

**RELATING WOMEN:  
LESBIAN EXPERIENCE OF FRIENDSHIP**

Submitted by  
Tania Lienert  
BA (Hons.) Deakin

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Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

La Trobe University  
Bundoora, Victoria, 3086  
Australia

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**In memory of**  
**Thelma Solomon**  
**Annette Pollock**  
**Christine McCarthy**

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**ABSTRACT**

Friends are of crucial importance to lesbians' lives, their significance heightened due to lack of acceptance from blood family, work colleagues and society. Despite a proliferation of literature on lesbians' love relationships, lesbians' friendships remain understudied. In the light of theorising about widespread shifts in intimacy patterns in modern industrial societies, this thesis examines the role of friendship for contemporary lesbians. It takes an interdisciplinary approach, using lesbian feminist, feminist psychological and mainstream sociological theories to interpret lesbians' negotiations of their friendships and preoccupations with their own continually developing sense of self.

The study finds that firstly, the most significant issue in negotiating friendships is deciding on a lesbian identity despite socialisation to 'compulsory heterosexuality'. Friends are expected to be accepting and supportive or they are lost. Discrimination, the fact that the lover is the 'best friend', struggles with difference in lesbian communities, time constraints and a more general shift to individualism mean that community and family contacts are replaced by small, supportive and affirming friendship networks. These meet needs and within them lesbians negotiate a sense of self, but for the most part with no template of political consciousness. Secondly, while friendships are important, they are also difficult. The fluidity of the friendship relationship, blurred boundaries between friends and lovers, and women's moral 'imperative to care' all provide barriers to communication. Thirdly, while lesbians value 'the relational self', a confident sense of self is challenged when close-connected relationships sit at odds both with mainstream, heterocentric culture, and with traditional models of psychology which promote independence and separateness.

Lesbians who are confident communicators, who have access to alternative feminist discourses which value relatedness, and who, together with their friends, are open to change, are able to negotiate satisfactory friendships and relationships. The study demonstrates lesbians' complex subjectivities as changing selves are

negotiated through friendships, love relationships and communities, particularly through experiences of loss.

**STATEMENT OF AUTHORSHIP**

Except where reference is made in the text of the thesis, this thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis or any other degree or diploma.

No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgement in the main text of the thesis.

This thesis has not been submitted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

All research procedures reported in the thesis were approved by the Deakin University Ethics Committee and the La Trobe University Human Ethics Committee.

Tania Lienert ..... Date .....

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## INTRODUCTION

*Ellen I wish I could live with you always. I begin to cling to you more fondly than ever I did. If we had but a cottage and a competency of our own, I do think we might live and love on till Death without being dependent on any third person for happiness.*

*What shall I do without you? How long are we likely to be separated? Why are we to be denied each other's society – I long to be with you. Why are we to be divided? Surely, Ellen, it must be because we are in danger of loving each other too well – of losing sight of the Creator in idolatry of the creature.*

*Letters from Charlotte Bronte to Ellen Nussey, 1836 and 1837  
(cited in Miller, 1993: 35-36)*

*It was a very very intense emotional relationship. Very very, at some stages (pause) um. It was like we were going out together, but we just weren't having sex, or being sexual with each other ...she'd write that she really wanted to strengthen the relationship and um all these amazing things in the letter about (pause) don't know how to explain it, but it was actually quite intense ... I mean where does the line stop? Yeah and that's what's really bizarre like I don't think it does, it's really hard to draw lines with those sort of friendships, at times apart from at sex.*

*Interview with Lucy, a lesbian aged 26, about her friend Daniela, 1997*

One hundred and sixty years separate these two reflections of women's intense friendships. They differ in language, context and circumstance, yet the voices speak clearly of the importance of women's friendship and the challenges of maintaining them in the context of personal and social censure.

This thesis is concerned with how friendship is experienced by lesbians in the context of the social changes of the late twentieth century. It examines the significance of friendship for 40 contemporary lesbians in rural, regional and metropolitan Victoria, Australia, using qualitative data from 40 questionnaires and 25 interviews. Like most work in women's studies, it is interdisciplinary. It

combines lesbian feminist, feminist psychological and mainstream sociological approaches to provide both a critical feminist analysis of lesbians' friendships, and a contribution to theorising about suggested widespread shifts in intimacy patterns in modern industrial societies.

Three quarters of the lesbians studied are of Anglo-Australian descent, and one-quarter from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds. They come from a mixture of working class and middle class backgrounds. Most are aged between 30 and 60, and are focused on relationships, careers, study, and children. More than half have children, mostly from former heterosexual relationships, although for two-thirds of these, their children are now grown. They identify as feminists, but not with lesbian feminist politics. Although they are aware of feminist and lesbian and gay activism and politics and it informs their lives, most are not politically active.

The identities and friendship practices discussed in this thesis demonstrate the impact of four distinct historically shaped discourses on contemporary lesbians: passionate or 'best' friendships with their lovers and others (nineteenth century romantic friendships); identities based on sexual relationships with their lovers (a continuous pattern heightened by the sexual politics of the 1980s and 1990s); equal, mutual and friendship-based relationships with their lovers (the second-wave feminist and lesbian-feminist ideal that is part of a posited 'transformation of intimacy' (Giddens, 1992) in late capitalism); and the postmodern project of self-development that is part of a more widespread shift to individualism in the contemporary west. Yet lesbian identities and practices have not developed in a linear, progressive way. This thesis explores how lesbians draw on these historical and modern discourses, sometimes unconsciously, and how they weave them together and lay them across each other as they attempt to make sense of their friendship experiences.

Given that lesbians and other sexual minorities have fought for and won a limited measure of acceptance or tolerance in western liberal democracies in recent decades, yet continue to be marginalised, it is not surprising that their experiences of friendships and love sit at odds with mainstream culture. In particular, the

postmodern push to individualism over community, backed up by a plethora of counsellors and therapists who push individuation in personal relationships, sits uneasily with the pleasures of these women's close-connected relationships.

The women in this thesis are on a journey of self-discovery, but it is not the isolated, individuated, angst-ridden journey experienced by male postmodernists, such as those described by Elliott (2001). Nor is it experienced in the company of large numbers of others, such as in the consciousness-raising groups that were common in the women's movement of the 1970s. Rather the women negotiate a sense of self through the establishment and development of and changes in their close-connected friendships and relationships. The results confirm the research of a small but influential group of feminist psychologists who argue that, as Janet Surrey puts it, 'identity and relationships develop in synchrony' (1991: 63). This study puts the processes of lesbians' friendships under the microscope, looking for how these personal relationships are played out in different contexts, and what this means for the lesbians studied.

### *Origins of the study*

My aims and directions reflect my own position and interests. I am an educated, white Australian woman who chose a lesbian path in the late 1980s. I 'came out' into a vibrant lesbian feminist community in Adelaide in my early 20s. There were similar communities in most Australian cities, the members of which I met at annual summer holiday camps, festivals and conferences. As I travelled around Australia and overseas and moved interstate, I felt part of a national and international lesbian feminist community. As a Women's Studies student at a university with strong anti-discrimination laws and feminist and lesbian staff, I was free to study lesbian issues without comment.

My interest in studying friendship in general arose because, at the time I began the thesis, at the age of 29, I had been single for more time than I had been in relationships. I had been embraced and supported by a network of friends, was active in my community, and felt secure in my identity as a single woman. Writers

on friendship argue that social research has tended to downgrade friendship as an important aspect of life (Lopata, 1981; Derlega and Winstead, 1986; Hynes, 1989; O'Connor, 1992; Hamson, 1995). When my early surveying of the literature revealed gaps in the study of lesbians and friendship it became clear that there was a need for such studies by lesbians such as myself, and I shifted my focus to this area. My reading uncovered not just the 'resolutely heterosexist' (Kitzinger, 1996a: 295) studies of women's friendships Frances Doughty (1982), Celia Kitzinger (1996a) and Suzanna Rose (2000) comment on (eg. Johnson and Aries, 1983; Bell, 1981; Brown, 1981; Bankoff, 1983; Roberts and Scott, 1984; Fox *et al*, 1985; Gouldner and Strong, 1987; Aukett *et al*, 1988; Berkman, 1996), but also ones that stringently denied lesbian relationships (Faber, 1980) or were blatantly homophobic and pathologised lesbians (Wolff, 1971).

My intention was to achieve what Jeanne Stanley calls a 'non-pathological perspective': moving away from homophobia, past moderate acceptance, towards the affirmation of lesbian lives (1993: 115-116). (See Chapter Two for a discussion of 'insider' research).

Beginning with a radical feminist framework, I was inspired by texts on friendship as political by lesbian and feminist ethicists, philosophers and theologians from the US and UK (Hoagland, 1988; Heyward, 1989; Hynes, 1989; Jeffreys, 1990; Raymond, 1991a; 1991b; Hunt, 1992; Lugones, 1992; and Mohin, 1996). My questionnaires and interviews were designed to test their theories with Australian lesbians. I also hoped to make a contribution towards what Mary Hunt (1992) describes as a society that celebrates all kinds of friendships as important, not just couple relationships. Following Raymond (1991a) and Hunt (1992), I aimed to come up with models for social change. However, participants' varied and complex stories, my own shift from being single to partnered, and a change of universities saw me broadening and changing my approach. I considered insights from feminist post-structuralist, psychological and psychoanalytic theories (eg. Scott, 1992; Flax, 1978; 1993a; 1993b), as well as from sociologists who have suggested and charted widespread shifts in intimacy patterns in recent decades in both heterosexual and lesbian populations (eg. Giddens, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Stein,

1997). I am not an objective researcher: my analysis both reflects and is informed by this journey.

Only a few studies of contemporary lesbians' friendships emerge from an interdisciplinary literature search (eg. Raphael and Robinson, 1984; Nardi, 1992; Nardi and Sherrod, 1994; Stanley, 1993; Stanley, 1996; Hall and Rose, 1996; O'Boyle and Thomas, 1996). All are from the US and the UK, and most are small qualitative studies. Other accounts of lesbians' friendships have to be sifted from amongst wider fields. Most relevant research comes from the discipline of psychology, but it only studies friendship in relation to love relationships. It tends to be based on small clinical samples, individual cases, or large-scale studies of couples, and is analysed within a therapeutic framework (therapists writing about solutions to problems). Accounts of lesbians' friendships can also be found amongst lesbian feminist writings in women's studies, history, philosophy and theology; in collections of personal testimonies and 'coming out stories'; fiction, plays and songs; and in large sociological surveys of lesbians and gay men that tend to collapse the experiences of the two groups together, sometimes inappropriately. The literature falls into four main topic areas that roughly parallel the discourses mentioned earlier: friendship and intimacy (passionate friendships); friendship and community (identities based on sexual relationships); friends as family (the 'transformation of intimacy'); and 'coming out' (the 'project of self').

My initial research identified a number of gaps in knowledge about lesbians' friendships. While some feminist and lesbian feminist writings have drawn attention to the *importance* of friendship in women's lives, often drawing on historical or activist communities, they have not done empirical work on friendship *processes*: how contemporary women (including lesbians) choose, establish, maintain, resolve conflict, manage inequality and/or end these crucial relationships, and the implications for lesbian subjectivity. There is relatively little work on lesbianism in the personal relationships tradition, so the similarities and differences between lesbianism and friendship remain virtually unexplored, in particular, what happens when romantic or sexual feelings arise between friends (O'Connor, 1992; Stanley, 1993; Peplau and Spalding, 2000). In addition, researchers suggest more

needs to be known about why some friendships do not survive the disclosure that one friend is a lesbian, and the benefits of friendship between lesbian and heterosexual women (O'Boyle and Thomas, 1996). There is a need for investigations of the impact of changing legal recognition of same-sex relationships; and of the impact of prejudice and discrimination on lesbians, including how they cope and create supportive social networks (Peplau and Spalding, 2000). And because lesbians and gay men tend to move to cities, country lesbians are neglected (Weeks *et al*, 2001). The need for a qualitative study of lesbians' friendships on their own terms, in a contemporary Australian social context, was apparent.

This study attempts to fill some of these gaps, researching lesbians' personal relationships with other women at all levels, as friends and/or lovers (and acknowledging the often blurred boundaries between the two) and in social networks and communities, in rural, regional and urban locations. It finds that lovers fulfil many functions of the 'best friend' commonly identified by heterosexual women, and reduce the felt need for a larger network of friends or for community involvement. In addition, many relationships arise out of friendship, and after sexual relationships end, they continue as friendships. Vetere (1982) has suggested that friends and lover relationships appear to be two ends of a single continuum rather than oppositional categories. With such crossovers between sexual relationships and friendship, it became impossible, as Cecilia Solano warns (1986), to imagine studying any one relational mode in isolation.

Even more crucially, a strong feature of this study is that most (three quarters) of the participants have left heterosexual relationships and chosen lesbian relationships instead. Because I asked for stories of continuous friendships and ones that had ended, many are also narratives of transition from a heterosexual to a lesbian identity. Participants' transitions follow a very similar pattern for most: they simply 'fall in love' with another woman they meet, usually at work or in an educational setting, act on these feelings, and deal with the often negative fallout from family and friends. Engaged on the late modern quest for what Giddens calls

‘emotional democracy’ (1992) and Jamieson calls ‘disclosing intimacy’ (1998), the women value the mutuality and reciprocity in their relationships with other women.

This method of coming to a lesbian identity is commented on by Gramick (1984), Faderman (1991) and Orbach and Eichenbaum (1994). Our era, through the legacy of Freud and all his spiritual offspring, is hyper-sophisticated concerning sex, Faderman argues. So two women passionately attached today, whether lesbian or not, must at least think about sexual attraction and decide whether to act. This was not so in the past (Faderman, 1991: 4). It would seem that many of the women in the study thought about their attraction and, with the increased visibility of lesbians giving them points of reference, and work giving them economic power, decided to follow ‘the lesbian path’ (Cruikshank, 1985). Their relationships are fully embodied: only one wrote about meeting friends and lovers through a personal ad and none of the participants mentioned meeting friends or lovers on the internet.

As Ponse (1978) and Stein (1997) observe in their research, some participants ‘recast the past’ to claim they had always been essentially lesbian, just misled by what Rich (1981) calls ‘compulsory heterosexuality’. About a quarter have always identified as lesbian. Others are clearer about having made a choice to be with a female partner. Amongst this latter group, despite uncertainty for some about a lesbian identity, if their current relationship ended, they would seek a female partner again. This thesis acknowledges both what participants and other studies of lesbians describe as essential or ‘core’ lesbian identities, and lesbian choices (Raphael and Robinson, 1984; Kitzinger, 1987; Charbonneau and Lander, 1991).

Participants’ preoccupation with this momentous change and the implications for their sense of self prompted me to shift away from a thematic discussion of lesbian friendship processes to an analysis of their stories through a sociological lens. This meant examining theories of the self and society and the meanings that individuals give to their experience (see Chapter One).

*Discourses influencing lesbian identities and practices*

As discussed earlier, in this thesis narratives of lesbian friendship, and hence of the self, reveal the influences of four distinct historically shaped discourses. These underpin the theoretical framework for the study.

The discourse of ‘romantic friends’, which originated in the nineteenth century, has clearly had an impact on heterosexual and lesbian women’s friendships today. Because the sexual mores of the nineteenth century and earlier times forbade active sexuality in women, it is difficult to separate what constitutes ‘lesbianism’ and what constitutes ‘women’s friendship’, and recent feminist literature on romantic friendships very often ties them both together. Seeking a history and literature which they claim has been denied, ignored and erased by men, feminist and lesbian scholars have uncovered rich stories of how nineteenth-century women in the US, Europe and China lived together in pairs and shared their lives. The reasons for this ranged from necessity to a positive choice (Woolf, 1974; Smith-Rosenberg, 1975; Faderman, 1981; Rich, 1981; Lindsey, 1981; Mavor, 1981; Faderman, 1983, Nestor, 1985; Vicinus, 1985; Whitbread, 1988; Byatt, 1989; Raymond, 1991a; Miller, 1993; Auchmuty, 1993a; Jeffreys, 1997). Partnerships were usually between middle-class career women or those who were financially independent.

Women who were forced to marry, such as Charlotte Bronte, often wished they had the choice to live forever together with their women friends (Miller, 1993). Letters demonstrate how women in passionate friendships were unrestrained in expressing their physical love for one another (Smith-Rosenberg, 1975). With no concrete evidence of genital sexual relations, scholars debate whether some of these women were ‘lesbians’ in the contemporary sense of the word (Smith Rosenberg, 1975; Faderman, 1981; 1983; Lesbian History Group, 1993). Liz Stanley comments on the desire of lesbian scholars, including herself, to build a lesbian history and identity and thus to claim passionate friends as lesbians (cited in Hamson, 1995). Whatever the nature of the relationships between these women was, there is more agreement among scholars that in the 1890s, as women gained more economic and political power and status through the feminist and suffragette movements, their

friendships and couplings became more suspicious in the minds of powerful men, and began to be labelled deviant. The sexologists' description of the female homosexual as one who disdained the trappings of femininity also cast all feminists and 'new women' as lesbians. The sexologists effectively divided these women from each other, and brought a long tradition of unselfconscious passionate friendships to an end (Auchmuty; 1992; 1993b; Lesbian History Group, 1993; Koppelman, 1994).

While friendships between heterosexual women today can be close and intense, passionate, romantic friendships persist more often between lesbians or between lesbians and heterosexual women (eg. Hunt, 1992; Rothblum and Brehony, 1993; Weinstock and Rothblum, 1996; Daly, 1996). Despite psychologists in western liberal democracies today agreeing that homosexuality is not a mental illness, the taboos remain and many heterosexual women censor or deny affection for fear of being labelled lesbians (Palladino and Stephenson, 1990; Daly, 1996).

There is another side to the historical events at the turn of the century, which introduces the second discourse that influences lesbians today: the discourse of lesbian identity as overtly sexual. By the 1920s, the categories developed by the sexologists, and by Sigmund Freud and other psychoanalysts, were taken up by European lesbians, who organised around them, using the suggestion that lesbians were born 'congenital invert' to plead for societal tolerance. Radclyffe Hall's famous 1928 novel *The Well of Loneliness* is one such example. But because lesbianism was portrayed as deviant, most lesbians went underground until the women's liberation and gay liberation movements of the late 1960s and 70s.

The discourse of lesbian identity as overtly sexual re-emerged as salient in the 1980s and 90s in response to attempts by lesbian feminists to claim lesbianism as a political position. Throughout the 1970s, women in western liberal democracies, including Australia, who felt they had been 'born lesbians' and taken great risks to live lesbian lives, often clashed with women who 'found lesbianism' along with feminism (Martin and Lyons, 1972; Bradstock and Wakeling, 1987; Nestle, 1987; Faderman, 1992; Stein, 1997). Yet the feminist movement gave them visibility,

legitimacy and a voice (Cruikshank, 1985; Penelope, 1990). In particular, some lesbians protested lesbian feminist calls for 'political lesbianism': that any woman could – and should – identify as a lesbian, without necessarily having to have sex with women (Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group, 1981; Rich, 1981; Pitman 1981; Gregory, 1981; Doughty, 1982; Vetere, 1982; Darty and Potter, 1984; Johnson, 1990; Raymond, 1991b). The alleged 'desexualisation' of lesbianism was one of the topics contested in debates popularly known as the 'sex wars' in feminism in the 1980s (Snitow *et al*, 1983; Vance, 1984; Jeffreys, 1993b; 1997a), and in queer politics in the 1990s (Lienert, 1993; Jagose, 1996; Seidman, 1996).

The third discourse – that of equal relationships – comes from the women's liberation movement's protests of inequality in heterosexual relationships (eg. Miller, 1976; Chodorow, 1989; Hite, 1989), lesbians' celebrations of the absence of gendered power differences in their relationships (Wolf, 1980; Sang, 1984; Hoagland, 1988; Jeffreys, 1990; Mohin, 1996; Dunne, 1997; Stuart, 1997; Weeks *et al*, 2001) and heterosexual feminists' subsequent stories of work to build more equal relationships with men (eg. Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 1993; Harris, 1998). As a result of the women's liberation movement, the nuclear family is falling apart on issues of emancipation and equal rights, argue Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (1995). Women expect 'emotional democracy' (Giddens, 1992) or 'disclosing intimacy' (Jamieson, 1998) in relationships, and if they do not get it, they tend to leave and seek it in another relationship. Giddens suggests lesbians, more easily able to achieve equal relationships, are the vanguard of a desired 'transformation of intimacy' that heterosexual couples struggle with (1992).

The fourth discourse lesbians in this study subscribe to, individualism, is an increasing trend in recent times across western liberal democracies (Beck, 1994; 1996; Cox, 1995). Theorists suggest the economic pressures of late capitalism such as the need to find and keep a job, and the withdrawal of social services, are leading to a more profound individualism than has been the case in the past, with people being more concerned for themselves than for extended family and community life. As a part of this shift, Giddens' (1992) concept of individual

preoccupation with self-development and personal growth – the ‘project of self’ – is relevant to this study.

For lesbians and gay men, a shift to a more profound individualism is also linked to the gains won in the activism of recent decades. These have removed the necessity of banding together and activism for survival, so lesbians are freer to pursue a ‘project of self’ with a new confidence. Lesbianism is illegal in many countries across the world, and lesbians face social ostracism, loss of family and employment, and even the death penalty (Reinfelder, 1996; Draper and Hall, 1999). But in western liberal democracies such as Australia, campaigns for lesbian and gay rights in the 1970s, 80s and 90s gained results. The category of homosexuality as a mental disorder was removed from the American Psychological Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* in 1973 (Morin and Rothblum, 1991), which paved the way for reforms elsewhere. By the late 1990s in Australia, although same-sex relationships did not have equal status with heterosexual relationships, most lesbians had the right to work, study, and receive services free from discrimination (Millbank, 1997; 1998; Stewart, 2001; Women’s Electoral Lobby, 2001; Small, 2002). At the same time, it was less likely that lesbian parents would lose custody of their children for being unfit parents, a common finding in the 1970s (Hanscombe and Forster, 1981), and despite self-insemination being illegal, lesbians were not prosecuted for starting their own families this way<sup>1</sup>.

With lesbianism being ‘resexualised’ (Raymond, 1991b; Richardson, 1992) in the queer 1990s, it also became individualised. With many lesbians changing their style away from the androgyny of the 1970s to become more glamorous and feminine, lesbianism became less political and therefore less of a threat to men. It even became ‘chic’ or fashionable for heterosexual women to explore (Daly, 1996). Elaine d’Esteire (2002) has observed that this may have something to do with the

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<sup>1</sup> In 2001 the Victorian Labour Government passed the Statute Law Amendment (Relationships) Act, which gave same sex couples in Victoria the same rights and obligations as heterosexual couples in areas such as property, wills, finance and health. Self-insemination remains illegal and lesbians are still denied adoption rights and access to reproductive technology.

economy: lesbians today, a majority of whom are workers without dependent children, fit neatly into the male culture of economic rationalism.

Despite changes in the language used to describe friendships between women, as this study will show, the connections between lesbianism and friendship endure, albeit in a very distinctive late twentieth century form. Lesbians today draw on the legacy of this past and the language of romantic friendships and lesbian identity as a sexual identity, using these debates in constructing their own identity and practices, and weaving them together with the feminist and lesbian-feminist discourse of equal relationships, and the more profound individualism that is a notable feature of late capitalism.

This thesis argues that despite a societal push to individualism and the ‘project of self’, the women in this study are searching for a ‘self-in-relation’ as opposed to an individualistic self, and that living as a lesbian means this is played out in very distinctive ways. We can see from the ways the women talk about their friendships that their perspectives on relatedness are influenced by discourses of romantic friendship and equal relationships. As ‘relational selves’ with an ‘imperative to care’ for others, the women differ from men who are socialised as and promote the view that they are more separate and independent (note that this view masks men’s actual dependence on women and each other). Consequently, they are also different from heterosexual women, where the gender difference between partners means a strong amount of closeness between the couple is not always valued (Stanley, 1993: 4; see also Gilligan, 1982: 154; Mencher, 1997). By contrast, being a ‘relational self’ – and with relatedness heightened with other women – is a positive, yet challenging, feature of their lives.

This study provides insights into complex subjectivities that broaden our understandings about the changing nature of intimacy in the contemporary period. The results suggest that theorists of the ‘transformation of intimacy’ and of the self need to take more account of the importance of relatedness for women, including lesbians.

*Chapter outline*

Chapter One explores the contemporary preoccupation with questions of identity and the self and the growth of a ‘therapy culture’ to provide a framework for analysing participants’ concerns with self-development. This preoccupation is set amidst debates on the changing nature of intimacy in developed western economies such as Australia. Feminist criticisms of traditional models of psychology, and feminist and lesbian alternatives, help frame participants as ‘relational selves’ with an ‘imperative to care’ for their lovers and others. Reviewing the literature on lesbian friendship, Chapter One then finds that many studies fail to consider changing notions of intimacy and the self in a late modern social and political context, while others are only just beginning to do so.

The choosing of questions and the conducting of the questionnaires and interviews using feminist research methodology is documented in Chapter Two. This chapter provides a critical reflection on feminist prescriptions for interviewing in the light of most participants not wanting to ‘share power’, but rather to tell their stories.

Chapter Three examines how lesbians establish, develop and maintain friendships. Most meet friends and lovers at work or while studying, reflecting the nature of the sample – new lesbians – as well as the greater integration of lesbians in mainstream society. Shared intense or life-changing experiences forge strong bonds which means friendships are often self-maintaining.

The crucial importance of friendship to lesbians’ lives, in the light of widespread lack of acceptance from family, work colleagues and society, is the focus of Chapter Four. However the stated significance of friendships sits at odds with actual practice for a number of reasons. Friendships between lesbians, and between lesbians and heterosexual or bisexual women, can be complex and intense, with boundaries blurring between friends and lovers.

Chapter Five examines the ‘best friends’ model of lesbian relationships. As with their close friendships, in lover relationships lesbians are ‘relational selves’,

encouraged by female socialisation and choice towards a moral 'imperative to care'. The women value their close-connected, reciprocal relationships. Although not free of power struggles, these are still at odds with mainstream, heterosexual culture, especially with the dominant psychological discourse of independence and separateness.

The relevance to lesbians of the widely noted decline in community contacts in late capitalism, and the shift towards negotiated rather than obligated kin relationships, is addressed in Chapter Six. It examines the challenges to and changes in definitions and expectations of lesbian communities through the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, in particular, struggles with difference. Lesbian communities today provide support and friendship rather than politics, and activism takes place at home.

Chapter Seven explores the self-development that takes place in weathering conflict and change in friendships and relationships. Most participants are reflective about their lives, loves and choices, and most have had professional counselling. The most momentous change that affects their personal relationships and subjectivity is the transition to a lesbian identity. Participants' generally low tolerance for conflict and change demonstrates on the one hand, how problematic conflict resolution can be for women, and on the other hand, how choices around friendship help define and redefine the changing self.

When asked to reflect on their experiences of friendship and to offer visions for the future, most lesbians in this study emphasise personal change. Chapter Eight demonstrates the preoccupation of the women in this study with self-development over and above social change. However, the self with which lesbians are preoccupied is not an isolated, individuated, 'selfish' one, but a self that is connected and bonded to others.

The Conclusion situates the women's experiences of lesbian identity in late modernity, where the demands of work, relationships, children and/or other family members means the time available for friends is necessarily lessened. In this context, the 'project of self', which is always a 'relational self', is more able to be

accomplished in small networks that include lovers, ex-lovers, close friends and selected kin, than in larger lesbian communities or through political activism.