent Generation. Other demographic variables such as race and ethnicity were similar to those of people who are heterosexual (Gates, 2010).

The experiences associated with coming out can be difficult (Swindell & Pryce, 2003). For example,

...inner resources and the traumatic factors surrounding the coming out process (including rejection from family members and society, internalized homophobia, fear of physical harm, and social isolation) may well shape the way in which this event is perceived by individuals and their response to it. (Swindell & Pryce, 2003, p. 101)

Lesbians' responses to trauma will differ (Swindell & Pryce, 2003). With lesbians, one cannot assume a traditional family member will come forward when help is needed. One key stressor is family rejection: "Such rejection is less likely to occur as a stressor for members of other groups, who often find support and solace within the family" (Russell & Richards, 2003, p. 325). Gay men and lesbians are often part of each other's support

systems for this reason, creating a *chosen* family structure (Oswald, 2002). According to

K. P. Gates,

The modern movement of lesbian health care systems go back to the AIDS [Auto-Immune Deficiency Syndrome] epidemic. When someone was ill, they took care of each other. Part of being independent is asking for help for what is needed. It's not unusual for women in the north woods to take care of themselves and each other. (personal communication, June 14, 2012)

Yet her words are made more complex by the work of others, "The consequences of isolation include threats to health, mental health and the very survivability of rural gays and lesbians. Information is power" (Smith & Mancoske, 1997, p. xvii).

Finding the Population

The University of California Los Angeles' Williams Institute generates independent research about sexual orientation and gender identity to inform public policy and law (Williams Institute, n.d.). Many of their reports are included in this section as they provide data analysis to count same-sex couples in the United States (Williams Institute, 2009).

Overall, it is unknown exactly how many people are gay, lesbian, or bisexual in the population. The U.S. Census Bureau does not gather information specifically about sexual orientation. According to the William's Institute's "United States Census Snapshot: 2010" (Gates & Cooke, 2010), the census provides the opportunity for same-sex adult members of a household to describe their relationship with the "Person 1" as "husband/wife" or "unmarried partner" (p. 4). The snapshot report provides numbers of couples that are *adjusted* estimated figures. "The adjusted figures do not take into account the possibility that some same-sex couples may not be counted in U.S. Census tabulations

due to concerns about confidentiality or because neither partner was Person 1 in the household” (Gates & Cooke, 2010, p. 4).

According to a recent publication by the NGLTF, “Outing Age 2010: Public Policy Issues Affecting Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) Elders” (2010), it is clearly difficult to gather completely accurate data about sexual orientation. Responses hinge on what researchers measure and how they measure it. The language used to determine sexual orientation also varies across the literature. Generally, researchers have asked about same-sex attraction over the lifespan, romantic attractions, or relationships, sexual behaviors, or identity as a gay, lesbian, or bisexual person. Each of these questions yields different results about sexual orientation (Savin-Williams, 2009). According to Gates’ (2011) report, “Identity, behavior, attraction, and relationships all capture related dimensions of sexual orientation but none of these measures completely addresses the concept” (p. 2). “Privacy and confidentiality appear to be paramount concerns for GLBT people as they consider whether to ‘come out’ in government, media or scholarly surveys” (NGLTF, 2010, p. 133).

The GLBT population is non-homogenous (Kehoe, 1989). Individual experiences of aging may vary demographically. The report “Outing Age” (NGLTF, 2010) states that older GLBT people are diverse, and the mechanisms by which they cope with the challenges of being GLBT may differ due to their diverse identities (NGLTF, 2010). Current literature continues to urge inclusion of racial minorities, immigrant populations, socioeconomic status, and other demographics into the GLBT aging research. At present, it is difficult to make broad generalizations about GLBT people and aging due to the lack

of far-reaching, longitudinal studies about this minority population (Gates, 2011; NGLTF, 2010).

Further observations complicate the matter of collecting data about the GLBT population. The challenge of inquiry about the variety of experiences about being gay and aging is magnified by an inability to reliably determine someone's sexual orientation. Gates' (2011) study, "How Many People are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender?," identifies the need to collect more accurate information about sexual orientation and gender identity when conducting surveys. Again, questions need to be asked consistently and over long periods of time; respondents may or may not answer consistently if questions vary in determining sexual orientation (Gates, 2011; NGLTF, 2010). For example, questions that ask about a person's sexual identity may yield different results than asking about sexual behaviors or sexual attraction. The National Academy of Sciences (Solarez, 1999) report, "Lesbian Health: Current Assessment and Directions for the Future," also discussed the varying dimensions of sexual orientation specifically for lesbians. The following excerpt from the 1999 report clearly illustrates the variations in identifying oneself as a lesbian:

Of the women in the survey who reported some aspect of same-sex orientation, 58.7% reported that although they found sex with another woman to be desirable, they had never had a female sexual partner and did not identify themselves as homosexual or bisexual. Nearly 13% reported that they had engaged in same-sex sexual behavior at some time since puberty, but did not identify as homosexual or lesbian and did not desire a female partner. (Solarez, 1999, p. 45)

Over 90% of the women who affirmed a homosexual or bisexual identity both desired and engaged in sexual activity with other women (Solarez, 1999). Merely desiring a female partner did not seem to warrant identification as a lesbian for most respondents.

There is an urgent need for data collection on all GLBT people in the United States. The “Outing Age” report by the NGLTF (2010) urges data collection about GLBT people from federal agencies including the U.S. Census Bureau. It is rare for a national survey to directly ask or give options for self-disclosure of sexual orientation or gender identity. The National Academy of Sciences (Solarez, 1999) suggested adding sexual orientation to existing large-scale, national studies including cohort studies. The U.S. Decennial Census did not include questions that directly asked about sexual orientation or gender identity (Gates, 2011). However, the Nurse’s Health Study II and the Women’s Health Initiative both added questions about sexual orientation as requests for data came from interested researchers and participants in both ongoing studies (Solarez, 1999).

Evidence suggests pervasive invisibility of lesbian elders not only in society, but also in the literature. The Committee on Lesbian Health Research Priorities of the Institute of Medicine called attention to the scarcity of research about lesbians in the United States (Solarez, 1999). According to Traies (2009), *Now You See Me: Invisibility of Older Lesbians*, invisibility may be a consequence of cumulative effects of ageism, sexism, and heterosexism. Knauer (2009, 2011) points out the stereotypical notion that senior citizens do not have sex and old gay and lesbian people do not exist. A study by Fullmer et al. (1999) observes that as women age, they are more likely to be seen by others as asexual beings. Gay culture appears to add to the invisibility through its own

age segregation, and within the population at large, where heterosexuality is presumed (Knauer, 2009; Merrill, 2010; Traies, 2009).

Insofar as the current GLBT movement is concerned, the issues receiving the most policy advocacy have been marriage equality, employment non-discrimination policies, and repeal of the military policy, as reported in “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” (Knauer, 2009). Incidentally, the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy was successfully repealed in 2011. The level of impact the aforementioned advocacy efforts could have on GLBT elders is rarely mentioned. Previous studies adding to the invisibility of GLBT elders includes the fact that most studies about aging lesbians have been grouped with those of gay men due to probable shared experiences as sexual minorities (Merrill, 2010).

Identifying lesbian elders may be more difficult where resources for sexual minorities are scarce to nonexistent, such as non-metropolitan areas where GLBT centers or advocacy groups are sparse. Most service providers to aging adults do not yet target outreach efforts to the GLBT population, nor are GLBT elders visible in aging policy (New York State Health and Human Services Network, 2009).

Geography

The U.S. Census Bureau’s special report issued in February 2003, “Married-Couple and Unmarried-Partner Households: 2000” (Simmons & McConnell, 2003), estimates there are 594,000 same-sex unmarried-partner households. These households represent only 1% of all coupled households (Simmons & McConnell, 2003). The Williams Institute’s 2010 update found 646,464 unmarried same-sex couples, representing 5.5 same-sex couples per thousand the United States (Gates & Cook, 2010).

Geographically, the state of Minnesota is located in the northern portion of the Midwestern United States; it is ranked 23rd in the nation for the number of same-sex couples (4.89) per 1,000 households, while Minneapolis, MN ranks fourth in the nation for *large cities*, in the number of same-sex couples (21.74) per 1,000 households according to University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) Williams Institute's report, "United States Census Snapshot: 2010" (Gates & Cook, 2010). The Institute's 2008 report found that same-sex couples live in every county in Minnesota (Romero, Rosky, Badgett, & Gates, 2008).

For the scope of the proposed research, three counties (Cook, Lake, and St. Louis) border Lake Superior's North Shore. According to Gates and Cook (2010), Cook County is the most northeastern county in Minnesota and has 5.79 same-sex couples per 1,000 households in the state, accounting for 14 same-sex couples; 12 are reported as female. Lake County has 2.59 same-sex couples per 1,000 households, accounting for 12 same-sex couples; 11 are reported as female. St. Louis County has 3.03 same-sex couples per 1,000 households, accounting for 257 same-sex couples, all of whom are reported as female (Gates & Cook, 2010). Members of same-sex relationships who do not live together were not counted; likewise, the number of single lesbian and gay men were not determined by U.S. Census Bureau data.

Elders as Teachers

Literature establishes that an elder culture exists for First Nation people (Steigelbauer, 1996) as for many ethnic groups (Scharlach, Fuller-Thomson, & Kramer,

2002). Elders are revered as teachers and as important sources of knowledge and skills

(Steigelbauer, 1996). According to Scharlach et al. (2002):

Afro-American, Hispanic and Native American families have traditionally been structured to involve at least three generations. The grandparents frequently see their role as passing on the traditions and heritage of the culture, including the teaching of Spanish language skills in Hispanic families. (p. 9)

In Hmong culture, “Elders are also seen as the wise and educated, so whenever there are issues/conflicts, it is brought to the elders... It typically isn’t questioned because they are the teachers. This is a cycle” (H. Vang, personal communication, July 31, 2012). In Tejano culture, elders are also seen as teachers. Younger people listen to the elders when they speak and sometimes ask questions (C. Davila, personal communication, July 31, 2012). According to Steigelbauer (1996), the elders’ descriptions of their roles are in service to the people. They describe

...a learning process that is sparked by an event, personal, spiritual, political or all of the above...causing them to take up the task of learning the teachings and the ceremonies, learning them in an active and involved way... Elders are not self-appointed, but rather “recognized.” (Steigelbauer, 1996, p. 47)

The role of the elder is to “teach, to pass on wisdom, as well as to be acknowledged and respected for the status of their age and learning” (Steigelbauer, 1996, p. 63).

In contrast, gay culture is a youth-oriented culture (DeAngelis, 2002). Trotman and Brody (2002) explain that, “Unlike members of ethnic minority groups, lesbians do not receive minority mentoring from family members, nor do they obtain a sense of history of lesbian struggles from family members” (p. 172). Within the extended social networks that are often referred to as *family* in gay/lesbian communities, older members of the community as *elders*, or teachers to future generations, are not included. It is not

yet established as a cultural norm for older gay and lesbian people to be the teachers or *elders* who pass on teachings and important traditions to successive generations.

Summary

In summary, there is a wide range of issues that help frame the lives of GLBT people who are aging. As presented here, there are basically two generations of people who would be considered elders in the GLBT movement: they are members of the Silent Generation and the early retirees of the Baby Boomer generation. Aging studies consider the intricacies of their past intertwining GLBT history, the GLBT social movement, and ever-changing legal status addressing sexual orientation. Additionally, the literature describes the plight of GLBT elders as it concerns their experiences with violence, hate crimes, and religion relating to politics and social change. The sometimes difficult task of coming out, dealing with stigma, and increasing invisibility with age are also discussed. Finally, issues about finding the GLBT population, problems with the U.S. Census, geographic, and other representations of sexual orientation are presented. The concept of GLBT elders as teachers to younger generations is also explored, though the concept is relatively new. It seems important to consider ways to better understand who comprises the aging population of lesbians inhabiting the North Shore of Lake Superior and to explore their lived experiences. The ethnographic methodology used to collect data and the analytical tools used to analyze these data are discussed in further detail in Chapter III. Chapter IV presents the results and subsequent data analysis. Chapter V discusses the conclusions drawn from this study, as well as limitations of the study and directions for future research.

CHAPTER III. METHODOLOGY

Introduction

A review of the literature in the U.S. indicated several gaps across disciplines in understanding the role of non-normative sexuality in rural areas. In general, research about the lived experiences of gay men and lesbians focused mainly on subjects who live in urban and suburban areas, ignoring rural subjects (McCarthy, 2000). Consequently, the lived experiences of lesbians on the North Shore of Lake Superior, specific to aging, had never before been studied.

Statement of the Problem

The lived experiences of aging lesbians on the North Shore of Lake Superior through history have not been recorded. Therefore, successive generations of younger lesbians do not have access to the knowledge, information, survival skills, and experiences of elders that may have served to empower them, and that may have contributed to the creation of a form of curriculum. Many older lesbians of the Silent Generation are already deceased; their lived experiences and wisdom that might have been shared with younger generations of lesbians have vanished. It was important to study the lives of aging rural lesbians on the North Shore of Lake Superior to gain insight into the lived experiences of these women, to increase our understanding of their lives and to share their stories with future generations of lesbians; not doing so would be an act of injustice. The injustice would continue to be felt not only by society at large, but also

by future generations of lesbians who may seek information and empowerment from elders.

Prior to this study, those seeking lesbian elders on the North Shore of the upper Great Lakes could neither find them, nor locate information about their lived experiences. The lives of rural lesbian elders living on the North Shore of Lake Superior have not been included in scholarly literature.

Research Questions

1. What are the lived experiences of aging lesbians on the rural North Shore of Lake Superior relating to the experience of aging?
2. How is the lived experience of aging as a lesbian on the rural North Shore of Lake Superior currently supported by community?
3. How is the lived experience of aging as a lesbian on the rural North Shore of Lake Superior currently unsupported by community?

Research Methods

An ethnographic approach was utilized in this study. Ethnography, “allows the researcher to discover and analyze the categories and questions that are most relevant for the people being studied and participating in the research” (Murchison, 2010, p. 12). Ethnography was best suited for this particular study because it employed multiple angles for exploring the research questions through various modes of data collection common to ethnographic research. The research questions, as they relate to what it is like to age as a lesbian living in a rural area on the North Shore of Lake Superior, were best answered by

understanding individual participants living their lives in the context provided by their environment.

Pilot Study

The study was piloted with two lesbians at their home which is situated inside the city limits of Duluth, MN. The goal of the pilot study was to practice interview questions, capture field notes, transcribe, code, and thematically analyze data through the biographic lens of participants. These goals were accomplished and the interview questions were subsequently fine-tuned based on the experience gained through the pilot study. The two women who participated in the pilot study were partners, over age 60, and fit all other criteria of the proposed study, except for living in a rural area.

Contexts

In order to understand the lived experiences of aging lesbians on the North Shore of Lake Superior, participants were studied within multiple contexts. These contexts included exploring parts of their life stories prior to coming to the North Shore, learning about how they established a life there, their cultural affiliations, outdoor activities, experiences since arriving on the North Shore of Lake Superior, and other elements of their daily lives including what they have learned. Learning about the experiences of a mostly invisible population such as the one described in this study would not have been uncovered in a traditional classroom environment. According to LeCompte (1987),

educational anthropology is an American phenomenon, and since formal, public, universal, secular elementary and secondary schooling is the most visible context for learning in America, it isn't surprising that studies of this context dominate the field. However, there are other *contexts* for learning, and there are different *kinds* of learning, both cognitive and cultural. Can we not explore these, especially

when our current learning institutions seem so out of step with current cultural realities? (p. 51)

Ethnographic research, as conducted in this study, was inclusive of both a cognitive and cultural exchange between researcher and participant.

Analytical Framework

Biography, as noted in curriculum theory (Pinar, 1995), was applied as the theoretical lens through which to analyze findings rendered from this ethnographic study of the personal experiences of aging lesbians in a rural area on the North Shore of Lake Superior. The intent was to uncover linkages to teaching and learning. It was important to understand how research participants are learning to age and what their experiences and contexts are or have been in the course of their lives, through individual biographical narrative accounts. Denzin (1999) stated, “The world is always already constructed through narrative texts” (p. 414). Pinar (1995) explained, “The effort to understand curriculum as autobiographical and biographical text has emerged as a major contemporary curriculum discourse” (p. 516). Three “streams of scholarship” related to “autobiographical and biographical research” were described by Pinar (1995) in detail:

The first stream of scholarship we shall term autobiographical and biographical text. Major concepts in this stream included *carrere*, collaboration, voice, dialogue journals, place, poststructuralist portraits of self and experience, and myth, dreams, and the imagination. The second stream we characterize as feminist autobiography, major concepts with included community, the middle passage, and reclaiming of self. The final major category of studies are those efforts to understand teachers biographically and autobiographically including collaborative biography and autobiographical praxis, the “personal knowledge” of teachers, teacher lore, and biographical studies of teachers lives. (pp. 516-517)

For the purpose of this study, biography was used as the analytical framework.

Further, the combination of ethnographic methods for data collection and the use of a biographic analytical lens toward understanding curriculum provided a unique marriage, opening a social platform for explicit teaching and learning while generating mutual understanding and meaning between participants and the researcher. “The significance of ethnographic biography, thus lies in its ability to explore the contexts in which personal lives are mythologized, and mythologies take on lineaments of the personal experience” (Jackson, 2008, p. 391). The objective was to write about the insider’s perspective (Murchison, 2010) from the vantage point of an aging lesbian on the North Shore of Lake Superior. The participants shared stories in formal and informal settings, and revealed experiences that may be used to inform successive generations of lesbians.

Role of Researcher

The role of the researcher in this study was one of ethnographer, meaning interviewer, participant-observer, and observer. The relationship that the researcher developed with the participants was forged through an informant and then independently formed by building rapport and establishing trust. Rapport was developed first through one of the participants who facilitated the researcher’s entry into the lives of the other participants.

The study consisted of 1:1 semi-structured interviews between the researcher and each participant with the aim of generating an understanding of the lived experiences of the participants in the context of their own life and their environments, which included

elements of their personal history, social networks, cultures to which they belong, attributed meanings, and so forth.

The researcher's role in relationship to the study's participants is described in detail in the previous chapter. To recap, the researcher disclosed her own sexual orientation in the informed consent *and* when she presented the proposed study to potential participants. Personal identification as a lesbian may have assisted in gaining rapport with research participants who were recruited for this study. However, the researcher does not identify with participants' experiences as members of the age cohort over 60, and does not live in a geographic residence considered rural. The informant who facilitated contact with the first participant was indeed part of the age cohort over age 60 and thus was helpful in gaining access to that research participant. The researcher's role upon making contact with the potential research participants was to obtain informed consent in accordance to the ethical guidelines of conducting research with human subjects. Ultimately, the role of the researcher in this study was to consciously facilitate the collection of data in a manner sensitive to the participants.

Participants

The ideal number of participants for this study was established as five to eight. In terms of sample, Angrosino (2007) noted the difficulty in determining a specific number for a sample, but explained, "The size of the sample depends on the characteristics of the group you are studying, on your own resources (i.e., legitimate limitations on your time, mobility, access to equipment, and so forth), and on the objectives of your study" (p. 48). I was able to recruit seven participants who lived in a *contained* environment along the

North Shore, such as one township or *named* area along the North Shore; they also fit all of the criteria for the study. An informant assisted in the recruitment of participants.

Recruitment

The participants recruited for this study were purposive. They were recruited through one lesbian informant the researcher knew in Duluth. The informant knew of one lesbian who lived in the research area on the North Shore of Lake Superior and who was also over 60 years of age. The informant made contact with the potential participant and provided an introduction to me as the researcher, via email. Once the participant invited contact with me, I set up a phone conversation to discuss the proposed study. The participant agreed to meet and I was invited to join her with her partner at Christmas Eve mass at their church, followed by a potluck at their home. She also invited me to a Christmas dinner at their home the next day with her partner and other guests from their community. I accepted with gratitude. During these two events, I was introduced to other potential participants. The hosts of the dinner established a date and time to hold a potluck.

At the potluck, a total of seven women who identified as lesbians over age 60 living in rural areas on the North Shore were present. I made an informal presentation that would allow the potential participants to learn about the nature and purpose of the proposed study, ask questions, and decide whether or not they wanted to participate. In accordance with Blaikie (2010), the potential participants were also informed about the research methods, requirements of participants, and how the results of the data would be

used. All seven women agreed to participate in the study; they signed informed consent forms.

Location of the Study

The ethnographic study was conducted in a location along the North Shore of Lake Superior. The specific location was deemed most practical, especially in terms of being able to access the community and identify the contexts and cultures of the environment, as the North Shore stretches through many small towns and communities situated among three counties (St. Louis, Lake, and Cook) comprising over 150 miles of distance from Duluth, MN to the United States/Canada border.

Data Collection

LeCompte (1987) explained the data that are sometimes made available to ethnographers include artifacts, field notes, drawings, maps, or other forms of information for analyzing “process, structure, context, history and the interplay between biological and cultural variables” (p. 46). These are all important to an ethnographic research study. The types of data that were collected during the course of this ethnographic study are described in detail. The key methods of data collection were the use of observation, participant observation (Van Manen, 1990; Walsh, 2009), field notes (Walsh, 2009), grand tour (Pink, 2008), and interviews (Angrosino, 2007; Murchison, 2010).

Phases

Data collection took place in at least three different phases during the course of this study. Table 1 illustrates these data collection phases referred to as *Kitchen Table Discussion*, *Semi-Structured Interview*, and *Grand Tour*.

Table 1

Data Collection Phases

| Data Collection Phases | Participants | Description |
|---------------------------|--------------|--|
| Kitchen Table Discussion | 7/7 | Free-Flowing |
| Semi-Structured Interview | 7/7 | 1:1 Interview |
| Grand Tour | 4/7 | Trail Center 3/7 Home Tour 2/7 Outdoor Hikes 1/7 |

The first data collection phase took place at the home of two women who agreed to participate in the study. They hosted the potluck gathering to assist in introducing the proposed study to their friends; they invited seven other women, and two were no-shows. The seven women present all decided to become participants in the study and signed the informed consent forms during dinner. The participants comprise a rather unique subculture of aging lesbians on the North Shore of Lake Superior

Kitchen-table discussion. Once all forms were signed, the participants began discussing the proposed research. At that time, the researcher requested permission to audio-record the kitchen-table discussion in progress. All participants agreed and a free-

flowing, lively discussion ensued. This discussion was helpful in gaining insight into the lives of each participant during this informal conversation that lasted approximately one hour. The audiotape was transcribed verbatim and helped further shape the questions that were used in the semi-structured interviews to be scheduled with each participant.

Semi-structured interviews. The second phase in which data collection took place was during scheduled, semi-structured interviews. For six of the seven participants, the interview took place at their home. For one participant, the interview took place at the home of another participant. The semi-structured interviews provided the most data in direct response to the interview questions. The transcribed audiotapes were transcribed verbatim and accounted for over 170 pages of transcribed data.

Grand tour. The third phase of data collection was the grand tour (Pink, 2008). One grand tour involved three participants and the researcher, who took a trip to a favorite restaurant up the Gunflint Trail known as the Trail Center. This location was also mentioned during the kitchen-table discussion and was identified as a place important to most of the participants for one or more reasons. During the grand tour, the researcher was actively engaged in participant observation. Participants also educated the researcher about what they enjoyed about the location, why they went there, and how often. Field notes supported the grand tour, in addition to photographs.

Another participant invited the researcher on two grand tours which were graciously accepted; the first invitation included a hike through the participant's property to the Lake Superior Hiking Trail that linked up to a nearby river. The second invitation

involved meeting at a coffee shop and driving up the North Shore to a different river for a snowshoe hike when it was 35 degrees Fahrenheit below zero.

The last grand tour involved meeting the participant at her home where she and her partner live. There, the researcher received a tour of their home on Lake Superior. Each of the grand tours was supported by photographs taken by the researcher on location and field notes that were written after the grand tour took place.

In all, four of the seven participants took part in the grand tour. One was cancelled due to inclement weather. Two did not schedule due to time restraints and their planned travel out of the area as well as the researcher's departure. Details of the grand tours were woven into the Results section of Chapter IV.

Further data collection took place by direct observation of participants during the interview and at other places where they were present in the community, including religious services. Participant observation data were recorded in field notes.

Additional data were collected through the researcher's solo excursions while trying to experience elements of the various cultures firsthand. Other data about the area were collected by speaking with local residents and interacting with them, listening to conversations in a local coffee shop, going to places such as the Trail Center to take more in-depth photographs for later analysis and description, experiencing a snowshoe hike alone in the woods, skiing on East Bearskin Lake on the edge of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area (BWCA) 27 miles up the Gunflint Trail, watching DVDs about early pioneers of the geographic region, and reading books and other material on location in a cabin on Devil Track Lake where the researcher stayed for 35 days. These and other

experiences were reflected upon and recorded in field notes which were compiled in a single notebook with a plastic cover to protect it from the elements.

Data that were audio-recorded were transcribed verbatim, and brought back to each participant for member-checking while requesting feedback from each participant for verification of the transcription. Member-checking allowed participants to verify places and people, and provide feedback to the researcher about the transcript. The participants were generally responsive to this process. Some omitted the actual name of a town they mentioned while providing an alternative to use a directional descriptor to identify a place in lieu of the omission. For example, one participant omitted a town name, but maintained that the use of *southwestern Minnesota* was acceptable. This process also allowed another member to candidly request omitting part of a conversation that she wished she did not discuss on tape. Member-checking also took place after Chapter IV was written. Participants were given a copy of Chapter IV and they were asked to read it and provide feedback if they felt that they were falsely represented or misquoted. Participants wrote back with minor changes clarifying content and actually paid compliment to how it was written, adding validity to the study. All of the participants' wishes were respected and the requested actions were taken. These and other changes were, in actuality, minute.

In sum, data were gathered from a variety of methods in accordance with ethnography. All types of data gathered from the participants and data relating to the study were stored in locations that were private and locked in a secure location. Data that were kept in computer files were all encrypted and password protected. The purpose of

protecting the data was to “protect the interests of the research participants” (Blaikie, 2010, p. 31) which included their privacy. At no time did the researcher engage with the participants in a way that would be considered fraudulent, deceptive, or dishonest.

Data Analysis

Generally speaking, the process of conducting the ethnographic research for this study involved collecting a large amount of data. In accordance with Murchison (2010), the data collected in this study were systematically organized and coded for further analysis. An emergent system of coding and thematic categorization was used. Because the semi-structured interviews all contained the same core questions, key points made by each participant in response to each of the questions were highlighted and summarized. Once all interviews were transcribed and key points were highlighted, themes based on recurrent mentions of a particular activity, description, experience, feeling, attitude, etc. were developed. The researcher also made note of things that were unique or particularly interesting and flagged those items with a highlighter. Participants’ pseudonyms and the page number of their transcripts containing the item deemed unique or interesting were noted.

Once the emergent themes were identified, an outline was formed. The unique and interesting pieces that did not fit into the overall thematic structure were woven into the biographical introductions of each participant by pseudonym, as seen in Chapter IV. Photographs and field notes were also revisited and analyzed. The field notes served as essential supplements to the interview transcripts and included notes about experiences on grand tours and solo excursions, in addition to the disposition and personal

characteristics of participants, and insights into specific issues on the North Shore that were learned from sources other than participants. Additionally, notes taken while watching documentaries about early pioneers in the geographic location studied, quotes from books checked out of the local library, and other materials that supported the analysis and thinking about aging lesbians living in rural areas on the North Shore of Lake Superior were collected.

Summary

In summary, the data collection method used in this study was ethnography. One informant was used to gain access to potential research participants. Research participants were recruited using full disclosure of the nature and purpose of the research study; informed consent was established prior to engaging in formal research. The researcher remained mindful of the sensitive nature of this study and maintained a high level of integrity in accordance with research involving the use of human subjects, especially vulnerable populations who were engaged as participants in this study.

Data collection involved a multi-modal approach including participant observation, documentation of field notes, grand tour, and use of semi-structured audiotaped interviews that were transcribed verbatim. Additional data consisted of photographs and notes taken while reviewing other sources used to understand and learn about the research location and cultures.

The analytical framework for this study was biography. Biographies consisted of the participants' lived experiences and the context and meaning generated by the participants. These biographical accounts of lived experiences and personal narratives

provided access to knowledge relating to the research questions that may have otherwise remained a mystery to current and future educators in a multitude of disciplines and applied interdisciplinary studies.

Data generated during the course of this study were organized and categorically coded, explicitly documenting themes that answered the research questions about lived experiences and aging in a rural area on the North Shore of Lake Superior from the perspective of the research participants. This ethnographic record was used to enrich the understanding of aging lesbians on the North Shore of Lake Superior as it related to the lived experiences of participants and their own learning about aging in this rural environment. The results and analysis of this study are discussed in Chapter IV.

CHAPTER IV. RESULTS

Introduction

Due to the fact that the lived experiences of aging rural lesbians on the North Shore of Lake Superior had never been studied, participants' lived experiences were investigated in this study using ethnographic methods such as interviews, grand tour, participant observation, and field notes.

Location of the Study

The study is contained in a single county on the North Shore of Lake Superior. According to the county's website, winter is the county's most "legendary season" of the year because the location hosts an average snowfall of 121 inches annually, has the largest network of cross-country ski trails in the state, and numerous opportunities to experience a unique adventure on a dog sled or sleigh ride (Cook County Events and Visitors Bureau, 2010, n.p.). Here, lively adventures are abundant, while the phrase *dead of winter* remains mythical. The data collection period for this study took place in the heart of winter, during the month of January when air temperatures ranged from 37.4 degrees Fahrenheit to negative 27.4 degrees Fahrenheit (Weathersource, n.d.). The county is also home to the historic Gunflint Trail (Gunflint Trail Historical Society, 2010), a popular entrance to the BWCA, and the Grand Portage Indian Reservation. The location was described by a participant as one of those *end of the road towns*.

In terms of sexual orientation, the county is unique. Gates and Cook (2010) identified 646,464 unmarried same-sex couples in the United States representing 5.5

same-sex couples per thousand people. The average number of same-sex couples for the state of Minnesota is only 4.89 per thousand people, while the county in which the study took place reported 5.79 same-sex couples per 1,000 people, trumping the national average (Gates & Cook, 2010).

Research Questions

The research questions that framed this study are as follows:

1. What are the lived experiences of aging lesbians on the rural North Shore of Lake Superior relating to the experience of aging?
2. How is the lived experience of aging as a lesbian on the rural North Shore of Lake Superior currently supported by community?
3. How is the lived experience of aging as a lesbian on the rural North Shore of Lake Superior currently unsupported by community?

Data Analysis and Results

The data for the study were collected through ethnographic methods; methods included semi-structured interviews, grand tour, observation, and participant observation. Conversations with local residents and solo excursions also contributed to an understanding of participants' lives and added depth to the emerging analysis in which the researcher was constantly engaged during the course of this study. Grand tours also provided more insight into the cultures of the county, the geographic locations of participants' residences, and aided in further development of understanding how they viewed their own living environments.

The data analysis and results of the study are organized around the three research questions that seek to provide (a) an understanding of the lived experiences of aging lesbians on the North Shore of Lake Superior, (b) information to describe a unique curriculum for successive generations, (c) insights into how aging lesbians' lives are currently supported on the North Shore of Lake Superior, and (d) insights into how aging lesbians are currently unsupported on the North Shore of Lake Superior.

The findings and subsequent analysis of the data gathered through the aforementioned ethnographic methods are organized and discussed according to key themes that emerged during data analysis. The data were analyzed through the use of the biographic lens provided by each participant. The biographic lens was captured through participants' thoughtful responses to questions used to extract knowledge about who they are, what their life was like prior to moving to the North Shore, and how they transitioned to the North Shore.

Additionally, participants were asked to discuss the various ways in which they feel supported or unsupported as aging lesbians in their rural environments. Questions that aimed at helping to answer the interview questions were direct, open-ended, and non-directional, non-leading questions. Participants were also asked to discuss their cultural affiliations and those in the county as they perceived them and experienced them. In turn, they gave detailed descriptions and outlined their personal experiences through storytelling that aided in understanding the various cultures present in the county. Most participants told many detailed stories reminiscent of the past and of their transition to the North Shore from somewhere else; they did so candidly with a reflective, helpful

disposition throughout the interview process. The participants at times became animated during the interviews and the points they discussed felt real, as if the researcher was reliving a piece of their history as they told their stories, usually from a comfortable place in their home.

These and other follow-up questions served the purpose of eliciting responses to questions that helped frame the participants' lives in such a way that they discussed their own understanding of the place called the North Shore and how they managed to maneuver a path toward acceptance within an otherwise isolated community supported mostly by tourism on one of the Upper Great Lakes. This made the location unique and dissimilar to other small towns in the state of Minnesota.

Lesbian Women on the North Shore

Each woman interviewed for the study provided an intriguing glimpse into the backdrop of her life leading up to her conscious decisions to build a life on the North Shore of Lake Superior. Of the seven lesbians interviewed for this study, six were coupled and one was single. Each woman was interviewed individually. All participants responded to the same questions which were digitally recorded and then transcribed verbatim.

In this first section, each woman is introduced in-depth by her chosen pseudonym for purposes of anonymity; this introduction is intended to give a broad context to each woman's life and includes the history, feelings, circumstances, and decisions that brought her to the North Shore of Lake Superior to establish a life. Subsequent themes are flushed out and discussed categorically to describe what the participants had to learn in order to

live on the North Shore. These themes address adaptation, culture, and community engagement, and are discussed after participants' stories are presented, introducing the reader to each of the seven women, their histories, epiphanies, decisions, and their outcomes.

Participants' Stories

Olivia. Olivia is 62 years old; she grew up in Washington state in an environment similar to the North Shore with a pristine wilderness. Olivia enjoyed hiking in the mountains and the San Juan Islands. She is well educated and earned her Ph.D. in English literature from the University of Minnesota and worked as a university professor and an ordained minister. She is also well traveled. Olivia has lived abroad in England and South Africa. While living abroad, she met the man who became her husband and moved to Minneapolis with their three children.

Eventually she and her husband bought a home right on the North Shore where they planned to retire. To do so, they had to downsize their home in Minneapolis from a lovely estate in a prominent, wealthy neighborhood. Shortly after moving to their new home, she discovered that her husband was having an affair. She asked him to stop, but he did not.

Olivia explained the effect of trauma on both herself and her children who requested that she maintain some kind of "semblance of home" for them and she did, although it was not easy. Olivia maintained ownership of their retirement home on the North Shore of Lake Superior. Meanwhile, she confided in her friend, Isabella, about the

traumatic events unfolding in her life. Isabella, who had been through a similar experience, soon became Olivia's life partner, though it was a surprise to both of them.

Prior to her divorce, Olivia spent time on the North Shore and the BWCA. She described her first trip to the BWCA as "falling in love." Soon after her first couple of trips, Olivia began to lead trips for a number of years and continued to spend a lot of time in nature. "My sense of connection is almost entirely in nature," she explained with a soft, self-assured voice. She described with joy what it feels like when she is outdoors, in nature. "I just feel elated and so happy. Deeply happy. Deeply connected. You know it does count as a religious experience for me," she said. Olivia's descriptions of Lake Superior, which she commonly refers to as "Mother Superior," and the trails she hikes were poetic at times, as she spoke with long pauses between her thoughts, reminiscing of previous adventures into the wilderness. "I love hiking on paths that I know where the spring flowers are, even if I can't see them," she said. It's as if the image of a spring flower flashed before her, and she disappeared into the wonder of that moment. And it felt like I was there with her, even though we were sitting in her living room with two dogs lying on the floor, and a drooling cat sitting on the couch behind her head; the interview continued as the sun went down on the big lake and darkness descended.

Isabella. Isabella is 67 years old and grew up in Connecticut. She is college educated and earned her Bachelor of Science degree in political science at a college in Indiana. After college, she became a flight attendant. Isabella was talkative and witty, sometimes jumping from one topic to the next, all the while totally immersed in her memory, sharing freely. She talked about having to maintain her weight, wear false

eyelashes, and endure other accounts of sexism. When she wed her husband, her father walked her down the aisle at their wedding and said, “You know you can turn back any time.” She married anyway. He had three children from his previous marriages and Isabella had three children while married to him.

They had a difficult marriage. Isabella described her ex-husband as “emotionally and verbally abusive,” and he ultimately left her for his college sweetheart. She had a daughter in college and her boys were instructed to live with their father because he told them that she could not afford them. She found herself alone for the first time in her life. Her face expressed the devastation of this event as she shook her head side to side, while expressing openly the amazing journey of self-discovery and surprise in herself and her own abilities to overcome the difficulties she experienced.

She moved into a place with a four-season sunroom, which she described as her “healing place,” for 10 years. It was in a 100-year-old cottage on Lake Minnetonka on the outskirts of the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, MN. Her children came to live with her at different times and she slowly discovered herself and her inner gifts. She described the fallout of her divorce and her memory of it:

The marriage dissolves, the house goes, the kids go, oh my god what’s going to happen? Like, I had this bow tied on this box so tight and when the thing broke, it was like...*oh my gosh*, and yet I didn’t die. It was okay. In fact, it was more than okay. It was the freedom that I had never experienced before. It was absolutely a gorgeous freedom of finding out who I was and what had meaning for me.
(Isabella, personal communication, January 23, 2013)

For Isabella, divorcing her husband opened doors to things that were really important to her such as her spiritual quest and healing, social justice, and compassion.

Isabella's life would take on more new developments. She volunteered in an at-risk program with people who were deaf and hearing impaired. She became proficient in sign language and ended up working there for 13 years, teaching leadership development. She was also forced to take a look at herself and her relationships with women. Isabella smiled, explaining that she consulted a spiritual psychic who seemed to validate her own feelings about her interest in a relationship with a woman, though Isabella had not identified any woman in particular. However, the psychic described a woman who was in a religious order but was not practicing at the time, a situation very much like Isabella's current partner, Olivia, was experiencing at the time.

Isabella and Olivia were involved in the same church. Olivia invited Isabella on one of the trips she was leading into the BWCA. Isabella accepted and humorously explained that she had never taken a trip into the wilderness, ever, nor had she ever been camping. Isabella explained:

I was like *oh my gosh* I didn't know my ass from a hole in the ground about how to do anything like put up a tent...never carried a canoe, hell and the portaging I didn't know if I had died and went to *hell* or if I really liked it. (personal communication, January 23, 2013)

She laughed heartily during the interview as she explained the experience. She knew one thing—that is, she liked being around Olivia, who she described as “fun” and “empowering.”

They continued their rugged hiking adventures together and would stay at Olivia's home on the North Shore. A dangerous incident brought them closer together. Isabella fell into a steep ravine along a river during their hike. She recounted the incident,

with her own disbelief, knowing she was lucky. “All of the sudden I’m heading for this rock with my name on it and hit my head on it; it split open and Olivia was there. I did not lose consciousness and I’m obviously bleeding profusely.” Olivia ran two miles to get help, and a full-on rescue ensued with 29 helpers as inclement weather moved in to make the rescue effort more difficult. She explained how it began to rain. Then it began to thunder. She laughed as the story kept building; Isabella was a fun-loving and gifted storyteller. She was taken by ambulance to the hospital in Duluth. After a short stay in the hospital, Olivia took Isabella to her home up the shore to recover.

During Isabella’s recovery at Olivia’s home they realized they had more than just a friendship going. She recounted the moment saying, “. . .we looked at each other. . .knowing it’s a gift, but also *oh my gosh* what do we tell the kids? That’s what I was thinking. What do we tell *the kids*?” Eventually, she explained, they did tell the kids, who were mostly supportive with the exception of each of their adult daughters, who struggled at first, but are now more understanding. They were able to talk about their difficulties and move forward.

For Olivia, it had never crossed her mind that she would partner with a woman. She explained, “It was obviously a real shock to the system for both of us I would say.” Looking back, Olivia recalled being attracted to women as well as men; she was usually attracted to their humor and intellect. Olivia also consulted a therapist to ask, “What is going on here?” Per Olivia’s account, her therapist explained that it was not unusual for aging women “to be really close to somebody and their friendship to be so intimate and it’s right on the edge until something happens.” Something happened. Fearlessly, Olivia

and Isabella moved forward to build and formalize their relationship and their commitment to one another.

Olivia and Isabella had a commitment ceremony on Lake Superior, followed by a blessing in Minneapolis with over 100 people in attendance before leaving for Michigan where Olivia landed another university position. Isabella gave up her career to follow Olivia. Olivia was excited about her position and the schedule. She explained, “[The position] suited me fine because I would have summers and vacations so that I could come up here, so I continued to do that.” Though she loved what she was doing, after three years at the college, the academic politics of the college were difficult. At one point, they were at their home on the North Shore and they made the decision to leave Michigan. Olivia explained:

[We] just had this sense, you know we could live up here and do things up here and it would be much more part of who we are; so we decided to just take the plunge and do it, to move up here. So I went back and quit my job. Fortunately I didn’t know the economy was going to tank, or else I probably would not have had the nerve to do it. (personal communication, January 15, 2013)

That was in 2008. Since then, they have lived together in their comfortable home on the North Shore, adorned with lit-up birch tree branches, tapestries, earth-toned furniture, and local art; many birdfeeders are visible from the casual living room chairs and they have a calming sea-level view of Lake Superior. Their property also contains a small guest house, a large garage with five canoes fondly referred to as Beatrice, Sophia, Madeline, Bernardo, and Cecilia. A yurt sits quietly upon a hill, with a beautifully painted outhouse nearby, and round fire ring on a small trail that connects to the Lake Superior Hiking Trail. Olivia and Isabella are truly immersed in the glorious beauty of the north woods.

Betty. Betty is 61 years old and hails from Madison, WI. She was the youngest of the participants in the study. Betty is best described as someone with boundless enthusiasm for nature, has a highly active and creative mind, and is eagerly talkative. She gave due warning at the beginning of the interview to help her stay on course.

Betty always wanted to be a veterinarian but she was not good at math. She also did not like to study, so she knew at a young age that the profession probably would not materialize for her. Betty was an only child who became a Girl Scout, and her family did not camp. The Girl Scouts meant a lot to her early development. She explained:

It was my saving grace because then I could be strong. I could be around strong women. Some of them were lesbians, some of whom were straight. It didn't matter because they were strong women that were confident in the outdoors. (Betty, personal communication, January 22, 2013)

As a sophomore in high school, she and her troop went on a trip to Isle Royale, an island just off the North Shore of Lake Superior that is visible on a clear day from the shores of the Grand Portage Indian Reservation. This was her very first experience in the wilderness. Betty was not a swimmer so she did not canoe. She never thought going to the BWCA was an option, and she did not know anyone else who went. It was her first time wearing a backpack. She described the trip as “the most amazing experience of my life. We saw moose; we saw wolf scat.” Betty’s trip to Isle Royale was life-changing. She recounted:

... what happened to me was in my mind this topography became one and the same with freedom, camaraderie, and really feeling like you were really out in the woods. The lake, the rock, the spruce, that became to me a touchstone. (Betty, personal communication, January 22, 2013)

When she returned to Madison, she remembered she had that freedom to go back to if she needed it.

During her high school years in Madison she did not say very much and she did not fit in; she knew she was different and she did not date. But she recounted her experience as a Girl Scout, time and again. As a Scout, “I could play guitar. I would lead songs. I was looked to as a model. People wanted to be around me. I was a leader. I knew about the woods. I just blossomed,” she explained with great joy.

Betty was a camp naturalist at Girl Scout camp, and young women would come out to her, but she had not come to know her own sexual orientation. Betty attended the University of Wisconsin Stevens Point. She majored in natural resource management and education. She explained that even her college experience was lonely, because she had not yet realized she was a lesbian. In retrospect, she believed that was probably for the better. She recalled:

It did spare me the angst of dating, breaking up, and that wasn't part of my college experience. At the time I thought, man, I'm so lonely, but now I know that allowed me to focus on what I was there for. I didn't have all the angst and drama. (Betty, personal communication, January 22, 2013)

At age 22, Betty moved out to California to follow a woman she had a crush on. When confronted with the reality that they were just friends, she moved in with a lesbian friend from camp. Her first love, she explained, “Was an older woman who was an opera singer and a music teacher.” That was her coming out experience. Thankful she did not have the stereotypical heterosexual, back seat of car, first-time sexual experience, she recalled:

It couldn't have been more different. This was the most tender, amazing, romantic... I just am so thankful to [person] for that. We weren't together very long of course because, God, I was 20-something and she was in her late 30s but it was just wonderful. (Betty, personal communication, January 22, 2013)

Although Betty's time in California was a great experience for her, she missed the Midwest. In California there were certainly pine trees and mountains. Betty explained the difference was in the relationships she formed in the Midwest. They ran deeper than what she experienced in California, and so she returned to Madison. She landed a job with the Parks Department in the Twin Cities and thought it would be like northern Minnesota, but it was not. Consequently, she began to travel north for weekends with friends to go camping. She recalled the experience traveling down Highway 1 from Ely, MN and saw Shovel Point and thought, "This is Isle Royale, this is it, and I had this ah-ha experience, this, *this*, *this* is it!"

Betty continued to spend time on the North Shore and explained, "I was sort of a serial monogamist through my late 20s and early 30s and I was like oh, I'm never going to find anybody." Like Isabella, she visited a psychic. Betty recounted the psychic's comments. "I'm getting 5 years, I see somebody with a little gray hair and you just take her hand and walk for a long, long while." Betty said she thought to herself, "I'm in my 30s, I can't wait 5 years!" Five years later she met Randy, who became her partner.

Betty was interviewed in the *raven room*, an addition on the western side of their dome-shaped home situated directly on the North Shore. The waves that splashed upon the enormous rocky shore were audible from inside their home, located in the west end of the county. During the interview, a few white-tailed deer pranced through the snow,

heading down to the lakeshore on their usual daily trail. Their property is graced with tall pine trees providing shade toward the entry to the home, with a completely clear view of Lake Superior on the other side. The raven room was comforting, with its natural bright light, many books, driftwood, rocks, poetry, photography by Betty's partner Randy and others, and two dogs who fell asleep in the sunshine (one was on the floor and one on the couch with all four legs up in the air), completely relaxed. Their home was peaceful and their energy so positive. Randy sat patiently near the light shining in from a matrix of triangular windows next to a green, wood-burning stove in the dome, busy on her laptop computer.

Randy. Randy is 65 years old. She grew up on Mackinac Island, Michigan. She was easygoing, eager to answer questions, well-spoken, and thoughtful. She had a seemingly pragmatic sensibility and a fun-loving sense of humor. Randy moved to Ottawa, Canada to go to school from grades 7-13 and returned to Mackinac Island in the summertime. The Great Lakes were naturally part of her background. Randy had a successful career as a family physician and has since retired. After medical school, she landed in St. Paul for her residency.

Her first time traveling to the North Shore, she recalled, was probably the winter of '73 with a group of people from work on a ski trip. They stayed at Lutsen Ski Resort. The next year, she purchased one of the condos at the Lutsen Mountain Village with a heterosexual couple. Eventually, she met Betty through mutual friends. She described the night they met:

We met at Sweeny's Wine Bar in St. Paul. Ruth McKenzie was singing there that night and I was going to meet a couple of friends but they never came, so a woman that I knew from St. John's said "Dr. [pseudonym] Randy, would you like to come and join us?" So then Betty was joining them too and so we met there. (Randy, personal communication, January 21, 2013)

Randy and Betty have been together ever since they met that night at Sweeny's Wine Bar.

Randy was *out* to her medical partners during her career as a family physician and helped make radical change. She was on the board of her medical group and after she and Betty became partners she asked the CEO, "Now how do I get Betty [pseudonym] on my health insurance?" Randy explained, "She seemed taken aback and said, 'Well you fill out these papers.'" Randy suspected that had she not been on the board that would not have been an option. A couple of years later, a male physician thanked her and said, "I understand I have you to thank for partner benefits." Same-sex partner benefits were not yet a standard policy. Randy figured she had the clout and was a past board president; she could do it, and she did.

After Randy and Betty had dated for about one year, Randy brought Betty to her condo in Lutsen. They both loved going up there and enjoyed their time together. She explained,

We noticed a lot of For Sale signs as we came up. So we looked in the paper and we kind of figured out where one place was that was listed as a starter cabin and it turned out to be the place that we bought. (Randy, personal communication, January 21, 2013)

That was in 1986. Randy explained how much they both love the area:

We both have an affinity for the Great Lakes. It was the choice between the shore and say an inland lake; there are pluses and minuses to both, but I think for us

Lake Superior was just a huge draw and had nothing to do with being lesbians, it had to do with loving nature, the Great Lakes and this part of the world, the country. (personal communication, January 21, 2013)

Although Randy is retired, Betty is not. Subsequently, they also own a home in the Twin Cities. Both of their jobs were there and Randy had no desire to come up and practice medicine in a small town. She explained, "It's much harder to get time off or it used to be. I was married to my job enough in the Cities, but at least I knew I could get away."

Betty and Randy are split on how much time they each plan to spend in their North Shore home in the future. Randy, who grew up on Mackinac Island, explained, "I have done my small-town time...it [Mackinac Island] makes this look like a major metropolis." She enjoys at least having available the things she has in a big city, yet as a photographer, she feels the scenery is a lot better on the shore and there is more to photograph.

Betty, on the other hand, is still employed in the Twin Cities as a naturalist, but plans to retire in June 2014. "I will be 62½ and I don't want to work any more than that. And since we can afford it, we figured it out." She does not know how much time she will spend at their home on Lake Superior. "It's an unknown," Betty explained. "I may miss running water." Their home does not have running water, but has one of the most exquisite, artfully decorated outhouses on the North Shore, connected to their home by a slightly elevated and covered ramp to shelter them from the elements. Candlelit in winter, it almost feels heated. Despite not having running water, they have a built-in shower with a fountain pump to bring the water from a bucket to the showerhead. The drain goes out under the home and becomes runoff water. All products used to wash are

environmentally friendly. The same goes for their kitchen sink setup. They have to haul in their own water, as they do not have a well or septic system. For now, it works. Even though they will likely spend more time there when Betty retires, Randy said, “I can’t see being 80 and trotting out to the latrine, you know? Just the simple things like that. Running water. There are some things that are kind of nice to have.”

So the couple comes up to the North Shore as much as they can, and they have met a lot of people. They have met so many people they said they feel like they are part of the community. Betty recalled coming up and not knowing many people at all, “just having little adventures,” she said. Early on, they met two lesbians who owned a store and there they met another lesbian woman, Rhoda. “And we just totally struck up a friendship with Rhoda,” recounted Betty. Rhoda introduced them to others and that was their first circle of friends; even though Rhoda was not living there full-time yet either. Initially, they spent a lot of time by themselves.

Rhoda. Rhoda is 67, and she is currently single. Her home was luxurious, with enormous comfort and a stunning view of Lake Superior’s rocky shore with waves crashing beneath *the snug*. The snug was a delightful sitting area with natural light flooding through the spacious windows; the view was reminiscent of popular photographs of Carmel by the Sea from Pacific Coast Highway 1. The waves pounded the rocks on the shoreline, with water freezing on the rocks, over and over, providing an ever-thickening layer of ice. The splashing sounds of the water, though vividly powerful, actually provided a relaxing and inviting atmosphere for an interview with Rhoda. Her home is located in the west end of the county, not far from Betty and Randy’s home.

Rhoda grew up in the Twin Cities. She married a man and got what she referred to as her M-R-S degree, or *Mrs.* degree. She was going to put her husband through college, but he never finished. Together they had three children; their marriage ended in divorce. Rhoda returned to college in her 30s. “The minute I left him, I enrolled in college. I went to night school for about 3 or 4 years and I thought, ‘I have to go to day school if I’m going to really finish,’” she recounted.

She could never attend school full-time with three children as it was too much work and responsibility. Rhoda eventually graduated in her early 40s from the University of Minnesota. She majored in women’s studies with an emphasis in women’s literature and a minor in ethnic studies.

Rhoda had warm-hearted memories about the long family history of vacations to the North Shore dating back to stories of her mother’s trips as a teenager with her grandparents in the 1920s. At that time, the road only went as far as Duluth, MN. Rhoda’s parents started coming up the shore as far as Split Rock Lighthouse for many years between the 1930s and 1940s because they were able to afford gas and obtain extra gas coupons during the war. Most people could not. Rhoda’s first trip to the shore was when she was an infant, though she would not remember it. But she remembered the stories and had fond memories of trips later in life:

There was no skiing and there were no resorts that had outdoor or indoor swimming pools. Not until the late ‘50s. Lutsen had an indoor swimming pool...there were just these little ma and pa places. You had cabins that you stayed in and you brought your own food and they were fairly inexpensive. (Rhoda, personal communication, January 8, 2013)

Rhoda came up to a cabin for two weeks every summer. Her parents eventually bought their own place in Lutsen in the mid-1950s when Rhoda was about 10 years old; they eventually spent the entire summer there. She explained:

My mother and I would come up the day after school was out and stay until Labor Day Weekend when school started...my dad came up every weekend. This now seems like an enormous amount of driving. There were no freeways. It amazes me, but that's the way they did it. That's the way they lived. (Rhoda, personal communication, January 8, 2013)

Rhoda is the youngest of four kids. Her older brother played sports and did not come up to the cabin, and her two older sisters had jobs. "It was especially good for me because I had time with one of my parents alone for the first time in my life. My mother was really a lot different when she wasn't with the whole family," she recalled. Rhoda's memories of childhood, she explained, are very different than her siblings' memories.

Rhoda described later trips to the North Shore cabins as an adult. "Then when I was older and first married to a man and then had women in my life, I always came here a lot with them to my mother's places. She always had a cabin."

Her mother bought a new place the year that she died which resulted in a family fight and a name drawing to see who would get the house. Her sister won the drawing, but Rhoda bought her own place and is happy she did, because she did not have the feeling of connection that she had in previous places where she spent significant time with her mother. It was not "Mom's place."

Rhoda lived part-time at her current home for quite a while. She followed in her parents' footsteps, using her place as a vacation home while living in the Twin Cities. For a few years she lived in San Francisco but eventually returned to the Twin Cities and then

returned to the North Shore for a time, evermore increasing the length of her stay. By the time she was living on the shore for six or seven months of the year, she thought, “I think I just want to live here. I hadn’t wanted to when I was younger as a lesbian.” She had the same joy that her dogs had when they came to the North Shore, panting with excitement. She described it as exciting and relaxing coming back each time to her place on the shore. She explained:

I thought I had to live in the city to have a community and I think when I got older, it didn’t matter to me so much whether I had a lesbian community here or any kind of community, which I *knew* I could have up here. I knew I could have both because I did know some lesbians up here. (Rhoda, personal communication, January 8, 2013)

Rhoda knew other lesbians then and she currently has a circle of lesbian friends. For her, though, the location was most important. The North Shore was where she wanted to be; she explained why:

...I needed people that I liked around me, but I wanted the place more than anything. The *place* fed me more than anything else ever did. And, I didn’t care about having a night life like I did when I was younger, or even the kind of social life I had when I was younger. (Rhoda, personal communication, January 8, 2013)

Rhoda had been living and working in Duluth when she made the move. She continues to have a social life and said she feels part of a solid, extensive community network. She is a business owner and a writer, and has a lot of connections through the many projects and causes she supports. She is an incredibly generous person, and seems to enjoy people, though she is highly opinionated and is not afraid to share her views. She identifies strongly as a feminist and a lesbian. Rhoda made reference to two other women, Eleanor and Golda. “They have the *most* fascinating life,” she explained. “They’ve been so

dedicated to making a difference. They really are interesting women. A lot of women up here are really interesting.”

Eleanor. Eleanor is 67 years old. The interview with Eleanor took place at the home she and her partner Golda are currently renting, about 10 minutes west of Grand Marais, slightly inland up on a ridge. It is probably best described as the lower level of a very large split-level home that is shared by at least one other resident on a large piece of land with yet another breathtaking view of Lake Superior. They also own a condo in downtown Minneapolis. During the interview, Eleanor seemed confident. She was also direct and to the point. It seems as though she values a fulfilling life, and does not waste a moment on the trivial; she was the most serious and concise of all interviewees.

Eleanor grew up in a small southwestern Minnesota town that was an agricultural community. She remembered going to *the lake* as a kid. The lake was any lake in a series of chains of lakes in state of Minnesota, known as *The Land of 10,000 Lakes*. Eleanor remembered fondly going to Big Lake, Clear Lake, and Good Lake. “We went there for swimming lessons, to fish and everything else.” As a kid, she remembered her dad only had one week of vacation and they rented a cabin somewhere; it was the classic *Up North at the Lake*, which was dependent upon where they could rent a cabin.

As a child, Eleanor also went to camp and recalled canoeing; she calls water her element. She also remembered family trips to Split Rock Lighthouse and being in Duluth. “I remember standing down at the harbor watching the big boats. The stories about the Lake [Superior] have always intrigued me; lighthouses to some degree and in a real subliminal way,” she recalled. But as an adult, Eleanor has been coming up to the North

Shore for well over 20 years. “It’s because of the Lake, and then secondarily for me, it’s the environment.” She eloquently described how Lake Superior is a very powerful piece of nature and what it means to her:

Well, it’s [Lake Superior] a total indication of the fact that I’m out of control. The Lake is a very powerful thing. And it can bring cooling breezes, but it can also rage and bring down huge cargo ships. And that to me says, well, for me it’s a metaphor for God. I think that Native people call it Gitchi Gami which might be another name for God, I don’t know...but I understand that. It’s also renewing and charging and creates all kinds of things. I could just sit here and look. On the days you can’t see the Lake, it’s very sad. (Eleanor, personal communication, January 30, 2013)

Eleanor’s description honors the lake as a living being, very much in sync with how many others view the lake and appreciate its power. Because their current home on the North Shore is up on a ridge and slightly inland, the lake sometimes disappears from view due to fog or stormy weather.

Eleanor is also college educated. She attended school in downtown Minneapolis at Augsburg College on the West Bank in the 60s. She explained that it was the center of the earth of all things revolutionary. She recalled:

We were against the war; we were for civil rights; we were on the streets and at that time there was proposed a huge development in that area. And so, depending on who you were, you were either for it or against it. (Eleanor, personal communication, January 30, 2013)

Due to Eleanor’s focus on urban studies at Augsburg College, the proposed development and the topic of urban renewal became a large part of who she is, and the 60s played an important role in shaping her. Eleanor explained, “In the sixties, you got married and so I did.” In the late 60s she went to Reed, “Which is a little hotbed of radicalism in [Portland], Oregon,” she said. There, she earned a Master’s Degree in Education,

focusing on social science education. In the 70s, Eleanor's life was about education. She taught at an inner-city school in Minneapolis.

In the 80s, she went to Luther Seminary and completed a Master's in Divinity and was ordained and spent nearly four years in Macedonia. In the late 80s, Eleanor's life took a dramatic shift. She met Golda. Eleanor divorced her husband and got involved with Golda and had to leave the church because of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America's (ELCA) policy. "You could not be involved, as they put it; everybody had to be either married or celibate... I was no longer married and I was not celibate, so I chose to leave the church," she recalled. Eleanor was well aware that she had been on track and was being groomed to become a bishop.

In the 90s Eleanor's relationship with Golda continued. Together, they were working as community developers. "It was a \$400 million dollar project to take the tax-increment dollars and return them to the neighborhoods." Golda, she explained, trained all of the neighborhood leaders in 81 neighborhoods, while Eleanor managed staff and led three neighborhoods through the development process.

In 2000, Eleanor began working for a church in a Twin Cities suburb as a "Mission Developer," which she described as "more of like a Catholic social justice worker." Half joking and smiling, she explained that she stayed there for eight years, "helping the folks in [city] figure out that the world was not *all* [about] tennis and SUVs." The church was part of the ELCA, the biggest Lutheran denomination. In 2006, she explained, "The church again voted *not* to let gays and lesbians in committed relationships to be ordained." But her church took a stance and did an act of ecclesiastical

disobedience, and they called her. They reinstated her ordination. “This was a *really* big deal; they called me then as a pastor.” It was a message to the larger church, the ELCA, which she described as, “You guys don’t know what you’re doing; you’re losing all of these wonderful competent people because of your stance.” She continued to work on social justice through her retirement in 2008. Eleanor and Golda have been together for 22 years.

Golda. Golda is 65 years old. She always greeted with a genuinely huge smile, and seemed light and easy-going. She is curious and adventuresome, and contrasted herself with her partner as one who must *experience* life, but has a hard time *imagining* it. In this regard, she and Eleanor seemed to complement one another on many levels. They are indeed, as Rhoda mentioned, interesting women and an interesting couple.

Golda grew up out of a Jewish tradition in St. Louis Park, MN. She said her grandparents were Orthodox Jews and her parents were Conservative Jews. Golda recalled,

My grandparents were in North Minneapolis because Jews were restricted to communities where they could live. Minneapolis was a *very* anti-Semitic city, my parents were banned from certain jobs and housing was only available. So I grew up in a very Jewish community and we did not grow up on a lake because I didn’t even know what that meant. Because Jews were urban people. (Golda, personal communication, January 30, 2013)

When Golda graduated from high school, she explained, “We literally had college recruiters come and say to the women, ‘oh so you’re going to college to get your Mrs. degree’ and that was pretty standard.” She was married in 1968. She had two children

and worked in a lab as a cytotechnologist, training at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, MN. She was active in her community and did volunteer work.

Golda eventually became aware she was a lesbian by age 30. She felt her lesbian sexuality had always been there, but “when you were growing up in the 50s I mean it just was not, being a lesbian was not a cool thing,” she recalled. She divorced around 1980 and her children were turned against her by her ex-husband. Prior to the divorce, Golda had already gone back to school and earned her Master’s degree in adult education and she worked in community education from 1980-1990. Recalling her position, she said:

I was director of Community Ed, so I headed up a program. We took the program from about 30 classes a year to 114, and supervised all of that and ran an advisory council and did collaborative programming. (Golda, personal communication, January 30, 2013)

Golda made it all sound easy, though the work she described was seemingly ambitious.

Later, she was recruited by the Neighborhood Revitalization Program to train 81 neighborhoods. Golda designed and facilitated the training and completed it in five years and described herself as “bored.” She went back to seminary and earned her Master’s degree in divinity. She went to work for the police department in Minneapolis as a crime prevention specialist. They also wanted her to become ordained, but she could not because she is a lesbian. She did not feel the need to be ordained, but she was told to do so. She took a couple of classes and was ordained in 2009 as a United Church of Christ (UCC) pastor. She described herself as “the only person in the country who was actually a city employee on loan to God.” Once ordained, they made it a called position to do ecumenical work. “They put me in North Minneapolis in 1996 when it was [known as]

Murderapolis,” she explained. She was matched with a police officer to address issues and came to see up close and personal just how people lived. “My life radically changed. I saw the world and like oh, my god...I mean I just couldn’t believe how people chose to live.”

Golda is proud of her work and is also humble. She enjoyed her work and the freedom she was given to innovate. She developed a program that was a model for the Kennedy School of Government and for the International Association of Chiefs of Police.

In 2000, she was asked by a friend who is a priest if she wanted to become a shared employee between the Council of Churches and the police department. She seized the opportunity and did something she had no experience doing—developing a prison re-entry program. Prior to her departure in 2011, the program became a national model featured by the Bureau of Justice.

In terms of her history coming to the North Shore of Lake Superior, Golda said she had been coming up to the area before she met Eleanor. “I would say at least 30 years. So I’ve always loved this area and I love the lake and I like the woods, so that’s kind of what brought me up here,” she explained.

For Golda, when they moved into a condo in downtown Minneapolis, she had not realized how much noise there would be and discussed a compromise. Together they combined their love of the North Shore and Golda’s need, as she explained, “To reclaim the ability to walk directly outside and be quiet.” When they first came up to the North Shore, they would stay for three weeks and return to the city for a week. Now they spend about six weeks up the shore, and only five days in the city.

During the course of my stay in the county, I spent the least amount of time with Golda and Eleanor, as they were out of town on vacation most of the time I was onsite. We were unable to take part in a grand tour activity together, though I did participate in religious services with them. Eleanor presided over two of the services I attended with them.

Most of the women who participated in this study reported a significant amount of learning about themselves and about the North Shore, even if they had been coming to the area for years. The most salient themes that emerged, concerned adaptation, culture, and community engagement. These themes are discussed in the following sections.

Adaptation

The women in the study all reported various types of adaptations and adjustments upon moving to the North Shore. They reported acclimating to the weather, geographic changes, and small-town life; sometimes, though, the change became greater self-sufficiency and development of a network of relationships they did not have elsewhere. Their stories illustrate these points.

Golda never lived in a small town. The hardest part for her was learning how to just *be* in a non-urban environment. “I had to wind down and live with myself. I think that was challenging. Now I have to do the reverse when I go back to the city,” she said. The second thing for her was learning to figure out how to be retired and live without a title. Golda also observed that people tend to be more relational and will come over for coffee and stay for two to three hours. Since Golda did not grow up with a family that camped or spent significant time outdoors, learning to feel comfortable outside was a big

adjustment, especially in the woods. Golda described a time when she and Eleanor rented a cabin through a state park overlooking a waterfall. It was gorgeous. At nightfall, it felt scary. “We moved this huge dining room table in front of the door and I mean, we *weren't* comfortable,” she explained, laughing about the situation in retrospect. Golda learned she was also afraid of the dark. Yet she and her partner could walk in North Minneapolis at night, or other rough parts of the city without a problem. “But put me in the middle of the wilderness and we gotta bar the door. So that’s pretty funny!” she explained.

For Eleanor, a major change was not having a dry cleaning service. “You only wear wash-n-wear; that’s why we all have the same uniform on. Either L.L. Bean, Carhart, or Woolrich.” Eleanor also joked that if you want treats, you have to make them yourself. More significantly though, one must have access to reliable transportation, especially if you do not live in town, she explained. Eleanor and Golda do not have Wi-Fi where they live so they used the public library to access the Internet and email every day it is open. But having a wireless phone service is crucial to ensure safety; like many people they only have cell phones and do not have a land-line service. Verizon, Eleanor explained, was “dinging around with their tower and all of us essentially lost cell phone service wherever we lived, and that’s *really* dangerous...so some of us made some noise and got Verizon to attend to it.” If there were a crisis, a fire, or a health emergency, they would be in trouble without it, Eleanor explained.

Olivia felt the first two years were more challenging than she expected. In winter, she explained, there is a need for meaningful activity. It was a shock to her system to

have nothing to do, so she remodeled her entire kitchen in a two-week period of time. She did not know how to do it, but she learned. She also learned how to make mukluks from moose hide by taking a class at the North House Folk School. When she needed a table, she made one. A major adjustment also concerned darkness. “I think I had never realized how much darkness [there was].” Olivia recalled visiting her son in Philadelphia where he was living at the time and she would be walking around in the evening pushing her granddaughter in a stroller and realized how much artificial light she was accustomed to prior to living in a rural setting. “You can go out and do things. People are out walking around.” When Olivia’s friend came to visit from the east end of London, she asked about the Boundary Waters and said, “Never in my life have I been anywhere where I couldn’t see artificial light,” so Olivia took her into the BWCA. “In a way, seeing things from her perspective was really fun to be able to do. That’s very life-giving I think.” On the topic of light, Olivia swears by owning a headlamp. She also recommended cleats for walking on ice. Other practical advice to newcomers was to keep their sense of joy and keep doing things outdoors. To live on the North Shore, she said, some people must work two to three jobs to make ends meet. For that reason, she said, it is also hard to attract and keep younger, educated people in the county.

Isabella’s major challenge upon moving to the North Shore was clothing. Previously, she dressed for fashion. She had to learn how to layer her clothing in order to keep warm. She also had to mitigate a shoe fetish. “I’m getting a little better; I kind of know what’s going to work and what’s not,” she explained. The food is also different, “Because you can’t just go into like the supermarket and the produce is right there. It’s

not the same here. We don't have as much fresh produce." When people come to visit she asks them to "Please bring up some fresh fruit and veggies." Like Olivia, Isabella had to get accustomed to the darkness and the long nights and what to do with those long nights. Netflix seemed to be her saving grace in wintertime, in addition to *surprise nights* which she said they learned from Eleanor and Golda. She explained it could be anything like going on a tour of the lumber mill or going out to eat.

The major shift for Isabella and Golda together is probably the changing seasons. Because they continue to work and serve the tourist industry in the summer months, "Summer is a like a blink of an eye here," she said. As for winter, "It's more relaxed and so you have dinners and get to see each other and meet for coffee, do stuff, or go hiking; where[as] in the summer you don't do that," she explained. There isn't enough time.

Rhoda's transition to the North Shore was lifelong, gradually moving from the Twin Cities, then to Duluth, and finally living full-time in her home along the North Shore of Lake Superior. Her account of adaptation was more relational. Rhoda knows a lot of people and her stories illustrated how people take care of one another; this also seemed to be her experience. For example, "Almost everybody has a long driveway. If you haven't got enough money to pay for a plow, you're in trouble," Rhoda explained. She said it helps to know people.

Rhoda remembered one winter when there was an unbelievable amount of snow. Her neighbor could not get her vehicle out to get to work as the snow was too deep, but a friend who had four-wheel drive could pick her up if she could just get out to the road. Rhoda explained that a friend rode in on a snowmobile and brought the neighbor a pair of

snowshoes. Even though Rhoda can afford to have her driveway plowed and wood chopped, not everyone can. “And a lot of women do it themselves for years, but can’t at a certain point,” she noted. According to Rhoda, those who live inland and off the grid probably heat more with wood than those who live on the shore. “People on the shore by and large have a little more money,” she observed.

Randy’s commentary on adaptation was simple. She said you need to know winter and summer survival skills. “Carry water when you go on a hike, carry some food; don’t go out in those tight lycra ski outfits; they are not very helpful if you break either a leg or a ski,” she explained. To Randy, it is just common sense. Observant of her own aging, she shared, “Physically my stamina probably isn’t quite what it was so I don’t want to go on an all-day hike...and you have to remember that wherever you go, you’ve gotta get back.”

Betty’s account of adaptation was also relatively simple and concerned outdoor life too. She explained,

You need to be self-sufficient... People used to give me such a hard time because when I go out in winter I have a fanny pack and I have a temporary shelter, I have matches, I have a candle and all these things; I have an ACE bandage and I have food that I take with me. (Betty, personal communication, January 22, 2013)

Betty’s advice was practical about the reality of winter survival if you happened to find yourself in a pinch. “There’s no ski patrol,” she quipped. “There’s not going to be someone who shows up when you dial 911. There *may not* be a phone signal.” Betty seemed to take a lot of pride in being prepared and knowledgeable about going off into the wilderness.

Her partner, Randy, appeared to understand, even though she does not share Betty's stamina. Randy gave Betty a 50-foot rope for her birthday. Betty likes to climb little waterfalls in the wintertime and she described them as gradual, icy declines. Betty said, explaining what she learned from her gay male friend:

You just loop the rope onto a tree root so you can get it loose from below and use that to get down the incline and you just pull the rope back. You never know when you're going to find a place like that and you don't want to slip and fall and you don't want to wonder, "well how am I going to get down this waterfall?" (Betty, personal communication, January 22, 2013)

Most people see running water as a luxury. Betty saw it as an inconvenience at her home on the shore. She explained:

If your septic tank freezes up and your pipes freeze in this kind of weather, what do you do? Well, we don't care, we've got water. We've got our fancy latrine attached to the house with the covered walkway. We've got it made...that was Randy's idea, it's brilliant. We're self-sufficient, we really are. (Betty, personal communication, January 22, 2013)

Betty admitted they have to go now and then to a friend's house to get water. But she could name two dozen people who she could call if she needed to fill up their water jugs. This was just another example of how part of survival on the North Shore is about building important relationships with other people.

According to Betty, no one is going to say,

"No, I don't want you in my house." Whereas, in the cities you might call someone up you don't really know and they are like "uh, well I was just on my way out and the outside spigot doesn't work" because it's winter. (personal communication, January 22, 2013)

Betty recounted on numerous occasions the many differences among people who are overlooked because they need one another to survive. This interdependence between strangers is also symbolic of the culture of the county.

Additionally, nearly all of the women expressed some kind of dismay about the lack of reliable veterinary care, especially for their dogs. All of the participants in the study had at least one dog or cat. Golda mentioned that the closest emergency vet is 104 miles south, in Duluth. In addition to veterinary care, most of the women said they had to learn to live without ethnic restaurants and quality grocery stores like Byerly's. Some of them, like Olivia, have learned to cook what they like to eat. She learned to cook East Indian dishes. Rhoda said she had to learn to live without a movie theater and there are things about actually being in a theatre that you cannot get at home. For example, she said,

I have this thing about movies; there's something to do with going to the movies and someone's coughing, or someone's rustling paper you know. I mean there's just this atmosphere in a movie theater you don't get when you're sitting at home. (Rhoda, personal communication, January 8, 2013)

She used to travel 90 miles and stay overnight in order to see two or three movies in one weekend.

There are other things that all of the women had in common. They shared a love for the arts. Grand Marais is home to the Art Colony, the Arrowhead Center for the Arts, the Grand Marais Playhouse, and the Music Association. They are also involved in the North House Folk School. Still, they drive to the Twin Cities which is over 200 miles away to take in more theatre, art galleries, or the opera. Some even have season tickets.

The arts hold varying degrees of importance. For Golda, arts and culture are the most important aspects of her life with Eleanor. Golda has been able to explore more of her artistic side since moving to the North Shore. She explained,

I've never worked with my hands because all of my art teachers have told me I shouldn't do art. My music teachers told me I shouldn't do music and so I've been taking classes at the Grand Marais Art Colony. (Golda, personal communication, January 30, 2013)

Golda has a small collection of pottery she made that resembles high-end art typically found in a gallery or at an art fair. Additionally, Golda shared:

We try to go to almost all the plays. We support the Playhouse. We try to go to lectures. The music events, we try to go to here. We take some classes at North House Folk School. So I think we do as much of that as we can. If I would say anything, that's probably what I miss from the cities the most. (Golda, personal communication, January 30, 2013)

Rhoda is heavily involved in the literary arts and currently provides support to others by bringing authors to the county. Rhoda and Olivia have both authored a number of books over the years.

Clearly, the rural county is known for its arts and culture. It is also capable of drawing in novices who wish to learn something new, develop existing talent, or improve their skill sets.

Culture

It is without doubt that there is a vibrant and creative community in the county. There is also a lot of culture. Along with the various cultures come meaning or definition, stereotypes, history, and stories. The cultural descriptions that follow provide important contexts about the environments in which the participants live, revealing their own

cultural affiliations while also uncovering some of their values and beliefs about other intersecting cultures with which they have little or no affiliation. These cultures and subsequent descriptions are provided through the lens of the participants in the succeeding accounts. Sometimes, the participants' renditions of the various cultures are humorous, serious, or merely matter-of-fact. Nonetheless, they engaged in the topic with a thought-provoking approach.

Geographically, the culture of the county is divided into four sections. Isabella explained, "There's the Gunflint Trail, the East End, the West End, and Grand Marais." Rhoda referred to the geographic divide as either the "shore" or "inland" in terms of where people lived. Both the inland and Gunflint Trail culture was commonly referred to as more masculine than other areas. Rhoda explained that the divide is not as split as it used to be, because so many people have moved up to the North Shore from other places and have changed the inland culture. Still, she explained, "It used to be much heavier and it is *still* somewhat. [But] the hunter, the fisher, the *men*, the *men*, the *men* dominated the inland culture!" And, she noted, "Women dominated the culture on the West End, on the shore anyway in terms of all of these older women who built their retirement cabins along here. They were teachers then." A number of the retired school teachers, she said, were very likely lesbians whether they called themselves that or not.

Five of the seven participants live on the shoreline of the North Shore, while two of the participants currently rent their home, slightly inland, but up on a ridgeline overlooking Lake Superior. Three of the participants on the shore live on the west end and two live on the east end, and the two who live up on the ridgeline overlooking the

lake are a few miles west of Grand Marais. None of the participants identified with *inland* culture but few identified strongly with any area in particular, despite living in a certain area. All of the participants held the identity of belonging to the county and seemed to hold pride in the fact that they live there. The county identity is strong. Truly, the county is anything but ordinary. One of the local residents humorously described it as the *island of misfit toys*, a reference from *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*.

Even though none of the participants identified with the inland culture, such as the masculinized Gunflint Trail culture, one location in particular was held in positive regard by all participants. In fact, three chose this location for a joint-grand tour; the location is the Trail Center Lodge, referred to as Trail Center. The Trail Center is located 30 miles up the Gunflint Trail on Poplar Lake; it has been a local landmark on the Trail since 1938. Originally, it was a logging camp. Today, “It is now a full service restaurant, gas station, specialty foods, gift store, grocery shop, information center with cabins and a small motel” (Trail Center Lodge, 2013).

Participants spoke highly of the Trail Center from the first audiotaped, kitchen-table conversation. There were numerous reasons the participants enjoyed this place. To name a few, it is where many cultures come together and has a formal declaration that people will respect each other. Another reason is that the owner is a woman, who is very involved in the antiviolence movement for women. Rhoda alluded to the fact that because it’s located *up in the woods* where the culture is different, the women up the Gunflint Trail are *strong* women. The Trail Center seemed to be a symbol of strong women and they were drawn to it. Betty wondered, “How many people have been influenced in some

small way by eating there and reading that [all people are respected] and saying oh, it's a *culture* in this restaurant?"

Despite the moose head on the wall, other dead animals, and antler mounts everywhere, they very much enjoyed the food, the service, and the atmosphere of diverse groups of people coming together in one place so far up the Gunflint Trail. Another reason the participants seemed to love culture of Trail Center is that the so-called writing is literally on the walls. Bumper stickers reflect their beliefs. One sign on the wall reads: Tourists Treated Same as Home Folks. Bumper stickers on the high-back wooden bar chairs in front of the bar speak to some of their own values such as preserving the wilderness, treating others with respect, and nonviolent attitudes. For example, my photographs captured these bumper stickers on the aforementioned bar chairs:

- Who needs Social Security when we've got homeless shelters and food shelters?
- Little Trees Need Hugs Too!
- Well-behaved women rarely make history
- Urban sprawl: Cut down all the trees and name the streets after them
- Free Speech Zone
- A woman without a man is a like a fish without a bicycle
- Coexist
- Indian Country
- I love cats. They taste like chicken
- Vegetarians do it with relish (but wear a condiment)

- An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind
- I used up all my sick days so I called in dead
- Who would Jesus bomb?
- Keep your Butt in the car. The Earth is not your Ashtray
- Last Time We Mixed Politics with Religion...People Got Burned at the Stake
- Hatred is Not a Family Value

Those are just a few of the examples of bumper stickers, and why the Trail Center appealed to the participants who spoke highly of this location. Some of the women said they come up to the Trail Center on Sundays after church for lunch and a hike. On this day, the temperatures had fallen below -20 and a hike was against their better collective judgment.

Additionally, participants described *culture* by those who have always lived there versus those who moved from some other place. Those who have always lived there are identified through the last names of generations of pioneer families, Native Americans, and other locals. Those who have moved from some other place are sometimes referred to as *migrants* or *transplants*, or simply *retirees*. In order to be a local, Isabella said, “You have to have gone to high school here. If you haven’t gone to high school here, well you’re not a local,” she explained. None of the participants in the study identified themselves as being a local, and knew they were considered a transplant of some sort. However, they did identify with one or more of other cultures described in this section.

Culture was also described in accordance with outdoor activities. For example, there are the *motorheads* or people who are involved with snowmobiling and ATVs.

There are the sportsmen, which includes hunters, fisherman, and trappers. The motorheads seem to be fundamentally at odds with the non-motorized outdoors people, who include the cross-country skiers, hikers, and those who snowshoe. By the same token, it may be the snowmobiler who rescues the cross-country skier or hiker who gets lost or injured in the wilderness. As noted earlier, interdependence seems to be a value that is also crucial to survival. There does not appear to be much tolerance for judgment; peaceful coexistence between these groups tends to be the norm. Both groups, it is noted, provide tourism income to the county. The entire participant group seemed to identify with the culture of the non-motorized outdoor people, even though they sometimes acknowledged being less able to participate in these activities as they age—the activities have been something they have enjoyed. None of the participants identified with the motorheads culture.

Other types of people were more or less described haphazardly. For example, Isabella explained, imitating who she referred to as rednecks in a gruff, curt manner, saying things like, “I’ve got my gun and I don’t care what anyone says, move from my property, that wolf’s gone!” Betty noted that there is a Hovland subculture which she described as kind of a joke to some people. “There is a certain self-sufficient maybe slightly Hippie, um, kind of Hovland vibe,” she said. Amusingly, she told the story of Hovland residents who tried to get an ordinance passed, whereby one must cut down lumber on their own land and build a certain percentage of it with their own hands in order to build there, but it never passed. It is not entirely far-fetched though. “A lot of people built their own places and kind of lived off the grid,” Betty explained. None of the

participants expressed any identification with the Hovland culture, but a few of them referred to lesbians who live in Hovland as the *Hovland gals*, acknowledging they are aware of their existence, but they did not seem to be a significant part of participants' social network.

There is also a popular arts culture. In addition to the programs and facilities mentioned earlier (Art Colony, Playhouse, Music Association, etc.), there are a lot of local artists. "I think the art community, the lively art scene has tended to draw people up here who are open to subtlety, nuance, and mystery," Olivia explained. Isabella remembered looking out her window in the summertime and seeing a local artist. "[He was] just standing out in our front yard painting the poppies that are just effusive next door, and then I see it for sale at Sivertsons [art gallery]!" Local art was on display in the homes of every participant in the study; such art observed consisted of poetry, paintings, sculpture, tapestry, pottery, or photography. Most of the art reflected the natural wilderness environment including animals common to the area such as the moose, fox, beaver, wolf, bear, and bald eagle; rocks including polished agates; and trees reflective of the boreal forest such as pine, fir, and spruce, or birch, maple, and aspen trees; photos or maps of Lake Superior and the BWCA were also common.

The culture that was least understood, but most interesting to many of the participants, was the Grand Portage Indian Reservation. Some of the participants have made efforts to increase their own awareness and understanding about the culture. Betty was part of a local book club that read two books from two different periods in history and was led by a woman from Grand Portage. "I don't know much about the rez culture

at all because you really have to belong [to it],” Betty said. Golda shared that the *community* has a creative element in it, and is mostly accepting of diversity, with the exception of longstanding history with Grand Portage Indian Reservation. The problems, she noted, are not caused by people who live in Grand Portage, but quite the opposite:

For example, when they did Highway 61, Chippewa City, which is just out of town, had all these spirit houses and graves and when they put in the Highway, they just got rid of them all... The history isn't...the history starts with who came when they are white, rather than the history that was here. (Golda, personal communication, January 30, 2013)

Golda wonders what impact that has on children in the school. Isabella noted that there is a lot of bullying in the schools and people say things like, “Well it’s Grand Portage [what do you expect?]”

The cultural divide seemed perpetuated by the local newspaper’s *Matter of Record* where criminal records are printed for the public. Isabella explained:

If you call in for anything [its listed in Matter of Record], so they have Grand Marais, Grand Portage, Grand Marais, Grand Portage, so if you have certain things like Grand Portage domestic, alcohol, occasionally and then you have all that kind of stuff you can tell who is here, who is there.... (personal communication, January 23, 2013)

She felt it would be beneficial if the location would be left out of the description as it has become a divisive tool between the Native and non-Native communities. In terms of bridging the divide, several of the interviewees were involved in collaboration between a religious/spiritual group in Grand Marais and a Native art project, *Seen Through Native Eyes*, to connect the cultures and learn together. Many of the women described *social justice* as a meaningful core value they hold. None of the participants identified with being part of the Grand Portage community or culture.

In terms of lesbian culture, it was only mentioned when prompted by interview questions. For example, Isabella said, “Let’s see, what groups I belong to? Gay/Lesbian. I guess I have to put that down.” Isabella recognized that coming out later in life may have spared her the difficulties that others have faced. For example, Isabella explained:

One of the things I realize is that I haven’t had to fight for it. And I haven’t had to be judged. And I haven’t had to have the finger pointed at me. And so, I haven’t really experienced the same pain that some had before me. (personal communication, January 23, 2013)

According to Olivia, “I feel like there might be some lesbian culture up here and I’ve just missed it so far.” She also said she realized she does not think she knows any younger lesbians. Betty, on the other hand, commented on the lesbian culture as younger and employed. She added:

They have lives here. And most of them have come here from somewhere else. They didn’t grow up here...[they] settled and now they are an integral part of the law enforcement community and the natural resources community and I mean, they are all over the place. But, they are younger.... (Betty, personal communication, January 22, 2013)

The subculture of the younger lesbians that Betty described is not necessarily unique. She explained, “Their community isn’t much different from ours in that it is not much different from Duluth or the [Twin] Cities.” By this she said she meant that they organize potlucks, might go for a hike, run their dogs together, or host dinner at their house for one another. Eleanor did not think there was any kind of lesbian culture, though she and Golda did not seem to be drawn to any exclusive group. She explained, “We have gay guy friends, we have lesbian friends; we don’t really hang in anything that I would understand to be a lesbian culture, in fact I don’t even know what that means.”

There was not any designated location that was verifiable as a gay or lesbian establishment of any sort, and although a local tavern was said to be a gay-friendly hangout, it was also stated that it was stereotyped as such because *theatre people* become synonymous with *gay people*. Interestingly, the American Legion Post was noted by a nonparticipant as a place where lesbians occasionally went to shoot pool and drink beer. Otherwise, there does not appear to be a visible or recognizable gay or lesbian culture in the county, though the summertime tends to attract many tourists who were described as *obvious* same-sex couples transforming downtown Grand Marais into a miniature Provincetown (Provincetown is a well-known lesbian tourist destination and home to many gay and lesbian people in Massachusetts). Interestingly, I learned the local Chamber of Commerce reportedly made a conscious decision not to advertise directly to the GLBT population (Anonymous, personal communication, January 31, 2013). However, some businesses do attempt to provide a symbolic invitation by displaying a subtle rainbow flag, welcoming the *gay* dollar.

Finally, few participants commented on a political culture per se, except in relationship to the recent constitutional amendments in the state of Minnesota during the 2012 election (the people of the state of Minnesota voted down the requirement for voter identification and rejected writing the already illegal same-sex marriage into the state's Constitution). A few participants alluded to having a political sign in their yard against at least one of the amendments, and some also have the *Vote No* bumper stickers on their cars to indicate they were against the constitutional amendment relating to banning same-sex marriage.

Community Engagement

All of the participants in the study are somehow engaged in their community and they believe it is important to do so in order to find a sense of belonging in the community. Many of the participants volunteer. Several examples illustrate their claim.

Randy observed, “Most people do participate in life with their neighbors and people help each other certainly. People participate in the life of the community and take their turns being on boards and commissions and that sort of thing.” Rhoda served on the board for the Violence Prevention Center. “Each one of the board members has a *huge* job to do almost. It was demanding as a job time-wise. I loved it,” she explained. She also volunteers at the Care Center, reading to senior citizens as illustrated by a news article I observed on her refrigerator at her home.

Golda, even though she is retired, does take a job from time to time. Last summer she worked two jobs. One was at The World’s Best Donuts. “I thought, what better job to do if you’re retired from the police department than to sell donuts,” she joked. Yet, it is hard work, and before she was hired, they asked if she could deal with the typical massive crowds of tourists, to which she replied, “I’ve been in riots.” Golda also volunteers for Meals on Wheels and the Thrift Shop. At the Thrift Shop, she said, “You technically get paid \$11 per hour.” The money earned goes back to the community to a nonprofit organization designated by the volunteer. She has also used her previous experiences to do some training for the Violence Prevention Center, and volunteers for the Community Emergency Response Team.

Eleanor is involved in the local school as a tutor, she volunteers for Meals on Wheels one day a week, and she helps with medical transports to Duluth where people need a ride to get to a doctor's appointment. She is also part of a quilting group and sings in the chorale. She identified many other places where volunteers were needed, and expressed interest in the local historical society.

Olivia's involvement is strong in her faith community; she gives a lot, especially in her professional capacity to her church. She also volunteered at the local Thrift Shop but did not like it. "The [North House] Folk School has a program where you can earn classes by volunteering and that was really fun," she recalled. Olivia also felt strongly that being part of a faith community in general was very important in order to get to know other people.

Indeed, being part of a faith-based community seemed important for six of the seven participants. Two of the participants belong to more than one religious institution in the county. The participant who is not part of any faith-based institution does, however, jokingly claim membership in a church, even though she does not attend it because when she was hospitalized, members of that church came to visit her. She is basically affiliated by way of the other six participants.

As documented in this section, the biographical accounts by the seven participants in this study do inform a unique curriculum for future generations related to aging. Some of the experiences run counter to the experiences documented in the scholarly literature such as migration patterns from small towns to big cities (Weston, 1995), experiences in religious institutions (Adamczyk & Pitt, 2009; Sherkat et al., 2011), or leading lives that

may seem more or less assimilated, rather than lives without social supports leading to experiences of isolation (Adelman, 1986; Bell & Valentine, 1995). Among these and other examples lie rich possibilities for understanding how people who are lesbians might be able to choose to live anywhere in the world if they wish with a significant amount of class privilege, and those choices may come with learning curves, necessary knowledge about culture and community, and certain adaptations such as those the participants described.

Experience of Support by Aging Lesbians

Three themes emerged in the process of analyzing data that indicated support for aging lesbians in the county. It is important to note that the experience of being a lesbian was repeatedly denied as playing any significant role in supportive aging for most of the participants. The themes that currently support their experiences fall into the general categories of social support, active lifestyles, and health care.

Social Support

The participants described their social support networks as heterogeneous. They find support from people who are not just lesbians and gay men, but also from people who are heterosexual. No one described their social support network as homogenous in any way. Rhoda stated clearly and assuredly, “My social support is mostly heterosexual. They are somewhat intergenerational. A lot of them I have worked with or they have worked for me or something.” Rhoda, the only single woman who was interviewed for the study, made a point that couples do not often socialize with friends who are single.

She sometimes feels a little left behind or forgotten. This is an important item to take note of due to her uniqueness in this study.

Most of the couples socialize with other lesbian or gay male couples, but they described their social network as broader than their immediate friends. Isabella explained that their spiritual group was a major support system for them. The support network was sometimes larger than a group of friends or people who share common interests. “One of the things that is *really* quite unique about this community is that if there’s someone in trouble, someone who gets sick...the community bands together,” explained Isabella. For her, that is what it means to be part of the community. As such, the county identity that seems to trump sexual identity is also reflected in how the participants described their social support networks—broad based and heterogeneous. Differences are set aside. As Betty put it, “That’s a secret of living here. Nobody gets to judge anybody.”

Active Lifestyles

Most of the participants lead what they would characterize as *active* lives, and they supported each other’s notions that one had to be healthy and active in order to age on the North Shore. The ability to be active, though, is sometimes dependent on what you have at your disposal to actually *be* active. Most of the participants have the proper outdoor gear to keep them active. The day before their interview, Eleanor and Golda shared that they ran into an 85-year-old woman who had just been out cross-country skiing.

For Eleanor and Golda, it is important for them to exercise too, but it is harder in the winter. Eleanor explained, “We walked our road yesterday, but we both had trax on.”

She added that many older people do not like to venture outside in the wintertime because they are afraid they are going to fall. The *trax* they referred to are made of flexible rubber with metal springs or small chains that stretch over the base of a shoe or boot from front to back, and provide a grip on packed snow or ice for improved traction. Golda said she and Eleanor try to get out and walk or hike at least two miles every day. Many people in town head just east of Grand Marais to Croftville Road for their exercise—it is a road that stretches along the North Shore of Lake Superior. From end to end the road is 1.5 miles. Most people walk from one end to the other and back for a solid three-mile walk.

Olivia is also very active and uses something similar to *trax*: she uses cleats. She wore them during a hike up the frozen Kadunce River and was able to gain enough traction to climb up many gradual inclines of frozen waterfalls, and of course get back down them. Betty explained, “If you’re not in your 80s or 90s, you’re out doing something...you’re out skiing or you’re out snowshoeing, or you’re out walking.” In terms of her own awareness of aging, Betty said, “I know I am not going to be snowshoeing up into the hinterlands so much [when I feel older]; I might just do a loop on Artist’s Point or something.” At this juncture in her life, though, there seems to be little standing in Betty’s way; she will continue to hike the trails and remain active in the outdoors. As for Rhoda, she used to be more active and enjoyed hiking the river trails, though she admits she was an ambler. She is now diabetic and has to deal with neuropathy in her feet, which prevents her from walking very far. Overall, the participants all seem to enjoy the outdoors where their activities take place.

Healthcare Needs

While health care is severely limited in terms of access to specialists, the existing care for *most of the participants* was discussed in positive terms. They have good relationships with the doctors and dentists and they are able to be open about their sexuality to these professionals. Golda explained:

The healthcare is very dear here, and they'll say "How is your partner?" and they are very inclusive when you come to the doctors, but I worry more about how it would be if we were in assisted living. We don't have assisted living. How would that go? (personal communication, January 30, 2013)

Some of the healthcare support staff in town are also openly gay. A seemingly simple piece of support was a form at the doctor's office. "I think they have a form [that asks] whether you are married, single, divorced, widowed, *partnered*," explained Eleanor. She felt that was pretty sophisticated for a small town, but figured it may just be the case because of the gay men who work there and are out, rather than closeted.

In terms of healthcare insurance, Eleanor and Golda were the only participants who mentioned having long-term care insurance; they are insured as a couple. Golda, who commented on health care said, "I think if you're in great health, that being here is fine. But if you're not in really good health, and you need medical services, how does that play out?" Some things will likely remain unknown until they have to face these issues firsthand.

In sum, most of the participants did not need very much health care, nor do they plan on needing it with any immediacy at their current age. Looking ahead into the future or telling the stories of people they know who have had to access specialized care gave

them further insight into what their own future might hold. The outlook for the participants' future, if it is anything like the stories some of them shared, would not be characterized as supportive. The North Shore would then be a more difficult place for people in general who are aging.

Lack of Support Experienced Among Aging Lesbians

Three themes emerged in the process of analyzing data. Participants described ways in which aging lesbians lack support on the North Shore of Lake Superior. As with the previous section regarding their experiences of support, it is important to note that the participants' experience of being a lesbian was repeatedly denied as a significant factor in aging, except for those noted in this section—legal concerns in particular. Rhoda explained forthrightly, “My own personal opinion is that it doesn't make any difference, you're all going to get old whether you're a lesbian or gay or straight, to state the obvious.” The themes that emerged indicating a lack of support for aging lesbians on the North Shore of Lake Superior fell into three general categories of health care, access, and legal concerns.

Health Care

In terms of health care for participants, it was discussed in mostly positive terms relating to their current needs in the previous section. However, *some participants* do currently have health issues that they are unable to find support for within the county. In order to find specialty care for health problems, the closest specialists are 90-110 miles away.

At the time of her interview, Rhoda was laid up with a broken foot. When I arrived at her door, she was visible through a window and waved at me from a chair; I noticed she had her foot elevated. She had to get a ride to Duluth the day before, which was 90 miles from her home. She was wearing a boot to protect her foot, and needed the assistance of crutches to move around her home. Rhoda was also unable to drive. Because she is single, there was no one living with her to help her. The task of getting a glass of water or making breakfast was difficult for her. She said, “Everything is a production. I ate breakfast standing up this morning because to bring it all up would have been harder, you know?” For meals, Rhoda would need to rely on her sons who both live nearby or call upon friends. Despite having her sons nearby, she said, “I think in my case sometimes people don’t even think to help me because of my kids, [which] even adds on to it [the difficulty] if I don’t get any help from them, you know?” She acknowledged her sons do have their own lives and are not always available. Rhoda also has other health problems that she needs to see a specialist for in Duluth, all requiring significant travel for specialty care.

Isabella currently travels 110 miles to see a specialist in Duluth because she has glaucoma in both eyes. Contemplating her future and those of her age peers, she acknowledged there is a need for assisted living in addition to specialty health care. “I think one of the things people are seeing is that people have to move away,” she said. “I think for a lot of [us] being in [the county] means being active, so if anything happens to curtail that...a lot of people don’t stay here,” she explained. Isabella, who works with

hospice and palliative care, is familiar with the situations of many of the local residents.

Isabella explained:

I just heard of a woman who is an artist, who has no family and she's 89. And, she still drives. She's forgetting like, I think she cooks for herself but what's happening is, errands and picking up her mail, she has no one. She has no family. It's friends who are saying, okay how can I help? (personal communication, January 23, 2013)

Care Partners, Isabella said, is an excellent program that provides assistance a few times per week. Otherwise, the next step for people is the Care Center which is attached to the hospital; it is a nursing home. There is only one place she described as an assisted living facility, but "you have to be able to feed yourself [and] dress yourself. You just might need someone overlooking your meds or something like that." The facility is described as *very* expensive, and it is currently the only so-called assisted living facility available. Some people who I spoke with actually found someone to live in their home with them to provide basic care and run errands in trade for room and board.

Although Randy has no intention of using health care more than absolutely necessary, she felt health care was a significant issue too.

...needing health care and becoming a little more infirm with age, I think aging does impact people maybe a little bit more but in different ways than in the Twin Cities because there are fewer services, although the services are being expanded and increased as I think of all of us Boomers age, it's being recognized as a real need here. (Randy, personal communication, January 21, 2013)

Randy acknowledged that health care is not what it needed to be and she felt her generation was probably going to have a large impact on meeting needs of a growing, aging population. Isabella echoed Randy's sentiments with hopes that Baby Boomers will

have an impact. Even though most of the participants do not have major healthcare issues at this time, all of the participants mentioned the need for assisted living.

Access

Access plays a major role in aging on the North Shore of Lake Superior, particularly in the wintertime when all bear the reality of the cold and harsh climate of northern Minnesota. One must deal with ice, snow, and the occasional blizzard or ice storm capable of downing trees and leaving people stranded to freeze to death; these are extreme examples of the danger that the natural elements produce, providing hindrances to mobility and travel. In general, though, a steep driveway or simple ice can be enough to make an older person decide not to go outside. Therefore, access to daily activities becomes hindered by weather or terrain-related barriers. Rhoda decided not to make a 20-mile drive into town for a planned lunch to be part of a grand tour activity; because of heavy snowfall, she had to cancel. "I just don't risk it anymore," she said.

As Betty shared, there are not sidewalks where she and the other participants live on the outskirts of town, and in the wintertime she said, "Roads get plowed when they get plowed and so there is a certain sense that you have to be more careful." In addition to the impact that weather plays on mobility, transportation could be an issue for people as they age, though the participants have not yet had to deal with the issue. When a person is no longer able to drive, life in a rural area such as this one could become problematic. There are no buses. There are no taxi cabs. There is one source of travel up and down the shore: the Arrowhead Transit (AT). The AT only goes to Duluth on the fourth Thursday of each month, according to the AT website (Arrowhead Transit, 2012). A local

physician reported that the AT runs to Duluth twice a month (S. Stover, personal communication, March 10, 2013). A few of the participants mentioned the AT during interviews, but they did not know where it stopped, whether it had routes near their homes, or when it was available.

The participants in the study all had their own transportation; most had vehicles equipped with four-wheel drive. It is unlikely they have had to ponder how their life might change if they became incapable of driving. However, if the time comes and they need transportation, their access to regular transportation would likely become a hindrance to their independence in aging and limit their mobility where they are currently living.

Legal Concerns

Some participants in the study addressed legal concerns as a major issue in terms of lacking support in aging, specifically related to being in a same-sex relationship. Isabella described going to a wedding and coming home, telling her partner, Olivia, “I feel really sad because we can’t get married.” Even though they have their healthcare directives and a will, she does not have confidence that it will be honored by other family members. “Everyone else in the family trumps [me],” she explained. She knows that blood relatives can still override a so-called same-sex domestic partner in an emergency room situation, or contest issues in a will. “That’s the only thing,” Isabella said. Then she asked, “How will my children *honor* our will? How will our children *honor* our directives? You know, how will I be able to minister to my life partner?”

Olivia recognized these problems as well. She considered their financial security and mentioned her ex-husband and recalled, “I really supported a whole lot of what he had done for a long time, and he had done the same to me...” She could relate to the financial security that is often lacking in same-sex relationships where one is not automatically entitled to the retirement benefits of their partner, nor their social security. Isabella’s ex-husband is in fact deceased, and she is able to collect social security from her marriage to him. This would not be the case for a same-sex couple. Despite the legal concerns she and her partner shared, Olivia said, “I’m happier to have the relationship that I have now, and lots of other things I have living here, but, it’s [financial security] a little scary.”

Golda mentioned that she and her partner Eleanor have long-term health insurance as a couple. Thinking about health care, she said, “Both of us have been married previously, and Eleanor has kids and I do, but I’m not connected to mine. So there’s a whole different network that you need when you don’t have children underneath to support you.” The course of aging for all of the participants seems difficult to predict. On one hand, there are legal problems with discrimination against same-sex partners and on the other hand, there are the fears of family members overriding the wishes between two committed adults, and the grim reality that they do not have access to the rights and benefits of a legal marriage (MetLife Mature Market Institute, 2010).

Rhoda’s assessment of these issues was that “lesbians, who are not alone, are *going* to be alone, eventually. It’s better to plan ahead,” she said. “I think that we should maybe be more aware of that and work on it *with* our single friends and with the

knowledge that we will all be single someday probably.” Rhoda’s comments about doing something about the problem of aging and being alone was the first hint that any participant was willing to do something about the problems facing an aging population. There is certainly a belief that things will change, and there is strong faith that Baby Boomers will bring about necessary change. No one discussed personal advocacy beyond political action already taken by voting against the proposed constitutional amendment in last November’s election to ban same-sex marriage, which is already illegal in the state of Minnesota.

Summing up aging, Golda said it best: “Aging is not for *Woosies*. Things happen to your body. You become aware of your own mortality. You watch your limitations of your body. So you have to finally come to terms with death.” Some of those terms are most certainly the complications of an unjust legal system that continues to instill fear in same-sex couples who do not have the security of a legal marriage. Contemplating the fate of the single lesbian, Golda said, “What would it be like to live up here if I didn’t have a partner, ‘cause death will waltz in. And it’s usually not a dance card that you have waiting. It’s a dance card that comes calling on you.” The voices of the seven women who participated in this study are clear, experienced, and wise. They are also seemingly open and accepting of fate to a degree, while they work hard to keep themselves healthy and well, all the while understanding their limitations.

Summary

The lesbian women on the North Shore of Lake Superior all shared an early love for this geographic area. They discussed the many cultures of the county in which they

live, as well as how they adapted to the North Shore when they decided to establish a life there. They also discussed the many ways in which they felt supported or unsupported as aging lesbians on the North Shore of Lake Superior. In Chapter V, observations and analyses about the rural location in which this study took place, participants' social environments, the concept of place, and the North Shore of Lake Superior will be discussed. An analysis of culture and perceived class status as it relates to the experiences of the women who participated in the study, in addition to limitations of the study and directions for further research, will also be provided.

CHAPTER V. DISCUSSION

Introduction

This ethnography revealed the lived experiences of seven aging lesbians, 61-67 years old, who were called to the North Shore to establish a life. They bridge two generations by definition including the Silent Generation born from 1925-1945, and the Baby Boomer generation born from 1946-1964. Several themes emerged in this study, some of which confirm or contradict the existing body of scholarly literature. Other themes emerged and are discussed in detail with an attempt to bring to the fore what I believe actually comprises a unique subculture of the aging lesbians who participated in this study. The interpretation of the findings and subsequent conclusions are discussed in this chapter. As it relates to documenting a curriculum that is extracted from the lived experiences of aging lesbians, the knowledge, skills, and values most worthwhile to the participants in this study did not concern matters relating to sexual orientation. On the contrary, the knowledge, skills, and values that were deemed most important to the participants in this study seemed to concern their sense of community, social networks, and their relationship to the environment.

Summary of Findings and Conclusions

Previous research indicated that there were few studies researching lesbians over age 60 (Woolf, 1998). Bell and Valentine (1995) said that research about sexuality in the context of rural environments was sparse. In terms of studies that did include aging lesbians, those with rural identities were largely absent (Comerford et al., 2004; Kehoe,

1989; McCarthy, 2000). This study intentionally sought out lesbians who were over the age of 60 and living in a rural environment. The following subsections discuss results specific to participants' rural location, social environment, and migration, in addition to the uniqueness of place, culture, and class.

Rural

Unique to this study is most certainly the specificity of this rural location. The participants deemed the location different from other small towns and communities in which they have lived. The cohesive and overarching county identity above all else, and the relative unimportance of participants' lesbian identity in their lives are interesting. In terms of existing in or out of the proverbial closet, they appear spatially ambiguous; they are neither in, nor out. Their sexual orientation was seemingly mundane to them and of little consequence in their daily lives as aging lesbians who live in a rural environment, which makes these participants intriguing to me.

Bell and Valentine (1995) concluded that rural areas were isolating places with “unsupportive social environments and a chronic lack of structural services and facilities leading to eventual or projected emigration to larger (urban) settlements which offer better opportunities” (p. 116). In this study, there are indeed many ways in which the rural place is geographically isolating as it exists along the North Shore of Lake Superior, where the lake extends to the horizon. Inland, the surroundings consist of Canada to the north, and a dense inland wilderness bordering the BWCA.

Social Environment

In terms of the social environment, consistent with existing literature, the aging lesbians who participated in the study all had supportive social networks that were described as non-homogenous, and some identified these networks similar to “families of choice” (Degges-White, 2012; Fredriksen-Goldsen & Muraco, 2010; Knauer, 2011; Oswald, 2002). In Grossman et al. (2000), these support networks usually consist mostly of other GLB people. Even though participants in this study do have a small network of same-sex couples and single gay people with whom they might regularly socialize, they seem to be living *mostly* integrated, self-described *assimilated* social lives with the majority of their support coming from people who identify as heterosexual.

Insofar as the structural services that one might find in a metropolitan area catering to a wider GLBT community are concerned, they are indeed absent in this particular place. More noteworthy, though, this structural absence does not seem to hinder their quality of life in any way. It is relevant that most of the women in the study were previously married to men; they married men because that was what was expected of them at that time. Some of the women are divorced and came out later in life having little or no contact with a lesbian culture. Additionally, their generation would be characterized as pre-Stonewall, which means they probably did not form any dependence upon GLBT structural supports, dependent of course on the year and context in which they came out (Parks, 1999; Rosenfeld, 1999).

In terms of this particular rural environment, the aging lesbians in this study from both the Silent and Baby Boomer generations are living seemingly whole, fulfilling,

productive lives in which they regularly contribute to their communities, report feeling assimilated and accepted, and have contact with other gay men and lesbians. Although such contact with other gay men and lesbians has varying levels of meaning and importance to each participant, it does not seem to be needed to maintain their own sense of identity in terms of their sexual orientation.

Migration

In terms of migrating patterns, the participants in this study all moved from urban centers to this rural environment on the North Shore of Lake Superior. Some grew up in smaller towns and moved to metropolitan areas prior to their subsequent movement to the North Shore; however, some did not. Knopp and Brown (2003) studied migration patterns based on sexual orientation and found that lesbians tend to be “in-migrants” from “large metropolitan areas” more so than gay men (p. 417). Knopp and Brown (2003) also indicated finding that some gay men and lesbians move between the rural and urban environment on a regular basis, calling this a “hybrid” identity in terms of residence (p. 417). In this case, hybridity of residence appears to be presently modeled by four of the seven participants (Betty, Randy, Eleanor, and Golda). In any case, there does not appear to be any concrete pattern per se that would illustrate a trend about aging lesbians and their decision to take up residence on the North Shore, other than a love for Lake Superior.

Place

Whitlock (2010) stated, “Queer narratives, like any others, can neglect to trouble the intricacies of place, and thereby lack critical dimension” (p. 272). The discussion of

place in this study adds an undeniable, critical dimension to aging studies about lesbians, but also about aging in general.

The place in this study, known as the North Shore of Lake Superior, has been regarded as a spiritual place (King, 2002). Participants fondly referred to the lake as *she*, giving it a female gender pronoun. They also referred to the lake as *Mother Superior*, giving it a multidimensional identity by associating it not only with femaleness, but also with power and religiosity. This is similarly reflective of how the participants may be seen through their own biographical lens. One participant referred to herself and her partner as, “We’re not shrinking violets.” She said she knew they were powerful women.

In terms of power, participants in this study have been in leadership positions in their communities, their employment, and/or civic organizations. Likewise, they all identify as female. In terms of religiosity, all of the participants except for one attend religious services on a regular basis, while three have been professionally affiliated with a religious denomination. The one who does not attend religious services still calls a particular church, “the church I don’t attend,” but she is affiliated by association with its members. All participants would most likely agree that they relate strongly to Lake Superior; it played and continues to play a strong role in their desire to live within view of this powerful body of water. Participants described the lake as calming, healing, and relaxing. It is unquestionable that the lake, although not made explicit, could be seen as playing a supportive role in participants’ aging and overall health and well-being.

In addition to place and the positive attributes associated with place, it takes on new meaning and provides additional challenges to people as they age and *if* they become

infirm. For example, participants identified three areas that provided challenges to them as they age. Two warrant discussion here: health care and access. The need for specialty health care was illuminated because it is currently 80-110 miles away from their residence (or more if one lived farther north up the shore or inland). In addition to health care, the issue of access was a concern. Access addressed transportation and personal mobility; the weather can play a major role in access. Some areas of access cannot be easily overcome. For example, the cold, oftentimes sub-zero winter temperatures, unpredictable lake effect weather, and normally regular and heavy snowfalls make outdoor activity very difficult. Participants noted that it is important to lead an active lifestyle to maintain good health, and that good health was important in order to live there. Additionally, steep and rocky terrain, dense wilderness, and remoteness all add complexity to aging.

It is factual that sidewalks are currently nonexistent where each of the participants live, and there are few places to go for a walk without worrying about the weather, terrain, or other dangers. Exercise remains an important part of what participants deemed necessary in order to stay healthy. At the time of the data collection, the YMCA was building a new facility for the county. Plans for the new YMCA included an indoor walking track. This, along with the other health and wellness programs and services, will be accessible with a membership to the YMCA. However, if the weather, a steep driveway, ice, or lack of access to snow removal prevent one from leaving their home, the YMCA facility becomes meaningless. At some point, for all aging members of the community, the North Shore may become seemingly impossible to navigate.

Also, there are elements of this particular location that one must simply accept and live with until one is no longer able to do so. These barriers to health care and access also create a *culture* of aging that seems to be all too true for locals and long-time residents who have already experienced the need to take care of an aging family member. They have likely learned how to navigate the challenges of distant specialty care and lack of assisted living. When one's independence wanes, and the stress of finding care outweighs the ability to feel the positive effects of the environment, it does not matter who you are—living independently on the North Shore becomes nearly impossible. Anecdotal information suggests that county-supported assisted living would drive up overall healthcare costs; it was described by a local resident as unrealistic at this time. Travel to specialists is a way of life in the county; it is one of many trade-offs for living in a remote area.

Lastly, place was important to the participants and had an impact on their decisions to come to the North Shore; it also played a major role in learning how to live in it. They identified adaptations, culture, and community engagement as important in their learning about the area and how to live successfully in the new environment. Two areas should be highlighted that gave the researcher additional insight into perspectives that are relevant to discuss in terms of participants' relative comfort in the county. Patterns and themes existed in terms of which cultures the participants were engaged in, but patterns also exist in terms of what they do not engage in culturally. These two areas are culture and class status.

Culture

There are several cultures with which participants did not identify. They were the Grand Portage Indian Reservation and nearby Hovland, motorhead culture, the repeatedly masculinized Gunflint Trail, and those who fish, hunt, and trap. It is important to note that these cultures are the oldest and most longstanding cultures that have dominated the county, with the exception of the motorheads. Also, women participate in all of these cultures. The Gunflint Trail was home to many women who were self-sufficient, served as guides on the Trail, nearby lakes, and into the BWCA; some of those women were also lesbians. For locals, hunting, fishing, and trapping have been a way of life, or a generational bonding experience rather than a gendered activity. And, it is likely a necessity for economic reasons.

Class

Participants were never asked about their income, assets, financial stability, or class status. However, all of the participants in the study are college educated; some have more than one degree or a terminal degree. All of the participants live on the North Shore near Lake Superior, and/or have a view of Lake Superior from their residence; one participant indicated that it is much more costly living on the shore versus living inland. Additionally, some women have the ability to retire before the age of 65, while others can afford to have wood chopped and snow plowed for them. Some of the participants have retirement funds. None of the participants considered themselves *locals* who were described as growing up in the county and graduating from the county high school. In essence, they have transplanted from somewhere else, and some are retirees who also

have more than one residence. These observations indicate a certain level of class privilege for most of the participants.

In particular, a story is recalled that a participant told about a parade some of the women attended in a neighboring county. She described the environment as being “visibly working class.” Working class was also associated with feelings of discomfort for them. This discomfort was also supported by the fact that the county voted for the proposed constitutional amendment that would have written a ban of same-sex marriage into the state’s Constitution. The county in which they live on the North Shore, however, voted overwhelmingly against the amendment, which was indeed defeated in the state of Minnesota last year. What I find interesting is that the county in which all of these women live is in fact sustained by a working class, which includes foreign student workers whose very survival depends upon the tourist economy to support them. Many members of this working class must work two to three jobs to make ends meet which was in fact mentioned by some of the participants.

In sum, revealing the culture and class differences are critically important. These differences lead the researcher to believe that the women who are described as aging lesbians in this particular county on the North Shore actually comprise a rather unique subculture, which was an unexpected finding. Personally, as a researcher, these and other findings certainly revealed class issues within lesbian culture and the fluidity and privilege that class status provides. For instance, the level of safety perceived in an environment seems to create a psychological sense of well-being. On the other hand, a

lack of perceived safety or support seems to create a sense of discomfort, maybe even vulnerability.

It is true that no local, working-class lesbians over age 60 were recruited for the study, nor did they emerge during the course of the study. In fact, they remained silent and hidden. This calls into question the notion of true assimilation of aging lesbians on the North Shore of Lake Superior. Those who participated in the study believe their sexual orientation to be of little or no consequence to others with whom they come into contact; however, their self-perceptions may not speak the same truths for other lesbians, aging or not, who inhabit the area despite the culture of interdependence already described. Working-class lesbians, especially if they would be considered locals, may have too much to lose if they did come out.

Delimitations and Limitations

The findings of this study are not meant to be generalized beyond the participants who were studied. The context of the study included a location that was deemed unique, even by the participants. Their experiences of the rural community described in the study was regarded as exceptional and set apart from other rural places they have lived. Also, data collection took place during the winter season; the participants were neither observed nor engaged in activities outside of the winter season during the course of the study. None of the participants in the study are locals; all of the lesbian women came from metropolitan areas prior to establishing a life on the North Shore of Lake Superior. Insofar as the term “elder” is concerned, I do not believe that the subculture of lesbians who participated in this study would consider themselves “elders” within the lesbian

community. Elder, I believe, is not a term to be used lightly and it is not given in accordance with age; it is a term used to identify older lesbians who pass on teachings and important traditions to successive generations as it relates to lesbian culture. The term “elder” as it might be applied to aging lesbians ought to be reserved for those who find value in lesbian culture and community and are willing to share what they learned with generations who come after them. Elders serve their community in this capacity specifically. I believe that GLBT culture in general is in dire need of cultural elders.

Suggestions for Future Research

There are countless directions for future research. Because lesbians, especially aging lesbians in rural areas, continue to be invisible in the scholarly research, more studies inclusive of rural lesbians are encouraged. Further research on the North Shore that is inclusive of local, working-class lesbians is also encouraged, and would add another critical dimension to this particular study. Added depth and understanding may also come from studies involving women (including lesbians) who participate in cultures that were not experienced or mostly unexplored by the participants in this study such as those from Grand Portage Indian Reservation, Hovland, the Gunflint Trail, and those involved in hunting, fishing, and trapping to gain a wider understanding of the role that gender and sexual orientation play today. Finally, more multi-demographic, place-based ethnographic studies to continue building on the lived experiences of aging lesbians in other parts of the state, the country, and the world should be encouraged.

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