

**Non-Heterosexual Women's Experiences of Informal Social Support: A Qualitative  
Metasynthesis**

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### Abstract

This metasynthesis explores how non-heterosexual women experience informal social support. A systematic literature search was conducted to identify papers for inclusion, following which Noblit and Hare's (1988) meta-ethnographic approach was adopted to synthesise the findings of 16 papers. Four themes were derived: (i) disconnection from family life, (ii) the benefits of cross-sexual orientation friendships (iii) negotiating (internalised) homophobia and seeking a space for authenticity, and (iv) the intimacy of friendships between women. The impact of heterosexism on the women's experiences of social support is discussed, implications for health and social care are explored and future research avenues are proposed.

*Keywords: non-heterosexual, friendship, social support, heterosexism, metasynthesis*

Since the 1970s there has been increasing interest in the beneficial effects of social support (Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet & Farley, 1988). Research suggests that those who feel they have adequate social support report better physical health (Umberson & Montez, 2010) and psychological wellbeing (Kawachi & Berkman, 2001) than those who lack this form of support. Social support can improve wellbeing by contributing to heightened self-esteem, purpose and meaning (Thoits, 2011) as well as protecting individuals from the harmful effects of stress (Cohen, 2004).

While there are a variety of definitions of social support (Veiel & Baumann, 2013), for this review Cobb (1976)'s definition will be adopted, who proposed it to be "the individual belief that one is cared for and loved, esteemed and valued, and belongs to a network of communication and mutual obligations" (p. 301). Thus the focus here will be on the affective function of social support, emphasising the meaning that the individual makes of his or her support, rather than the instrumental function such as providing practical help and advice (Vaux, 1988), although obviously the latter can influence the former. Furthermore, this definition places value upon the *perception* of a person's social support, as defined by that individual, rather than other definitions which may assume that frequency and proximity are perceived as helpful which is not always the case (Schilling, 1987). Indeed, perceived support is only moderately related to actual support (Lakey & Drew, 1997), and of these two constructs perceived support is more consistently linked to wellbeing (Haber, Cohen, Lucas & Baltes, 2007). Wang (2014) suggests that both the size of network and perceived social support may relate to subjective wellbeing, however perceived support may have a more important role in promoting wellbeing and can mediate the effects of network size. In addition, it is possible that social support can have negative consequences on wellbeing, as well as positive (Lincoln, 2000). While both formal (usually provided by organisations or agencies) and informal social support may contribute to psychological wellbeing

(Agneessens, Waeye, & Lievens, 2006), informal avenues of social support, which includes friends, partners, relatives, neighbours and colleagues, are the most frequently valued sources of support (Gottlieb, 1985). This is particularly the case for non-heterosexual women who are less likely to utilise support from professional services (Hash & Netting, 2009).

Research on social support in lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) populations has produced similar results to that conducted in the general population, suggesting it also has benefits for psychological and physical wellbeing for this group (Kwon, 2013; Nesmith, Burton, & Cosgrove, 1999). The stress caused by minority status can increase psychological distress (Lehavot & Simoni, 2011; Meyer, 1995), suicidality (Johnson, Faulkner, Jones & Welsh, 2007) and reduce health outcomes (Meyer, 2003), therefore social support may be particularly important for LGBT individuals due to its ability to buffer the effects of stigmatisation and prejudice (Bridges, Selvidge & Matthews, 2003; Cohen, 2004; Stanley, 1996). Existing quantitative research into benefits for non-heterosexual women specifically is somewhat lacking. One study noted that lesbian women with higher levels of social support demonstrated better adjustment to ageing and less depression (Dorfman et al., 1995). Another suggested social support might improve psychological wellbeing in lesbian women by increasing self-esteem and life satisfaction (Beals & Peplau, 2005). Research with bisexual women has found lower levels of perceived social support (Balsam & Mohr, 2007), which may partially explain their higher rates of psychological distress than lesbian, gay and heterosexual individuals (Jorm, Korten, Rodgers, Jacomb & Christensen, 2002), perhaps due to social exclusion from both heterosexual, and lesbian and gay communities (Kwon, 2013).

The fear of discrimination and prejudice that non-heterosexual women experience (Meyer, 2003) may impact upon the ways in which social support is perceived and experienced, such as by reducing disclosure and honesty, which may inhibit the development

of genuine friendships (Altman & Taylor, 1973). For example, O'Boyle and Thomas (1996) found that lesbian women were uncomfortable disclosing personal information with heterosexual friends, which limited the depth and authenticity of these friendships. This may explain why many non-heterosexual women prefer to become part of social networks consisting of other non-heterosexual women (Averett, Yoon & Jenkins, 2011; Galupo, 2007; Stanley, 1996), where they may feel more able to be open and can therefore develop deeper friendships. These social networks may also provide non-heterosexual women with access to role models, therefore aiding identity development (Krieger, 1982), which may be important in a culture where lesbian and bisexual experience is not widely visible (Galupo, 2007).

It has been documented that many non-heterosexual women gain social support from friends rather than from their family of origin (Almack, Seymour & Bellamy, 2010; Masini & Barrett, 2008). This is consistent with research conducted with LGBT populations more widely, whereby supportive groups of friends (coined 'families of choice' or 'fictive kin'; Dewaele, Cox, Van den Berghe & Vincke, 2011) become a primary source of support (Weston, 1991). Dewaele et al. (2011) describe this as an adaptive process, whereby supportive friendships ameliorate the lack of familial ties for LGBT people. They also suggest that friendship support networks may be smaller, and less stable than familial support networks, placing non-heterosexual women at risk of lacking stability and breadth in their social support networks.

Consequently, the current research aimed to draw together the growing body of qualitative literature in this area by conducting a metasynthesis, in order to develop a coherent understanding of how social support is experienced by non-heterosexual women. As highlighted above, a lack of social support may impact detrimentally on non-heterosexual women's physical and psychological wellbeing. Exploring in depth the complexity of these relationships may serve to increase understanding in this area, which may also enable the

development of suitable interventions to improve psychological wellbeing in non-heterosexual women.

A qualitative metasynthesis involves "the bringing together and breaking down of findings, examining them, discovering the essential features, and, in some way, combining phenomena into a transformed whole" (Schreiber, Crooks & Stern, 1997, p. 314). It can generate new insights into a phenomenon as well as ensuring findings are accessible to professionals in health and social care, researchers, and policy makers (Finfgeld, 2003). This method is not without its critics, who propose that synthesising previous research may contaminate the original studies' findings (Sandelowski, Docherty & Emden, 1997). To reduce the potential for contamination, transparency and rigor have been upheld in order to maintain the quality of the original findings (Thomas & Harden, 2008).

The rationale for including only women and not all individuals within the LGBT population is based upon feminist perspectives suggesting that the experiences of those who define themselves as female are qualitatively different to the experiences of individuals who define themselves as male (Peplau, 2003). Although it is recognised that there is political value in the unison of LGBT individuals, to combine these perspectives within research could ignore the differences in non-heterosexual women's experiences thus further contributing to the invisibility of this group in the context of a patriarchal culture (Averett and Jenkins, 2012). Furthermore, although it is acknowledged that the experiences of lesbian, queer, bisexual, pansexual or 'undefined' women may differ (Masters, Johnson & Kolodny, 1992), this research will include all non-heterosexual women due to issues of self-labelling (Diamond, 2003a), fluidity in women's sexuality (Diamond, 2003b), and not wishing to contribute further to the invisibility of people with other sexualities (Miller, André, Ebin & Bessonova, 2007).

### **Terminology.**

At present there is no clear 'best practice' term to describe women who identify as non-heterosexual and/or engage in same-sex sexual behaviour. This issue has therefore been considered carefully here. The primary aim has been to most accurately represent the individuals within the samples included, while avoiding any oppressive language. While it is recognised that the term 'non-heterosexual' may be considered pejorative due to its implicit suggestion that non-heterosexuality is a "negative derivative of heterosexuality" (Browne, 2003, p. 133), alternatives such as 'sexual minority' or 'queer' also have potentially discriminatory connotations. Therefore non-heterosexual is the term that will be used throughout this paper, although this is done cautiously, with recognition of the issues surrounding labelling individuals based solely upon their sexual orientation.

### **Method**

This metasynthesis was conducted in accordance with Noblit and Hare's (1988) meta-ethnographic approach to synthesising qualitative literature. In the early stages of this systematic literature review, the research question was broadly defined as "how do non-heterosexual women experience informal social support?".

#### **Searching for and Selecting Studies**

Relevant papers were identified by searching PsycINFO, Academic Search Complete, and the International Bibliography of the Social Sciences databases in November and December 2014. Following guidance from an expert librarian and a researcher in lesbian studies, the search terms used were ["sexual orientation" OR lesbianism OR bisexuality OR "women who have sex with women"] AND [friendship OR "social support"]. No limits were set on the date of publication. This search yielded a total of 507 papers for review.

In order to identify all relevant papers, five essential inclusion criteria were applied: (i) the paper included a study which utilised qualitative techniques for data collection and analysis, (ii) the paper was published in English (iii) the paper was published in a peer-reviewed journal (to ensure a minimum level of quality) (iv) the paper included data obtained directly from non-heterosexual women, as evidenced by quotes throughout the text and, (v) the papers had a substantial, although not necessarily primary focus on the experiences of friendship or social support (as defined earlier). In addition, papers were excluded if they mixed data obtained from non-heterosexual women with that obtained from other groups of people, unless interpretations relating to the former could be clearly identified.

The papers were first reviewed by examining the titles and abstracts. In cases where these suggested the paper might be suitable for inclusion, the full text was obtained and reviewed and the inclusion and exclusion criteria applied. The reference lists of all papers identified for inclusion at this stage were reviewed, identifying three further papers. This process led to the identification of 16 papers for inclusion in the metasynthesis (see Figure 1).

<Insert Figure 1 here>

### **Characteristics of the Selected Studies**

The papers identified for inclusion were published between 1993 and 2013, with the majority (n=14) being published from 2000 onwards. Thirteen of the studies used samples from the United States, one paper used a sample in Canada, another used a sample in the United Kingdom and a further study used a South African sample. Of the 504 non-heterosexual women that were included in the 16 studies, 389 identified as lesbian, 19 as bisexual, and 96 as sexual minority women. Participants were aged between 15 and 95. Most of the participants self-identified as White or Caucasian. Other ethnicities represented within



the combined sample include American Indian, Black or African American, Asian American, Pacific Islander, Hispanic, Jamaican, Afghan, Xhosa and multi-ethnic.

The studies covered a wide breadth of topics and utilised a variety of qualitative approaches to data collection. These, along with other methodological details are outlined in Table 1.

<Insert Table 1 here>

### **Appraising the Quality of the Selected Studies**

The UK National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) guidance promotes the use of structured approaches to appraising the quality of papers selected for review (Centre for Reviews and Dissemination, 2009). The Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) tool (Public Health Resource Unit, 2006), a widely used 12-item checklist, was utilised to appraise the quality of the 16 studies selected for synthesis. As determining inclusion of studies based upon the assessed quality remains a contentious issue within qualitative research (Jensen & Allen, 1996) it is vital that a balance is achieved between upholding rigor and allowing for difference and breadth across the studies. Due to this, the CASP tool was used to identify strengths and weaknesses of each of the studies, but was not used to determine inclusion. Studies were assigned a score from eight to 24 based upon how much evidence was provided for each of the eight appraisal questions; the final scores are provided in Table 1.

### **Analysing and Synthesising the Selected Studies**

Data from the 16 studies were synthesised using Noblit and Hare's (1988) seven-stage meta-ethnographic method, which provides a "rigorous procedure for deriving substantive interpretations about any set of ethnographic or interpretative studies" (p. 9). Once the topic

had been chosen, and appropriate literature identified, the next stage of the meta-ethnographic procedure involved reading each of the papers, extracting methodological details and forming initial thoughts. Following this, each paper was re-read and major concepts and themes were identified and noted down to assist in determining how the papers related to one another. All relevant quotes from participants were extracted, along with authors' interpretations of the women's experiences. During the next stage, second order interpretations were developed. The interpretations were synthesised across studies, leading to the four final overarching themes. All themes were present across a number of the papers, and no themes depended solely on findings from papers with lower CASP scores. A summary of the initial concepts that resulted in each of the themes is included in Table 2.

### **Reflexivity.**

There is increasing recognition of the importance of "owning one's perspective" when undertaking qualitative research (Elliott, Fischer & Rennie, 1999, p. 221) due to the widely argued notion that total objectivity is unachievable (Tufford & Newman, 2012). Since a metasynthesis approach includes data from a range of researchers, using a variety of methods and theories, the potential for bias is reduced (Ma, Roberts, Winefield & Furber, 2015). However, biases during the process of conducting the metasynthesis may have influenced the data, leading to greater weight being given to certain themes or concepts over others. It is important to acknowledge the researchers' positions as young, white, non-heterosexual women, who are all clinical psychologists. Having an 'insiders perspective' can offer benefits and challenges to conducting research (LaSala, 2003), and impact upon the data, such as by adding greater weight to findings which resonate with one's own experiences. The three researchers frequently discussed the findings so that alternative perspectives could be considered in order to minimise bias (Wisker, 2005).

## Results

Through the process of synthesising the 16 papers, four main themes emerged related to the non-heterosexual women's experiences of social support and friendship: (i) disconnection from family life, (ii) the benefits of cross-sexual orientation friendships (iii) negotiating (internalised) homophobia and seeking a space for authenticity, and (iv) the intimacy of friendships between women. These four themes are described in detail below.

### **Theme 1: Disconnection from Family Life**

This theme outlines the women's experiences of family, and indicates that many women felt a disconnection from family life as defined by societal norms. At the heart of this was the experience of being excluded or rejected from the women's families of origin, which arose in most of the studies. Women of all ages referred to parents, siblings or extended family members actively rejecting or "ostracising" (Gabrielson, 2011, p. 326) them due to their sexual orientation after they came out. This applied to a range of cultural and ethnic groups, but was particularly evident in Kowen and Davis's (2006) research conducted in South Africa, where the general increase in societal acceptance that women in some countries (e.g. USA) have experienced is less widespread.

Although many became estranged from families of origin, some felt that families had become more accepting over time (Jones & Nystrom, 2002), and a small number of women reported receiving consistently positive support from their families of origin. For these women, it appeared that the timing of disclosure of their sexual orientation was important, whereby disclosing later in life resulted in more positive and accepting responses (Glass & Few-Demo, 2013). Having opportunity to talk and work through any concerns the family had also assisted in maintaining or building supportive relationships after the women came out (Oswald, 2000).

Further evidencing this disconnection from family life, the women often did not have children of their own so social support from biological children was rarely mentioned. This lack of a younger generation of support caused concern for some participants in Gabrielson's study with older lesbians (2011): "Part of the issue is who is going to do for me what I'm doing for my dad?" and "growing old as a lesbian, there isn't anybody because you don't have children [...] so we have to figure out 'what are we going to do when we get dotty?'" (p. 327).

The experience of feeling disconnected from family life had two main consequences for how the women experienced social support. The first was the development of self-reliance; some women, particularly women from older generations found comfort in relying only on themselves for support instead of needing others (Comerford et al., 2004; Jones & Nystrom, 2002; Richard & Brown, 2006). As a result of being excluded from families of origin, the women had built up barriers to protect themselves from future loss or rejection by avoiding becoming reliant on others or in some cases by not acknowledging the extent to which they relied on others for support (Richard & Brown, 2006). Hence, it was difficult for some women to let others in (Aronson, 1998) or to rely upon others for support, which caused anxiety for older women who were beginning to realise they may require support from others in the future (Gabrielson, 2011). Some women also put others' needs above their own, believing this would make them more valuable, and therefore reduce the risk of further rejection (Aronson, 1998).

Many women, including those who preferred to be self-reliant, had an understandable need for connection, belonging and security, which were lacking following exclusion from their families of origin, or due to them not having children. This led to a second coping response, whereby the women intentionally sought out consistent and reliable social support elsewhere, or "create[d] family" (Gabrielson, 2011, p. 328). Many women intentionally built supportive networks that provided emotional, practical, moral and financial support as well as

the reassurance that someone would be there to help in a crisis. One woman reported, "I have a circle of friends that I could pick up the phone and say 'Hey I need some help' and they'd be here. Stepping in and helping out the way a family does" (Gabrielson, 2011, p.328), and another woman valued dependability from her friend, stating, "She's there for me [...] Someone to depend on" (Galupo et al., 2004, p. 44). This support was valued highly, and in fact, many women reported a sense of gratitude and felt "lucky" (Aronson, 1998, p. 509) to have supportive networks. This gratitude may have reflected the difficulties the women had previously faced in gaining support.

Social support was seen to be crucial to the women's wellbeing: "Her friendship is of primary importance to me. It's essential to my wellbeing" (Galupo et al., 2004, p. 45). It was most often provided by women's "family of choice" (Jones & Nystrom, 2002, p. 67) or from belonging to a community, usually a female non-heterosexual community (Aronson, 1998; Degges-White, 2012; Jones & Nystrom, 2002; McCarthy, 2000; Stanley, 2002; Valentine, 1993). The process of gaining social support from same-sexual orientation friends was supported by finding a partner who had a pre-existing network of supportive non-heterosexual friends, or by meeting someone who could introduce them into a non-heterosexual community (Valentine, 1993). Those whose primary social support networks consisted mainly of other non-heterosexual women had the added benefit of support in developing and maintaining their identities as lesbian or bisexual women (Valentine, 1993). This also helped the women to feel included due to the shared bond of oppression and sense of group marginalisation (Degges-White, 2012).

## **Theme 2: The Benefits of Cross-Sexual Orientation Friendships**

This theme outlines the benefits and challenges to having friendships with those outside of the non-heterosexual community. As discussed above, many of the studies

reported that women's primary social support came from other non-heterosexual women. However, some of the women had difficulty in accessing non-heterosexual communities due to the invisibility of these groups, particularly for women in rural areas (Comerford et al., 2004; McCarthy, 2000) and for women with children (Glass & Few-Demo, 2013). Lesbian community was also perceived as too "exclusive" in one instance, where a participant stated that the "controversy" and "love triangles" made it hard for her to get involved (Galupo & St. John, 2001, p. 88).

Due in part to these difficulties, many women had formed supportive, cross-sexual orientation friendships with heterosexual women, and sometimes men. For some, sexual orientation played no part in how much they valued their friendships, as the quality of the support provided was seen as more important (Degges-White, 2012; Oswald, 2000).

For others, particularly younger women, there appeared to be specific benefits to developing supportive cross-sexual orientation friendships (Galupo et al., 2004; Galupo & St. John, 2001; Weinstock & Bond, 2002). Cross-sexual orientation friendships provided non-heterosexual women with an opportunity to develop uncomplicated, platonic relationships devoid of any sexual attraction, which was appealing for some of the women. When the sexual tension was absent from the dynamic, women found it much easier to have open and supportive relationships with heterosexual women, which offered emotional and sometimes physical intimacy (Diamond, 2002).

In order to develop supportive friendships outside of the non-heterosexual community, trust was needed, which sometimes took time to develop (Degges-White, 2012; Galupo & St. John, 2001). Focusing upon shared interests, and commonalities helped maintain these cross-sexual orientation friendships, however the women also valued the different perspectives gained from these friendships (Weinstock & Bond, 2002). When

supportive heterosexual networks were established, women valued these friendships and felt they could have societal benefits, such as building allies and support for the non-heterosexual community by helping heterosexual women to understand the oppression that non-heterosexual women face (Weinstock & Bond, 2002).

### **Theme 3: Negotiating (Internalised) Homophobia and Seeking a Space for Authenticity**

This theme relates to the women's experience of facing prejudice and discrimination regarding their sexual orientation, which impacted upon how they experienced social support. Many of the women felt unable to be open about their sexual orientation, due either to past experiences of prejudice, perceived prejudicial attitudes of others, or internalised homophobia as a result of others' prejudice which created feelings of shame in the women. This led to women being fearful of trying to seek social support in places where other non-heterosexual women might be, reflected in one woman's account of the first time she visited a gay bar: "It took me months to go there. I went in a quivering wreck" (Valentine, 1993, p. 112). Furthermore, women felt the need to "drop pins" (Valentine, 1993, p. 110) in conversation before disclosing their sexual identity, even with those they thought might also be non-heterosexual: "We got talking after a couple of months and started to mention gay topics, just edging it in, mentioning it a bit more till gradually we understood each other" (Valentine, 1993, p.110) and "I may slip in a tell-tale pronoun or casually say 'my girlfriend and I' or something. And then I wait" (Degges-White, 2012, p. 22). This enabled the women to assess how much to share with people, and to distance themselves from anyone they perceived to be unaccepting (Oswald, 2000).

For some, this homophobia created barriers to authenticity within their social support networks. Some women described how they felt the need to suppress or deny their sexuality in certain relationships, appearing heterosexual in some groups and non-heterosexual in

others (Degges-White, 2012). For example, religious groups and family were cited as important social networks which Black lesbian women wished to be a part of, but in order to do so the women were forced to create "dual roles" (p. 718) to separate out their lesbian identity from their family or religious identity (Glass & Few-Demo, 2013). Others reported less of a need to clearly separate out aspects of their lives, yet the recognition of how difficult it can be to be honest and 'out' in some contexts was frequently discussed (Aronson, 1998; Degges-White, 2012; Galupo et al., 2004; Oswald, 2000; Stanley, 2002; Valentine, 1993; Weinstock & Bond, 2002). Some women noted that it was sometimes hard to get beyond superficial conversation without 'outing' oneself, and it took time to develop trusting, supportive friendships. Interestingly, for some the success of cross-sexual orientation friendships, as discussed in theme two, was attributed to the suppression of the non-heterosexual women's sexuality (Galupo et al., 2004; Glass & Few-Demo, 2013).

The need to hide a pertinent aspect of oneself appeared to have a considerable impact on the women's psychological wellbeing and led to depression, isolation and loneliness. One woman describes the loneliness she faced:

I thought I knew what lonely was before I came out to myself, but it's nothing like being a lonely lesbian. I'm too afraid to come out to straight friends, but too afraid to develop lesbian friendships in case I get outed if someone sees me with a group of lesbians in public (Degges-White, 2012, p. 21).

Although many of the women experienced barriers to being fully open and honest in their friendships outside of the non-heterosexual community, those who were authentic often reported that it benefitted their experience of receiving social support overall. As discussed in theme one, attempts to live an authentic and 'out' life had led to exclusion from families of origin for many of the women. However, for some women, this did not deter them from



coming out to other people they met in their life. Disclosure of sexual orientation, when met with a positive response, led to relief, increased closeness, trust and honesty in addition to a feeling of being truly accepted by the other person (Galupo & St. John, 2001; Oswald, 2000; Weinstock & Bond, 2002). Sometimes these benefits were only achieved over time, and some women felt they needed to educate individuals in their support networks and challenge homophobic views, in order to gain this acceptance (Comerford et al., 2004; Galupo & St. John, 2001; Oswald, 2000). Being accepted challenged the women's expectations and stereotypes regarding heterosexual people's attitudes, and the women were then able to believe acceptance from others was achievable. When asked what she had learned from having a heterosexual friend, one lesbian woman replied, "that I can have one" (Galupo & St. John, 2001, p. 90), indicating how unattainable this had felt before. Achieving acceptance of their authentic selves increased women's self-esteem and self-acceptance (Galupo & St. John, 2001), which may in turn have helped women to build their social support networks further.

It is important to note that some women continued to hide their sexual orientation or separate their sexual identity in some social networks, and felt this led to increased acceptance within that friendship (Galupo et al., 2004; Galupo & St. John, 2001; Glass & Few Demo, 2013). For some this was due to discomfort they felt at being out in heterosexual contexts, or fears that being out would lead to further exclusion. Some women may simply have not considered whether or not to disclose their sexual identity, or had not felt this to be a defining feature of their identity, which may have reflected the experiences of the women who participated in the studies not included within this theme.

#### **Theme 4: The Intimacy of Friendships Between Women**

Theme four outlines how non-heterosexual women experienced same-sex friendships as particularly intimate, meaningful and long-lasting. As highlighted in the themes above, the

non-heterosexual women's support networks often appeared to consist mainly of other women (both heterosexual, and non-heterosexual). The non-heterosexual women in these studies reported to develop "uniquely deep emotional connections" (Degges-White, 2012, p. 19) with other women, which they felt to be considerably more intimate than the type of connection that could develop between people of different genders. Diamond (2002) provides a number of examples of this intimacy: "It was like having a girlfriend without knowing it", "Most people don't feel so strongly about their friends [...] I did love her, that deeply. A day without her was unimaginable" and "I was always so tuned into her" (p. 9). Physical affection was a common feature of these close friendships, as reported by one woman: "We were so physical with each other that I feel like it made us more able to read each other's emotional cues" (Diamond, 2002, p. 9-10). Despite this physical intimacy, there was often no sexual desire present in these friendships, as one woman noted: "It was like this pull to be near her, this longing for nearness, but it wasn't sexual" (Diamond, 2002, p. 10). The participants in Diamond's study were recalling close friendships they had experienced during adolescence, which may explain how this intensity could exist without sexual longing, when sexual desires are just beginning to emerge. However, this intimacy was also discussed in studies with older participants suggesting it can occur across the lifespan. For one woman, intimacy was characterised by openness: "I can tell her anything and she will not judge me. And she feels the same way, which I just love. And really intimate stuff too." (Galupo et al., 2004).

Most of the friendships described in Diamond's study did not lead to sexual relationships, however it is interesting to note that in other studies, the women described applying friendship scripts (social constructs that instruct behaviour in friendships) to romantic relationships (Degges-White, 2012; Valentine, 1993). This may contribute to the blurring of the boundaries between friendship and romantic relationships, as discussed by Weinstock and Bond (2002). The women experienced fluidity of emotional and sexual

feelings in their friendships with other women, which sometimes made it difficult to distinguish between friendships and romantic relationships, as both types of relationship shared similar characteristics (e.g. physical/emotional intimacy in both friendship and romantic relationships).

Some women reported that ex-partners and ex-lovers were significant sources of social support, and this was seen to be commonplace for non-heterosexual women, particularly amongst older generations (Comerford et al., 2004; Richard & Brown, 2006). Women attributed this to the limited breadth of female non-heterosexual communities (Degges-White, 2012; Valentine, 1993), however some felt that the friendship they had developed prior to, and during their relationships was very valuable and so wished to maintain this after the relationship had dissolved (Degges-White, 2012; Diamond, 2002).

### **Discussion**

The findings from this metasynthesis illuminate the ways in which non-heterosexual women experience social support, and provide new insights into the impact of a sexual-minority status on women's lived experience of friendship. Social support appears to be highly valued and provides a number of benefits for non-heterosexual women, influenced by factors including the gender or sexual orientation of those providing it, and the level of authenticity present in friendships. Yet meaningful support can be difficult to acquire for numerous reasons, which may be attributed to historic and prevailing homophobia and heterosexism.

The findings suggest that current societal narratives around non-heterosexuality impact greatly on non-heterosexual women's experience of social support. Most of the studies included here were conducted in Western societies, where despite increased acceptance of non-heterosexuality since the sexual revolution of the 1960s, and recent changes to the legal

system (Knauer-Turner, 2015), heterosexism (the denigration, stigmatisation or discounting of non-heterosexuality) still pervades through all levels of society (Herek, Gillis & Cogan, 2009).

Heterosexism appears to have affected the non-heterosexual women's disconnection from family life. Previous research has demonstrated that non-heterosexual women may receive more support from friends (or 'families of choice') than from families of origin (Almack et al., 2010), which is echoed within the current findings. For the women in the studies included here, this disconnection from traditional notions of family was commonly attributed to families of origin holding prejudicial attitudes towards their sexual orientation, leading to the women either being excluded, or purposefully distancing themselves from families of origin. The rejection-identification model proposes that members of disadvantaged groups may increase their identification with their disadvantaged group in an attempt to maintain their self-esteem and gain a sense of belonging (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999), which could be seen in the women's leanings towards seeking social support from other non-heterosexual women instead of families of origin. This distancing may have been a protective process that allowed the women to develop their non-heterosexual identity and build healthy self-esteem amongst like-minded peers. However it was not always easy for the women to gain social support from other non-heterosexual women, particularly if they were fearful of being 'outed' or if non-heterosexual communities were less available to them, such as in the case of women living in rural areas. The result may be social exclusion, which can lead to a heightened risk of depression, loneliness, or anxiety (Baumeister & Tice, 1990; Leary, 1990; Williams; 2001).

Furthermore, heterosexism appears to have influenced from whom the women sought social support. In line with previous literature (Averett et al., 2011; Galupo, 2007; Stanley, 1996), the current findings highlight that social support is primarily received from other non-

heterosexual women. Yet the current findings refute the assumption that social support from other non-heterosexual women is always preferable. Many women had reported to value cross-sexual orientation friendships and the social support they received from heterosexual women, and not just to avoid their non-heterosexual identities. Historically cross-sexual orientation friendships have been less available and less desirable (O'Boyle & Thomas, 1996), however, it appears that young, non-heterosexual women are increasingly utilising social support from heterosexual women and gaining alternative benefits from this, such as having uncomplicated, platonic friendships. It appears that this may be beneficial for individuals by increasing breadth of social networks, thus improving subjective wellbeing (Wang, 2014) as well as providing alternative support to those who do not have access to, or wish to engage with non-heterosexual support networks. Furthermore, it may also have benefits for the LGBT social movements, by reducing the exclusion and segregation of non-heterosexual women, allowing those outside of the LGBT population to be educated about the issues faced by non-heterosexual women, and through recruiting heterosexual women as 'allies' to the LGBT population (Fingerhut, 2011; Herek & Capitano, 1996).

Another key finding was the special nature of friendships between women. Gender differences in the qualitative nature of friendships have been explored in the general population (Elkins & Peterson, 1993; O'Connor, 1992), whereby female friendships offer intimacy and empathic understanding (which has been suggested to have therapeutic effects; Buhrke & Fuqua, 1987), whereas men often report their same-sex friendships to be less rewarding (Wright & Scanlon, 1991) describing them as somewhat insincere and lacking depth (Miller, 1983). The deep emotional connections that develop between non-heterosexual women and their female friends may increase perceived social support, resulting in positive effects on psychological wellbeing (Haber, Cohen, Lucas & Baltes, 2007), through stress buffering (Cohen, 2004), and direct effects such as heightening self-esteem, purpose and

meaning (Thoits, 2011) and highlighting the importance of the quality of the relationships. This intimacy in female friendships may be a result of patriarchal expectations of men and women, in which women are more able to comfortably show affection and be emotionally open than men are (Rawlins, 2009). Research that further explores the factors that contribute to greater rewards within non-heterosexual women's friendships could therefore be beneficial.

Heterosexism appears to have influenced the depth and authenticity of friendships for non-heterosexual women. In line with previous literature (O'Boyle & Thomas, 1996), the current findings suggest that some of the women were unable to be authentic with those in their social support networks, for example they hid or minimised their non-heterosexual identity in order to elicit social support or to avoid rejection from others. Concealing one's sexual identity can be a result of internalised homophobia, which can lead to feelings of shame and the desire to hide one's true self (Shidlo, 1994), and doing so may impact detrimentally on psychological wellbeing (Schrimshaw, Siegel, Downing & Parsons, 2013). This choice to remain hidden is understandable based upon the women's previous experiences, however this may inadvertently reinforce heterosexism by implicitly agreeing that this denial of non-heterosexual identity is necessary (Weinstock & Bond, 2002). More positively, the current findings also highlight that many women were able to develop open and accepting friendships, which could improve these women's self-esteem and psychological wellbeing (Impett, Sorsoli, Schooler, Henson & Tolman, 2008).

### **Implications for Health and Social Care**

The current findings highlight a number of important considerations for health and social care providers, including possible avenues for improving wellbeing in non-heterosexual women. These include the opportunity for addressing social exclusion and the

value in facilitating social support networks in which the women can be authentic. The findings also provide support for the value in ensuring mental health and social care professionals working with non-heterosexual women have a good understanding of the barriers non-heterosexual women may face in gaining meaningful social support.

As discussed, some of the women felt the need to conceal their sexual orientation in their social support networks. As this is understandable given prevailing heterosexist culture, rather than encouraging disclosure of sexual orientation, mental health and social care professionals and others working closely with non-heterosexual women may seek to address concerns that non-heterosexual women have around concealment and focus upon reducing internalised homophobia, which can cause distress in itself (Igartua, Gill & Montoro, 2003). This may then enable the women to feel more able to be authentic without fear of prejudice, and develop their social support networks, which may improve their emotional and physical wellbeing.

There may be barriers in any form of direct intervention due to some non-heterosexual individuals not feeling comfortable disclosing their sexual orientation to health and social care providers (Fenge & Hicks, 2011). This may mean opportunities to address the issues specific to non-heterosexual women may not arise. Although the decision to come out is influenced by a myriad of complexities (Kahn, 1991), professionals can focus on creating safe, accepting environments in which non-heterosexual women feel more able to disclose their sexual orientation (St. Pierre, 2012), to better meet the needs of this group of women.

Interventions that aim to increase access to informal social support have been used with a range of people: from those with diabetes (van Dam et al., 2005) to new mothers (Wiggins et al., 2005). Research suggests these may have a beneficial effect on emotional wellbeing (Hogan, Linden & Najarian, 2002). These types of interventions, such as peer-

support groups, or interventions which aim to increase people's links with their community, may be particularly useful for individuals from minority groups who are at risk of social exclusion due to stigma (Leff & Warner, 2006; Takács, 2006). However it is important to consider that homophobic attitudes may persist in non-heterosexual women's local communities, meaning they may not wish to, or be able to gain meaningful social support from members of their community. Experiencing social support in this way may even have negative consequences on wellbeing (Lincoln, 2000). Therefore also ensuring non-heterosexual women have access to LGBT-specific social spaces, which may feel more accepting, may increase the women's opportunities to gain meaningful and supportive social relationships. The current findings add weight to the use of these social interventions with non-heterosexual women, which may provide an alternative for individuals who do not wish to engage in direct psychotherapeutic approaches that have historically pathologised non-heterosexual behaviour (Katz, 1995). In addition, to promote wider systemic change, improved education and policy reforms aimed at challenging heterosexism may serve to improve access to social support for all non-heterosexual, and gender-minority individuals.

### **Limitations of the Metasynthesis and Future Research Considerations**

The current findings provide novel insights and suggestions for intervention, but the review is not without limitations. Although the meta-ethnographic approach allowed for the women's experiences within the studies to be preserved (Britten et al., 2002), the large number of studies included here meant it was difficult to capture the nuances of individuals' experiences within the overarching themes. For example there were some studies that included participants from black and minority ethnic (BME) groups, and the studies covered a broad range of ages, which meant that these additional factors could not be considered in depth. Due to the lack of prior synthesis in this area it was decided that no studies should be excluded here. However, future research could examine these nuances in more detail, for



example by focusing on the experiences of BME women, or older women, or women who have children.

The findings are also biased towards experiences of non-heterosexual women in English speaking countries, in particular, women from the USA. This research therefore does not include experiences of women from countries where English is not the primary language, therefore no inferences can be made regarding these. It is proposed that more research is conducted exploring the experiences of non-heterosexual women from non-Western countries.

Furthermore, due to recruiting a somewhat hidden population many of the original studies utilised a snowball sampling procedure to recruit participants, which can lead to biasing issues (Browne, 2005) such that women who do not associate with other non-heterosexual women may have been excluded. Consequently the current findings may not represent the views or experiences of these women and as such the recommendations may not be applicable to all non-heterosexual women. Recruiting this population is challenging but would add to the research; therefore future research should take into account issues around self-labelling of one's sexual orientation.

This research explored the experiences of family connections for non-heterosexual women. It seems important to question how relevant traditional notions of 'family' are to members of the LGBT community, as current definitions are often highly heteronormative and propose family to consist of a heterosexual man and a heterosexual woman raising children together (Gamson, 2000). Using current definitions in research may exclude those for whom the term 'family' does not fit with their experience, or those who choose to distance themselves from this heteronormative construct (Hudak & Giammattei, 2014). Therefore, future research may wish to explore or contribute to the development of language that is

inclusive of all definitions of 'family' (traditional and non-traditional) that may exist in LGBT people's social networks.

### **Conclusions**

In conclusion, this research has illuminated a number of novel findings that contribute to the existing literature exploring social support for non-heterosexual women. Implications for those supporting or working with non-heterosexual women have been discussed, including the potentially beneficial role of social, psychological and societal interventions. A number of future avenues for research have been proposed in order to further explore the experiences of non-heterosexual women, and LGBT individuals more generally.

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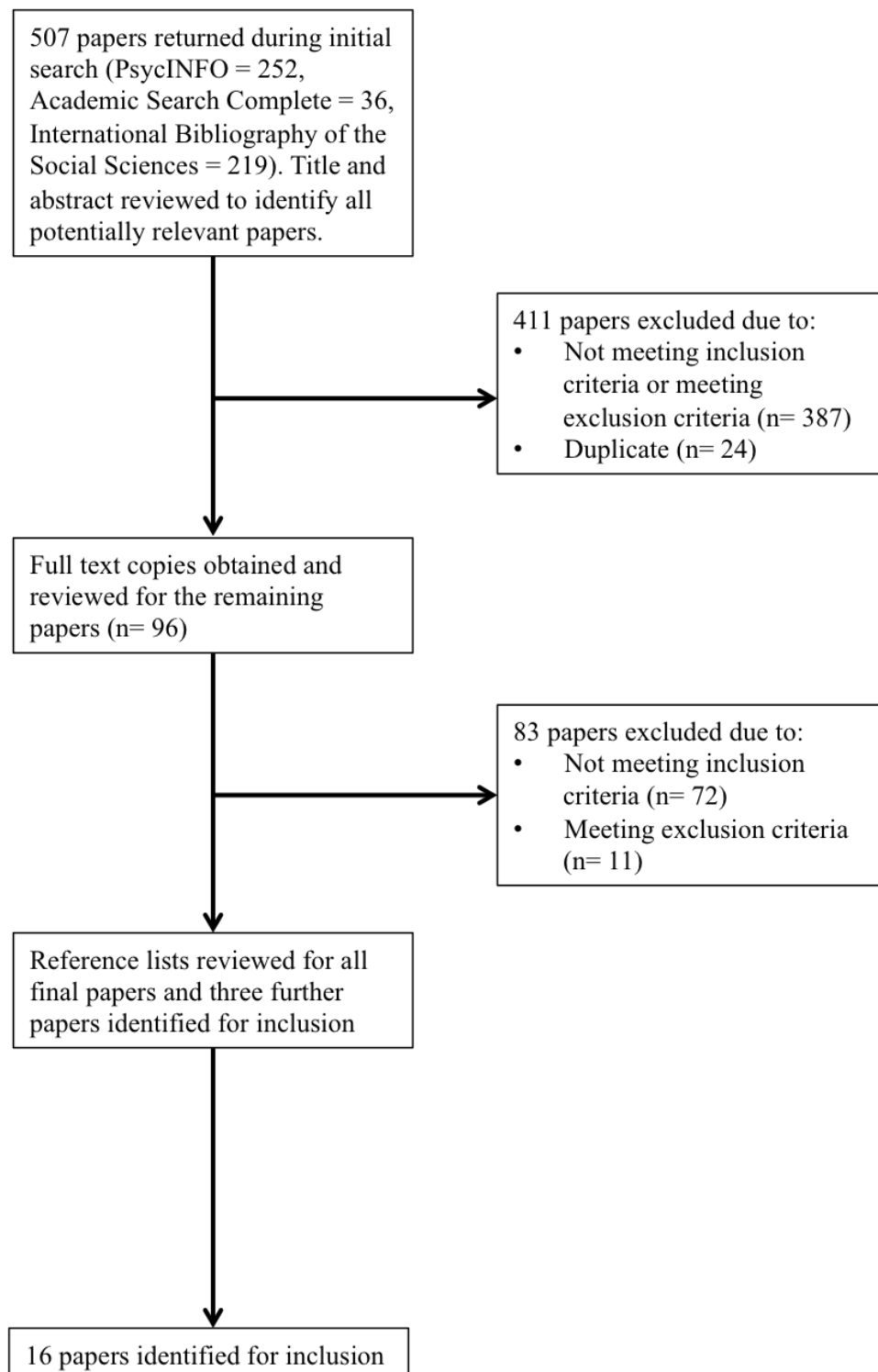
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## Tables and Figures



**Figure 1.** A flow chart depicting the process of searching for studies for inclusion

**Table 1. Summary of the methodological details and CASP scores for the included papers**

Author(s)	Country	Research question/aim(s)	Sample	Methodology	CASP SCORE
Aronson (1998)	Ontario, Canada	To study lesbians' experiences of giving and/or receiving care.	Lesbian women (n=15) Age: early 30s-mid 60s, Ethnicity: all White	12 semi-structured interviews and 3 written accounts; Thematic analysis	18
Comerford et al. (2004)	Vermont, USA	To explore lesbian elders' perceptions of ageing in Vermont.	Lesbian (n=14) and bisexual (n=1) women Age: average age of 60 Ethnicity: 13 White, 1 American Indian, 1 African American	Qualitative semi-structured interviews; Thematic analysis	22
Degges-White (2012)	Mississippi, USA	To explore lesbian women's experiences in social and romantic relationships	Lesbian women (n=154) Age: mean age 42.4 Ethnicity: European American (88%), African-American (2.6%), Asian/Pacific Islander (2.5%), Hispanic (3.9%), other (3.2%) (NB. demographic information was not provided in the article -	Semi-structured interviews	11

Diamond (2002)	New York, USA	A qualitative investigation of young sexual-minority women's most intimate adolescent friendships.	this was provided by the author through direct correspondence). Sexual-minority women (n=80) Age: 18-25 Ethnicity: "predominantly White"	Scripted, 30-minute phone interviews; Approach to analysis unclear	19
Gabrielson (2011)	Illinois, USA	To demonstrate findings from a larger study which highlighted the importance and role of the "created family" in relation to participants' health, wellbeing, and decision making regarding issues of ageing.	Older lesbian women (n=4) Age: 59+ Ethnicity: not stated	Instrumental collective case study from an original qualitative exploratory study that used across-case, thematic and within-case narrative analysis of interviews conducted with 10 older lesbians	19
Galupo, Sailer & St. John (2004)	Maryland, USA	To explore the complex ways in which bisexual identity intersects with the intimate social dynamics within close cross-sexual	14 friendship pairs: bisexual women (n=7) lesbian women (n=7) and their heterosexual friends (n=14) Age: 18-34 Ethnicity: 19 Caucasian,	Three semi-structured interviews were conducted with each friendship pair; Thematic analysis	18

		orientation friendships.	4 African-American, 1 Asian-American, 1 Pacific Islander, 1 Hispanic, 1 Jamaican, 1 Afghan		
Galupo & St. John (2001)	Maryland, USA	Investigate benefits of cross-sexual orientation friendships in adolescent girls.	10 friendship pairs: bisexual women (n=5) lesbian women (n=5) and their heterosexual friends (n=10) Age: 19-25 Ethnicity: 12 Caucasian, 5 African-American, 1 Asian-American, 1 Pacific Islander 1 Hispanic	Three semi-structured interviews were conducted with each friendship pair; Approach to analysis unclear.	16
Glass & Few-Demo (2013)	Virginia, USA	To examine how Black lesbian couples receive informal social support from their social networks, guided by an integrated framework of symbolic interactionism and Black feminist theory.	Lesbian women in committed relationships (n=22) Age: 27-44 Ethnicity: all Black or African-American	Dyadic semi-structured interviews; Analysed using a grounded theory methodology	23

Jones & Nystrom (2002)	Washington, Oregon & California, USA	To explore the life course experiences of older lesbians and their concerns and needs as they age.	Lesbian women (n=62) Age: 55-95 Ethnicity: 59 White, 3 Women of Colour	Semi-structured interviews; Grounded approach	18
Kowen & Davis (2006)	Cape Town, South Africa	To explore the experiences of lesbian youths in South Africa.	Lesbian youths (n=11) Age: 16-24 7 Xhosa, 4 English	Qualitative exploratory in-depth interviews; Approach to analysis unclear	15
McCarthy (2000)	Various rural towns, USA	To explore the experiences of rural lesbians.	Lesbian women (n=10) Age: 18-52 Ethnicity: 9 White, 1 Hispanic	Focus group; Approach to analysis unclear	18
Oswald (2000)	Illinois, USA	To understand what happens when young women come out as bisexual or lesbian/how coming out affected these women's relationships with family and friends.	Bisexual (n=4) & lesbian women (n=2) and their family/friends (n=25) Age: 15-55 (the 6 young women were aged 18-23) Ethnicity: 4 White, 1 multi-ethnic, 1 "homeless street youth"	Multiple interviews were conducted (with the focal participant, and with the participants friends/family); Data analysed using grounded theory open coding techniques	19
Richard & Brown (2006)	Connecticut, USA	To explore lesbians' experiences of and perspectives on ageing: this paper	Lesbian women (n=25) Age: 55-73 Ethnicity: 24 White, 1 of African descent	Focused, in-depth interviews; Thematic analysis	20

		focuses primarily on one of four main findings - social support.			
Stanley (2002)	East Coast, USA	To explore young sexual-minority women's perspectives on cross-generational friendships with older lesbians.	Young sexual-minority women (n=16) Age: 15-25 Ethnicity: 10 women of colour, 6 White	Two semi-structured group interviews; Data consisted of hand written notes (to maintain confidentiality); Approach to analysis unclear	17
Valentine (1993)	A town in Southern England, UK	To examine how lesbians meet and develop social networks.	Lesbian women (n=40) Age: 18-60 Ethnicity: Not stated	In-depth semi-structured interviews and social network analysis; Approach to analysis unclear	14
Weinstock & Bond (2002)	New England, USA	To explore the experiences of friendship between young lesbians and heterosexual women.	Lesbian women (n=23) & heterosexual women (n=24) Age: 18-25 Ethnicity: "mostly White"	Surveys were completed by participants; Qualitative text analysis used to identify themes in the data	16

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**Table 2. Table showing the contribution of each study's concepts to the final themes**

Study	Theme 1. Disconnection from family life	Theme 2. The benefits of cross-sexual orientation friendships	Theme 3. Negotiating (internalised) homophobia and seeking a space for authenticity	Theme 4. The intimacy of friendships between women
Aronson (1998)	<p>Lack of support from family of origin.</p> <p>Felt lucky to get support from family and health care providers - but acknowledged shouldn't need to feel this gratitude.</p> <p>Women were uncertain about how to generate more dependable support.</p> <p>Receive a range of support: practical, financial, emotional and moral.</p> <p>Desire to maintain control of their own care - hard to let others in or depend on others.</p> <p>Community often rallies round - help in a crisis.</p> <p>Resisting care - unaccustomed to putting their needs first (fear of exclusion/loss of support if do)</p>		<p>Passed as blood relative due to hetero-relational culture.</p> <p>Had to obscure lesbian identity to pass as legitimate caregiver.</p> <p>Needing to make informal support networks as formal ones not always available due to discrimination.</p>	

Comerford et al. (2004)	<p>Self-reliance (fluidity of gender roles - doing 'masculine' tasks etc.) but interdependence needed (good relationships with neighbours) in rural environments - limited ability to rely on just oneself in older age.</p> <p>Intentionally built support systems.</p> <p>Links to wider lesbian community - valued by some but not all of the participants. Some accessed lesbian groups: important to feel comfortable here.</p> <p>True friends (most of whom lesbians) more vital than family - family not who you turn to.</p>	<p>Isolated due to rural context so harder to meet other lesbians</p> <p>Social support = connections with local groups, larger community, and connections that are shaped by the individuals particular context.</p> <p>Healthy integration between lesbian and heterosexual people - found others to be open and welcoming.</p>	Felt ill at ease with heterosexual people.	If not partnered, ex-partner might a good source of support.
Degges-White (2012)	<p>Rejection from close family members (despite changing attitudes).</p> <p>Depth of friendship stems from the sense of group marginalisation.</p>	<p>Variety of social support networks - different types of friend, what's important is the quality of the friendship not sexual orientation.</p>	<p>Live double lives - appear straight to some and lesbian to others (lacking authenticity?).</p> <p>Internalised homophobia a bigger threat to developing a social support network than external homophobia.</p> <p>Authentic friendships -</p>	<p>Uniquely deep emotional connection with other women.</p> <p>Blurring of friendship/romantic boundaries.</p> <p>Most relationships start out as friendships - so added level to friendship.</p>



getting beyond superficial conversation can pose challenges.  
Trust important: would drop hints in conversation with heterosexual people to test out the friendship & ascertain trustworthiness.

Best friends without limits - intimacy in both sexual and nonsexual  
Friends->Partners->friends commonplace: this attributed to the limited breadth of lesbian community.

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Diamond  
(2002)

Not sexually motivated - in fact it was the *absence* of sexual attraction that made them so comfortable with the physical affection with female heterosexual friends.

Friendship similar to a relationship - blurred boundary.  
Features such as possessiveness, obsession, fear of losing the person.  
One pair even sought a couples counsellor who presumed lesbian relationship.  
Physical affection a common feature of friendships - more able to read each others emotional cues as a result, different to other friendships in that more representative of parent/child or romantic relationships.  
Some of the friendships then did lead to attraction - but these were no more intimate

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than the ones which didn't.  
 Context of adolescence  
 (developmental processes)  
 adds to intimacy - first  
 experience of reciprocal  
 intimacy.  
 First same-sex experience  
 usually with a friend.  
 But not all people who have  
 this then go on to develop a  
 non-heterosexual identity  
 One participant had long  
 friendship that led to a one  
 year sexual relationship and  
 then went back to friendship.  
 Fluidity of emotions and  
 sexual feelings - difficult to  
 distinguish the difference  
 between close same sex  
 friendships and love affairs.  
 Add a third variable of  
 openness to intimacy with  
 same-sex friends.

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Gabrielson (2011)	Past history of exclusion. No children to care for them Fears about exclusion, past loss or trauma related to loss impacts on current relationships. Needing to be caregiver of	Fears of mistreatment when need to rely on others for support.
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parents.  
 Friends as family.  
 Realising own limitations-  
 need for others' support, not  
 as independent as hoped or  
 previously thought.  
 Need for consistent  
 support/unconditional  
 support (attachment - secure  
 base) not available from  
 family, so seek it from  
 friends.

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Galupo, Sailer & St. John (2004)	Social support provides constancy that you can rely on. Don't feel so alone.	Difference in sexual orientation made them appreciate the similarities more (rather than focus on differences). Had benefits in that could keep different parts of their lives separate. The women appreciated keeping friendship and sexual interest separate (which was one of the benefits of cross-sexual orientation friendship - lesbian friends have sexual tension, actually helpful to have friends where this is absent - clearer boundaries	Following disclosure of sexual orientation felt relieved, able to feel closer and more open, increased trust, and feelings of acceptance. Deepened and matured the friendship (when a positive response was received). Challenging perceived prejudice - receiving acceptance from heterosexual women showed acceptance is possible - opening doors for authenticity, and self-acceptance/self-esteem (which add indirectly to	Friends are there when needed and someone to talk to - shield, therapist, fun and someone to depend upon.
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		but still with the benefit of female friendship).	social support). Friends were first people the young women came out to - so very important relationships. Younger lesbians so these benefits may be more available due to increased acceptance in society.
Galupo & St. John (2001)	Friendship important to wellbeing.	Cross-orientation friendships commonplace for bisexual women. Difference less noted in bisexual-heterosexual friendship pairs. Focus on similarities over difference (e.g. attraction towards men in bisexual-heterosexual friendship pairs).	Acceptance received from friends Although less open about sexuality in bisexual-heterosexual pairs, therefore less implicit acceptance? The women became more open and more like lesbian-heterosexual pairs when bisexual woman in a same-sex relationship
Glass & Few-Demo (2013)	Negative (judgemental/critical?) support from extended family - but still support. Need for sense of connection and belongingness so still need this family support. Self-sufficiency of black	Benefits of lesbian community - for individuals, but <i>not</i> for families or couples.	Felt a sense of loyalty to family. Family may invalidate relationships and lesbians are often desexualised - feel they may reinforce this themselves. Impact on self-esteem,

women a dominant cultural narrative.

Two couples did feel acceptance from family (due to time of disclosure, families prior experience).

wellbeing, creates distance through denial.

Dual roles (separate out lesbian role/family member role).

Church community important for black women. Important for self-esteem and alliance to culture to attend church.

But lesbian relationships nullified by religion and made women feel relationship must be hidden.

Felt the need to create a homeplace for authentic selves.

Acceptance received by re-labelling partners as fictive kin (aunt, friend, daughter). Create symbolic boundary to protect authenticity of relationship from perceived discrimination.

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Jones & Nystrom (2002)	Self-sufficient and independent much of their lives (needed to become this way - rejection from family led to need to provide for self).	Family and friends the main sources of social support: networks of friends, 12 step programmes, church groups and organised lesbian support groups formed the foundation
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Preparing for self-reliance during later years.  
 Family of choice - broad definition of family.  
 Family of choice includes current and previous partners and friends, and sometimes members of biological family e.g. children.  
 Difficulties with biological family - unable to come out, or had to withdraw from family activities. But biological family became more accepting over time for some.  
 Community forms a good foundation.  
 Greatest source of support came from within oneself (or God).  
 Satisfaction with social contexts in older age.  
 Concerned about losing support through bereavement.

for the women's support systems.  
 Range of social support - mostly from lesbians, sometimes non-gay community groups.

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Kowen & Davis (2006)	Many were rejected from family of origin and extended family, contact with family restricted due to fears of the	Feel isolated at school - excluded through heteronormative assumptions.
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women harming/influencing others in the family (children). Fear around non-heterosexuality in this culture.  
 No support offered from family.  
 Due to lack of family support, lesbian youth seek out alternative social support in friendships.  
 Friends an important support system: financial support, understanding, acceptance and feeling comfortable.

Important that friends provided acceptance and a space to feel comfortable.

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McCarthy (2000)	<p>Isolation and invisibility. Isolation related to feelings from the past (past exclusion): hinders group identity.          Connection is genuinely appreciated.          Benefits of other non-heterosexual friends - fitting in, have lesbian identity reflected in others.          Community can be hidden, lesbians can help other lesbians to meet people.</p>	<p>Multi level community - other non-heterosexual women firstly, and then heterosexual friends second.          Takes extra effort to gain lesbian community.          Leads people to need to seek support from heterosexual people.          More variety in social support networks due to rural location.          Heterosexual friends still appreciated, and can be</p>
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Important to be connected to community, to be active. Most women's strongest connection is to lesbian community.

accepting - but the women felt they had to educate them sometimes.

Oswald (2000)	<p>Sought to find lesbian community - used pre-existing resources and relationships already available to them. Sense of community provided safety, support and information as well as a sense of belonging. Extended family showed prejudice. Some were excluded from family of origin due to their religious beliefs - some women felt that family of origin needed to change their views/beliefs if going to accept them.</p>	<p>Educating heterosexual people helps build relationships. Structure and boundaries of relationships different after coming out. Sexual orientation irrelevant in some of the supportive relationships.</p>	<p>Talking can be an important way to receive support - creating acceptance. Need to work through difficulties to achieve acceptance. Being open and honest, and authentic allowed others to become accepting over time (and therefore provide more meaningful support). Homophobia brought people closer (heterosexual or otherwise) as they were united against it. Distances selves from bigoted or prejudiced people (including extended family in some cases).</p>	<p>Ex-lovers included in social support networks (for Kate and Candy - who were not</p>
Richard & Brown (2006)	<p>Did not rely on any formal support mechanisms - informal only.</p>	<p>Large variety of support.</p>		



Variety of support - valued laughter/heart, practical things from others.  
 Don't need to use family support, so not preferable if have family of choice.  
 Choose to be as independent as possible.  
 Consistency of support important.  
 Biological family (children) included provided support sometimes.  
 Some rejected the help of others - self-reliant (related to "butch identity"). Sometimes may have a lot of support but not perceive that, or feel support is not reliable.  
 Continuum of support - associates --> friends  
 Lack of family support.

partnered).

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Stanley (2002)	Difference/similarities recognised within the friendships. Perceived benefit of friendship with other lesbians - connection, advice and support, acceptance (being	Distance between heterosexual friends who didn't know about sexuality (not accepted = barrier). Important for African-American women to have same-race friendships to	Friendships with other women the norm, rather than with men.
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who you are), sense of community and shared history.

Older person may want to give back but generation gap can be a barrier (for the younger women).

buffer against racial prejudice (the intersectionality of their experience).

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Valentine (1993)	<p>Matriarchal figures in lesbian spaces: these can be supportive, they welcome in newcomers.</p> <p>This snowballs the lesbian community.</p> <p>Identity can become embedded in the networks formed in gay spaces - changing their style/behaviour to fit in with the dominant collective identity (impact of culture).</p> <p>Use these communities for practical services as well as emotional support.</p>	<p>Having a partner with an already established group of lesbian friends can help one establish social networks although mostly in first relationships neither have much contact with the gay scene and can be isolated.</p> <p>This may then lead to a widening of the social network.</p> <p>Lesbians have socially diverse friendships.</p>	<p>Loneliness and depression can result from the isolation experienced by many lesbian women.</p> <p>Many met other lesbians by chance in heterosexual environments - fearful of consequences of disclosure so 'drop pins' and look for clues in body language to determine if others are lesbian/share own sexual orientation.</p> <p>Finding safe spaces (gay spaces) - some see these as vital, others are fearful of these - at the time was hard to find these spaces (before the internet was widely available). Some moved from rural to urban areas for this reason.</p> <p>Taking a step towards</p>	<p>Some women befriend ex-lovers - contributes to density of lesbian networks.</p>
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obtaining a lesbian social support network felt like a big step - fear around being outed..

Some women used community initially to meet other lesbians but then held onto these social supports and moved away from lesbian spaces together.

Fear of anti-gay harassment in heterosexual environments and lack of gay social spaces where it is possible to meet friends affect the formation and character of lesbian social networks.

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Weinstock &  
Bond (2002)

The friendships are interesting due to differences & different perspectives.  
Absence of sexual tension in cross sexual-orientation friendships.  
Cross sexual-orientation friendships provided a boost in status.  
Cross sexual-orientation friendships have societal benefits - building

Unconditional acceptance based upon true authenticity but discomfort with sexuality expression sometimes.  
Cross sexual-orientation friendship led to courage to come out.  
Heterosexism impedes open, trusting and guilt-free relationships.

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community/allies, breaking  
down barriers.

Lesbians perceive a lack of  
understanding from  
heterosexual friends- inability  
to understand their  
experiences of oppression.

Sometimes lesbians felt  
unappreciated by their  
heterosexual friends (not  
clear why).

Challenging to deal with  
heterosexual friends -  
heterosexual privilege or  
heterosexism /political  
differences.

If both parties collude in  
removing the lesbians'  
sexuality from the friendship  
they are reinforcing  
heterosexism.

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