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Laura Hamilton

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# TRADING ON HETEROSEXUALITY

## College Women's Gender Strategies and Homophobia

LAURA HAMILTON  
Indiana University

*In this study, the author uses ethnographic and interview data from a women's floor in a university residence hall to examine how some heterosexual women's gender strategies contribute to their homophobia. The author describes a prevailing heterosexual erotic market on campus—the Greek party scene—and the status hierarchy linked to it. Within this hierarchy, heterosexual women assign lesbians low rank because of their assumed disinterest in the erotic market and perceived inability to acquire men's erotic attention. Active partiers invest more in this social world and prefer higher levels of social distance from lesbians than do others. These women also engage in same-sex eroticism primarily designated for a male audience. They define their behaviors as heterosexual, reducing the spaces in which lesbians can be comfortable. Finally, the author concludes by discussing the unique nature of women's homophobia and the links between sexism and heterosexism.*

**Keywords:** *sexuality; homophobia; lesbianism; college; social distance; gender strategies*

Scholars note that homophobia plays a central role in the construction of masculinities (Connell 1987; Corbett 2001; Kimmel 2001; Pascoe 2005). Indeed, as Corbett (2001) notes, the term *faggot* stands in for more than sexual insult: It connotes a failure to be fully masculine. “Real” men repudiate the feminine or that which they perceive to be weak, powerless, and inconsequential (Kimmel 2001). The hegemonic form of masculinity thus supports men's dominance over women and other men in subordinated positions because of race, class, or sexuality (Connell 1995). The

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literature on masculinities suggests that homophobia occurs when men try to perform hegemonic masculinity. By verbally or physically attacking men whom they perceive as not masculine, men may reassert their own manhood (Corbett 2001; Kimmel 2001; Pascoe 2005). When relying solely on this conceptualization, homophobia takes on gendered characteristics, underscoring a particular masculine manifestation of antihomosexual behaviors as quintessentially homophobic.

Past research seems to support the association of homophobia with men: For instance, studies often find that women have more positive attitudes toward homosexuality (Loftus 2001). Giddens (1992, 28) has even predicted that women will be the vanguard in creating a space for "the flourishing of homosexuality." Yet, it is possible that women's homophobia remains obscured when conceptualizing homophobia as a singular phenomenon. As Stein (2005) suggests, homophobia can take many forms and operate through multiple mechanisms. Homophobia may also be central to the development of certain feminine selves but not in the same way as for masculine selves. Because women and men are in different positions with regard to power, women's homophobia may support gendered identities that are most successful in garnering men's approval (Rich 1980). Some women may distance themselves from others who do not perform the erotic selves that they perceive as valued by men. These women may exhibit homophobia to maintain the believability of their traditionally feminine identities.

In this article, I draw on ethnographic and interview data from a women's floor of a residence hall on a public university campus to suggest that heterosexual women may display homophobia against lesbians as they negotiate status in a gender-inegalitarian erotic market. First, I describe the Greek party scene on this campus, the erotic hierarchy linked to it, and lesbians' low ranking within this hierarchy. I then explain that women who were active partiers excluded lesbians from social interactions and spaces while critical partiers and nonpartiers were more inclusive. Finally, I describe how heterosexual women conceptualized the same-sex eroticism that they used to garner men's attention and the consequences that this had for lesbians. I conclude by discussing how gender inequality and heteronormativity combine to create homophobia among women.

### **GENDER STRATEGIES: "TRADING ON" HETEROSEXUALITY**

Scholars have used Swidler's (1986) concept of "strategies of action" to show how women create "gender strategies" that help them navigate

inegalitarian gender conditions. A gender strategy is a course of action that attempts to solve a problem using the cultural conceptions of gender available to the individual (Handler 1995; Hochschild 1989). Gender strategies are thus both cognitive and behavioral. They are not, however, always reflexive. In interaction, decisions and actions often occur quickly and nonreflexively. Women may fall into well-established patterns of behavior that pull from available cultural definitions of femininity and masculinity. Consequently, they can engage in gender strategies without awareness of the gendered aspects of their actions (P. Y. Martin 2003).

Gender strategies involve the use of particular gender presentations over others. These presentations do not reflect preexisting internal qualities but become engrained in people's bodies through the constant repetition of particular movements, acts, and thoughts (Butler 1990; K. A. Martin 1998). Premised on gender difference, heterosexuality is one of the key mechanisms through which women and men learn to embody gender. Given women's subordinate position, much of what makes a woman traditionally feminine is her ability and desire to attract a man (Bartky 1990). Women learn to produce feminine bodies and to have desires for men that conform to heterosexual imperatives. Many of the roles from which they gain their identities—such as girlfriend, wife, and mother—further emphasize the centrality of heterosexuality to gender identity (Jackson 1996).

Depending on the rules governing a particular social field, some gender presentations will garner more rewards than others will (McCall 1992). As Connell (1995) notes, while political, cultural, and economic practices benefit hegemonic masculinity, they but subordinate masculinities that eschew heteronormativity. Many of these same practices similarly disadvantage women. However, femininities that conform to heteronormative ideals of feminine charm and beauty can operate as a form of embodied cultural capital (McCall 1992).<sup>1</sup> One strategy that women may use to deal with gender inequalities is to “trade on” their embodied capital (Chen 1999). That is, they may rely on their ability to signal heterosexuality to acquire better treatment and more status than other women (Butler 1990; McCall 1992; Rich 1980; Schwalbe et al. 2000). Homophobia can result when women who have embodied capital disassociate themselves from those who do not. Any benefits that women may accrue through homophobia come at a cost: They ultimately reinforce the gendered inequalities that made such a gender strategy necessary (Schwalbe et al. 2000).

Gendered-embodied capital is not equally available to all individuals: Instead, material resources, the physicality of bodies, and prior gender performances all restrict the femininities/masculinities that individuals

can enact. Audiences hold people accountable for the types of gender performances that they expect from particular bodies in particular social positions (Bettie 2005). Gender identities thus reference locations within social hierarchies. Hegemonic masculinity, for example, relies not only on heterosexuality but also on race and class statuses (Chen 1999). Similarly, women's embodied capital privileges whiteness and requires classed knowledge and resources (Bettie 2005; Collins 1990). Therefore, heterosexual women in socially dominant race and class positions may have greater access to the dividends of hegemonic masculinity as they are most likely to embody cultural notions of an "ideal" femininity.

### **EROTIC MARKETS AND HETEROSEXUAL PRIVILEGE**

A ubiquitous element of youth cultures, erotic markets are expanding to include larger segments of the population for longer periods of their lives. Erotic markets are public sexualized scenes in which individuals present erotic selves that are subject to the judgments and reactions of others (Collins 2004). These markets require a mass of individuals who share similar assumptions about the kinds of sexual activity that are open for negotiation and how to interpret the sexual activity that does occur.

Many erotic markets operate using heteronormative cultural logics. This does not mean that all people within these scenes are heterosexual or that all erotic behaviors in this scene occur between women and men; rather, the available cultural understandings in heterosexual erotic markets reflect heteronormative ideas about sexuality, what "sex" is, and for whom it is performed. Because heterosexuality presumes gender difference, these meanings also code "real" sex as that which is penetrative or initiated by men and position women as desired objects rather than desiring subjects (Armstrong 1995; Jackson 1996). As a result, same-sex eroticism between conventionally feminine women becomes a performance for men, one that inevitably ends in heterosexual sex (Jenefsky and Miller 1998).

Within erotic markets, hierarchical rankings sort individuals by both successful participation *and* perceived desirability to potential partners. These rankings often transfer into other social relationships, marking status even when individuals are outside of erotic markets. Rankings are determined, in part, through social activities that are "organized by flirtation and sexual carousing" (Collins 2004, 253). Individuals who are not skilled, interested, or successful at engaging in these activities face exclusion from this avenue to status and the social networks of those who are

high status. They must also perform gender in ways that others recognize as legitimate and desirable. For women within heterosexual erotic markets, this means performing a conventionally feminine identity.

Heterosexual relations are often organized in ways that benefit men (Jackson 1996). Past research has documented the gender imbalance in power, resources, and status that operates in erotic markets on college campuses—particularly those in which Greek organizations are present (Armstrong, Hamilton, and Sweeney 2006; Boswell and Spade 1996; Handler 1995; Holland and Eisenhart 1990; Martin and Hummer 1989; Stomblor and Martin 1995). In these situations, women can use heterosexual performances to access benefits through their relations with men (Schwalbe et al. 2000). Many women who identify as heterosexual are privileged in heterosexual erotic markets in ways that lesbians are not and invest in maintaining their privilege (Rich 1980). These investments may not be fully conscious—women’s participation in the heterosexual erotic system can preclude the kind of social contact with lesbians that fosters acceptance.

### **SOCIAL DISTANCE: ASSESSING HOMOPHOBIA AMONG WOMEN**

Social distance is the degree of closeness that people are willing to tolerate in their interactions with a stigmatized group (Gentry 1987). Goffman’s (1963) work on stigma suggests that people often avoid encounters with stigmatized individuals because of interactional ambiguities and a fear of contamination by association. Inserting social distance is one way to mitigate these perceived costs of engaging in social interaction with “different” individuals (Milner 2004).

Particularly among women, homophobia often appears as a form of social distance.<sup>2</sup> Socialized into “niceness,” women may not always participate in the direct, aggressive, and publicly visible behaviors that many equate with homophobia among men (Gilligan 1982; K. A. Martin 2003). Research on adolescents suggests that women often use exclusionary projects—such as the maintenance of social distance—to mark the difference between themselves and “others” (Eder 1985; Merten 1997). In college, lesbians pose unique interactional threats to heterosexual women if they fail to engage in the appropriate erotic activities or present traditionally gendered selves in heterosexual erotic markets. Heterosexual women may also feel that lesbians are sexualizing the previously “safe” (i.e.,

heterosexual) backstage area of the residence hall floor. By maintaining social distance from lesbians, many heterosexual women assuage their fears of status contamination and quell anxieties about their own sexuality.

## METHOD AND DATA

Data for this study are from ethnographic observation, individual, and group interviews conducted at a large midwestern research university as part of a project on collegiate life.<sup>3</sup> One goal of the project is to understand how dominant groups on campus maintain and reproduce environments in which they are privileged. For example, all 43 of the women in this study were white. In addition, most came from middle- to upper-class families, identified as heterosexual, and had traditionally feminine gender presentations. Only two identified as lesbian, six were from working-class families, one was born outside of the United States, and another was isolated for her noncompliance with norms of appearance. Therefore, most embodied a femininity that the prevailing erotic market of the campus rewarded—if they chose to participate.

Most of the data were collected as part of an ethnography conducted throughout the 2004-2005 academic year on a women's floor in a mixed-gender residence hall that was identified by students and staff as a "party dorm." The title does not refer to partying within the residence hall itself; instead, students are attracted to this residence hall because it offers the most direct route into the dominant party scene on campus. Students from all residence halls gather outside of this and other party dorms en route to parties, making a party dorm a good site to study the dominant party culture on campus. Roughly one-third of incoming students are housed in party dorms; these residence halls feed the greatest number of students into the Greek system (which includes about 20 percent of students). While students cannot choose to live in party dorms, they can request certain areas of the campus. Some selectivity does occur, as many students pick particular areas because of the party dorms within them. Yet, even party dorms include students who are at least initially less party oriented.

A research team including one faculty member, five graduate students, and three undergraduates conducted the ethnography; five team members identified as heterosexual women and one as a gay man. Our team occupied a room on the floor we were observing. During the first semester, at least one member of the research team was there three to four weekday afternoons and evenings and one to two weekend afternoons and evenings

per week. In the second semester, I was there two weekday evenings and one weekend evening weekly. Members of the team took notes about each interaction after the observation periods were completed. Interviews with floor residents occurred throughout the academic year and lasted between 1.5 to 2.5 hours. After each interview, we took notes. I conducted the majority of interviews but also relied on data collected by others. I used Atlas Ti to analyze interview transcripts and all notes.

Researchers formed different types of relationships with women based on their age, position in the university, and shared interests and/or tastes. As I identify as white, upper-middle-class, and heterosexual and have a fairly traditional gender presentation, I was able to connect with most women on the floor. Yet, this did not hinder me in forming close relationships with the out lesbians on the floor or several of the working-class women. As women on the floor generally associated with those of similar status, they often did not realize that individual researchers also knew others on the floor. This allowed me to move among different social groups with ease. Researchers only brought up sensitive topics in interview settings. However, discussions about issues such as sexuality did occur spontaneously. Our relationships with respondents did not change perceptibly after completing interviews or observing these sensitive discussions, perhaps because we did not reveal our own political and social attitudes.

Of the 53 women in the hall, we interviewed 43. This article focuses on the 43 residents with whom we completed interviews. All of these women were first- or second-year students. As older students—particularly seniors—may age out of the party culture, this study is most representative of processes occurring in the early years of college. Although all women on the floor were part of the ethnography, interview data allowed me to confirm social distance to lesbians. During interviews, women referred to their actual contact with lesbians on campus, what—if anything—they did to maintain social distance, and their preferred level of contact. In no case did women present attitudes that did not match observed behaviors toward out lesbians on the hall. Based on observations, the 11 women who are not included in the article are representative of other women in the hall in terms of their orientation to partying and fall into levels of social distance in proportions similar to the rest of the hall.<sup>4</sup>

I accepted the sexual orientation that women claimed across multiple data points—in interviews, surveys that we administered, and interactions with friends or the research team. The women who identified as heterosexual did not indicate otherwise across any of these settings in the course of an entire academic year. Recognizing that sexual identity may be concealed, is fluid,

and may vary across multiple dimensions (i.e., political, social, sexual, etc.), it is entirely plausible that some of the heterosexual women in this study may privately see themselves as bisexual or lesbian or acknowledge this in different social contexts or during later periods of their lives. I am limited to the reported self-understandings of sexual identity that were in play during the ethnography. Regardless of their self-understandings in other aspects of their lives, the women who claimed public heterosexual identities could profit in keeping social distance from out lesbians. As I discuss later, many of them did simultaneously imitate same-sex erotic practices, but they generally did so *only with an audience of men*.

I also include data from a group interview with lesbian and bisexual women on campus conducted in spring 2004 to examine the impact of heterosexual women's same-sex eroticism on other women's experiences of social space on campus. This group interview was obtained through student organizations on campus and covered a variety of topics including sexuality, relationships, partying, and the Greek scene. Although they are marginalized, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered students do have resources geared toward recognizing their needs; for instance, they have access to alternative housing, support groups, discussion forums, rights-oriented organizations, and a few social venues. Yet, these resources and institutional policies against discrimination by sexual orientation do little to challenge the heterosexual social world on campus, and, for first-year students who are placed in "party dorms," knowledge of them may be limited.

## THE EROTIC HIERARCHY OF THE GREEK PARTY SYSTEM

Although only one of the many social "games" on campus, the Greek party scene is the largest and most well known among students. Many arrive on campus anticipating participation in the drunken social world portrayed by MTV and other youth media as "college"; in fact, students often head off to party before they attend their first college class or unpack their possessions. Erotic interactions between men and women play a central part in this world.

### The Greek Party Scene

The Greek party scene is a sexualized social arena that is temporally and spatially specific. It occurs in the evenings in fraternities and in popular bars known for their laxness in enforcing laws against underage drinking. All of

these fraternities are effectively white organizations; the few Black and multicultural Greek organizations do not have on-campus houses that can accommodate large parties. Although fraternity houses host parties with varying themes, they all revolve around a predictable “party routine” in which women are expected to drink, flirt, and socialize (Armstrong et al. 2006). Bars often serve as secondary sites for those who party at fraternities. Thus, the party scene achieves a level of cohesiveness. As one respondent put it, regardless of where you are, “it’s the same party, exactly the same frat, the same people.” Fraternities have a monopoly on this scene because they provide “free” alcohol to underaged women who otherwise might not be able to obtain it. This resource, combined with little university policing and private ownership of communal spaces, allows them to dictate almost every aspect of the parties they hold (Armstrong et al. 2006).

For example, many fraternities operated a one-way transport system in front of the “party dorm” that we observed. Starting the week before school began, fraternity men waited in the latest sport utility vehicles to drive women to their parties. First-year women clustered in this area and had little control over their destinations. Fraternity men also dictated party themes, most pressuring women to arrive scantily clad. Women described attending parties such as “Golf Pro/Tennis Ho,” “Trophy Wife and James Bond Husband,” “Playboy Mansion,” and “CEO/Secretary Ho.” In addition, fraternities screened admission into their parties. One evening I observed a fraternity member selecting what appeared to be the most attractive and scantily clad women to receive the first ride; sometimes he even split up friendship groups. Women also reported that fraternity men rejected non-Greek men to create a favorable gender ratio. Finally, fraternity men determined the flow of guests and alcohol in their houses. Several women described men luring them into private spaces to receive alcohol. One noted that “Every guy [asks] you wanna drink, you wanna, oh, come see this . . . oh, let’s close this, and closes the door, and I just get so annoyed.”<sup>5</sup>

For women, participation in this scene was not contingent on Greek status. Greek women did frequent the scene more heavily—often partying a few weeknights along with the weekend evenings; however, nearly all (49 out of 53) of the residents on the hall attended at least one fraternity party before they had the chance to join sororities. Although only 20 women on the floor became “Greek,” most women who started by participating in this scene continued to do so. Many participated because they perceived few other options; on several occasions, women explained that they had “nothing else to do but drink.” As one resident complained, the social scene is “so concentrated on the fraternities and fraternity-type partying.”

Choosing not to participate also came at a cost. Several nonpartying women lived near each other in an area of the hall that the most social women labeled “the Dark Side.” This phrase operated as a code word for “losers” and “antisocial” people. Although the women who coined the phrase hid its meaning, women on “the Dark Side” eventually found out why others called them by this name. These women and others who did not invest heavily in the party scene reported feeling lonely and left out. As one explained, “I thought people would be more open, and college was going to be a great place where I have all these friends, and I’m just really making some acquaintances and no friendships yet.” Because of the dominant party culture of the hall, nonpartying women typically remained unaware of others like them.

### Women’s Erotic Status

The party scene privileged individuals who actively participated in the erotic market. Because fraternity men controlled important party resources, one had to attract their attention to be included in the party. A woman explained, “Well, I flirt with guys . . . I just pretty much do that so we can go play flippy cup (a drinking game) or get free beer.” The lesbians on the hall found this exchange to be intolerable. One described a party she attended as follows:

I was uncomfortable . . . in the sense that all of the girls kind of have to compete with each other to get the alcohol, and it just screams so much like prostitution to me. You know, even if they’re not literally having sex with the guys, it’s just like they’re . . . selling their flirtiness for beer or something, and that’s just so not me.

She felt that fraternity men treated women who were unwilling to “trade on” their erotic interest as lower status and less deserving of alcohol. For this reason, she no longer attended Greek parties. The other lesbian on the hall never attempted to attend, stating, “I will never go. I don’t want to go. It’s not my scene at all.”

Most heterosexual women who partied found men’s erotic attention both important and rewarding. One woman noted that the best thing about “kissing guys” at parties was not physical pleasure but “know[ing] that a guy’s attracted to you and is willing to kiss you. It’s kinda . . . like a game to play just to see.” Women even felt that not receiving this attention could be damaging to one’s self-esteem. A woman with a long-term boyfriend described the costs of not seeking men’s approval: “I was like the little conservative, country bumpkin in my outfit. I was like, no, I’m not going

to get any of the attention. They're not going to waste their time with me. . . . You need to flirt; that's good for your confidence." Failing to signal interest in obtaining men's approval could also result in embarrassment. Another woman said that she was mortified when she unknowingly showed up at the "CEO/Secretary Ho" party dressed as an actual secretary wearing a long-sleeved blouse and a knee-length skirt. When she walked in the door, a fraternity member flashed her a sarcastic thumbs-up, telling her, "Nice outfit."

The importance that most women placed on men's erotic interest translated into a clear hierarchy among them. At the top of this hierarchy stood "the blonde." By definition, all "blonde" women were white, having tan skin and light-colored hair. They were also thin, trendy, and sociable. Women felt that men found all of these traits to be desirable. One woman explained that being "blonde" was when "all the guys are like, 'Oh my god they are so hot.'" The seemingly organic nature of the "blonde" appearance belayed the extensive bodily work that went into managing a "blonde" body. For example, navigating the line between "good" and "bad" tan (looking "orange," as the women put it) involved knowing how to tan and when to stop. Many women struggled to maintain slender physiques while engaged in a party lifestyle that involved drinking a lot of beer and eating late-night pizza. Money was also essential; women often used colored contacts, hair straighteners, and salon hair coloring to appear more "blonde."

"Blondeness" also implied erotic interest in and appeal to heterosexual men. Part of indicating their interest in men involved actively working to avoid signaling homosexuality. For example, a woman told me about having a rainbow-colored arm cast in junior high, noting that she would never get one now as people might think that she was a lesbian. These women often assumed that others who did not exhibit a high-status gender presentation were lesbians. During a discussion in a dorm room one evening, several of them recoiled with disgust at a picture of tennis star Serena Williams, noting that her extremely defined muscles made her look "mannish" and like a lesbian. Because sexual orientation is not necessarily visually apparent, they equated gender conformity with sexual conformity. Most heterosexual women believed that this method could detect lesbians, whom they assumed to be "boyish." Both out lesbians on the floor dressed "sportier" than other women (often in sweatpants or T-shirts and rarely in makeup—even at night). After the women came out as lesbians, others insisted that they already had guessed based on their appearance. As one noted, "Definitely you can tell . . . there are people that have the stereotype . . . . They've got a way about them that they're probably gay."

Although heterosexual women generally did not believe that lesbians could be “hot,” several did reevaluate their ranking of lesbians based on this possibility. When I asked one woman how she would feel about having a “hot” lesbian roommate, she explained,

If my roommate was a lesbian and she was more feminine, I think I would be more comfortable . . . [If she was] like me—she looked girly—it wouldn’t matter if she liked guys or girls. But if it was someone that was really boyish, I think it would be hard for me to feel comfortable.

As Gamson (1998) noted of talk show audiences, heterosexual women on the hall often found the idea of lesbians who conformed to gender norms less problematic than those who did not. Regardless of her actual availability to men, the “hot lesbian” would at least look available.

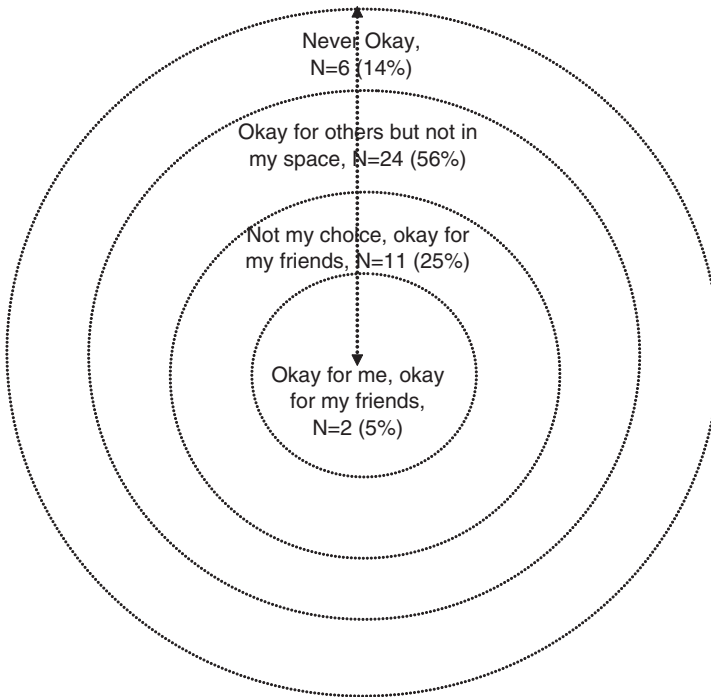
However, if she were unwilling to enter the party scene and “sell her flirtiness for beer,” a hot lesbian—like any other woman—would find her access to erotic status severely limited. The lesbians on the floor were thus doubly disadvantaged; first, by their refusal to participate in the erotic market and then by their choice not to perform “blondeness.”

## MAPPING SOCIAL DISTANCE FROM LESBIANS

Women on the floor had varied relationships to the Greek party scene. Most were highly invested in this scene, but a number were critical or opted out of the party scene altogether. As illustrated by Figure 1, women also differed in their willingness to interact, establish relationships, and share personal space with lesbians. All of the women who were most involved in the party scene fell into the two outer rings of social distance, while those who invested less required less social distance from lesbians.

### Active Partiers

I defined active partiers as those women who (a) reported attending a fraternity party at least once a week for the majority of the academic year and (b) generally expressed satisfaction with this scene. Thirty women met these criteria; 19 of them joined sororities. I spent hours talking to women in this group as they prepared hair, makeup, and outfits for “going out.” For most of them, partying was one of the major activities of college life. One avid partier explained, “I guess the only things I feel like I do here are study and party. My life is split between those things.” Many



**Figure 1: Levels of Social Distance from Homosexuality**

emphasized the thrill of dressing “all sexy” for these parties. As a woman noted of a Playboy mansion party, “It’s an excuse for everyone to just like dress in the sluttiest little thing that they can pull off without looking like complete trash. It was just so fun because you have an excuse to just like let loose, and there were so many people there.” Along with the erotic energy of this scene, they also took pleasure in drinking. One woman exclaimed, “I almost feel getting drunk is like—I’m so happy! I guess that’s what we mostly do.” These women also felt that partying was a ubiquitous part of campus life (“There’s always a party going on here, you know?”) in which almost every student was perceived to participate (“That’s what practically everybody is doing on the weekends”).

Among active partiers, there was a distinction between women who felt that homosexuality was “never okay” and those who felt that homosexuality was “okay for others but not in my space.” For the six heterosexual women in the “never okay” category, religious beliefs were the guiding

principle shaping their desired level of social distance from gays and lesbians. All of these women grew up in religious communities or rural towns. They saw homosexuality as a clear-cut moral issue; it was always wrong for both men and women. As two roommates explained:

R1: We've been sheltered around diversity. . . . Everybody's a farmer, everybody's the same.

R2: Hardly [any] gays or anything, so we're not used to all this gay pride stuff, and it's like, What are they doing? Read the Bible.

None, however, were part of Christian groups on campus; in fact, these groups did not approve of participation in the sexualized and wild party scene. Instead, women in the "never okay" category used religious objections that reflected the cultural logics of their homogenous hometown communities rather than intense personal involvement with organized religion.

These women were frank in interviews and with peers about their beliefs, often saying homosexuality physically disgusted them. They struggled with what they felt to be an offensive new environment in which different values prevailed. For example, one night a frustrated woman told me and several others how tired she was of looking at "that" (the GLBT—Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgendered—Rainbow week bulletin board just outside her door). She said vehemently, "I just want to take a big black marker and write "straighten up . . . straighten up your future."

Others generally tolerated these women's verbal denunciations of homosexuality, labeling them as ignorant or provincial only during interviews. However, one of these women faced exclusion on the floor because she rejected her assigned lesbian roommate in such a negative fashion. This woman slandered her lesbian roommate as a "dyke" to others on the floor, engaged in loud verbal assaults on her, and made a show of changing her clothing elsewhere. Eventually the lesbian roommate chose to move out, and a friend with a similar conservative religious background moved in. Many floor residents ostracized this woman and her new roommate. She reported, "A lot of people don't say hi, don't smile, don't acknowledge us because they think I am this bad person."

Gamson (1998) notes that in talk shows, a similar process often occurs; audiences will isolate individuals with the most prejudiced views so as to define themselves as comparatively tolerant. Floor residents identified these women as "bigots" because they directly mistreated a lesbian, explicitly made it about her sexuality, cited religious morality, and made it political by hanging a "Vote for Bush" poster on their door. As Eliasoph

and Lichterman (2003) note, Americans generally avoid political discussion because they see it as too divisive. A resident elaborated, "It could maybe make her uncomfortable if her roommate was a lesbian . . . [but] she shouldn't go around blabbering it." Although this woman understood the desire not to share a room with a lesbian, she found the public and unsophisticated way in which the other woman handled it to be objectionable.

The 24 women in the homosexuality as "okay for others but not in my space" category displayed this sort of sophistication, walking the line between the competing values of openness to diversity and dissociation from low-status lesbians. They were aware of the need to respect the discourse of diversity acceptance promoted by university staff and officials through numerous and visible "Celebrate Diversity" decorations and activities. The increasing visibility of gay characters in television shows that many of them watched (including *The O.C.* and MTV's *The Real World*) also signaled that appearing gay friendly was hip and fashionable. These women responded in interviews as to "prove" their tolerance, often in comparison to others with less socially acceptable views. As one noted, "It just doesn't faze me. I think you can do whatever you want to do, and I never was brought up that gay is wrong—like shaking the Bible." Another woman explained, "I mean, if they want to be gay, that's great. I don't have anything against it. I would rather someone come out . . . than being scared, but I dunno because I'm not."

Awareness of cultural values for diversity, however, does not always translate into acceptance of marginalized groups. Researchers suggest that most whites now engage in "symbolic racism," framing their negative views toward other racial groups in ways that do not seem outwardly racist while continuing to engage in more indirect forms of discrimination (Schuman, Steeth, and Bobo 1988). Women in this category similarly avoided openly prejudiced statements about homosexuality or gays and lesbians as a group but still kept lesbians out of their social spheres. As one woman carefully noted of lesbians, "There's always going to be people that are different, but here I'm not friends with those people." Their lack of lesbian friends was not a consequence of the circumstances. The women in this group were generally aware of the two lesbians on the hall, mentioning their presence in interviews and interactions. One of the lesbians even noted that she was friendly with some of these women until she came out; then it was as if they were strangers.

Women in this group managed to avoid lesbians on the hall without appearing to contradict their "openness" to diversity by using the language

of taste. Rather than highlighting lesbians' sexual preference as problematic, these women cited differences in interests, personal styles, or social chemistry. For example, one woman in this category also moved away from her lesbian roommate but maintained that it was mismatched personalities that led to her switch. As she explained during the interview, "I just don't like living with her because it's hard. We don't talk, and so I don't like that atmosphere." Even when talking with each other about lesbians on the hall, women in this group rarely said they disliked lesbians because of their sexual orientation. One woman told me about a conversation she had with another heterosexual woman who said that she would not want to move in with the lesbian (despite tension with her current roommate) because "she's bigger and she's weird." When I looked confused about this, the woman I was interviewing leaned in and whispered, "[She's] a lesbian."

The preference for social distance from lesbians was most apparent when I asked women to consider lesbians in their personal space. Almost invariably, they were concerned about being "checked out" by lesbian room- or floormates: "I'd be freaked out changing. I know I sound so close-minded, but truthfully I would be like scared. Like, is she watching me change or will she hit on me?" In a residence hall where private space is public space, lesbians introduce interactional ambiguity. Women were familiar with men eroticizing them—even on their floor and in their rooms—but lesbians added the possibility of an unfamiliar sexual gaze. One woman noted, "Having a lesbian on the floor has scared me. When I'm in the shower and I know she's next to me . . . I get nervous. 'Cause I never thought about a girl looking at me that way." In her opinion, even shared floor spaces were more comfortable when assumed to be heterosexual.

### **Critical Partiers and Nonpartiers**

These 13 women shared an orientation to the party system that was different than for women in the outer two levels of social distance. They afforded the party scene less importance, choosing to define themselves through other avenues. I identified five of these women as critical partiers because, although they participated in the party scene, they consistently critiqued it. When I asked one critical partier where she partied the most, she said, "Whichever [place] I hate the least that week." The only critical partier or nonpartier to join the Greek system, she did so as an attempt to make friends but refused to be "fake and try to please people." She

disliked the elitism of the party scene, where “people base stuff on money,” judging others through their ownership of designer goods. Another woman maintained that she did not always have to party in the Greek scene, stating, “Tell me what I’m missing out on that I can’t find with other people . . . . It’s not worth it to me.” She and her roommate, another critical partier, chose not to go through the process of visiting and eventually joining sororities, often referred to as “rush.” They even posted what they called an “anti-rush” message on their door: “Yes, that’s right. We quit. The two females who live in this room have been officially disqualified [by choice] from the rush process.” This was a bold move in a context where the Greek system was highly valued.

I defined 11 women as nonpartiers because they chose to opt out of the Greek party system. Many of these women noted that they did not enjoy partying. One explained, “I’m not a big party person . . . . I’m not a big person on drinking, and I don’t like being around people that are totally drunk, acting like idiots.” Several of them reported being made fun of by other floor members. One woman, for instance, told me that a floormate chided, “You haven’t drank and you’re at college? Come on.” For several who opted out, financial or personal issues led them to value school differently.

Some of these girls don’t even go to class. It’s like they just live here. They stay up until 4:00 in the morning. [I want to ask,] “Do you guys go to class? Like what’s your deal? . . . You’re paying a lot of money for this. . . . If you want to be here, then why aren’t you trying harder?”

Her contempt reflects the fact that partying is also a classed activity—one that not everyone can afford.

Critical partiers and nonpartiers fell into two groups: those who were willing to have lesbian friends and those who were willing to consider public lesbian identities for themselves. The 11 women in the homosexuality as “not my choice, but okay for my friends” category believed in the benefits of diversity in college. Many were curious about meeting new people and learning about their experiences. One woman, a friend of a lesbian on the floor, enthusiastically detailed the positives of having a lesbian roommate, exclaiming, “I don’t care, I’d be inquisitive! I’d want to know about . . . what they’ve dealt with and what their views are on gay pride like ‘I wear the rainbow.’” Another woman talked about her interest in the gay and lesbian community in the town, sparked by her contact with a bisexual woman. She explained, “I’m really into everything different. Anything to have an experience is just so cool.” For these women, contact

with gays and lesbians was seen as a form of personal enrichment—"an experience" that could be consumed.

A few women in this group, however, felt that one's sexual orientation was not what made someone a desirable friend. They typically noted that a lesbian roommate would be the same as any other roommate—only a problem if they did not get along with each other. As one woman noted, she "loved" her lesbian friend because she was "real" and "down-to-earth." Another described her close lesbian friend, saying,

She says what's on her mind and I love that. I just I get a kick out of half of the things she says, and the other half I just really appreciate that she's honest . . . . That's a good quality in anyone.

These two women did not think their friend's "gayness" made her fun and unique; they each enjoyed their lesbian friend for other aspects of her personality such as candor, wit, and sincerity.

While perhaps they were positive influences in the lives of individual lesbians, these women did not challenge the overall marginalization of lesbians. When they protested the exclusion of their lesbian friends, they did so in private or anonymously. For example, several of them privately expressed fierce hatred for the "bigots" on the floor. But, rather than speaking to the resident assistant or bringing up tolerance as a floor issue, they admitted to secretly writing things on the door of these two women. They realized that other people on the floor were not as accepting of lesbians as they were but did nothing to change this. As one noted, "It just sucks that not everyone can be open-minded."

The two women who felt that homosexuality was "okay for me, okay for my friends" had the smallest social distance from homosexuality. Both identified as lesbians and felt shunned because of their sexuality. One explained of her roommate, "She was really nice the day I met her, and then after I told her I was gay, she changed." Based on this reaction, the woman felt she needed to be careful about who she told. When I asked her if many people knew at first that she was a lesbian, she said, "No, take a look at the floor I was on, the building I was in. Of course not. I didn't want people to gang up on me." When she moved into a new residence hall, she decided that it was best to signal her sexuality only subtly by hanging her gay pride flag. She noted, "I learned my lesson from directly telling a roommate . . . . Honestly, I would have kept it a secret until I found out how she felt about it. If she was against it, I would have kept it secret." This woman was willing to hide her sexuality rather than face a negative reaction.

The other woman had a similar experience with her roommate. She and her roommate never actually talked about her sexuality nor did the roommate directly confront her about it. Instead, the roommate indirectly signaled her disgust for lesbianism. The woman who identified as a lesbian explained,

I was watching this show on VH1. It showed a clip from Melissa Etheridge's wedding, and I remember she made this disgusted noise and commented on it, but it stuck out to me obviously—like I see how you feel about this.

A week later this roommate had “a full out conversation about how disgusting [lesbianism] was” with a woman who lived next door. This conversation occurred in the lesbian's room, but the women who were talking never acknowledged her presence. Even in her own private space, she felt dismissed and ignored.

Both lesbians also reported that they felt unwelcome on campus. When I asked one woman if she thought that students were accepting of homosexuality, she made a clear distinction between how she felt in Adams (a relatively small alternative residence hall she moved to midyear) versus other places on campus. She noted that in most places, “I just feel uncomfortable. Like here (Adams), I'm totally comfortable with everybody. . . . If they're Adams kids I know that they're accepting.” Outside this pocket, however, the two lesbians often felt isolated. As the other woman explained, “I assumed that everyone was straight, just like the rest of the world, where everyone assumes that everyone is straight.” In classes, she reported sensing intolerance that kept her from being more open.

There have been a couple times that I've kind of come close to saying something about [my sexuality], and I hold myself back because I know. For example . . . my English teacher is actually out and he's alluded to it a couple of times, talking about his partner. And the reactions that I've seen [my classmates] have to it, have kept me from [disclosing it].

For both women, college life involved constantly monitoring their surroundings, determining when they could be open, when they could not, and what spaces allowed them to be “lesbians.”

### APPROPRIATING LESBIAN EROTICISM

Although lesbians received clear messages that their sexuality was not welcome, same-sex eroticism of a certain kind thrived. Active partiers

frequently engaged in same-sex sexual behaviors in the party scene. Their ability to do so without social stigma depended on maintaining social distance from those who identified as lesbians. Heterosexual women's appropriation of lesbian eroticism for their own use put lesbians in a difficult position. Woman-to-woman eroticism had its place on campus among those who identified as heterosexual, but out lesbians often encountered disgust or hostility.

### Same-Sex Eroticism among "Straight Girls"

Only active partiers, those in the two outer rings of social distance from lesbians, participated in same-sex eroticism (4 out of 6 women in the "never okay" group; 17 out of 24 women in the "okay for others but not in my space" group). Same-sex eroticism included kissing (on the mouth, often involving tongues) and fondling (of breasts and buttocks), particularly while dancing; no heterosexual women reported oral or digital stimulation of the genitals. These women openly discussed such behaviors with researchers, talked about them with their friends, and posted pictures of themselves kissing women in their rooms and on the Internet.<sup>6</sup> Heterosexual women who were more open about homosexuality did not either engage in the same behavior or advertise it in the same way.

As Jenefsky and Miller (1998) note, the performance of lesbianism for men may signal heterocentric eroticism. Women on the floor who engaged in this behavior claimed that they intended their same-sex kissing for an audience of heterosexual men. Several noted that they liked to get reactions from men. One described, "You get guys that you just like to see their expressions. It's just so funny to see them be like, 'Oh my god, I can't believe you just did that, that was awesome.'" Another woman explained, "Guys said, 'Do it, do it!' just screwing around . . . [They] were like, 'These girls are going to kiss!' So you think you're cooler and guys think you're cooler." The value in the same-sex kiss, therefore, was in the attention that it could garner from men. Like a sexy outfit or new stilettos, heterosexual women could deploy same-sex eroticism as a statement of style to get attention amid a sea of scantily dressed young women. One resident even noted that unlike doing drugs, this way of getting attention did not cause bodily harm.

Heterosexual women were careful to claim that their kisses had little meaning behind them, noting that they were not involved and not "serious." They often contextualized their behaviors so that others (and perhaps themselves) would interpret them as heterosexual. As two roommates told me when I asked if they had ever seen two girls kissing,

R1: Well, sometimes we're drunk. (Both laughing)

R2: Like trashed.

R1: We have a wall of shame of pictures.

R2: Sometimes we get a little out of control and trashed, but it's not like we're going crazy on each other. Like, it's just to be funny. It's random kisses. It's not serious.

R1: Right (laughs). It's not like I want you or anything. Eww.

Women often attributed these kisses to alcohol. Among this crowd, however, intoxication was rarely an embarrassing state. Drunken pictures were most likely to make it into public view as they provided proof that one could party hard. Same-sex sexuality was just another way to mark oneself as edgy and spontaneous—"stepping outside of your box," as one woman called it.

Floor residents who employed woman-to-woman eroticism were careful to distinguish their behaviors from those whom they considered to be "real lesbians." As many felt that lesbians were identifiable through their unfeminine appearance, they seemed sure that those in their social networks were heterosexual even if sexual orientation was never a topic of conversation. As one respondent noted,

R: It's totally different if you're into it. Like lesbians or something. It's just your friend.

I: How can you tell like if somebody is really into it or not?

R: I don't know. I always just assumed everyone wasn't. Just 'cause it's people I knew. I've never seen real lesbians kiss.

All of these women agreed that you only kissed close friends whom you trusted to be heterosexual. One even described it as a "bonding" activity between her and another woman on the floor. When they saw other women kissing at parties, they usually applied the same assumptions.

These women felt that encountering lesbians making out in the heterosexual space of the party scene was unlikely. They understood that women achieved status and even basic inclusion in the party scene through their ability to attract men. In their eyes, most lesbians were incapable of doing so; lesbians were "boyish" and "weird" and therefore unlikely to be "hot" or "blonde." They assumed that lesbians simply could not succeed in passing as heterosexual women. This assumption allowed them to construct seeming boundaries between their same-sex erotic practices and those of who they deemed to be "real" or "actual" lesbians. The maintenance of these boundaries played a central role in their ability to maintain heterosexual identities and define their behaviors as hetero-, rather than homo-, erotic.

## Reducing Lesbian Spaces

Heterosexual women's enactment of same-sex eroticism worked to further marginalize lesbians. Displays of eroticism between women perceived as undesirable to heterosexual men invited ridicule or worse. Because the heterosexual party scene encompassed all Greek houses, many off-campus houses, and all but a few bars in town, lesbians were effectively excluded (both by choice and by design) from most public erotic spaces in town. A lesbian in a focus group suggested that heterosexual women even encroached on the few lesbian- and gay-friendly party spots. Della's, the bar to which she referred, is a widely known gay bar.

One night I was at Della's and waiting for my friends to meet me there. I'm sitting alone at this table, and a group of approximately 50 girls in matching T-shirts with sorority lettering across the front, came in, took over the dance floor, and were makin' out and givin' lap dances to each other. . . . I called [my friend] and I was talkin' to her about how just disgusted I was by it because it's making a mockery of us. These two girls overheard me 'cause I was being loud (laughter). . . . And I tried to explain to them that if I went to the straight bar with my girlfriend and stood next to her, let alone kissed her, that would not be okay. But that these little girls kissing and giggling is A-okay because it's implied that there's no pleasure there or that it's to please men rather than to please themselves.

This woman experienced the sorority women's presence in her space as invasive and their behavior as insulting. Acting as heterosexual "tourists," these sorority women consumed the experience of the "exotic other" but could safely leave it behind (Casey 2004). As most erotic spaces privileged their sexuality, they felt entitled enough to invade one of the few lesbian-identified spaces in pursuit of a thrill.

None of the women in the focus group felt that heterosexual women's use of same-sex eroticism would lead to claiming a lesbian identity. One explained, "There doesn't seem to be any . . . authentic lesbian in between there." However, heterosexual women's enactment of same-sex eroticism in a gay bar suggests that their appropriation may not be only about garnering men's attention. It is possible that claiming a heterosexual identity allows them to enjoy experimentation with other women. On the floor, two roommates told me and another woman about a night when they danced together naked. They did this alone and were not recounting the story to get men's attention. Yet neither described this experience as a "lesbian" encounter, instead jokingly dismissing it as something to do when they

were bored. They may have privately experienced this as a moment of questioning their sexuality; however, their ability to tell others without facing challenges to their heterosexual identity was dependent on the existence of out lesbians from whom they could differentiate themselves.

As Casey (2004) notes, heterosexual women's intrusion into gay and lesbian identified spaces can reduce lesbians' comfort, safety, and sense of inclusion. Women who claimed heterosexual identities may have experienced freedom from men's gaze and possibly played with same-sex desire while in the bar; however, as a result of their intrusion, lesbians lost the right to define the meaning of same-sex eroticism in their own space. By claiming same-sex eroticism as a heterosexual practice, heterosexual women made lesbian desire invisible and reconfigured it as a performance for men. Ironically, in the lesbian bar take-over, heterosexual women took up space with their bodies and their sexuality—something that scholars find to be particularly difficult for women (K. A. Martin 1998; Tolman 2002). Yet they did so only at the cost of women who were more disenfranchised on campus than they were.

## DISCUSSION

The literature on masculinities suggests that men's dominance over women encourages adherence to heteronormative ideals of manhood that support aggression against gays (Connell 1987; Corbett 2001; Pascoe 2005). These analyses present the flipside of that story; women's efforts to navigate inegalitarian gender contexts may fortify their efforts to meet heteronormative standards of femininity. Although disadvantaged relative to men, heterosexual women may raise their status among other women by distancing themselves from those who do not perform traditionally feminine identities. Lesbians, who often avoid signaling availability to men through behavior or appearance, thus encounter systematic social exclusion.

Past scholarship may have minimized homophobia among women because it does not look the same as among men. Men's homophobia often takes the form of physical or verbal violence against gay men. My analyses suggest that homophobia among women instead renders lesbians socially invisible. For example, when someone covertly dismantled the Rainbow Week bulletin board in the hall, no one, save the resident assistant, said anything. The unceremonious removal of the board and its subsequent replacement with healthy eating suggestions fittingly represented the situation of the lesbians on the floor. Most of the floor was so busy avoiding them, they were almost socially nonexistent.

The problem of lesbian visibility is deeply rooted in heteronormative cultural meanings that are fundamentally gendered. They reflect the idea that women's sexuality is a direct consequence of men's desire, socially transforming sex acts between women into erotic fodder for heterosexual men (Jenefsky and Miller 1998). When heterosexual women engage in same-sex eroticism for an audience of men or in lesbian-identified spaces, they make it difficult for lesbians to mark their erotic activities as nonheterosexual. In contrast, heterosexual men may feel that homosexuality is a persistent threat (Armstrong 1995). As a result of the fundamentally gendered nature of sexuality, heterosexual men often ward off accusations of homosexuality while lesbians have to struggle to make their sexuality visible.

Because of the invisibility of lesbian sexuality, lesbians often have to deliberately signal their unavailability to men through dress, group affiliation, and choice of social space (Armstrong 1995). This may mean both choosing not to participate in heterosexual erotic markets and creating a less feminine gender appearance. As my data suggests, however, these are two key mechanisms through which women can gain status in gender inequalitarian conditions. Many lesbians face a dilemma: They can make their lesbian identity visible and face social invisibility or struggle with the invisibility of their sexual identity but benefit from social inclusion. Women's homophobia thus relies on heteronormative understandings of sexuality to keep lesbians marginalized.

My analyses suggest that homophobia among women (heterosexism) is tightly linked to gender inequality (sexism). When disempowered, women may rely on gender strategies that access compensatory benefits through their relationships with men (Schwalbe et al. 2000). These gender strategies require traditionally feminine gender presentations that become the primary form of embodied capital available to women in specific social contexts. First, women have to be in disadvantaged positions vis-à-vis men to need their "patronage" for achieving status. Social and structural inequalities that divide men and women into two different groups also naturalize the gender differences that they produce. Second, heteronormative cultural logics that assume the "otherness" of appropriate sexual partners must be in play. These logics privilege women who work to attract and please men, often through their gender performances. Although ultimately supporting their own subordination, women who benefit from these conditions can rely on homophobia to maintain the status quo.

My work also indicates that women's embodied capital is race and class specific. "Blonde" gender presentations are only possible for those who can produce long, straight blonde hair and "tan" skin. In addition, this appearance requires knowledge about styles and trends and the money

necessary to buy and embody them. Not everyone is, therefore, capable of producing the kind of femininity that can bring benefits in the erotic market of the Greek party scene. Although my analyses do not detail how race or class statuses impact women's gender strategies, it is possible that women with reduced access to the rewards of heterosexual performance have more room for gender flexibility. However, some Black feminists such as Collins (1991) and Smith (1982) indicate that when heterosexuality is among the few privileges available to women, they may invest heavily in "maintaining 'straightness'" (Smith 1982, 171). For this reason, women marginalized because of their race, ethnicity, and/or class background may exercise strategies of social distancing from lesbians with more vehemence. This remains a topic for further examination.

## NOTES

1. Connell's (1987) concept of emphasized femininity suggests that women may benefit by complying with men's domination. However, he argues that women have little institutional leverage or reason for marginalizing other women and fails to account for women's active use of their heterosexuality to gain status or power.

2. Many have recognized the problems with the term *homophobia* (see Adam 1998). Unfortunately, there are few other terms that are as widely recognized and understood.

3. I assigned pseudonyms to the names of locations and buildings to protect the anonymity of respondents.

4. Two of these women left the school midyear before we could interview them. Five women were too uncomfortable talking about themselves to do an interview. Four said they were too busy for an interview.

5. Not all fraternities or fraternity men engage in these behaviors. However, women reported similar experiences at all of the most popular fraternities on campus.

6. Recent survey results from the National Center for Health Statistics indicate an unexpected increase in reports of same-sex experiences among 18- to 29-year-old women, most of whom do not identify as lesbian or bisexual (Mosher, Chandra, and Jones 2005).

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*Laura Hamilton is a doctoral student in the department of sociology at Indiana University. Recent publications include an article on party rape (with Armstrong & Sweeney) in Social Problems (November 2006, Vol. 53, No. 4) and another about parental investment among adoptive parents (with Cheng & Powell) in the American Sociological Review (February 2007, Vol. 72, No. 1).*