

The Mirror Dance

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The Mirror Dance

IDENTITY IN A WOMEN'S COMMUNITY

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For our communities

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Preface

In the late 1970s, while spending a year as a visiting assistant professor at a university in a midwestern town, I participated as a member of a lesbian community in that town. At the end of my stay I conducted the seventy-eight interviews on which this study is based. When I left the community the following summer for a job elsewhere, I took with me four hundred pages of single-spaced typed interview notes, a collection of journals and stories I had written about my experience in the community, a collection of community newsletters, bits and pieces of correspondence, a blue shirt and a book of good wishes that were going-away gifts from community members, and many important personal allegiances and memories.

During the next two years, I found that it was not a simple matter to move from my experience of intimate involvement with the community to a sociological analysis of that experience. I spent a year alternately picking up and putting down my interview notes before I learned that, in order to progress, I had to confront the ambivalence of my personal feelings toward the community in which I had lived and done my research. The process of exploring my own experience led me ultimately to see that feelings similar to my own were important in the accounts of the women I had interviewed and enabled me to use those feelings to guide my larger analysis. That analysis resulted in

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The Mirror Dance, a study that focuses on problems of merger and separation and on conflicts surrounding identity.

Many people helped me with this work. I am indebted, first of all, to the women of the community whose experiences form the heart of this book. I want to thank them, although I cannot name them, for cooperating with my research, for taking me in when I was a stranger, and for struggling with the difficult problems this study describes.

I am indebted to other friends and colleagues as well. I want to thank Marythelma Brainard, who helped me with ideas about interpersonal boundaries, merger, and separation and also helped me grow, and Cleo Eulau who, earlier, taught me much about separation. Fourteen years ago, Peter Marris modeled being a sociologist for me and the spirit of his work has been behind mine ever since. James G. March repeatedly let me know that he felt I was worthwhile and that he would read with pleasure anything I wrote. Ann Swidler read, reread, and talked with me about self-other and self-community relationships, sharing her magic for understanding. Martin H. Krieger was, as always, a source of unconditional support. At crucial times, Rita J. Simon also gave me much-needed acceptance and support. Estelle Freedman helped me decide to write up this study when I was uncertain and then encouraged me to deal with its hardest problems. Her insights, her suggestions, and her caring have enriched each of its drafts. In addition, there are other friends who, over the years, have talked with me and shared experiences similar to those reflected in this book. I want to thank them for their knowledge and for their love. *The Mirror Dance* is about a particular community; it is also, more broadly, about us all.

Introduction

This book is about individual identity in a women's community. It is based on a year of participant-observation that culminated in two months of intensive interviewing with seventy-eight women who were either members of the community or importantly associated with it. The community—a loose-knit social group composed primarily of lesbians—was located in a midwestern town and had approximately sixty active members.

When I spoke with the women of this community, I initially intended to study privacy. I asked four basic questions: (1) How would you define privacy (what images come to mind)? (2) How would you define the local lesbian community? (3) Within that community, how have you been concerned about boundaries between public and private, self and other (i.e., what has been your personal and social history)? (4) With respect to the outside world, how have you been concerned about protecting the fact of your lesbianism (who knows, who does not, and why)?

In time, however, I came to understand that my inquiries into privacy required me to explore dilemmas of identity. I moved from thinking of privacy as an ability to close the door of a house in order to protect oneself from view, to thinking that, more accurately, it was an ability to both open and close the door to affect how one might be known. I came, in other words, to be concerned about control over definition of the self. I also came to

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realize that my study was destined to be about something even more compelling to me: the problem of loss of sense of self—how it occurs and how it may be dealt with in a social setting.

The community I had studied, it seemed to me, presented a basic identity conflict to members and potential members. On the one hand, it promised them that, within it, they would be affirmed for who they truly and fully were. Here they might find haven from the outside world, acceptance not available elsewhere, and confirmation of crucial feelings they had about themselves, feelings related to their lesbianism, their feminism, and their identification as women. On the other hand, in this community, they would often feel that their differences from others were not valued, their own unique identities given little recognition or room. The community, in other words, would often seem to threaten their sense of selfhood.

This, I came to feel, was true in large part because the community was a community of likeness, one in which individuals were encouraged to value a common identity as women. It was also a community of intimacy in which members were given support for experiences of closeness and union, including those which might reach their peak in shared sexuality. It was a community of ideology and, in particular, of an ideology that stressed the oneness of women working together for a better life, an ideology that dealt minimally, if at all, with possibilities for conflict latent in the differences between members. It was a stigmatized or deviant community, a condition that also emphasized the need for oneness and solidarity. It was a relatively new community and so lacked many predetermined rules and roles that might give its members established ways of exercising their differences. Finally, and not of the least consequence, it was a community of women: individuals with life experiences that tended to encourage, indeed to view as virtuous, the giving up of the self to others.

Individuals faced with the reality of such a group were especially likely, it seemed to me, to experience a threat to their sense of personal boundary, individuality, or separate self. This

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threat would not always be felt by all people, but it would be felt by many on occasion, perhaps by all at some time, and by some to a greater degree than others. Particular situations or relationships within the community might bring it out. The individual would then experience a sense of loss of self or loss of control over her identity as a complete and separate person. In the words of one of my interviewees, she would cease to be "anything that was clear to her."

This experience of loss of a sense of self would characteristically take two forms. (1) The individual might feel overwhelmed: she might have a sense of losing herself to the community or some part of it by being taken over, subordinated, in effect suffocated by it; she might feel she was being given little room for herself, little time or space to respond to her own needs; she might feel too entangled with the community, too caught up in its pattern of inbred relationships, too defined by the group and its norms rather than by her own. Or, (2) the individual might feel abandoned by the community and experience a sense of loss of self when it seemed that the group or some part of it had left her, rejected her, or failed to fulfill her expectations that it would be a supportive, nurturing, or caring environment. She might then feel isolated within the group, starved, left out, disappointed; she might feel generally that the group was not there for her, not truly responsive to her.

Individuals might be in one or the other of these emotional positions (feeling overwhelmed or abandoned) at different times; they might alternate between them; or they might feel them simultaneously. Certain individuals might tend to have more experiences in one position than the other. They might often, in anticipation of an experience of one or the other kind, take steps to avoid it. Their experiences and their responses to them might, in fact, reflect basic expectations of being overwhelmed or abandoned that they had prior to coming to the community. But the important thing is that whatever the prior histories of individuals, the community brought out such experiences frequently, and often in extreme form, over a wide

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variety of cases. It did so by offering, on the one hand, a strong promise of identity affirmation stemming from what its members had in common and, on the other, a lack of established mechanisms for dealing with the differences between members.

At the same time, however, the community seemed to push both members and others toward finding new ways of protecting and defining their sense of self. Very often the experience of loss of a sense of identity was, despite its difficulty, seized upon as an opportunity for identity clarification. Such clarification would result from processes in which individuals would come and go in relation to the community, comparing, contrasting, and developing ideas of themselves in relation to others as they did so. Clarification also came from processes in which an individual would learn to structure her relationships within the community in ways that made the terms of those relationships explicit, reliable, and responsive to her needs. By structuring her relationships both with the community as a whole and with its members, the individual could, it seemed, emerge from experiences of loss of a sense of self with resources for dealing with the distressing feelings of being overwhelmed or abandoned. She would have a better sense of boundaries between herself and others and, as a result, she would be more aware of herself as a complete and separate person.

Yet the experience leading to such an end would often be highly conflictual and, indeed, painful. The individual attempts to be part of the community, to be like others in the group, to merge symbiotically; simultaneously, she seeks a sense of herself through processes of separating, being different, being an individual distinct from the group. In her efforts to join with the group, she runs the risk of being overwhelmed. In her efforts to be separate, she runs the risk of abandonment. She is caught, sometimes painfully, between the two risks in a conflict between needs for likeness and for difference and the support each lends identity. Only sometimes, however, and often after the fact, does she realize that this conflict may be part of a process in

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which she learns about herself and in which, by structuring her relationships with others, she develops a clearer and perhaps better conception of who she is, sometimes seemingly in opposition to the group, at other times in conjunction with it.

Now all social groups—communities, organizations, families—confront their members with this kind of conflict. In all groups there is a tension between the individual's desire to be part of a whole and the desire to be different. In all groups there are risks of being overwhelmed or abandoned, and individuals faced with these risks may at times experience a loss of sense of self, or loss of control over identity. Yet in some groups this experience is felt more intensely than in others and seems to occur more frequently. In some groups the expected negative consequences of taking either risk seem greater and, at the same time, the identity clarification that may result is more needed.

In those groups where the desire for personal affirmation from the group is great, and the complementary desire for assertion of individuality is also strong, the conflict between likeness and difference may be unusually acute. In these groups, the dilemmas produced by such a conflict are seen especially clearly, with a good deal of their complexity apparent. A lesbian community is such a group. Examining it may be particularly instructive for understanding how a sense of loss of self, or loss of control over identity, may be related to a larger socially structured conflict and how such a conflict may be mediated in any social setting.

Within a lesbian community, we find that individuals constantly have to deal with the mirror images they present to each other and with the difficulty of developing a sense of self-identity that is different from the common identity that their group encourages. In this type of group, members must repeatedly improvise solutions which structure their relationships with one another so that they can emerge from experiences of loss of sense of self with an identity that is different from the identity of others who look very much like them. Because of the

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nature of this effort, and because it suggests the basic struggle with likeness that lies at the heart of the community's reality, I have titled this book *The Mirror Dance*. The phrase was used by one of the women I interviewed in speaking of the difficulties of couple relationships in the community, the place where, because intimacy is so highly valued and possibilities for merger are great, problems of loss of sense of self are felt most acutely.

To best portray these problems, *The Mirror Dance* has been organized in three parts. Part I provides an overview of the nature of the community and the ways individuals perceive it as structuring identity dilemmas for them. It also suggests how individuals characteristically respond to those dilemmas. Part II examines particular kinds of situations and relationships within the community where conflicts concerning control over identity are especially prominent. Finally, Part III steps outside the community and attempts to gain perspective by looking back at it. The chapters of the book may be read in any order, but the sense of the whole they convey is one that builds in the sequence in which they appear.

As will be evident, the book as a whole is written in an unusual manner. It describes and explains its community's dilemmas exclusively through the voices of community members. The book reads rather like a novel in that it proceeds by association, by ordering the stories of many different individuals to create a sense of a whole. Its analysis emerges through its ordering: in the way it juxtaposes, compares, and connects the different viewpoints it represents. It encourages the reader to grasp that analysis by identifying with the book's characters and the experiences they discuss. The result of this process should be an increasing familiarity with patterns that are pervasive and repetitive in the community, and that structure identity problems for members, but which are not well summarized in terms of abstract concepts. Rather, the methodological contention of this work is that here, as elsewhere in social science, pattern may be best represented through description. (This point is discussed further in the book's Appendix.)

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The *Mirror Dance* is clearly an experiment, both in women's language and in social science method.* It is composed of an interplay of voices that echo, again and again, themes of self and community, sameness and difference, merger and separation, loss and change. Speaking in the colloquial style of the community, these voices provide their own narration. There is no authorial voice in the body of the work, except in the first chapter which is designed to set the scene. In the remaining chapters, the voices of community members alone analyze and comment upon one another and guide the reader to an appreciation of the conflicts surrounding identity in the community. The reader may find that, at times, the voices of these women merge with one another and become indistinguishable; individuals with different names speak as if they were one, reflecting the extent to which the community is a community of likeness. At other times, the same persons stand out from others as separate and different, and are therefore more easily identifiable. In this way, the text illustrates its own thesis: that clarity about identity occurs through push-and-pull processes as individuals join and draw back; respond to loss and confusion; feel, on the one hand, dependence on community and, on the other, apartness from it.

The *Mirror Dance* is thus both document and analysis. It is built on the interpretation this Introduction sets forth and yet it is open to other interpretations. It invites the reader to join, to take part, to overhear the gossip of women in one particular subcommunity in a midwestern town, to come to know the members of this community, to share their insights and their confusions. The challenge is to adopt these women temporarily as a peer group, to muddle through their difficulties with them, and to confront one's own responses to those difficulties as they appear when articulated through the book's interplay of many voices.

*For a review of more traditional social science approaches to the study of lesbian identity and community, see Susan Krieger "Lesbian Identity and Community: Recent Social Science Literature," *Signs*, vol 8, no. 1 (Autumn 1982).

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The picture of the community that appears in this study is not intended to be objective; nor is it arbitrary. It is a structured representation of a particular problem, loss of sense of self; in a particular setting, a women's community; and of possibilities for achieving clarity about individual identity in circumstances of stress. My hope is that the insights and the sense of reality this study offers may be of use to individuals who must deal with problems similar to those of the women whose experience it describes. These, most especially, will be lesbians—those who are not members of self-defined subcommunities no less importantly than those who are. I would also like this work to be of use to others whose identity dilemmas are similar. Perhaps most crucially, I would like it to provide a sociological perspective on individual difficulty and to contribute to the development of that body of studies within sociology that represents abstract social processes in concrete organizational and subgroup settings.

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PART I

1

The Setting

It was a medium-sized midwestern town. The trees were large, the landscape flat, the houses set apart, each fronted with a plot of green. In the winter it was covered with snow. In the summer the air was thick with humidity and the streets were overarched with splendid heavy branches. One could walk across town in an hour and a half, drive across in less than fifteen minutes. The winters were long and people complained of cabin fever as they wore on.

It was a town in the middle of America. Bus service stopped before midnight and ceased entirely on Sundays after 4:00 P.M. Just beyond the city limits on all sides were fields of corn. On Saturdays men mowed lawns during those months when lawns mattered. In the winter cars skidded on ice and quite often the airport closed down, as did the highways, producing an isolation that felt complete. A few miles in any direction were smaller farming towns whose residents didn't place much stock in the university "in town," although maybe their children attended the community college. There was one main shopping center out north, and the downtown, renewed and paved with red brick, saw little use. It was a good place to raise children. The neighborhoods, with the exclusion of the south central area, were fairly safe. The bus stops were well lit. There were a few parks within the city limits and a larger one just outside, and many of the streets were cobblestoned.

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It was a town where people had families, a town where the bars were not, among the majority white population, a place to go, a town where it was hard to get a foreign car fixed, impossible to get a French meal and nearly as hard to find good Chinese, a town of fast pizza and big crowds at the K-Mart and on the 4th of July. One could get by without reading the local paper or listening to the local news, though people for the most part did not. Events of the larger outside world only sometimes impinged, as if the cornfields and the long straight roads and the fragile airport that were the town's connections to anywhere in fact functioned in reverse.

It was a gray place beneath a gray sky, most of it paved in gray, especially near the cement factory. People grew strong here. They valued being settled; they valued the fact that they were in the Midwest, America's heartland where the real people lived, not crazy people like they had in California or caught up with themselves like in New York. If the Russians bombed, it was safe to assume they would probably never drop anything near; or it used to be safe to assume that before students and a few professors from the university started telling people different. It was a town where you either came and went quickly or you stayed for a long time.

Once a month on a Friday night, a group of women would gather upstairs in a church not far from the center of town and meet and talk about what it was like to live here and to feel different—to feel part of a separate community. There would be between twenty and forty of them wandering in over several hours' time. They would bring wine and punch and, of course, there was coffee, for this meeting was what they called a coffee-house. They had been getting together this way for several years, beginning when there were only five or ten of them. They'd wear slacks and overalls, and in the winter they'd pile a table high with bulky jackets. The heat would sometimes be on, sometimes not. The room was large and wood-panelled and it had a fireplace. Space in it sometimes would be cleared away and the women would dance.

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Other times they'd just sit around in a big circle and talk about their sense of community: who they thought they were, what they were trying to do, how they wanted as a group to "be there" for each other, to lend tools, to feel support, to be able to share their lives as they might not on their jobs or at school or with the families from which they came. Occasionally a few of them would talk about going out to speak to classes and to other groups to tell people how they were really quite like others in the town. Their homes were the homes of your neighbors, their way of life really not as strange as it seemed.

Newcomers would frequently first enter the community these women formed by coming to their coffeehouse meetings, having found out about them from an ad in the university paper, an announcement in the community newsletter, or by word of mouth, and often they would be shy, wondering if this was a group they really wanted to be part of. If they stayed, most likely they'd be invited to come to the bar after, or to come some other time to one of the women's houses for a party or to have dinner. In spring or summer, if they lasted through the winter, they might come, as well, to a picnic or a special celebration held in one of the local parks. They might join a ball team or one of the small support groups that met each week; they might sing in the choir.

There were about sixty women actively involved in this group which called itself "the community," though the number you'd usually see together at any one time was more likely to be around twenty-five, and there were others beyond the sixty who took part but only occasionally. These women ranged in age from eighteen to fifty-one with the majority in their mid-twenties or early thirties. They were for the most part lesbian, some were feminists, a few simply woman-identified. They were white and middle class and most of them at some time or another had connection with the community college or the university. They were students, teachers, administrators, nurses, production workers, jewelers, waitresses, and printers. They were not a communal group, though they sought to de-

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velop those possibilities. They lived in separate houses: some together as couples, some in cooperative homes, many alone. A few came in from outlying towns where maybe they lived in a big, old farmhouse. Several had kids.

They joined the community looking for something and sometimes thinking they'd found it. When she had finally found these people, said one of the women, she felt she had finally found people who would accept her whole life and she didn't want to let them go. The community for her, said another, was a group of women she could know she could lean on for support or just let her hair down around. It was a group of women who allowed circumstances and places where she could be herself.

Yet often the hopes for being oneself here met with disappointment: "You would think it would be easier to assert your differences in a community of women," said Irene, "but it's not. It's real disillusioning." Or, "It gets down to the crucial thing that everybody's complaining about," said Carol, "which is not being able to be themselves. It's not that everybody has to approve of me, but I want to be accepted."

The community seemed to offer a promise: "Here are women who can understand me, touch me the way I want to be touched," Melissa felt. At the same time it provided an experience which was disconcerting: "In the process of all that happened, all that mutual discovery of pleasure within our community, I think I lost a sense of my own development separate from other people."

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She saw several different lesbian communities in town, said Ruth, though she understood what people meant when they said “the community.” It was definitely the most out, the most woman-identified. It was a group of women who were almost exclusively lesbians, who had been out or around for just about as long as she had been here, which was about five years, or longer than that. These were women who were the lesbian community almost because it was important to them and because they found a sense of being, belonging, fellowship, and sharing that way.

By and large, they had known each other for a number of years, many of them, or at least the nucleus; they were people who had chosen to remain here. They were mostly older than student age, professionals, people who had life ties here, and if they were students, they were graduate students. That was basically the core of the group that was meant as the lesbian community. As a claim to being “the community” they probably had it, she thought, because they named themselves in such a way and wanted it.

They were a real tight-closed group, felt Norah, a group that was closed until they knew for sure that you were a lesbian for one thing. And she didn’t think that you could just go meet them, go hang out with them. She thought you had to join them, which happened if you knew somebody.

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They were basically a social network, felt Irene. The common denominator was people who defined themselves as lesbians. The community was a social entity that had its own rules, its own membership, its own qualifications. It was primarily devoted to itself rather than a proselytizing organization (like a church or Rape Crisis). It had functions: it gave its members a group identity; it gave them support for their life style and a sense of security and affirmation; for some people who didn't have a strong identity other than the fact of their lesbianism, it was crucial. It was also exclusive. The membership qualifications were pretty narrowly defined: a woman had to be either sexually involved with another woman, or planned to be, or had a good strong history of having been.

But more than that was that the most important thing in 85 percent of the cases was a person's affectational life, or the way a person dealt with her relationships with other people. It focused, the community focused, Irene felt, on how somebody was in relation to somebody else. It had a lot to do with the other and how the individual developed herself in an abstract sense: how she developed in terms of ideas she had about herself in relation to others.

The community consisted, said Valerie, of a loose federation of support groups and the women's service organizations that were linked to these groups (the Women's Shelter, The Rape Crisis Center, the Women's Information Network), plus activity groups like the choir and the sports teams and the newsletter. Then there were women who were not in any of these groups but who related to people who were as friends or lovers and participated in community events: the coffeehouse, the parties, the Seder, the May Day, and Sapphic Plains Collective events like the square dance. And then there were the Arts Festival Collective people.

It didn't seem to be just any women in the larger community who happened to be lesbian, Bronwyn believed. It was a particular group of women who were lesbians and a few who

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were not, a group of women whose lives touched, who came in contact socially and emotionally.

It was basically women who chose to relate to other women sexually, felt Madeleine, who generally were in relationships with other women, although some were not. But it was the idea of community as opposed to single women relating sexually. There was a whole culture, a camaraderie, a support system, a network, shared understanding, shared vision. Then within that there were strong friendships and people who met each other in cluster arrangements.

They were, felt Lillian—the group that she had observed—many of them were “Ain’t it awful.” Everybody kept dumping on them. She saw many sick people. It was like you gained your support and identity by putting yourself in a bunch of people who were equally oppressed. She had chosen not to actively identify with them.

It was women who identified as lesbians and feminists so that they had a consciousness of wanting to be part of a community, felt Carol. She thought there had to be an idea of wanting a community for it to exist. Then that was built on by the shared activities, the newsletter, the coffeehouses. She wasn’t sure, but she thought there were maybe fifty to a hundred people in it on different levels: a core group and those who were more peripheral.

Right now the lesbian community for her, said Jill, was the potential for being what she would call home.

She came to it six years ago through the Women’s Shelter support group, recalled Gayle. That was how the so-called elite group in the community got started. The people in that group all met each other through working on forming the Women’s Shelter. Being thirty years old before you met another lesbian, that was where she was then. Going to the Women’s Shelter and meeting all these lesbians and finding people saying all these daring radical statements, she just felt her whole life had come together. It was Melissa and Elinor. They were the core of it for