

DANCING ACROSS BORDERS:
Women Who Become Lesbians in Mid-life

by

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DECLARATION

I certify that, except where acknowledged, this thesis is the original work
of the candidate alone.

Kristin Henry
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Abstract

This thesis combines theoretical discussion with extracts from transcribed focus groups and interviews to illuminate the impact on the identity of formerly heterosexual women who become lesbians in mid-life. I have conducted my research as participant observer who has this core experience in common with the other subjects. I have also included my poetry and journal extracts to track and comment on the project and the topic.

The accounts from twenty-three focus group members and interviewees contribute in two ways to the gap in published literature about the coming out process. First, this is to my knowledge the only Australian study of this kind. Second, the women's stories differ from other collections of coming out narratives because they do not, as a rule, privilege the lesbian experience over the heterosexual one. Instead the study focuses on what changed for the women when they made this transition, and on what stayed the same. They discuss these changes and lack of change with regard to personal identity, relationships with other women, children and families, friends, the workplace and the wider culture. The study investigates how all these elements of the women's lives have been influenced by their own maturity and by the prevailing social attitudes toward homosexuality at the time they came out. It also discusses the women's various attitudes toward the lesbian community and the politics of labelling themselves according to their sexual orientation.

The study is underpinned by theoretical perspectives on the formation of identity, on current thinking about sex and gender, and on an understanding of the evolving positions of lesbians and gays in the eyes of the church, the law, psychology and society in general. It pays particular attention to the relationship between lesbianism and feminism, and the impact of queer theory on lesbian identity. It also examines the changing nature of representations of lesbians in popular culture.

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