BLACK LESBIAN FAMILIES AND THEIR RELATIONSHIPS WITH THEIR FAMILIES OF ORIGIN

Valerie Quinn Glass

Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree or

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

In

Human Development

April Few-Demo, Chair

Fred Piercy

Katherine Allen

Megan Dolbin-MacNab

October 26, 2010

Blacksburg, Virginia

Key words: African American, Lesbian, Feminist, Family, Lesbian Stepfamily, Therapy

BLACK LESBIAN FAMILIES AND THEIR RELATIONSHIPS WITH THEIR FAMILIES OF ORIGIN

Valerie Q. Glass

ABSTRACT

Twenty-two African American lesbians were interviewed in order to identify and examine the intersection of individual and family processes that African American lesbian couples engage in as a family with members of their families of origin. A qualitative research design based on grounded theory methods was used. Data were interpreted using an integrative framework of postmodern feminism, Black feminism, and symbolic interactionism. Findings revealed three major themes: a) Black lesbian couples go through a coming out process as a couple and as individuals, at times, simultaneously; b) Black lesbian families establish and enforce boundaries to protect their intentional, co-created families, and this boundary definition shapes lesbian family identity, and c) resources accessible from informal social supports by African American lesbian families are different from the types of social support and resources available to Black lesbian individuals. These findings provide valuable insights into lesbian family processes that can assist family studies, feminist scholars, family therapists, and community practitioners in identifying future research directions and clinical practices appropriate for African American lesbian families.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When I began considering a personal path towards a doctorate degree, the first person I approached was my partner, Gamellia Richardson. I told her I wanted to do something completely selfish and give up our good jobs and our nice living arrangements. Her response was, “sounds great!” We packed up and moved, just like that. She was fully supportive from the start and I can not thank her enough for joining me on this journey and being my voice of both reason and confidence. She is my partner in love and life. I am truly grateful for the last eleven years.

During the process of this dissertation, I was blessed with a child, Jordin Glass-Richardson. She lights up my life. Her loving nature and quick wit is always present with me. I thank her for allowing Mommy to work and for those terrific hugs I got all during the process.

It goes without saying that I acknowledge my dissertation advisor, April Few-Demo. In this case, Dr. Few-Demo has contributed more to my professional growth than I ever thought was part of the advisor’s role. At every step, she would challenge my thinking and my way of doing things. I would be at a point of frustration over what she was telling me to do, then, suddenly, it would make sense. She encouraged me completely. She consistently challenged my view of the world. I have grown personally as a result of this project and have her to thank for that. She expanded my mind further than I expected and this resulted in a well written and thoughtful dissertation.

I have to thank my invisible cheerleader, Katherine Allen, whom many would agree is far from invisible. At some point during my doctoral process, Dr. Allen jumped in a really started cheering me on. This left me feeling both excited and humbled. I greatly admire Dr. Allen’s energy along with her research and her experience. I am grateful to Fred Piercy who has always

been welcoming to me. He provided me with a sense of strength in my own abilities. Megan Dolbin-MacNab began my dissertation journey with me. I started this research project with her assistance and her thoughtful critiques were welcomed and assisted me in generating this marvelous work. I have to especially thank Dana Stone Harris and Cathy Hudgins who endured the doctoral process beside me. I could not have made it through without both of their affections and intellect.

My parents' support and guidance throughout my life does not go without thanks. I was raised with communication and openness in my family of origin. In addition, my parents taught me the importance of challenging ideas. These values are integrated in both my personal and my professional life and allowed me to take on such an ambitious project. Also, my parents have worked hard and well at integrating my lesbian family into their lives; they welcome my partner and my child with open and loving arms.

I feel indebted to the participants in this study. I was overwhelmed by their openness and their excitement for this project. I found myself in awe of their comfort in themselves and their zest for life. I thank them for being a part of this valuable experience.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

Chapter 1: Introduction

Background

Issues specific to Black gay and lesbian couples and their relationships with their families of origin and extended families are rarely addressed in current research. Studies have addressed gay or lesbian couples and their extended families, but the subjects of these studies have typically been with White populations (Greene, 1993; Laird, 1996; LaSala, 2002). There is a dearth in the existent literature about how Black lesbian couples construct identity as Black lesbian families, and how interactions with the extended families of Black lesbian couples contribute to self-definition or self-determination within this unique family process.

Research acknowledges that lesbian relationships are often hidden or unacknowledged in Black families (Loiacano, 1989). Some Black lesbians are less likely to disclose their sexual orientation to the public in comparison to White lesbians (Parks, Hughes, & Matthews, 2004; Rosario, Schimshaw, & Hunter, 2004). It is also recognized that among (mostly White) lesbian couples, the perceived lack of familial support can negatively influence couples' relationships (Murphy, 1989). Although loss of familial support can negatively affect the well-being of individuals and couples regardless of race or sexual orientation, the combined effects of belonging to two minority cultures simultaneously may increase the need for family support among Black lesbian couples (Murphy, 1989). Through an examination of the bidirectional influence of relationships with families of origin and extended families on Black lesbian couples, this study addressed a previously neglected area of research.

Black lesbians, who have viewed their families as a resource of support and comfort throughout their lives, could have an increased fear of disclosing their sexual orientation to their families and communities (Greene, 2000). Black families and communities provide for their

members a safe place from the world of oppression and prejudice (Greene). Lesbians are frequently faced with the possibility of abandonment from their families of origin if they disclose their sexual orientation (Greene). With Black individuals, who often have intricately woven familial ties in support of their visible minority status, the consequences of disclosing lesbian identity affects their need for safety in their family settings (Greene). Greene (1993) suggested that this fear of isolation from the extended family seems to have further implications for research and therapy.

Many assumptions and generalizations are made from research with regard to individuals in a multiple minority status (Harper, Jernewell, & Zia, 2004). Researchers have not frequently addressed the different ways that racial oppression and heterosexism can be expressed in the lives of Black lesbians. In addition, researchers have not take into account the multiple layers of oppression that might exist and how multiple oppressions may affect individuals within the couple relationship. Harper et al. suggested that gay's and lesbian's voices are not present in either the gay rights movement or the civil rights movement. Harper et al. argued that research that examines the continuum of experiences among Black gay men and lesbians could prove beneficial in challenging assumptions and generalizations made regarding gay and lesbian couples in general.

This study contributes to our understanding of lesbian family identity and family processes of Black lesbian families. In 2000, Allen called for family research to "engage the critical intersections of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and age as they define family diversity" (p. 4). She argued that the current definitions for family are not adequate to represent family as it exists in our culture. She stated that it is the responsibility of family researchers to

include previously oppressed and marginalized families in an attempt to change the defining structure of family within the field.

Collins (2000) also called for the need to add diversity to research. She concluded that White feminist scholars often declared that more scholarship is needed that infuses diversity issues. These scholars are often reluctant to heed the challenge themselves. She stated that:

> These women claim that they are unqualified to understand or even speak of 'Black women's experiences' because they themselves are not Black. Others include a few safe 'hand-picked' Black women's voices to avoid criticisms that they are racist. Both examples reflect a basic unwillingness by many U.S. White feminist to alter the paradigms that guide their work." (p. 6)

By examining Black lesbian family processes through an integrative theoretical framework, I took on Allen's and Collin's charges and believe that my study will make a significant contribution to our understanding of lesbian family dynamics. I addressed this topic, despite my own experiences and my racial identity. I accepted this challenge to add a piece of understanding about a marginalized population. I attended to this openly, carefully, honestly, maintaining awareness along the way.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to explore how Black lesbian couples integrate their experiences with their extended families into their own identity processes. I built on the understanding of how Black lesbian couples negotiate their relationship in a family context and ultimately, in the larger social context. I explored how families of origin and extended family place the couples within their own family context.

Previous research indicates that challenges in the couple relationship include: a) abandonment from one or both of the families of origin (Greene, 2000), b) a secret identity that may put pressure on the couple relationship (Lorde, 1984), c) a feeling of non-acceptance into the family of origin by the non-familial partner (LaSala, 2002), or d) a labeling of gay or lesbian partners that does not reflect the significance of the relationship (i.e. by labeling the partner as "friend") the families of origin do not accept the complete identity as a couple with their families of origin (Greene, 1993). Depending on the attitudes and acceptance of the families of origin, the strength of the couple relationship is stressed or bolstered. This study focused on how Black lesbian couples talk about the influences that they believe their families of origin have on their relationship as a couple and as a family and how this relationship works to define identity.

Definition of Terms

The following list of terms explains how I defined relevant terms in this study.

1. A *lesbian* refers to a woman who acknowledges same-sex attraction (D'Emilio & Freedman, 1997; Johnson & Colucci, 1999). If partnered, a *lesbian* is partnered with a woman due to romantic feelings, experimentation, or political choice (D'Emilio & Freedman; Johnson & Colucci).
2. A *lesbian couple* is a committed, romantic relationship between two women who self-identify as lesbians. To identify the needs and experiences of this specific population, I do not address bisexual or transgendered issues within this study. I do suggest that these are also infrequently studied populations, particularly in Black cultures, and future research could focus on these populations.
3. *Gay and lesbian community* refers to a historical network of gay and lesbian individuals who support, educate, and befriend one another (D'Emilio & Freedman,

1997; Johnson & Colucci, 1999). I refer to gay and lesbian communities when discussing aspects of gay and lesbian life and living. In some situations gay and lesbian couples and individuals have relied on gay and lesbian communities to provide a network of family when they may feel cut-off from their families of origin. Occasionally, "gay," "sexual minorities," or "GLBTQ" (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered, or Queer) might be used to describe a larger community of individuals in this community (Johnson & Colucci, 1999).

4. The term *family of origin* in this study refers to the participants' direct family, traditionally referred to as the nuclear family (Martin & Martin, 1978). Martin and Martin referred to family of origin as a "sub-extended family" because of the family sense of obligation to the larger extended family. For purposes of this research study, when I refer to family of origin, I refer to the family unit that the individual participants' considered to be their parents and siblings.
5. The term *extended family* among Black individual refers to a multigenerational base of family members that provides support (Martin & Martin, 1978). The individuals within this larger family system often have a base or main link (Martin & Martin). The extended family is dependent on each other for emotional, social, and economic support (Martin & Martin). In addition, there is frequently a sense of obligation to those members of the extended family (Martin & Martin). For many Black individuals, members of their extended family consists of more than genetically-based ties, frequently non-genetic relatives are absorbed and accepted as family into the extended family unit. (Bridges, Selvidge, & Matthews, 2003).

6. The *intentional family* is considered the current family and partnership (Moore, 2008). In this study, the *current family* refers to lesbian couples and any children living in the home. Other terminology is often used for lesbian families in current research: "families we choose" or "families of choice" (Allen, 1997).
7. A *lesbian stepmother* is considered to be a woman entering a lesbian relationship and becoming a co-parent to her partner's biological children. A *lesbian stepfamily* also refers to lesbian partners and their children when one woman is not biologically related to the children (Moore, 2008).
8. The term *home* was defined by bell hooks (1994). I used this term throughout this study in order to further expand the definition of extended family in Black communities. bell hooks (1994) explains that home is "the construction of a safe place where many Black people could affirm one another and by doing so heal many wounds inflicted by racist domination" (p.449). The idea of extended family and "home" is important to Black lesbian individuals who may search for the comfort of "home" in the face of racial oppression while placing the oppressions based on their sexual orientation aside (Mays, Chatters, Cochran, & Mackness, 1998).
9. The *coming out process* is a commonly known term that explains the process a gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered individual goes through revealing their identity to themselves and others (LaSala, 2000). In this research, "coming out" at times refers to the "coming out" of the couple relationship. Coming out also refers to when lesbians accept their sexual identity on a personal level or share this identity with others (Rosario et al., 2004).

10. I used the term *Black* throughout this project instead of African American. A common socially used term is "Black" (Neal, 2001). Throughout history, Black individuals have been referred to by a number of terms, often carrying with them issues related to power and oppression (Martin, 1991). I feel that both of the terms "African American" and "Black" are used in our society and both have positive and negative connotations (Martin, 1991; Neal, 2001). The use of the term "Black" carries with it a political response and some people may disagree with my usage of this term (Neal, 2001). The term "African American" suggests a separation of Blacks as Americans; in addition, White individuals who were born in an African country are also considered "African American" (Wright, 1990). For me, I feel "Black" successfully describes a racial group of Americans without implying anything negative against the individuals I am defining. In addition, I feel that the term "Black" is often stated as a strength for those in Black communities. bell hooks (1984) and Patricia Hill Collins (2000) places the terminology of *Black* in a light of strength of culture and individuality throughout their works. Wallace (1995), a founding member of the National Black Feminist Organization, states that "Blackness…meant that I could finally be myself" (p. 221). For purposes of this paper, the term *Black* was defined as those of African descent, people of a particular racial background who have for generations been a part of the culture of the United States.
11. *Racism* is projected in many different forms in the United States. It refers to the removal, exclusion, or subordination of racial groups that are not a part of the larger racial group (Collins, 2006).

12. *Sexism* is the "belief in the inherent superiority of one sex over all others and thereby the right to dominance" (Lorde, 1984, p.45).
13. *Oppression* "describes any unjust situation where, systematically and over a long period of time, one group denies another group access to the resources of society." (Collins, 2000, p.4)
14. The terms *double jeopardy* and *triple jeopardy* were described by Beale (1995) in regard to Black women. She explained how, in our society, Black women experience double jeopardy economically and politically. Black women have less power than their male counterparts racially and also their White female counterparts and can feel oppression in both communities. Double jeopardy can occur when Black gay and lesbians are faced with the oppression based on their race and also their sexual orientation (Johnson & Staples, 2005). Black gay and lesbian individuals can feel intense community disregard due to their racial and sexual orientation identity (a double jeopardy) (Johnson & Staples, 2005). With Black lesbians, they experience oppression based on three minority statuses: Black, lesbian, and female (Lorde, 1984).
15. The term *gender presentation* refers to how an individual chooses to physically present herself to the outside world (Moore, 2006). Moore (2006) suggested that there are three different types of physical representations in Black lesbians. These are: feminine women, gender-blenders, and transgressives. Feminine women present themselves in a more traditionally feminine appearance. Gender-blenders present a more androgynous style of dress. Transgressives dress in a distinctively non-feminine style.

Research Questions

The research questions for this study are:

1. What is the coming out process for Black lesbian couples?
2. How does the relationship with the extended family influence lesbian couples relationships and identity with the passage of time?
3. What informal social support is available to Black lesbian families?

Summary

This research brought to light some issues that may exist for Black lesbian couples, because past research has not focused on this population (Greene & Boyd-Franklin, 1996). A grounded theory analysis of these couples explored family and community interactions and meanings that are created for the couples (LaRossa, 2005). This study provided the analysis in a way that will challenge society to look at their defined discourses and the necessity for change. As a final step the voices of the participants guided implications for marriage and family therapists.

This research was placed within an integrated theoretical framework: symbolic interactionism, postmodern feminist theory, and Black feminism. Data were explored using grounded theory techniques. The combinations of theories and techniques facilitated the construction of this research project and the preceding data analysis. The integrative framework was important to identifying identity creation and exploring differences with the specific population of Black lesbian couples and families.

To meet the challenges of adding diversity to research and redefining the prevalent view of family, I studied a population that is invisible in current research (Greene, 1993; Laird, 1996). I challenged not only the definition of family based on lesbian families, but also based on the

differences associated with Black families (Allen, 2001). In essence, I deconstructed the prevailing images of family while identifying needs, expectations, identity, and frustrations of Black lesbian couples.

Researchers have suggested that the individual aspects of Black lesbians and their extended families still need exploration (Allen & Demo, 1995; Greene & Boyd-Franklin, 1996). This research addressed Black lesbian couples and their relationship to their extended family. A qualitative approach was utilized to examine meaning and process in a descriptive fashion (Creswell, 1994). The research design incorporated postmodern feminist perspective. The grounded theory technique considered symbolic interactionism, postmodern feminist theory, and Black feminist theory.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This literature review focuses three specific areas: (a) a historical review, (b) a review of current research, and (c) a background for the integrative theoretical framework. First, I provided a historical look at both Black families and communities. This will provide a historical background and certain aspects of this population that might assist in understanding the environment experienced by some Black individuals. The review of research will explore current research specifically related to the research questions. Finally, I provide a backdrop to the integrative theoretical framework used in this study.

Historical Review of Black Families and Community

In order to explore research on Black gay and lesbian individuals and couples, a deep look at the culture surrounding these individuals is necessary. A background on research looking at Black families and communities provides the literature review with structure and coherence based on the researched population. A look into Black families and communities assisted in making assumptions regarding the specific struggles that Black lesbian couples might have with regard to their placement and acceptance in their communities. In addition, a look at Black family research assisted in defining extended family which is a key area of interest in this research study.

Defining “Black family” or “Black community” is by no means an exact science. In addition, these definitions I provided do not attempt to explain generalizations that exist in all Black families and Black communities. What I do provide in this review is literature that represents experiences of Black individuals, through both narrative and research, based on the context of family and community. It is presented as a frame for various experiences that exist for

some Black individuals. It provides researchers with a place to start in reviewing and analyzing data.

Family structure and importance in Black communities has been defined by several researchers and historians (Allen & James, 1998; Bridges et al., 2003; Greene, 2000; Mays et al, 1998; and Neighbors, 1997). Extended family is important for Black individuals. Mays et al. (1998) stated: "African American children who grow up with only limited contact with aunts, uncles, grandparents and cousins are deprived of an important source of encouragement, role models and emotional support, as well as a sense of family tradition and history" (p. 73). Black families have been a base of support for Black individuals in this country since the forced arrival of enslaved Africans (Mays et al.). This section examines the history and function of Black families, while introducing a deconstruction of family as it is commonly perceived in dominant White society.

It is an undeniable fact that the United States was built on racism (Collins, 2006). White settlers shaped society by taking over the lands of non-White inhabitants and building their fortunes off the work done by enslaved Africans (Neighbors, 1997). The division of race historically from the origins of the United States has had a cumulative effect on the roles that race and racism play in our society. Collins (2006) described the entire "national identity" that formed in our culture. This historical presence of racism has influenced the role of family in Black communities. Black families are a source of strength, "no other aspect of Black survival has been more written about than the role of African American families. Black families are seen as "the first line of defense against racism and are a primary mechanism for upward social mobility" (Neighbors, 1997, p. 280).

bell hooks (1994) expresses the importance of home in the face of an oppressive world in these excerpts from her short story, *Homeplace*.

> Oh! that feeling of safety, of arrival, of homecoming when we finally reached the edges of her yard, when we could see the soot black face of our grandfather, Daddy gus, sitting in his chair on the porch, smell his cigar, and rest on his lap. Such a contrast, that feeling of arrival, of homecoming, this sweetness and the bitterness of that journey, that constant reminder of white power and control. (p. 448)

She also expressed the importance of the safety of home in light of a racist community, hooks states that:

> This task of making homeplace was not simply a matter of Black women providing service; it was about the construction of a safe place where Black people could affirm one another and by doing so heal many of the wounds inflicted by racist domination (p. 449).

Allen and James (1998) explained that Black families have gone through major transitions. The earliest forms of Black families existed in the slavery era. These families were defined by circumstance, fear, and violence. Emancipation and desegregation have changed the face of Black family definitions as well. Recent changes in society have led to a new definition of Black families. A majority of Black homes are female-headed, urban, and poor. This view of Black families has limited family researchers to look only at the problems associated with these trends and not the diversity that exists within Black families or the positive directions of family dynamics in Black communities.

Black families fill an identifiable role for many of its' members. This role is a focused supportive environment with a strong sense of community, spirituality, and emotional support (Greene, 2000). The family supports must be considered in looking at the effects of this need and

the history of Black gay and lesbian individuals' perceived support from their families. Black families and communities are bonded by years of oppression and rely on each other for support when dealing with outside stressors and discrimination (Hines et al., 1999).

Often Black families are viewed through the lens of the traditional nuclear family. Lorde (1995) explained that there exists a "mythical norm" that "is usually defined as White, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure" (p. 285). She explains that power resides in those that fit closely to this norm. Typically Black families reside in a place far from this "mythical norm." Collins (2006) suggested that all families in the United States are compared to the "American family ideal" which consists of a two parent heterosexual couple and genetically born children in a middle-class home where the father is the breadwinner and the mother works at home as a housewife. This "ideal" creates a structure that is most accepted. In addition, it creates a system that reinforces the oppression of women (Collins, 2006). Black families may not fit into this imposed "ideal" and may come in many forms and structures (Collins, 2006). Individuals that do not fit the accepted "ideal" may feel less important or valuable to society.

Matrifocality. Black mothers and mother figures are seen as particularly important figures in Black families (Smith, 1983). Extended family networks base much of their expectations and meaning on the presence of this individual in the family. This is a complicated factor in terms of a daughter's lesbian identity. Black mothers and their daughters do not often discuss sexual identity (Smith). Lesbians, in Black communities, are taught that they should remain quiet and lesbianism is not considered a "real" oppression because Black communities often view it as something that can be hidden or changed (Smith). This message frequently comes for older mothers and grandmothers (Smith).

Frequently, in Black American households, a female is the head of the household (McKinnon & Bennett, 2005). The US Census reports that 31% of Black families are female-headed, compared to 12% of the general population (McKinnon & Bennett, 2005). This has led to a stereotypical image of a strong, woman-run home (Taylor et al., 1997). The prevalence of female headed homes is an unusual arrangement for Black families considering the dominant White families are typically more patriarchal (Taylor et al., 1997).

Black women are more likely than White women (and Black men) to be the primary wage earners of their households and often they are single parents as well (Taylor et al.). The reality is that female-headed households make up a large percentage of Black families (Collins, 1998). This is complicated by the economic realities of single-parent homes and the lower wages often earned by Black women (McKinnon & Bennett, 2005). In general, there are high rates of poverty for Black families (Davis, 1989; West, 1994). Children in Black homes are twice as likely, compared to White children, to deal with the effects of poverty, unemployment, and crime (Davis, 1989). The extent of poverty is another way that Black families are viewed as deviant by the larger communities. Black families are often blamed for the conditions they live in and are blamed for the effects related to these conditions (Davis, 1989).

The "traditional family ideal" exists in our culture to define family as man and woman, biological children, middle class, and White (Collins, 1998). Intersectionality defines the how multiple oppressions exist in our culture and how the different oppressions "mutually construct one another" (Collins, 1998, p.62). In view of the traditional family ideal, Black families are confronted with multiple oppressions and this influences family structure and dynamics.

Fictive Kin. It is important to gain perspective on Black community's conception of family. Family might take the form of a "kin network" (Scott & Black, 1999). Black families

coordinate resources with others for survival and might include extended families, neighbors, or friends. It is common in Black families for a close friend to be labeled an "aunt" and to carry out the role of an aunt with non-genetic children. These differences suggest that family of origin and extended family are widely defined in Black families.

Extended Black families combine a network of genetically related individual and also at times individuals who are not always genetically related (Neighbors, 1997). Black families tend to be "fluid and open" with regards to outsiders who are allowed or invited to be a part of the kinship network. This openness and support plays a functional role in support of the economic, social, and mental support needs of Black families. Family of origin, in Black communities, takes on a variety of definitions. Often, there is not a clear distinction of what constitutes genetic relationships, community, and society (Allen, 1995). For example, Black families can include both godparents, spiritual leaders, and multiple generations (Bridges et al., 2003; Hall & Greene, 2003).

Many Black households live in poverty; 25% of Black households are considered impoverished compared to only 12% of the general population (McKinnon & Bennett, 2005). This economic stress influences the dependency of family members on one another (Hall & Greene, 2003). This need for the combining of resources attributes to the building of fictive kinships into the extended family networks. Those outside the genetic family are sometimes "adopted" as equal members for emotional, economic, and moral support (Hines, Preto, McGoldrick, Almeida, & Weltman, 1999; Littlejohn-Blake & Darling, 1993). In addition, a spiritual connection among Black individuals becomes a part of the family, community, and culture as a "survival system" of coping and adjusting (Bridges et al., 2003).

Often there is an unspoken feeling within some Black communities that one's gay or lesbian identity be confined to places that are unknown to the rest of the family, like "bars and other secretive areas" (Loiacano, 1989, p. 23). Fictive kinship names and relationships are used in the Black community to label gay and lesbian couples and relationship. Black lesbian couples are often labeled according to the common close-friend relationships among Black women. For example significant others could be referred to as *sister* and *girlfriend* by their extended families or communities (Greene, 1996). Some women may hide behind this image, rather than face the pressures if they were to actually inform their communities of the nature of their relationship.

Religion. Church can play the role of an extended family network in Black communities (Ellison, 1997; Wiggins, 2005). Church provides Black individuals with a place of community and support (Ellison; Scott & Black, 1999). Frequently, church is a central location of activity and support that "may enhance perceptions of the quality of family life" (Ellison, p. 120). Black communities often view church as a "safe space" for Black individuals to share thoughts, fears, hopes, and to learn and grow (Collins, 2000). Battle (2006) described that:

> The gift that the Black church gives to the world is in its belief and practices that when any person is mistreated or disadvantaged, an incidence of supreme importance has occurred, and something sacred violated. This becomes the incredible achievement of the Black church: to make seamless human incorporation into the pursuit of God's peace and justice demonstrated in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. (p. 44)

In this respect, Black churches represent more than community connection and opinion, it embodies peacefulness, fairness, and acceptance in the face of a world that may not offer hope.

There are many different denominations of Black churches and there are Black individuals and families that are not part of any Black church (Battle, 2006). It is mentioned here

in detail because of the influence that Black churches have had on Black communities and families historically and because of the influence church has on Black gay and lesbians (Battle, 2006). Denominational differences are not be explored as part of this literature review, despite the diversity among Black churches (Pinn, 2006). The focus on Black churches will reside in the similarities of the denominations. The similarities I focused on were: That church was a place of acceptance for Black communities, attending church was as a liberating experience, and that church was a place of community connection and support (Battle, 2006; Pinn, 2006; Wiggins, 2005).

Dill (1983) explained the importance of "sisterhood" and "brotherhood" as a rite of passage and a comfort and connection for Black individuals. Dill (1983) stated that:

> Membership in the church entitles one to address the women as 'sisters' and the men as 'brothers.' Becoming a sister is an important rite of passage which permits young women full participation in certain church rituals and women's clubs where these nurturant relationships among women are reinforced." (p. 134)

In the same way, being a "brother" or "sister" helps add to feeling connected.

Church, in Black communities, plays a large, central role in the lives and traditions of many Black individuals (Ellison, 1997; Pinn, 2006). The power of this community transcends to family life and family expectations (Ellison; Wiggins, 2005). Currently, many Black churches preach against gays and lesbians in their own communities (Lorde, 1984). This feeling of discrimination influences the acceptance of gay and lesbian couples and leads to disapproval and shame in Black communities with regard to its gay and lesbian members. The role of church is explored later in this literature review to look at the effects of this institution on gay and lesbian identity.

Gender relations. Gender relations have particular importance to this research. Many of the issues related to homophobia have to do with the dominant constructions related to the expectations of "masculinity" and "femininity" in our society. In my experience, I have found that it is often difficult for society to understand how gender relations play out in lesbian relationships. As an undergraduate, I participated in many LGBTQ panel discussions on campus where I shared my personal experiences as a lesbian. The most common question that I remember answering was related to "who was the man" in my relationship. My response was that gender roles and gender relations did not exist in our relationship in the way they are traditionally represented. The idea of gender relations in lesbian communities was confusing to these students.

Images of gender that are common in Black communities are bound to have a confounding effect on Black lesbians (Staples, 2006). Black women are forced to face a series of images of femininity placed upon them by a dominant culture (Roberts, 1997). Lorde (1984) explained that "for Black women as well as Black men, it is axiomatic that if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others - for their use and to our detriment" (p. 45). Black women have long struggles to define who they are in relation to dominant images of Black femininity.

An individual who is both a woman and Black might find herself in a battle in receiving mixed message from society (Awkward, 1995; Roberts, 1997). The White cultural idea of femininity is often associated with emotion, weakness, and smallness, whereas the cultural idea of Black women is more of a larger, physically strong, and verbal individual (Awkward, 1995). Black women have had to both identify themselves and separate themselves in the face of societal images used to represent them (Collins, 2000). Shange (1972) reflected on a recent shift

in her, internally, as a result of her life changes and professional identity as a poet. In this passage, from the poem "i talk to myself," she examined a feeling of power and the influence of society on her own identity.

> i have more control over what will happen to me. i like that. i don't like that people think i knew from some unknown source that my life waz gonna change. that somehow i cheapened myself by allowing my piece to go to broadway. i don't like that people think i shd be different from who i waz. i don't like that some people liked me better when i waz powerless & worried all the time & now that i'm not I have no more good qualities. you know how some people are attracted to pitifulness. i'm not. (pp. 17-18)

In Shange's reflection, she looked at her own identity and power despite cultural expectations. She was, in a sense, defining herself and finding her power as a Black woman and as a poet.

The long-standing oppressive and controlling image of "mammy" has also been prevalent in U.S. society (Collins, 2000; McKinnon & Bennett, 2005). This image was considered to be an ideal image of Black women (Roberts, 1997). Another stereotypical image that has been in existence is the idea that Black families are female-headed. It is statistically true that most Black families are female-headed (Taylor & Johnson, 1991). The problem is the image presented by this reality is often one that is considered deviant and less valid than a male-headed household. Black women feel pressured to successfully run families despite the challenges they face with regard to oppressive conditions in the workforce and elsewhere (Collins, 2000). Black mothers, compared to White mothers, have been historically thought of as "immoral, careless, domineering, and devious" (Roberts, 1997, p.10).

The stereotypes of both Black women and Black families are seen as deviant. Black women have the powerful position of running the home while at the same time they are

oppressed by being denied financial resources and the proper support to successfully run the family (Roberts, 1997). This dual role is completely impossible to live up to and can feel oppressive to Black women. Common issues that many Black mothers face include welfare and unemployment (Roberts, 1997). These issues further separate Black women from the traditional ideal.

Another side of expectations Black women confront is the image of the "strong Black woman" (Springer, 2002, p. 1070). This impression relays the expectation that Black women must remain resilient, they must "deny emotional, psychic, and even physical pain—all the while appearing to keep it together" (Springer, p.1070). In Black churches, Black women are often expected to hold strong and virtuous positions (Wiggins, 2005). Another common image presented of Black women is a hyper-sexualized individual (Roberts, 1997). Black women have the challenge of finding their own identity within the muck of oppressive and/or contradicting images.

The gender images present in both the White and Black community are bound to lead to problematic circumstances for Black lesbian couples. This research has tapped into these common frustrations due to gender expectations and how these frustrations influenced the couple's relationship with their family.

Black lesbians. Smith (1983) reflects that "the oppression that affects Black gay people, female and male, is pervasive, constant, and not abstract. Some of us die from it" (p. xlvii). Some research has begun to focus on issues specific to Black gay and lesbian individuals and communities. Given the nature of the population in this research study, many aspects of Black gay and lesbian identity were explored as they have been presented in current research. This

provided a frame for introducing issues specific to Black gay and lesbian individuals that may also influence the couple relationship.

Black communities are diverse with regard to acceptance and opinions of Black lesbians. "African-Americans have tried to ignore homosexuality generally and have avoided serious analysis of homophobia within African-American communities." (Collins, 2000, p. 125). Gender plays a different and complex role in Black culture (Battle & Lemelle, 2002; Dade & Slone, 2000). These views contribute to a diverse role in the acceptance and opinions of Black society towards those of different sexual orientations (Dade & Slone, 2000). There is not much research regarding the influence and stigmatization of gay and lesbian acceptance in Black communities and the influences this can have on its' gay and lesbian members (Battle & Lemelle, 2002).

West (1994) defined a pattern of power that evolves from the atmosphere of racism in the United States. He described issues such as homophobia and sexism that are common in Black communities due to the environment of racism and sexism that exists in the larger community. These sexist and homophobic views increase as Black individuals gain more power in the previously designated White world. West (1994) explained that as Black individuals gain more power in the community there is a sense that only "certain kinds of Black people deserve high positions" (p.42). This creates somewhat of a backlash effect in the community as Black males are the ones gaining power, resulting in Black women and Black gays and lesbians who feel inferior and powerless.

The environment in Black communities in the United States is not typically inclusive of same-sex relationships (Greene, 1996). Facilitated by cultural guidelines, the integration of lesbian couples into their extended families of origin becomes a complicated issue. Staples (2006) suggested that Black communities are much more likely to harbor homophobic feelings

and behaviors than the White community. Much of these feelings, he argued, have derived from Black churches. As stated previously, the church is a major support and connection for Black communities. Black ministers, in many areas, have vocally denounced homosexuality and their congregations have followed (Staples, 2006). Recently, some Black churches have adopted practices that support anti-discrimination laws against gay and lesbian individuals, suggesting a possible slow change in this type of internal community oppression (Staples).

Black lesbians have unique challenges based on both their race and their gender (Lorde, 1984). Lorde (1984) states that "the Black lesbian has come under increasing attack from both Black men and heterosexual Black women" (p. 49). She continues to explain that Black women "have been encouraged to view each other with suspicion, as eternal competitors, or as the visible face our own self-rejection" (p.49). Black lesbians are viewed negatively by heterosexual Black women (Lorde, 1984). For Black lesbians, finding one's place in identity is difficult to express and explore (Lorde, 1984).

Lorde (1982) shared the challenges of being Black and gay in her autobiography, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*:

> I remember how being young and Black and gay and lonely felt. A lot of it was fine, feeling I had the truth and the light and the key, but a lot of it was purely hell.
>
> There were no mothers, no sisters, no heroes. We had to do it alone, like our sister Amazons, the riders on the loneliest outposts of the kingdom of Dahomey. We, young and Black and fine and gay, sweated out our first heartbreaks with no school nor office chums to share that confidence over lunch hour. Just as there were no rings to make tangible the reason for out happy secret smiles, there were no names nor reason given or shared for the tears that messed up the lab reports or the library bills. (p.176)

Lorde described her loneliness in her experience as a lesbian. She credits this loneliness to finding her identity as a Black lesbian.

Lorde (1984) explained that Black lesbians have a unique issue in hiding their identity because they are "caught between the racism of White women and the homophobia of their sisters" (p. 122). This also further identifies the issue of double jeopardy (or even triple jeopardy) for Black lesbians. Some Black lesbians may feel afraid to be out as a lesbian in Black communities for many reasons. They might experience racism in the larger lesbian community, and to further add to their feelings of isolationism, they are seen as a female minority in a male dominated world.

Giovianni (1972), a well-known Black lesbian poet, described in her poem, *The World is Not a Pleasant Place to Be,* the influence and the importance of coupling to her.

The World is Not

a Pleasant Place to Be

the world is not a pleasant place

to be without

someone to hold and be held by

a river would stop

its flow if only

a stream were there

to receive it

an ocean would never laugh

if clouds weren't there

to kiss her tears

the world is not a pleasant place to be without

someone. (p. 15)

For Giovianni, being in love and being a part of a couple is important so important that the world would not be "a pleasant place" without it. It is a difficult dilemma for some Black lesbians to be faced with the importance with coupling in their own minds, while weighing the importance of being accepted by their families of origin and extended families. Most White gay and lesbian individuals have the ability to closet themselves and fall back into White heterosexual privilege, while Black gay and lesbian individuals can also become closeted; they are unable to "hide" their racial identity (Staples, 2006). As a White lesbian, I recognize that there are moments when homophobia can become so overwhelming to me, I am able to hide my sexual orientation identity and jump into the White privilege I have become so familiar with. This compounding identity for Black gay and lesbian individuals never allows for a place without some sort of prejudice or oppression (Staples, 2006).

Review of Current Research

Several ideas are present in the current research related to coming out, identity, and support for gay and lesbian couples. Current research on Black minorities and gay and lesbian issues falls into the following themes: Issues related to coming out (Bowleg, Craig, & Burkholder, 2004; Consolacion, Russell, & Sue, 2004; LaSala, 2002; Rosario et al., 2004); identity (Mays & Cochran, 1999; Moore, 2006, 2008, 2009, 2010), and informal social support

(Battle & Lemelle, 2002; Bridges et al., 2003; Dade & Slone, 2000; Greene & Boyd-Franklin, 1996; Loiacano, 1989; Mays & Cochran, 1999).

Coming out. Research related to coming out typically focuses on adolescent experiences (Rosario et al., 2004). Other research on coming out experiences suggests a cut-off, or removal from the family of origin (Cohler, 2005; LaSala, 2002). Research on coming out experiences of Black gay and lesbian individuals addresses supports within and outside the family of origin (Bridges et al., 2003; Mays & Cochran, 1999). In addition, I have provided a background of research that specifically addresses Black lesbian populations.

One study examined Black gay and lesbian individuals specifically in terms of coming out experiences (Rosario et al., 2004). These researchers explored racial differences in coming out events among youth. These researchers indicated that "coming out" is often different for White Black adolescents (Rosario et al.). Black gay and lesbian individuals are less likely to be involved in gay communities and are also less likely to reveal their sexual orientation identity to the community. Findings concluded that Black gay and lesbian individuals find more cultural stigma in Black communities (Rosario et al.). One limitation of this research was that participants were adolescents. This developmental age could differ from adult coming out and identity processes.

For Black gays and lesbians, the process of coming out is a complex process. Black gay and lesbian individuals are not likely to be out to their extended families even when they are out to their mothers (Mays et al., 1998). Mays et al. analyzed data based on questionnaires sent to over 1000 Black gay men and lesbians. These researchers found that frequently these Black participants were out to their mothers and sisters, but not to the extended family. This research also suggests a withdrawing of the current family based on the reaction of the mother during the

identity disclosure process. This particular research provides a framework for Black gay and lesbian experiences with their families of origin. The research does not specifically focus on the couple relationship and specifics related to the couples' sense of support for the family.

Community, religion, family connection, and minority group one identifies most with can all influence Black gay and lesbian individuals' coming out process. Being of a minority race, some report not feeling accepted by White gay and lesbian groups. In fact, some report being met with overt racism within the larger gay and lesbian communities (Loiacano, 1989). Being open about one's gay or lesbian identity has different emotional stressors for Black individuals, as some feel that this will bring a sort of stigma to their intergenerational family ties (Savin-Williams, 1996). Noting the previously mentioned stigma placed on Black individuals, causes further stigma to their current families and is an increased pressure towards not being open about one's gay or lesbian identity.

One research study addressed the specific issues of Black lesbian women in the coming out process (Parks et al., 2004). The study found that, among lesbians, Black individuals were less likely to be out in their communities than Whites. Oddly, it seems that among older lesbians, Black women were more likely than their older White counterparts to be out to their family members. This may have to do with the stereotyped role older women play in Black communities of a powerful mother figure and the built in respect that goes along with this role (Collins, 2000).

Perceived non-acceptance by the church can impede Black individuals from coming out or accepting their own identity (Bridges et al., 2003). Religion can play a central role in the lives of Black individuals (Bridges et al.). The focus of religion in the family and community makes the difficult issue of coming out even more distorted for Black gay and lesbian individuals. Often Black gay and lesbians are denounced by Black churches and ultimately Black communities

(Clarke, 1983). Because of the power and centralization of Black churches in Black communities, the notion of the "sin" of homosexuality is real and powerful to many Black gay and lesbians (Clarke).

Mays and Cochran (1999) sent a survey to a sample of Black lesbian participants. What they found was that, compared to White lesbians, Black lesbians are more likely to build their relationships outside of lesbian communities. They continue to maintain and build ties with their Black extended families and communities. White lesbians turn mostly to gay and lesbian communities for support and social ties (Mays & Cochran). The importance and consistency of these extended family relationships could influence the coming out process. Black lesbians may feel the need to maintain the support of these outside relationships, regardless of their opinions of their sexual orientation identity. Mays & Cochran indicated that most of their participants identify as middle or upper class and note this as a limitation in their findings.

The success of getting through the coming out process is important to adult functioning for gay men and lesbians (Crawford, Allison, & Zamboni, 2002). Black individuals have developed some of the necessary skills to survive this coming out process. Researchers empirically examined coping among Black lesbians (Bowleg et al., 2004). They examined the effect of internal factors, such as racial and lesbian group identification and external factors, including social supports (family, community, and Black churches) and availability of resources on coping behaviors. The quantitative study suggested that internal factors are more predictable than the external factors in successfully getting through the coming out process. The study also stated that lesbian identification was positively correlated with perceived social support. The diverse experiences of coming out in Black communities implied that even with the lack of community acceptance and support, an integration of one's identity into their surroundings can

have a positive effect (Crawford et al., 2002). This is in direct conflict with the shame and deviant labels put on gay and lesbian persons that inhibit some from coming out in Black communities.

The factors associated with the coming out experience and the relationship between the individual and her family and the individual with her partner can be strained. Also, changes over time in family of origin acceptance played a role in family acceptance and couple acceptance (Savin-Williams, 2001). Coming out may have consequences for Black lesbians and their relationships with their families of origin or communities. How Black lesbians incorporate their experiences of coming out into their identity has also been researched.

Identity. Gay and lesbian couple identities and the basis of those identities has been the focus of some research. Coupling, in general, brings with it a multitude of problems and complications (McGoldrick, 1980). Couples break from their families of origin, in a sense, to explore their own family relationship. In the couple relationship, couples must negotiate many different challenges. These include role negotiation and expectations, unresolved issues from their families of origin, and rules associated with the families of origin (McGoldrick). The typical conflicts that exist with extended families undoubtedly are complicated when the coupling relationship is a lesbian relationship. I will address two aspects of identity within the current research here: identity creation based on relationship with families of origin and identity of Black lesbian families based on dominate discourses and experiences.

Family of origin. LaSala (2002) pioneered the path for studying gay and lesbian couples' identity development related to connection with families of origin; however, his research does not focus on racial differences. LaSala interviewed 40 gay and lesbian couples to determine the influence that their intergenerational relationships had on their lives. LaSala examined the data

through a Bowenian lens. Bowen stressed the importance of independence and differentiation to individual adult development (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). LaSala (2002) noted as a limitation of his study the lack of a diverse sample as most of the participants in his sample were White and middle class.

In general, LaSala (2002) found that most of the participants in his study identified some feelings of disapproval of their same-sex relationship from their parents. For some of the couples, the disapproval of the parents affected their relationship in some way, although most couples said these feelings of disapproval did not influence the couple relationship. A couple of participants noted they may possibly end their relationship because of feelings of disapproval from their parents. LaSala's major conclusion was that individuals who had not developed a successful intergenerational boundary were having the most difficulty with their couple relationship. Lesbian participants more frequently expressed the importance of feeling connected to their families despite their disapproval. In addition, lesbian participants more frequently explained their partners assisted them in dealing with possible disapproval of their parents.

LaSala (2002) created an introduction to intergenerational relationships of gay and lesbian couples. He opened the door for family researchers, theorists, and therapists who are interested in finding out more about the complexities of having to deal with possible disapproval from families of origin while maintaining an adult relationship. I expanded and built on LaSala's research and defined issues related to Black lesbians in Black communities while looking through a different theoretical lens.

Another qualitative study explored the perceived intergenerational support of gay and lesbian couples and the influence that this support had on the couple relationship (Rostosky et al., 2004). The research included 14 gay and lesbian couple interviews and most of the individual

participants were White. Typically, couples described both positive and negative reactions from their families. About half of the couples in the study discussed how the negative reactions of their families had negatively influenced the couple relationship in some way.

Cohler (2005) explored the family of origin and described the disruption to the family when a family member comes out. In this instance the family is completely changed, Cohler stated that "such disclosure leads to decentering the heternormative family or, in other words, to the 'queering' of the family" (p.155). In these instances, gay and lesbian individuals often bring to their families social rules that have begun to change in recent generations. This can be a challenge to the families' preset intergenerational ideas and rules, causing intense disagreement, anger, or a complete cut-off. This current research explored the balance of the family of origin and extended family with the current lesbian family.

All of the studies related to couple identity formation related to family of origin and extended family relationship mentioned in this section so far have focused specifically on White gay and lesbian couples. It is difficult to determine the influence on Black lesbian couples specifically based on this limitation. There is a dearth of research that specifically addresses Black lesbian couples with a focus on extended family connection. Research that has explored the influence of family of origin on Black gay and lesbian individuals suggests an opposite dynamic to what LaSala (2002) coined as cut-off.

Black families are less likely than White families to turn their backs on their gay and lesbian members (Greene, 2000). The importance of family in Black culture is sometimes seen as deviant by the larger community, which may facilitate a quiet acceptance of Black families' gay and lesbian members. Despite this, lesbians and gays are hesitant to reveal their sexual orientation to their Black communities for a perceived fear that they will experience rejection

from what they consider to be a primary identity group (Loiacano, 1989). White individuals, although often devastated at the idea of being cut-off emotionally from their families, do not necessarily have the added fear of loss of the primary source that connects them to a minority identity (Loiacano, 1989). Research that examines Black lesbians coming out to their families suggests that there is not a sense of cut-off, but that other scenarios may take place (Greene, 1996). Possible scenarios could include: a denial or lack of discussion identity, a more hidden lifestyle, or a focused attention on the part of the family to talk the individual out of their stated identity (Greene, 1996).

Previous research on gay and lesbian couples indicates that familial reaction can influence the couple relationship and identity (LaSala, 2002; Rostosky et al., 2004; Suter et al., 2008; and Todosijevic, Rothblum, & Solomon, 2005). Typically, negative reactions are more stressful and disturbing to lesbians than gay men (Rostosky et al., 2004; Todosijevic et al., 2004). Other identifiable factors have a negative or positive influence on lesbian couples (Todosijevic et al., 2004). When both members of a couple are from similar backgrounds and are similar in age, this seemed to influence the couple relationship positively.

Even with the idea that Black families do not cut-off their gay male and lesbian members, validation of Black individuals' lesbian identity by Black communities seems to be lacking (Loiacano, 1989). Black gay men and lesbians feel pressured to be secretive about their identities with their extended families (Loiacano). Black families are more likely than White families to not discuss issues of sexual orientation (Bridges et al., 2003).

Researchers explored the idea of family identity creation for lesbian couples based on a symbolic interactionist perspective (Suter, Daas, and Bergen, 2008). Participants were mostly White (30 White participants and 2 Black participants). What researchers found was that

participants' strength of identity evolved from creating their own symbols (i.e., last name, traits in sperm donor, and creating wedding rituals). These symbols affirmed the relationship and the family identity. This was one way lesbian families were able to build on their identity process. Again, it is important to consider this study *is* focused on lesbian participants, but not on Black experiences specifically.

Research involving the incorporation of Black lesbian coupling identity has not been visible until recently. Recent research explored Black lesbian couple identity related to: household decision-making patterns, gender presentation, relationship equality, and power relations (Moore, 2006, 2008, 2009).

Moore (2009) explored one aspect of Black lesbian identity, independence, in a recently published study. She provided data from a mixed method study that indicated that self sufficiency and economic independence was a value placed in Black lesbian couple relationships. Moore's research also suggested a non-egalitarian separation of roles and expectations within the couple relationship. This is echoed in her prior studies (Moore 2006, 2008). She explained that the division of labor in Black lesbian homes is frequently defined differently than in heterosexual or White lesbian identity (Moore, 2008).

Also related to Black lesbian couple identity is gender presentation (Moore, 2006). Moore found that there are specific presentations of gender with Black lesbian communities that influence the couple identity process. She defined three gender presentations in Black lesbian communities: (a) feminine women, (b) gender-blenders, and (c) transgressives. Feminine women have a defined feminine style. Gender-blenders are more androgynous in appearance. Transgressives have a distinctly masculine appearance. These images and expectations of these

images are important to Black lesbian couple identity. It determines the roles and identity process of the couple relationship.

Prior to Moore's (2006; 2008) recent research, most of the available research suggests that Black lesbians do feel they are unable to express the true meaning of their adult identity and relationships to families of origin and extended families (Greene, 1996; Greene, 2000; Loiacano, 1989). Murphy (1989) found that lesbian couple relationships, in general, are impacted by perceived negative reactions from one or both of the families. A negative reaction by one of the families can lead to a feeling of isolation because family is often where an individual turns for support even in their adult years. This negative reaction can also project a non-inclusive atmosphere for the partner. The partner may not be invited to family events and this can further isolate the couple and discount their relationship. This leads to consequences for Black gay and lesbian couples when it comes to integrating their current and extended families while remaining true to themselves and their partners.

Mays and Cochran (1999) identified the lack of research presented on Black gays and lesbians and began their own research project to add light to this invisible population. They started researching Black lesbians in the mid 1980s and titled their research the "Black Lesbians' Relationship Project." They gathered data and formulated a series of studies looking at Black lesbians. Overall, these studies established that Black lesbians found the importance of social support in Black communities to be an important aspect of their lives and led researchers to delve deeper into Black lesbian's relationships. In these studies, the researchers found that most of the subjects in relationships reported their relationships were generally positive. These researchers suggested this is an area that should be explored further.

The area that research is lacking related to Black lesbian couples and identity is the connection between family of origin and messages and symbols from interactions with others and the direct influence on Black lesbian couples. Of the studies presented related to identity, very few of the participants were non-White (LaSala, 2002; Rostosky et al., 2004; Suter et al., 2008; Todosijevic et al., 2005). A couple of the studies did not break down the racial composition of each of the couples (LaSala, 2002; Rostosky et al., 2004). Greene (1993) expressed that "the extent to which the parents or family of origin may control or influence adult family members and the importance of the family as a tangible and emotional source of support warrant understanding" (p.23). Black gays and lesbians in couples are faced with a complex interaction between their current intimate relationship, their family of origin, and their community (Greene, 2000).

Informal Social Support for Lesbian Couples. Research indicates that many gays and lesbians find support in gay and lesbian communities (Kaufman & Johnson, 2004). Gay and lesbian individuals seek answers to their identity and support for the coming out process from gay communities. This is not necessarily the case with Black lesbians (Lehavor, Balsam, & Ibrahim-Wells, 2009). Research indicates that Black lesbians and bisexual women feel a sense of racism within the larger GLBTQ community. This influenced Black lesbians and bisexual women to not seek the GLBTQ community for support. Researchers provide this as an important finding despite the fact that their sample is only 8% Black (about four individuals). It is important to consider what types of support Black lesbian couples are receiving from the GLBTQ community.

Black gays and lesbians do not frequently join the greater gay and lesbian communities (Staples, 2006). Instead, they remain attached to their families and communities (Mays &

Cochran, 1999). This brings up a key question about Black gay and lesbian couples, where are they getting support for their relationship? If families and the communities are often either ignoring or disagreeing with the relationship, yet these are the most important relationships in the lives of these individuals, does the couple feel support for their relationship? This study will specifically address these questions.

Integrated Theoretical Framework for the Study

The design of this qualitative research study is integrative in nature. I built on three theoretical frames: symbolic interactionism, postmodern feminist theory, and Black feminism. Postmodern feminist theory was the primary theoretical guide for the research design and the analysis of the data. Symbolic interactionism easily assisted in identifying how participants build identity and interact with the world around them. This theoretical framework was important for defining family relationship ideas present in the data. Finally, key thoughts and ideas from Black feminist theory were present in looking at participants and their individual issues. In this section, it is my task to explain how these theories independently and collectively worked together and helped me create an interpretive picture of Black lesbian family identity and family processes. Strengths and limitations of these theories are addressed.

Postmodern feminism. Foucault's book *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of Human Sciences,* laid the foundation for what is now commonly known as postmodernism (or poststructuralism) (Kritzman, 1988). He rejected previous theories of positivistic modernity and history (Foucault, 1970). Specifically, Foucault rejected the idea that human nature was measurable to specific scientific standards (Bernauer & Mahon, 1994). In addition, he argued that "subjectivity is constructed…by the various discourses, conventions, or regulative codes"

(Norris, 1994, p. 160). In this sense, knowledge is something produced through society through communication and language (Foucault, 1970).

Postmodernism is the paradigm, or world view, that was used as a base for this research. Postmodernism encompasses the thought that reality is not measurable in an absolute way and that reality is socially constructed (Freedman & Combs, 1996). This socially constructed reality is based on the dominant discourses that are prevalent in the surrounding population (Thompson, 1992).

The idea of "dominant discourses" and the symbols related to this are key components in the research design. Dominant discourses are present messages within society that influence how people think and believe (Hare-Mustin, 1994). "Discourse theory is one of an array of postmodern approaches to knowledge that ask how meaning is constructed" (Hare-Mustin, p. 19). These discourses come from interaction with others in one's community. "Discourses associated with groups on the margins of society are excluded from influence…they arouse discomfort" (Hare-Mustin, 1994, p. 20). The discourses of Black lesbian couples helped identify the social constructions created by their families of origin and the influence of these social constructions on the lives of the participants.

Feminist theory is a worldview of certain ideas and assumptions based on the idea that males and females are treated differently in an unequal fashion (Farganis, 1994; Sprey, 1988). Feminism has a multitude of definitions, but in general it describes the political and social movement to "end sexist oppression." (hooks, 1984, p. 26). One societal challenge of feminism is to redirect the focus of the world from the dominant (male) point of view into the less visible (female) point of view. Early phases of feminism glorified womanhood and anything womanly (Farganis, 1994). In addition to the feminist movement celebrating women's voices and talents,

this led researchers to begin looking at issues specific to women. hooks (1984) expanded on the definitions of feminism to include oppressions of all kinds. She encouraged feminists to embrace the struggles for all types of oppressive messages, racist, classist, sexist, or any other. She advocated for a complete destruction of the current societal structures.

In recent years, feminism has begun to pull in ideas of postmodernism, suggesting that there is not one type of woman or female point of view (Hare-Mustin, 1994). Postmodernism is a rejection of modernism in its efforts to define truths in terms of scientific standards and measures. "Feminists see postmodernism as a way of including previously marginalized voices" (Farganis, 1994, p.109). In its purest form, postmodern feminism looks at how power is socially constructed and how this has influenced oppressed groups (Hare-Mustin, 1994). Taken a step farther, postmodern feminism seeks to disrupt these socially constructed images of oppression through the deconstruction of negative images.

Postmodern feminism frames the realities of our current culture as oppressive and imbalanced (Olsen, 2005). In this respect, postmodern feminism not only looks at the construction of identity through social interaction, but also identifies how power and oppression have been a key theme in these interactions and meaning making (Olsen, 2005). It is a "critical theory for assessing the content and culture of the modern biophysical sciences" (Grassie, 1997, p.91). For this particular research study, oppression of lesbian individuals and Black individuals will play into the identification of issues faced by Black gay and lesbian couples in relation to their extended families.

In general, feminist research commonly exists in family studies research through the focus and exploration of gender (Sprey, 1988). In particular, gender is examined in its structure and function within the family and also in the larger community. Postmodern feminism in family

studies pushes to reconstruct "women's experience in families" (Allen, 2001, p. 797). Using feminism in family studies research "includes experience embedded in broader context, the struggle to adapt to the contradictions of family life, a vision of nonoppressive families, diversity among women and families, and rethinking the discipline" (Thompson, 1992, p.3). Family studies and the definition of "family" are challenged by feminist ideas in the field (Allen, 2001).

Feminist research has been defined, historically, in a modernist fashion (Fawcett & Featherstone, 2000). Arguments exist between postmodernism and feminism (Farganis, 1994). Specifically, the feminist movement has a hard time progressing on the basis of the postmodernist ideas of a lack of definable truth. These arguments have led many feminists to create a foundation that can be labeled as both postmodern and feminism (Fawcett & Featherstone).

Black feminism. Dill (1983) stated that "Black women experience class, race, and sex exploitation simultaneously" (p.137). Smith (1983) claimed that "Black feminism is, on every level, organic to Black experience" (p.xxii). Black feminism grew out of the women's movement and the civil rights movements (hooks, 1984; Smith, 1983). The women's movement in the United States was built primarily by upper middle class White women who did not necessarily recognize that Black women were part of their struggle. Many early feminists focused on the importance of equal rights between men and women, while not realizing the oppression of Black individuals. Feminism initially identified the woman's experience as a key factor in defining the movement. Lorde (1984) argued that this has invalidated the vast multicultural differences among women. Early Women's Studies courses focused on the history, art, and writings of White women (hooks, 1984; Lorde, 1984). This not only made Black women unable to find their voice in the feminist movement, it literally pushed them away. This has led to the increasing

visibility of Black feminism in identifying, presenting, and celebrating what is considered to be Black woman's experience. "Black feminist thought helps reconceptualize social relations of domination and resistance" (Collins, 2000, p. 229). Black women's experiences do not fit into the larger community and dominant experiences of community, work, and family.

During the 1960s and the civil rights movement, there was an increased feeling of pride in Black culture (Clarke, 1983). The Black Power movement arose in a determination to bring power to Black individuals and Black communities. The Black Power movement steadily pushed Black men into elevated status, celebrating Black masculinity, while further oppressing women.

In the 1980s, Barbara Smith edited *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (1983) to begin to help Black women see the multitude of oppressions that they face on a regular basis. Smith (1983) argued that Black women were aware and vocal about racism, but not as directed when it came to sexism. She stated that women in Black communities have also become less tolerable to differences among one another because of the need to unite as one against the oppressor. She challenged Black women to view the multitude of "isms" that exist and project a broader acceptance with less exclusiveness. To do this, Smith revealed words of Black women artists, philosophers, and writers to the reader to highlight the prism of difference among Black women. Those that have been oppressed or invisible have had to dig into the availability of leaders, artists, and the like to create meanings of their identity or "self-definition" (Collins, 2000).

The Combahee River Collective (1995) was created from The National Black Feminist organization in the early 1970s. This organization is a group of Black feminists who worked together in the struggles of oppressions of class, sex, race, and sexual orientation. This organization defined several tenets of Black feminism (Combahee, 1995). The members of this

organization stressed the importance of building on the identity and strengths of Black women. They felt that patriarchy is a large influence on the oppression of race and class. To end this oppression, this organization advocated for a complete change in the political, economic, and patriarchal systems that are prevalent in our society.

At first glance it might seem as if epistemologies of postmodern feminism and Black feminism are unable to fit together philosophically (Caraway, 1991). It is in these postmodern image creations that Black feminist thought develops. Much of societal views come from a White, male, middle-class, heterosexual opinion. Black feminism suggests that we look at the world from an opposite perspective. For example, what if Black, female, poor, lesbian was considered the dominant view? How would that view change the structure and meaning of messages that society receives about how one should act or behave? Collins (2000) stated that by "placing U.S. Black women's experiences in the center of analysis without privileging those experiences shows how intersectional paradigms can be especially important for rethinking the particular matrix of domination that characterizes U.S. society" (p.228).

hooks (2006) directly addressed postmodernism and its influence on society. In her book, *Outlaw Culture* (2006), hooks looked at both the images presented by society and those images not represented in society and the impact they have on certain subgroups. She focused on a larger misogynist culture and the influence on Black male rappers and the creation and reinforcement of sexist language and meaning in Black cultures. She identified a lack of discussion or images of poor individuals in our society and the effect the identity of poor that they can participate in activities or "feel good about themselves" (p. 197). She discussed the representations of Black men that lead them to define masculinity by their ability to dominate Black women. She recognized the impact of the "White" domination and how it has leaked into Black communities

as Black internalized oppression on Black individuals who vary in their appearance in Black communities. These ideas of how society can actually concurrently create and support a current structure of oppression are expressions of postmodern ideas.

Black women are forced to face oppression based on race, gender, and class (Collins, 1998; hooks, 1984; Springer, 2002). The addition of any other minority status, such as, lesbianism, can only further feelings of oppression in a greater society (hooks, 1984). Black lesbians (and Black gay men for that matter) are sometimes forced into situations where they must create a hierarchy of struggles (Taylor, 1998). They are stuck in a place where they may feel like one oppression is worse than another, that one is impossible to change, that they are able to hide something about themselves that is oppressing, or that they are being oppressed within one of their oppressed categories (Lorde, 1984). Black lesbians, for example, may feel oppressed because of their race in the larger society and in gay communities. They might feel marginalized because of their sexual orientation within a similar racial group or they may feel oppressed because of their gender in any circumstance (Lorde, 1984). Black lesbians might find that hiding their sexual identity is easier than hiding their race or gender and this causes them to remain fairly closeted in their communities (Taylor, 1998). They might be a "lesbian" in one situation, "Black" in another, and "female" in another. Audre Lorde (Rowell, 1991) explained that she is:

> A Black, Lesbian, Feminist, warrior, poet, mother doing my work. I underline these things, but they are just some of the ingredients of who I am. There are many others. I pluck these out because, for various reasons, they are aspects of myself about which a lot of people have had a lot to say, one way or another. (p. 92)

My partner is a Black lesbian and I am often shocked at her ability to adapt to environments when faced with a mostly White male community and White male expectations.

Often Black individuals will change interactional patterns when faced with "White-dominated" areas, such as work, school, or other environments (Neckerman, Carter, & Lee, 1999). I have seen my partner share football stories with my White father in a way that seems to me to be both "White" and "masculine." She is able to adapt her demeanor to be, what I perceive as "White" when we are shopping for a big purchase or she is making a business call on the telephone. In both these situations, she appears comfortable and relaxed. Then, I have seen her with her extended family. Her language, her topics of discussion, and her way of connecting all change in this environment. Deep down she remains the same soul and this part is obvious, but she has just figured out ways to communicate in many different environments. This has probably facilitated her success in life. Looking at her, as a White female, I am awed at her ability to do this and often consider how nice it would be to actually be able to adapt to my own environment that easily. Then, I look at the flip side of this experience that if she did not act differently while we were purchasing our house, how things would have turned out differently. In addition, at times when we need to conduct something related to business, she will ask me to make the phone call or the connection. The reality is that she is exhausted at having to change herself in this oppressed world. Neckerman et al. (1999) shared the relief that Black individuals feel when they return to their families and communities where they can "de-robe" and switch to Black "symbolic and interactional styles" (p. 954). The lifetime of oppression of what my partner knows as her identity as a Black woman has forced her into acting White at times, I exist in a privileged racial social category and I never have learned to adapt in this way because I never have had to. In the same instance, I realize, I am not as at ease or comfortable adapting to the styles and expectations in Black communities and often wish this were easier on me. This is one example in which I have recognized my own privilege as a White female.

The story I have just expressed is a work in progress for me. I am a White woman and view my partner's experiences through my own White experiences. In telling my partner what I had included in this dissertation about her, she argued that she was not "acting White" but "acting professional," which are two completely different things. This resolution was echoed by Dr. Few-Demo, my dissertation advisor, who also happens to be Black. I have resolved, however, to leave this story in as an incomplete example of my exploration of my own Whiteness and the importance of this exploration on this research study. I feel that exploring and deconstructing my own White identity is a lifelong process, so I will continue to think about this previously written story and my own struggles with viewing Black identity through my White experience.

Exploring my own White experiences is connected with the critical White studies movement. The critical White studies movement has placed the view of a White culture at its' core (Lipsitz, 2007). This assists in identifying White privilege in a historical context and in present daily life with my own exploration as a White woman. Collins (2000) states that White women also do not address their own privilege and that of White males because of the benefits they have received from not looking at these issues. McIntosh (1990) specifically addresses her own experiences trying to face her privileges as a White woman. She states that "whites are carefully taught not to recognize White privilege, as males are taught not to recognize male privilege" (p.31). It has been my goal, throughout this research project and beyond to continuously "identify, analyze, and oppose the destructive consequences of Whiteness" (Lipsitz, 1995, p. 369) as it exists in my own experiences and also politically in the larger community.

One aspect of the Black feminist movement is based on Black woman's standpoint (Collins, 1989; Collins, 1998; Taylor, 1998). Black women have a distinctive experience and

expression of these experiences. Black feminism is partly about capturing the unique standpoints of these oppressed voices in an empowering way (Taylor, 1998). “Black feminist thought consists of ideas produced by Black women that clarify a standpoint of and for Black women” (Collins, 1991, p.37). In light of this defining point made by Collins and the reality that I am a White female, I do not consider my research to be Black feminist research. I do, however, use Black feminism to highlight, explain, and drive much of my research. This is done cautiously as not to devalue the voice of Black female researchers in light of my own, but to supplement my research with the voices of Black feminists. There has been a considerable amount of written words by Black women that “contribute to our understanding of Black family life” (Johnson & Staples, 2005, p. 36). These words, and the words of the participants, are expressed throughout this research in a way to incorporate Black feminism and facilitate a deeper understanding of the issues.

This research and work is “activist” in nature simply by the topic and participants being studied. Collins (2000) argues that the suppression of the voices of the oppressed in our society makes the presentation and projection of Black voices inherently political and “activist.” Collins (2000) states that:

> Black feminist thought’s core themes of work, family, sexual politics, motherhood, and political activism rely on paradigms that emphasize the importance of intersection oppressions in shaping the U.S. matrix of domination. But expressing these themes and paradigms has not been easy because Black women have had to struggle against White male interpretations of the world. (p. 251)

By exploring the lives and connections of Black gay and lesbian couples, Black feminism is directly related to the struggles, identity, and community that Black feminism suggests.

Symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism is based on three ideas (Blumer, 1969). The first idea is "that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them;" the second idea is "that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of" social interaction; and the third is "that these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters" (Blumer, p.2). In essence, "meaning arises out of the process of interaction between people" through interpreting ideas or symbols (Blumer, p. 4). Symbolic interactionism argues that who we are and the meaning we get from that (including behaviors) comes from our interaction with our environment (Blumer).

Symbols, for individuals, are the basic unit for understanding symbolic interactionism. Hewitt (1998) explained that "a symbol is a sign—typically a word or combination of words—that means approximately the same thing to all members of the community" (p.55). He continued to explain that "symbols bring the external world within the person" (p.55). Symbolic interactionism arose out of how one uses, defines, and adapts behavior based on these symbols in our environment (Blumer; Hewitt, 1998). Through social interactions, the idea of self is created and defined based on these community ideas of symbols (Hewitt).

In this particular study, the use of symbolic interactionism was essential for assisting in the understanding of couple identity based on symbols that exist within one's extended family (La Rossa & Reitzes, 1993). It is my view that Black lesbian couples are constantly creating and recreating identity of their current couple relationship and family based on symbols and ideas they receive from society and translating these to define self. Messages and symbols within the family can be very different when viewed from the larger society (Hewitt, 1998).

Messages and symbols from the society as a whole, as well as Black communities and gay and lesbian communities can play a role in the development of self among participants (Suter et al., 2008). Cultural identity can be understood through symbolic interactionism (Larkey, Hecht, & Martin, 1993). This theoretical frame allows me to incorporate Black feminism and feminism into the narrative and results by examining the cultural atmospheres surrounding the participants. In addition, researchers have explored the idea of symbols and meaning on the family identity for lesbian families (Suter et al., 2008).

Symbolic Interactionism was a natural fit for balancing the feminist epistemology of this research study and the grounded theory framework that will guide the methodology. This study explored the ideas of cultural and familial expectations and symbols that assisted in identifying self and family identity among participants.

Integrating Theories. This research was placed within an integrated theoretical framework: symbolic interactionism and postmodern feminist theory. The feminist frame allowed for "taking the analysis of the data to a macro level, over and above the symbolic interactionist interpretation" (Keddy, Sims, & Stern, 1996, p. 451). Data were explored using grounded theory techniques. Although it may seem at first that postmodern theory has epistemological differences from any standpoint theory, Black feminist thought allowed me, as a cultural outsider, to place the diversity of Black experiences, specifically of the participants in this study, in a historical, as well as, contemporary political context. I found the key tenets from Black feminist thought particularly helpful in interpreting data from a specific population within Black communities. The integrated framework allowed for the telling of participant's stories "in their own words and those words are acknowledged and validated in the research process, analysis, and publication" (Crooks, 2001, p. 18). Postmodern and Black feminist theories were

easily couched in symbolic interactionism as a feminist perspective frames the cultural and external environments that influence families and individuals (Keddy et al). Finally, postmodern feminism set the foundation for the key historical factors that influenced social relationships and power differentials (Keddy et al.). These concepts were considered as the participants express their individual, couple, and family symbols and family identity.

Postmodern feminist theory takes into account the larger societal framework that exists in the defining of difference and constructing reality (Hare-Mustin, 1987). Cultural definitions of what it means to be "male" or "female," "Black" or "White," and "gay" or "straight" all play into the roles and lives of Black gay and lesbian individuals. In addition, social standards and expectations are prevalent in families. Hare-Mustin (1994) explained that "dominant discourses support and reflect the prevailing ideologies in society" (p. 19). This current research examined how Black couples described their position in their families of origin and in society based on the dominant discourse that influences them.

Key tenets from a Black feminist theoretical framework were used to specifically address the experiences of Black gay and lesbian couples (Collins, 2000). Few, Stephens, and Rouse-Arnett (2003) stated that "Black feminist thought is suitable as a guiding theoretical framework for investigating Black women's lives" (p. 206). Aspects of this theoretical framework that guided this study included: the creation of knowledge through experience, the importance of accessing Black voices in order to understand their struggles, studying an infrequently examined population, and the compounding effects of race and gender on oppression (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1984).

Collins (1990) stated that homophobia within Black communities is pervasive and the effects that homophobia can have on gay and lesbian populations is extensive. She also stressed

that homophobia has only infrequently been examined or addressed in Black communities. This Black feminist theoretical stance examined the role of the differing struggles of race and oppression. Black lesbian individuals are faced with the threat of racial oppression, gender oppression, and oppression based on their sexual orientation; this makes their situation unique (hooks, 1984). Using the lens of Black feminist theory provided a framework for examining the complex influences on this unique population.

Collins (2000) argued that the epistemology of Black feminist theory is defined by the knowledge and lived experiences of Black individuals. This qualitative study tapped into these lived experiences by looking at Black lesbian couples through their voices. By bringing this knowledge and lived experience to light, change in empowerment and social justice is possible. By investigating the experiences of Black lesbian individuals, we (as a nation, as scholars, and as individuals) will become more aware of the possible changes necessary to grow out of the current oppressive circumstances.

Symbolic interactionism is defined by how one uses, defines, and adapts behavior based on symbols in their environment (Blumer, 1969). Through social interactions, the idea of self is created and defined based on these community ideas of symbols (Blumer). In this particular study, the use of symbolic interactionism is essential for assisting in the understanding of how couples build their identity based on symbols that exist within one's family of origin (La Rossa & Reitzer, 1993).

These three theories, used together, created a stronger, richer study. Symbolic interactionism assisted in recognizing and creating meaning and identity processes within the couples and families. Postmodern feminist thought implies that society has developed definitions of lesbian couples that contributed to feelings of oppression felt by the couples. Postmodern

feminist theory indicates the way society defines terms leads to a stressful relationship between the couple and their families of origin (Olsen, 2005). This postmodern lens allowed for us to look more closely at societal impact. Finally, Black feminism suggests that Black identity could have a confounding effect in these feelings of oppression for Black lesbian couples (Collins, 2000). Black feminism also contributed to the richness of this research study by placing the data gathering and analysis into a frame that does not make the assumption that participants mirror White experiences. Black feminism identifies with postmodern theory by recognizing the influence of societal messages and expectations, while symbolic interactionism labels the meanings created by these messages.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This qualitative research study was designed and analyzed using grounded theory (Blumer, 1969). I will explore feminist models of research here that served as the overall background for my thinking in the research development and analysis that links to my postmodern feminist theoretical frame. Also, I will detail how grounded theory was utilized in the evolution of the data analysis. In addition, I will describe in detail the processes used to gather and analyze the data.

A Feminist Model of Research

A model of feminist research can take on a variety of different forms. Tinder (2000) posited that:

> The advantages of a research practice informed by postmodern feminist theory opens up new possibilities for undertaking research capable of handling complexity and continuing a commitment to social justice defined not just in terms of women, but men, women and children. (p. 55)

A key idea of feminist research in family studies is to change the view of family to a non-oppressive definition (Thompson, 1992).

Reinharz (1992) identified ten themes of feminist research that are relevant for the present study:

1. Feminism is a perspective, not a research method.
2. Feminism uses a multiplicity of research methods.
3. Feminist research involves an ongoing criticism of nonfeminist scholarship.
4. Feminist research is guided by feminist theory.
5. Feminist research may be transdiciplinary.

6. Feminist research aims to create social change.

7. Feminist research strives to create social change.

8. Feminist research frequently includes the researcher as a person.

9. Feminist research frequently attempts to develop special relations with the people studied.

10. Feminist research frequently defines a special relationship with the reader. (p. 240)

Sprague (2005) suggested that feminist epistemology in research is about "the knower, the known, and the process of knowing" (p. 31) and the relationship between these things. In this respect, she argued, positivist research is often viewed intrinsically non-compliant with the feminist researcher because it has clear divisions between the researcher and the thing that is being researched. For this reason, qualitative research methods were important to this research. In addition, a conscious effort was made to make the connections between "the knower, the known, and the process of knowing." This feminist research was directly attuned to the relationship power plays in the research process (Fox & Murray, 2000; Seibold, 2000; Thompson, 1992).

A positivist approach asks "African-American women to objectify ourselves, devalue our emotional life, displace our motivations for furthering knowledge about Black women, and confront in an adversarial relationship those with more social, economic, and professional power" (Collins, 2000, p. 256). In this respect, the qualitative design presented in this research directly acknowledged these limitations of positivist research. The design provided a space to explore and identify these issues through the stories of the participants.

In building a methodology for feminist research, it is important to consider their "interpretive paradigms" that are used to conduct the research (Collins, 2000, p.252).

Epistemologies and intersecting ideas that are used to explain the "social phenomena" were used to decide the method, create the questions, analyze the data, and decide how to disseminate the findings.

"Feminist analysis is inherently linked to action" (Reinharz, 1992, p. 175). This research took on a framework that Reinharz (1992) labels a "demystification framework." This research provides a knowledge base regarding a group of individuals that are often not understood and infrequently researched. One purpose in studying these individuals was to bring their issues to light and to give their voices power, creating the action-oriented piece integrated in the research. As a researcher, as a lesbian, and as a therapist I am committed to also sharing these findings in ways that may create changes to how the data will present. This could include publication, sharing of results in educational arenas, or within the community. In addition, the process of telling one's story can lead to personal change (Chase, 2005). Sometimes it is important to healing and growing to share stories. This might make even more of a difference in including the voices of previously silenced individuals.

Feminism is the overarching epistemological framework of the research design and analysis. Symbolic interactionism is the set of assumptions and ideas used in relation to the design and analysis, and grounded theory is the methodology for the data analysis (Keddy et al., 1996). This epistemology and theoretical base assisted me in re-telling the participants' stories and allowed for me to begin building an understanding of how participants arrived at their own conclusions in life. Patton (1985) described my feelings of the backdrop of this research by stating that qualitative research is:

> An effort to understand situations in their uniqueness as part of a particular context and the interactions there. This understanding is an end itself, so that it is not attempting to

> predict what may happen in the future necessarily, but to understand the nature of that setting—what it means for participants to be in that setting, what their lives are like, what is going on for them, what their meanings are, what the world looks like in that particular setting." (p.1)

His description of qualitative research crossed methodological differences to describe a basic unit of what qualitative research is working to discover.

Research Design Approach

Grounded theory originated from Glaser and Strauss (1967) with their book, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. Theory is generated from a "systematic discovery" from the "data of social research" (p. 3). This is done through the "collection, coding, and analysis of the data" (p. 3). This basic guideline to the analysis of the data was the constant comparative method, a continual simultaneous method of exploring data by coding, analyzing, discovering theory and re-designing theory after returning to the data.

Grounded theory provides a respectable direction for looking at families because of its ability to provide an explanation for what is going on in families (LaRossa, 2005; LaRossa & Wolf, 1985). Grounded theory originated to expand on qualitative methods using symbolic interactionism (Dey, 1999). In this respect, symbolic interactionism's usage is a natural fit in the grounded theory design (Dey). In addition, grounded theory can be used nicely as a feminist methodology because of its focus on understanding participants' voices and ideas based on the participants' experiences (Keddy et al., 1996). Grounded theory provided a frame to explore the social interactions based on participant's experiences (Crooks, 2001; Keddy et al.). Crooks (2000) expressed the complement of grounded theory to feminist research and research on women:

> Grounded theory is a respectful methodology in which the participants' views are sought, listened to, and valued. As women and researchers interact, the source of concern is known and the processes used to deal with it are explored. (p. 17)

In addition, Crooks (2000) explained:

> Grounded theory methods allow the research to see women as full members of their social, political, economic worlds; to understand the lives and activities of women; to understand women's experiences from their own particular points of view; and, finally, to conceptualize women's behavior as meaningful and as a direct expression of their world views. In taking this perspective, researchers give voices to the thoughts and actions of women and establish the importance of women from a woman-centered perspective. (p. 17)

Grounded theory methodology and feminist theory complement one another throughout the data gathering and data analysis.

Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis in this study was the couple. The individuals in the couple were interviewed together. There is a debate in the family studies field about interviews with couples separate or together (Valentine, 1999). Interviewing couples separately can provide a more honest and individual picture of what it going on (Valentine, 1999). This was not as important to me as the couples' relationships and their interactions with one another (Allen, 1980). I interviewed couples to look at the couples' jointly defined history as a couple (Valentine, 1999). I was interested in couple interaction (Allen, 1980). By interviewing the couple together, I was able to view the "insights into the dynamics of the household that would be difficult to identify in a one-to-one interview" (Valentine, 1999, p. 68). I was able to see and express the possible

frustrations and complications that the couple works on together in relation to their challenges with their families and their identity as a couple (Allen, 1980). The couples' conversations, the agreeing and disagreeing with the other's stories ultimately told a more specific story about the couples' struggles (Valentine, 1999).

One challenge of interviewing a couple together can be one member sharing information that may be confidential to the other member of the couple (LaRossa, Bennett, & Gelles, 1981). To counteract this challenge, I shared with each couple that each of them does have control over what part of the data they are willing to share. At the end of the interviews each individual was asked if there was any part of what was said during the interview that they would not like the interviewer to share or transcribe. None of the participants chose to remove anything from the taped interviews.

Sample and selection procedures. The Institutional Review Board at Virginia Tech approved the design, data collection procedures, and analysis prior to the start of seeking out or identifying participants (see Appendix B for complete IRB protocol.) Participants were comprised of a snowball sample of 11 Black lesbian couples. These participants were acquired and interviewed within a seven month time frame. Participants were recruited from: a gay and lesbian family listserv based out of North Carolina, a Black pride weekend in Washington, DC, and acquaintances of my colleagues and friends. Brief demographics represent some diversity in relation to where participants reside, economic status, career, and educational backgrounds (see Table 1). The subjects are identified only through pseudonyms.

Initially, I found participants using personal connections through both personal and academic networks. I immediately met challenges locating participants fitting all the categories necessary to qualify for the research project. I found it difficult to find couples where both

individuals identified as Black or African American. In addition, age and years dating categories were challenging. Then, as time passed, I found participants on a listserv in NC, which snowballed. I also attended the Black Gay and Lesbian Pride festival in Washington, DC, where I was also able to complete a couple interviews.

Participants were obtained using word of mouth advertising, referrals from friends, and connections that I have made in the community. Requirements for participants included: (a) each member of the couple self-identify as Black and (b) the couple must have been in a committed relationship for at least one year and currently living together (see Table 1 in Appendix C for complete demographics of participants). In LaSala's (2002) research, participants were excluded if they did not have at least one living parent. I did not want to facilitate the assumption that *parents* are the key and only important members of Black individuals' families. The form of Black families can include the nuclear family, female-headed households, grandparent headed households, and larger family systems (Staples, 1987). I wanted to capture these differing familial forms. In this respect, I asked the couples if key individuals in their family were still alive, but I did not restrict this definition any more that that.

Participants were paid $30.00 per couple, in the form of a gift card, for their participation. I was the only one with access to participants' names and contact information. These were kept in a locked files cabinet accessible only to the main researcher. After the interviews and transcripts were typed, participants are referred to by a pseudonym. I was the only person with access to any identifying data.

Data Collection

Interview questions were general in focus to provide for the subjects' initial thoughts and feelings without too much direction from the researcher. The interview protocol can be located in

Appendix A. The larger questions included asking the subjects about their families, their sexual orientation and level of openness about their orientation, their relationship, and the integration of these factors in their lives. The interviews ranged in time from about 35 minutes to about an hour and a half. Most interviews were about an hour in length. Interviews were tape recorded with the participants' permission and transcribed by the researcher. In the tradition of feminist research, interviews were "relaxed and in the form of conversation" (Seibold, 2000, p. 149).

Most interviews took place in either the couple's home or a neutral private location, such as a public library, church, or community center. All these places are acceptable locations for qualitative interviews (LaRossa et al., 1981). Three interviews were done over the telephone. I continued to gather data until I felt the data was not producing notable differences in codes, otherwise known as theoretical saturation (Dey, 1999). "Interviewing allows interviewers to envision the person's experience and hear the multiple voices in a person's speech" (Reinharz, 1992, p. 39). The interviewing technique comprised semi-structured and open-ended interview questions. This form of interviewing is one of the most common techniques in feminist methodology (Reinharz, 1992). "Interviewing offers researchers access to people's ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words rather than the words of the researcher" (Reinharz, 1992, p.19).

An important key to feminist interviewing has to do with the trust participants have in the interviewer (Few et al., 2003; Reinharz, 1992). Often times minority groups are skeptical of research done by researchers from oppressive groups (Reinharz, 1992). To assist in the trust, I occasionally disclosed information about myself, as it seemed appropriate to building rapport in the researcher-participant relationship (Few et al., 2003). I was genuine to my own nature and open with my opinions and my passions when necessary to build a supportive relationship. This

type of relationship between interviewee and participant are noted as a “true dialog” and is consistent with feminist methodology (Reinharz, 1992).

There are things to consider when doing a qualitative interview (Fontana & Frey, 2003). The researcher must be able to become a part of the environment that is being studied and be able to understand the language of the population interviewed or have an informant who can translate. The researcher must also be able to decide how to present self to participants and be able to build both trust and rapport with participants. Interviewing lesbian couples intrinsically has specifics to consider (Kong, Mahoney, & Plummer, 2003). Gay and lesbian individuals are sometimes fearful of exposing their sexual orientation because of condemnation. This may have resulted in difficulty finding participants comfortable enough to share their experiences. In order to be sensitive to this, I was open with participants about my own sexual orientation and my current involvement in a bi-racial relationship.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using grounded theory methodology. Grounded theory techniques fit the feminist structure and symbolic interactionist theoretical frame easily (LaRossa, 2005; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In addition, grounded theory is a commonly used methodology among family researchers (LaRossa, 2005). Below, I have outlined my procedure and how I used grounded theory principles (LaRossa, 2005).

Transcripts were created from the recorded interviews. Transcripts were typed within two days of the interview and analysis began immediately after the first interview which is noted as good practice by qualitative researchers (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Initially, I included details from the interview, like long pauses or emotional inflections to assist in the analysis process (Riessman, 1993). Once I transcribed interviews, I began the constant comparative method based

on the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Dey, 1999). Initially, I read and re-read the transcripts four times, to become familiar with them. After personally doing the interviews, than personally transcribing the interviews, I felt I began to really start hearing ideas and participants' stories clearly. To explore the data further, I began a three stage constant comparative method widely recognized in grounded theory work: (a) open coding, (b) axial coding, and (c) selective coding with the inclusion of memos (Strauss et al., 1998, LaRossa, 2005). A coding matrix was created to organize codes (see Appendices D, E, and F for a coding matrix that follows this three stage process.)

Memos. In addition to coding, I utilized memos throughout the process of analysis. "Memos represent the written forms of our abstract thinking about the data" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 198). To keep track of my own ideas and theoretical formulations throughout the data gathering and analysis, I kept a journal. Journals can be useful in writing initial ideas and "abstract thoughts" that came from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). I formulated memos throughout the entire process, from the very first interview, to subsequent interviews, to discussions with my advisor and others, to the final theoretical conclusions (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). These memos turned out to be the most relevant assistant to my data analysis procedure and I continuously looked at the data in response to my own memos.

Open coding. I started the process of open coding initially by reading the transcripts and coding main ideas presented by the responses (Dey, 1999). Strauss and Corbin (1990) defined open coding as "the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data" (p. 61). In this process, I read and explored each line of the transcripts and wrote codes directly on a copy of each transcript (Dey, 1999). I coded from the sentences or word groups, whichever made sense given the structure of the narratives. I coded several times

while keeping in mind my research questions, thinking through what was happening in the data, and summarizing what participants were trying to explain in their responses (Dey, 1999; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Each time I went back to the transcripts, I changed the ink color I used for the coding. I did this to explore ideas and aspects generated from my memos. During open coding the "data are broken down into discrete parts, closely examined, compared for similarities and differences, and questions are asked about the phenomena as reflected in the data" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p.62).

During the open coding process, I was in frequent contact with my dissertation advisor regarding my findings within the transcripts. In addition, she read through the transcripts and provided her thoughts on my initial codes. I had two individuals outside of my dissertation committee read through two different interview transcripts during the early stages of my data collection process. One individual identified as a Black lesbian and the other individual did not identify as Black or lesbian. Both individuals shared with me ideas or themes they felt emerged from the data. These were both similar to each other and to my own open coding. From this phase of the analysis, I moved to the next phase, axial coding.

Axial coding. After open coding I began the process of creating axial codes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, Dey, 1999). This involved taking the codes and putting them into groups or categories by making connections between the codes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). To do this, I created a modified version of what Glaser and Strauss first proposed in the origination of the grounded theory method. These researchers presented a method of grounded theory that involved cutting transcripts up with scissors based on codes and filing them in folders as categories emerge from the codes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I did a similar task as I created categories. I

"cut and pasted" data from the transcripts that had similar codes into a Word document and began to formulate the categories based on trends from the codes.

Selective coding. Finally, I began the process of selective coding. This involved integrating the ideas that evolved from the categories into a larger idea or theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This stage of grounded theory is based on abstract thinking and the development of theory in relation to the categories and evolution of these to a theoretical idea of what is going on in the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, Glaser & Strauss, 1967, Dey, 1999). I met with Dr. Few-Demo, my advisor, during this process frequently to assist with the collapsing and organizing of my selective coding. Dr. Few-Demo challenged me during this process with regards to my interpretations of Black family practices and assisted with my integration of Black family scholarship into the data. This enabled me to explore the data while challenging my own lens.

I studied the stories within the data, discussed ideas and thoughts with my advisor, looked at previous research, and talked with anyone who was willing to listen to my thoughts and ideas that were generated from the research (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In particular, I studied the categories relating to feminism and symbolic interactionism by first taking key tenets of postmodern feminist thoughts and keeping these in mind during my reading of the transcripts. Then I considered them again, using assumptions from symbolic interactionism. These frames enabled me to determine the categorical fit in relation to symbols and meaning making, social expectations, gender roles, and feelings of prejudice or lack of societal acceptance (LaRossa, 2005). These discussions, theory and scholarship, and my own analytical thoughts resulted in the final theoretical ideas generated from the stories of participants (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

This process of coordination and interpretation with Dr. Few-Demo led to the construction of three figures that represent the findings (see appendices G, H, and I). In our

discussions, the figures evolved as we explored the coding. We discussed these figures and changed them slightly through three revisions. These figures represent the research questions and the final stage of the selective coding process.

I have to admit that, as an early research professional, I was once given the task to analyze qualitative focus group data. This was something I had never done prior to that time. I met regularly with a faculty member who started a learning process that I continue to use for qualitative data analysis. Possibly without her realizing it, this unusual method stuck in my mind. This process remains the most important aspect in the data analysis process and the discovery of theory process. She introduced me first to coding and categorizing, but, perhaps purposefully, did not describe the best way to generate codes and categories. With the help of a graduate student, we decided to use flip chart paper. We filled up my office with marked up flip chart paper that had dozens of codes and categories. When we got to this stage we were lost. Dr. Knight said to us: "just keep looking at it and thinking about it, at some point you will just know what they (participants) are trying to tell you." (Knight, 1998, conversation). Those words rang continuously in my mind as I entered the selective coding process in this current research. In 1998, I was not aware of grounded theory, the stages, or research design and process, but somehow, I intuitively came up with a story that represented those participants. From this point, we worked backwards and brought in grounded theory and technique so that we understood what we had just done. This is how I attempted to approach my data in this current project, using my self, my intuitive response to the data. The use of self is frequently discussed in grounded theory literature as an important tool in formulation of story and theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, LaRossa, 2005).

Self of the Researcher

A key component to feminist research is the analysis of self during the research process (Thompson, 1992). Feminist researchers should take a look at the placement of their own experiences and biases from design creation, data collection, data analysis, to presentation. In exploring the population of Black lesbian couples, I constantly focused on my placement in my relationship as a White woman partnered with a Black woman. I looked at my experiences as a gay female and the processes that I have encountered coming out to a White family and community. In addition, I integrated my own views and experiences living with and supporting a Black female partner. I am aware that my partner's experiences are quite different than my own. These not only reflect variances in our cultural background, but they also do not define Black lesbian experience. Most importantly, recognizing my own race and privilege has been a necessary part of this process. I sought to provide a respectful and open environment for the participants and in compiling the findings. "Unpacking" my own "invisible knapsack" at times enabled me to better view the data and the participant's experiences (McIntosh, 1990).

To address the challenge of my own White ethnic identity, I took several steps to make the interview process more comfortable to participants. Few and her colleagues (2003) described the importance of trust with Black female participants. This can be achieved by gaining a degree of "insider status." As a White lesbian partnered with a Black woman, I disclosed this aspect of my personal life in an attempt to build trust with my participants. This is one step, however, "sharing certain identities is not enough to presume an insider status" (Few et al, 2003, p. 209). As a result, as a part of preparing for the interviews, I did extensive research, presented in this paper, in an attempt to build my knowledge of Black lesbian communities. By gaining this perspective, I was able to gain participants trust through my expression of the importance of Black gay and lesbian issues.

Frequently, during every stage of the analysis, Dr. Few-Demo would challenge my thinking. In particular, she made comments and suggestions about my interpretation of Black identity and Black family dynamics. She was constantly challenging my thinking and my viewpoint. I was able to digest these challenges and reflect on the data through a slightly different lens. This process was essential to locating my self of the researcher within the data analysis process.

As a therapist, I worked directly with many different cultures. I have found ways to gain the trust of clients of different races, ethnicities, and religions. I have learned by offering my race as a point of discussion, this facilitates the building of trust with many Black clients. I have told clients "I know I am White" and will often identify my awareness of racism. For example, I will say: "and I know there is quite a lot of racism in this area." Then I will allow the client to explore their thoughts on this by asking "how do you feel about my being White?" Oftentimes, I perceive an immediate change in the clients' demeanor. Their facial expression and body language seems to suggest that they are a little more at ease with me. Other times I have tried to identify with some aspect of Black culture. Once, I disclosed to I was up all night the previous night learning how to put cornrows in my Black friend's hair to a resistant client. This admission built trust because even though I am White and did not understand the world as she perceived it, she saw that I was more than willing to learn. In more resistant clients, I have revealed a more intimate powerful story about crossing the street with a close Black friend of mine and hearing a car full of teenage boys yelling negative racial expressions at my friend. I have disclosed my internal feelings and fears during that moment. Oftentimes, after telling this story to a Black client, I have found it opens the door to a discussion about how the client has been influenced by racism. It is

through my genuine character, honest disclosures, empathy, and past experiences that I found and gained trust with the participants of this study.

Self disclosure with the client was essential at times in the interview process; self reflection was important to the data analysis. Self reflection will be a part of the data analysis procedure and recognized researcher leanings and reactions will be noted. I consulted with colleagues about personal reactions and self-reflection (Avis & Turner, 1996). Although my own race can be seen as inhibiting the subjects self disclosure or the data analysis, my personal strength-based and feminist lenses seemed to allow for a sensitive outsider's perspective on the issues that evolved and participants seemed to be able to feel this respect and support from me as the interviewer.

Reflexivity is important to feminist research (Few et al., 2003; Fonow & Cook, 1991; Seibold, 2000; Thompson, 1992). Reflexivity is the "tendency of feminists to reflect upon, examine critically, and explore analytically the nature of the research process" (Fonow & Cook, 1991, p. 2). From a feminist perspective, the inclusion of the researcher's voice is an important aspect of the research process (Stivers, 1993). In this respect, as the researcher, I tell my own story about my own reality and how I experience the participants' lives. "Another hallmark of reflexivity is the willingness to engage in continuous self-criticism, that is, a conscious second guessing of one's expertness, a questioning of the traditional posture of the researcher as 'knower'" (Fox & Murray, 2000, p. 1161). Allen (2000) discussed reflexivity through a family studies lens. She advocated the importance of sharing, within the research, the researcher's role and identity as it relates to their topic.

Chapter 4: Findings

Participants' responses were coded to address the following research questions:

1. What is the coming out process for Black lesbian couples?
2. How does the relationship with the family of origin and extended family influence lesbian couple relationships and identity with the passage of time?
3. What informal social support is available to Black lesbian families?

What evolved from the first question are themes related to coming out both as an individual and as a couple. Findings for the second question reflected active boundary creation by participants to preserve the couple relationship and solidify family identity. Results for the third question indicated that participants felt a need for additional informal support.

There were 22 participants, 11 couples. Participants varied with respect to age, time in the committed relationship, and profession. All but one of the couples had children in the home during the time of the interview. Table 1 reflects some of the demographics of participants. See Table 1 in Appendix C for complete demographic chart of participants.

Table 1

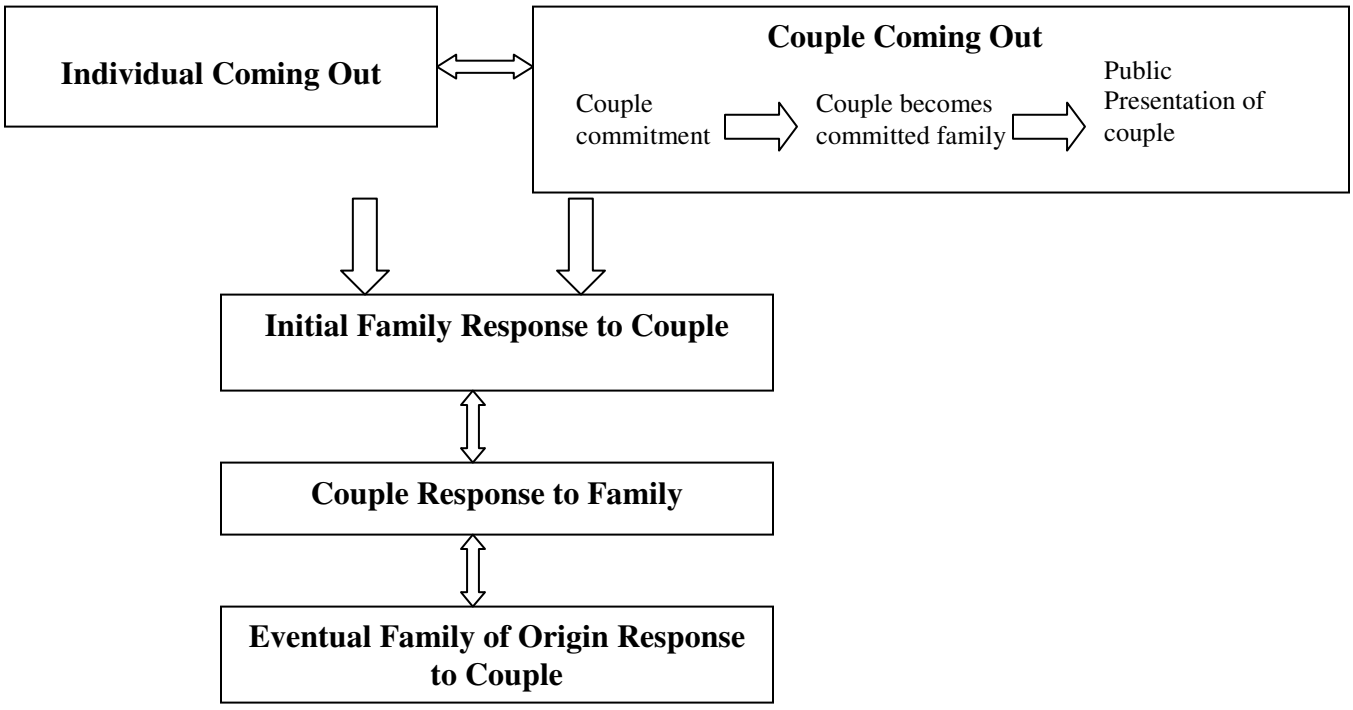
Demographics of Participants

		Time Together	Age-approx	Education	Job	Children in home (biological)
Couple 1	Veronica	2 years	mid 30s	no college	unemployed	1
Couple 1	Lora	2 years	late 40s	no college	unemployed	0
Couple 2	Anna	5 years	mid 30s	some college	therapist	2
Couple 2	DeeDee	5 years	mid 30s	unsure	security	0
Couple 3	Rebecca	1 year	late 20s	graduate school	teacher/graduate student	1
Couple 3	Karla	1 year	late 20s	graduate degree	administrator	0
Couple 4	Betty	6 years	mid 40s	no college	factory	1
Couple 4	Chris	6 years	late 40s	no college	factory/supervisory	0
Couple 5	Candice	1 year	late 20s	college	social work	1
Couple 5	Latasha	1 year	early 30s	no college	security	0
Couple 6	Tamara	5 years	early 40s	no college	factory	0
Couple 6	Lynn	5 years	early 40s	no college	factory-supervisory	1
Couple 7	Crystal	2 years	early 30s	graduate school	graduate student	1
Couple 7	Shauna	2 years	late 20s	some college	nursing aide	0
Couple 8	Shay	9 years	mid 30s	college	Resturant manager	0
Couple 8	Felicia	9 years	mid 30s	college	customer service	4
Couple 9	Francine	10 years	mid 30s	graduate school	counselor	1
Couple 9	Danica	10 years	mid 30s	graduate school	student affairs	1
Couple 10	Hazel	4 years	early 30s	college	teacher	1
Couple 10	Andi	4 years	late 20s	some college	security	0
Couple 11	Danielle	8 years	late 20s	college	sales	0
Couple 11	Geri	8 years	late 20s	college	teacher	0

Question #1: Coming Out Processes

Participants were asked during the interviews to discuss their coming out experiences. All individuals in the study reported they had disclosed their sexual identity to key important people in their families of origin. Many participants described an individual and a couple coming out process, sometimes simultaneously or subsequently. These processes are highlighted in Figure 1 (see appendix G for complete figure). For instance, some individuals acknowledged their orientation and disclosed their sexual orientation publically during the course of their current relationship. For others, this acknowledgement and acceptance occurred many years prior to their current relationship. I will present the complete figure and discuss each section of the figure as it is related to the findings.

Figure 1. Simultaneous Coming Out Processes Toward Black Lesbian Couplehood.



At times participants experience an individual coming out process while they are going through a couple coming out process. This couple coming out process is a three stage event. The coming out processes were followed by the family response, the couple response, and the eventual family response.

How individuals defined their lesbian identity. All participants confirmed that they identified as lesbians. In addition, every individual reported they had disclosed their identity to their family of origin. I will further breakdown the coming out experiences of participants. Seven of the 22 participants reported that they came out during the time of their current relationship. Eight participants stated they became aware of their sexual orientation prior to adulthood. Coming out experiences for the remaining seven individuals occurred in adulthood. Some individuals (n = 3) reported dating a couple women prior to their current relationship and this resulted in a more evolving understanding of their lesbian identity. Some (n = 4) reported knowing or becoming aware of their lesbian identity in adulthood but did not expand on their individual processes. Only two of the participants mentioned any personal struggles with their recognition and understanding of their own sexual identity. Individual coming out processes for participants suggested: (a) an ease in the personal acceptance of their identity, (b) no sense of being cut-off from their families of origin and extended families, and (c) at times a simultaneous development of lesbian identity with the couple coming out process.

Simultaneous development. Seven women came out individually and to their families during the course of meeting and falling in love with their current partner. This simultaneous coming out experience is signified in Figure 1 by the bidirectional arrow between individual coming out and couple coming out. This sexual identity development occurred within the supportive environment of their current relationship.

Participants who came out during the course of their current relationship, despite a feeling of surprise, accepted the new identity comfortably and quickly. Francine discussed her personal coming out story and shared that she did not really consider her lesbian identity until she and her partner made a public commitment. She stated:

> I didn't feel like I identified as lesbian until we had the (commitment) ceremony and at that point, I was like, ok, this is what the label is when you are two women together. That is what it is so that is what I am. So from then on, I started to say that I was, so, I just didn't have the whole history I think to go along with the relationship, it was like I was in love and I was just happy to tell whoever about it. I didn't have the history of having to deal with the rejection and the stigma and all that.

Candice's story is similar. She shared, "until I was about 22 years old, I (thought) I would be marrying a guy, yet that changed…Tasha is my wife, or almost my wife, and the person that I want to spend the rest of my life with."

Lesbian identity prior to relationship. Eight women shared they became aware of and accepted their lesbian identity at a very young age. Andi shared that she was about 13 when she came out to herself and her family. She stated, "I am really aggressive, so my family had an idea." She shared that her family had a difficult time with it, but that she was "independent" and "found (her) own way." Andi easily accepted her sexual identity at that age and didn't allow outside forces to interfere with this acceptance. Shay shared a similar story:

> I have been out a lot of years, I have always been the tomboy that I am…officially, I made it obvious at maybe 15 years old…I just kind of put it out there. I am the kind of person, you can love me or leave me, you know, I just always have been myself.

DeeDee shared that her mother knew she was going to be gay at four years old. She stated: "I come from a family of gay people; it is pretty much an open thing." DeeDee came out at a young age and never shared any struggles that she had with this identity, seeming to state the opposite, that she felt comfortable with herself.

Lack of personal struggle. In sharing their stories of coming out, regardless of when in their chronological age, the women became aware of and accepted their lesbian identity. Only two women shared any feelings of personal struggle through this identity process. Seven women, who came out later in life and in the context of their current relationship, did not share stories of personal distress or confusion over their sexual orientation. Instead, they shared matter-of-fact stories of a quick personal acceptance that they were in love with a woman. Betty shared that she "was never into [dating women]…I was just waiting for her." She explained, "I just didn't see any girls I was interested in before…anyone I wanted an actual relationship with, I like women, I don't know." Betty's statements about meeting her partner and falling for her suggested that she may have considered her lesbian identity in the past, but her words do not suggest she struggled with developing a lesbian identity.

Tamara, who did not identify as a lesbian prior to her current relationship, had a similar matter-of-fact way of sharing how she realized her feelings for a woman. She stated "I had an attraction for her" and their story continues to develop into a relationship. Tamara never mentioned a moment in time when she struggled with the fact that the person she had an attraction for was female. She just knew she had "an attraction" and wanted to develop a romantic relationship with her.

Two individuals presented an exception to the sub-theme of lacking personal struggles, Danielle and Geri. These two women were currently a couple and began dating early on in

college. They both came out during the course of dating. These two women were the only two women who expressed some discomfort while coming to terms with their lesbian identity. They were friends at first and slowly began to develop an attraction to one another. Danielle explained that when she first started realizing she was attracted to Geri, "I was scared, I was like 'wow, I really like girls.'" The couple considered themselves friends for two years before becoming a couple. They both shared they went through some personal growth and some concern about family acceptance. Both women stated they eventually accepted their sexual attraction to one another as well as claiming a lesbian identity.

How couples presented themselves as committed partners. In addition to the personal identification process and disclosure of individual sexual orientation, participants revealed a more public awareness of the meaning of their couplehood for themselves and others. I have labeled this process the *couple coming out process*. The couple coming out process is highlighted using quotes and facets of the participants' reported experiences. The emerging process that all couples experienced was: (a) couple commitment, (b) family commitment, and (c) public presentation of the couple. This process was part of what began a cycle of response that developed into the couples defining themselves as a couple and as a family. This process is highlighted below in the section below adapted from Figure 1.

Figure 1. Simultaneous Coming Out Processes Toward Black Lesbian Couplehood.

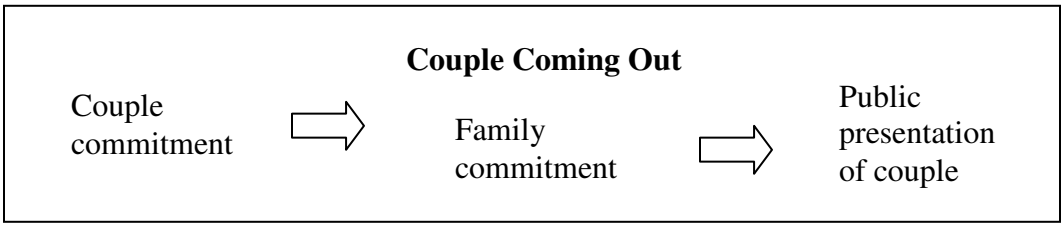


Figure 1. Figure above is a section of Figure 1.

Couple commitment. Initially, the first phase of coupling for participants was becoming a committed couple. This commitment becomes solidified by dating, frequent contact, defining of the relationship to one another and moving in together. As Veronica candidly shared her initial steps in declaring their commitment to one another, she discussed the exchange between her and her partner:

> I had just gotten out of the shower and I said "so you know, what is the deal, what is the situation, are we friends? Are we more than friends?" And, she was like, "I think that means we are more than friends."

Chris and Betty described their road to becoming a committed couple. Chris stated:

> The God's honest truth, she came over, you know we chilled, then it is like, she just didn't want to leave and I didn't want her to leave. And we just hung together and ultimately just got tighter and tighter.

Once the commitment between the individual members of the couple was solidified, even at times corresponding with the couple commitment, the family discussed the role of children in their union. For all but two of the couples interviewed, children were a part of their lives at the time the couple began building a relationship. What resulted from the process of defining a committed, intimate couple relationship was developing a shared definition of family commitment.

Family commitment. Family commitment came before the public declaration of participants' couple relationships in 9 of the 11 couples. These couples all had children in at least one of the partner's care at the time the couple relationship began. Rebecca and Karla had been dating about a year at the time of the interview and were planning to move in together about a month after the interview. They had made personal commitments with one another with respect

to their coupling. They were in the process of becoming a committed family. Becoming a committed family included negotiating the family roles and the family commitment. Rebecca and Karla did this with the introduction of Karla into the life of Rebecca's biological child as a step parent. Rebecca shared her rules for becoming a committed family:

> I am a Mom, and I have to make those sacrifices, if she (daughter) is not gellin' with (the person I am dating) I am always worried about that. I don't let them meet her until I am serious. But, they (daughter and Karla) hit it off really well…I was like…everything just came together.

Rebecca made it clear that the family arrangement with Karla would not have happened without her daughter's acceptance. The couple was able to negotiate this and define their family. Candice and Latasha shared similar family commitment experiences. They negotiated co-parenting issues with Candice's four year old child and became a committed family. The couple spent a portion of the interview discussing how they brought in Latasha as a second parent.

After Lora and Veronica committed to one another as a couple, Lora moved in with Veronica and her child. During the time of the interview, Lora and Veronica had progressed past couple commitment, were working on family commitment, and were looking towards presenting themselves as a couple in a more public way.

Lora began to set boundaries because of Veronica's relationship with her ex-partner. This ex-partner had previously been involved in a caretaking role with Veronica's biological child. Lora stated that she told the ex-partner, "this is my family now." Lora also shared "I am in the process of putting a ring on her finger." She explained her idea of presenting themselves as a couple (the couple coming out.) She stated:

> Once we cross the threshold….you are going to respect my boundaries, because this is my home now…This is where I can be comfortable. This is my home. We have established and are building a home. She is not just some floozy to lay up with, this is a relationship.

Lora's words introduced the idea of boundaries that developed in conjunction with and also as a result of the couple coming out process. I will discuss these boundaries more in the discussion section. Lora's comments also reflected that the couple presented themselves as a committed family in a more public way by "crossing the threshold." The next phase in this couple coming out process is the presentation of the couple's commitment to family of origin, extended family, and community.

***Couple presented publicly*.** In addition to couple and family commitment, the couple presented their identity as a couple and lesbian family to those around them. Most importantly, they reflected on their experiences with their mothers and mother figures, their families of origin, and their extended families. The couple at first presented the partner in very covert and indirect ways. With time, couples explored and planned commitment ceremonies to present and validate their relationships both personally and publically.

Participants reported coming out as a couple initially to their families of origin in a non-directive way. Participants did not typically do any formal announcing of the relationship; their partners just became a part of their lives. Essentially, they brought them along to family gatherings, had them in their homes often, or attended activities or functions with their partner. They did not introduce their partner as their partner or discuss the nature of their relationship.

Rebecca and Karla discussed the initial coming out process to Rebecca's family of origin. Essentially, the couple began coming out to Rebecca's family of origin by Karla's continual

presence in Rebecca's home, not any formal announcement of their coupling. Karla also attended Rebecca's family events. Rebecca shared that she did not overtly express the nature of their relationship. Karla shared, "it is not stated, but they know…it is not like talked about, like 'hey this is your girlfriend' but they already know, like basic interaction."

With Andi, or with her previous girlfriends, Andi came out as a couple by bringing her girlfriends to family and social functions. She felt that her family and friends would begin to understand the relationship just by having the individual around without verbally explaining the relationship to people in her life. She stated, "my girlfriends…I just brought them around…so, all my family knows, I never felt like I had to explain myself to anybody, they just went with what they saw." For many couples, the coming out process for the couple began by "bringing" their partner "around" the family.

In a more overt way, couples typically did present themselves as a couple in a more public way. For many couples (n = 5), this was defined as a "wedding" or a commitment ceremony. For the other six couples, there was discussion of a future public commitment or a change in language surrounding their relationship with others. For example, they used terms such as "wife" or "wifey." The commitment ceremony was described as an important expression of validation and legitimacy to the couple.

At times, it was the announcement of the commitment ceremony that marked the first moment (at the last moment) that the couple actually came out as a couple to their families of origin and their extended family (other than mother-figures). The nature of the relationship may not have been stated to others in their family until the union or until the planning stages of the union, even when couples had merged families and were living together. This was a final stage of coming out for couples. Couples discussed, planned, and invited extended family to

commitment ceremonies, often before really explaining the nature of their relationship. This event solidified their coming out to others as a couple.

Candice and Latasha were planning a wedding at the time of the interview. They were coming out as a couple to their families by having a commitment ceremony. Candice shared that she wanted to include her mother in the planning of the wedding:

> She went with us to look at the reception hall. I asked her if she wanted to be involved. At the same time I explained to her how much it meant for me that the day I got married. She would be a part of everything that went on.

Her mother did agree to be involved in parts of the planning and was present at the ceremony. In this respect, Candice had moved in with Latasha, made a personal and family commitment with her, but was still struggling with making their couplehood legitimate to her mother.

Francine and Danica met, dated, fell in love, got "married" (had a commitment ceremony), and then had children together in the course of their relationship. Their coming out, as a couple, surrounded their commitment ceremony rather than defining the family commitment first. Both individuals invited family and had to deal with a variety of consequences related to this. Danica was worried her mother would not come:

> It was touch and go for a minute. She said that she would come, but it was clear that she was not happy about it. Up to the moment, I wasn't sure. She pulled up to the church, and was doing whatever in the car and she took forever to come in. And so, she was very challenged, but she did it.

At times, members of the families of origin did struggle with the public commitment. Frequently they did take part in some of the commitment ceremony despite their possible internal struggles. With planning commitment ceremonies, family of origin involvement was desired, but the

ceremony itself and the couples' desire to announce their commitments took precedence because of the symbolic defining and presenting of their commitment. The response couples got from their families of origin and extended families during the entire couple coming out process played an important a role in the couples' identity development, particularly related to boundary creation around the current family.

The individual and couple coming out process led to: (a) a family or origin and extended family response, (b) responses by participants related to their family of origin and extended family response, and (c) an eventual response overtime by families of origin and extended families. This response cycle is highlighted in Figure 1. For each section of this response cycle I will discuss the findings related to that section.

Family of origin and extended family response. At the time of the interviews, the coming out process, as couples and as individuals, was a thing of the past for these participants. Most individuals seemed comfortable with their identity at the time of the interview and all have in one way or another expressed this identity to their families of origin, extended families, and communities. What happened both subsequently and interactively during this coming out process for the couple was the building of *lesbian family identity*. Lesbian family identity was based on the experiences of presenting lesbian couples to the family of origin and the adjustments and boundary settings that accompany this coming out process. In this section, I will address three categories of responses that related directly to the coming out experiences and how these experiences built on the development of lesbian family identity: (a) initial reactions from families of origin and extended families with regard to couple commitment, (b) the couple's response to this reaction, and (c) the family of origin eventual response to the disclosure of the commitment.

Figure 1. Simultaneous Coming Out Processes Toward Black Lesbian Couplehood.

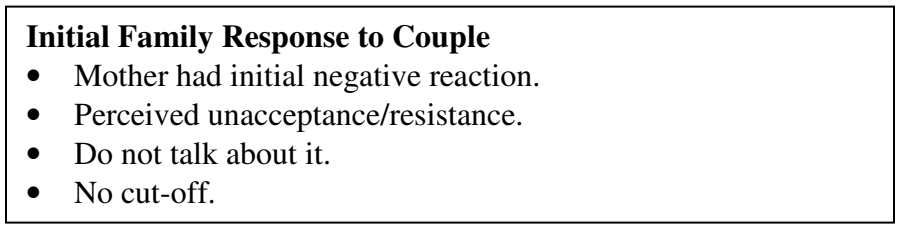


Figure 1. Figure is a section of Figure 1.

Initial reaction. Participants experienced initial reactions from their families of origin and their extended families. These reactions both molded and facilitated the couples' development. Participants discussed disclosure to their mothers or mother figures most frequently when highlighting the family of origin's initial reaction. In addition, participants discussed the extended family's reaction at times. Participants did not experience a sense of individual cut-off from their families as a result of their disclosure. As highlighted in this section of Figure 1 (also see Appendix G), lesbian identity development occurred prior to the current relationship and during the context of meeting and falling in love with the current partner. In discussing family of origin or extended family reaction, I included both processes.

Responses from mothers and mother figures. Most notable disclosures of sexual identity were the disclosure to mothers, aunts, grandmothers, sisters, and godmothers. Participants were typically given a general statement, "tell me about coming out." In response to this question, 16 of the 22 women immediately shared their experiences coming out to their mothers or mother figures and discussed the reactions of these individuals.

The experiences of coming out to mother figures varied among participants. The initial experience of disclosure to mothers and mother figures had positive, negative, and neutral reactions. Lora had a positive experience, she stated, "my mother and sister said they always

knew." Anna's experience was a little more neutral, "my Mama is the only person that matters and as long as she loved me…" Karla had a little more difficulty personally. She shared her personal struggle with coming out to her mother and her mother's somewhat neutral reaction:

> When I came out, I was just like, this is ridiculous. My mother needs to know and it was causing tension in the previous relationship I was in and so I was just like, look, I need to do this and so emailed my mother a letter. And, she wrote me back and said, look, next time if you want to tell me something, tell me something I don't already know.

Rebecca, Karla's partner, shared "my Mom knew like a long, long time ago, so it wasn't a matter of telling her, it is just like…I value my Mom's opinion, so that is my biggest thing."

Candice shared that it was hard for her mother when she came out. She explained, "it was really hard for her (mother) because even though she had accepted my (gay) cousins, I am her daughter." Shay also shared that her mother struggled at first. "In the beginning, my mother was a little shocked and she still had this perception of her little girl being with a man." Shay explained that her grandmother was aware of her identity before she was, she stated: "My grandmother, I don't think she ever thought it was a phase. I think she wished it was, but as close as we were, I think she always knew." Danica expressed her anxiety in coming out to her mother. She shared that a friend "kept encouraging (her) to talk to (her) mother." She continued by saying, "but, I was really afraid." Geri explained that she has told her mother of her sexual orientation, but no one else in her family knows.

Candice shared her mother's initial reaction to her sharing her commitment to Latasha. She stated:

> For my mother, it was really hard…initially it was 'get the f-in out of my house, I don't want those type of people in my house. She even called the cops, and we (Candice and Latasha) became '*those type of people*.'

Candice continued to deal with this negative reaction and verbalized her fears and sadness around this feeling of not being accepted. Geri also received a negative initial reaction from her mother. Geri stated that her mother was "freaked out" at first. Danielle stated that she and her mother did not speak for over a year after she disclosed her lesbian identity. Shauna explained that "in the beginning my mother was a little shocked." Crystal shared a somewhat mixed reaction from her mother, "honestly, I thought she would disown me because she is Pentecostal, but she didn't…it took her a while." Andi described her coming out to her family at the age of 13, and stated her family "had a hard time accepting." She explained she had a hard time dealing with her family's non-acceptance of her sexual orientation. Andi left home at 16 to "pretty much start my own life away from home."

Danica had a fairly smooth coming out experience with her mother. She shared that she sat her mother down at told her in her mid-20s and her mother told her she already knew about her daughter's sexuality and seemed to be accepting. When Danica and Francine began coming out as a couple, Danica stated: "we were never closeted and she (mother) was very uncomfortable with me sharing it with family and friends and at one point she said 'if I hear you shout it from one more rooftop, I am going to kill you!' or something like that." Frequently, participants explained their extended family members had a difficult time with others knowing participants' sexual orientation identity. Their families of origin and extended families did not seem to want to talk about it or let it be known that their daughter was partnered with a woman.

Extended family reaction. More than half of the participants (about 13) shared that they experienced an initial negative reaction from their family or origin or extended family. Frequently this included their mothers or mother figures, but also reactions from other extended family members. Both Shay and Felicia shared there is a feeling that they are not accepted by some important family members. Shay described that two of her three sisters are "uncomfortable" with her identity. She explained that neither sister plans to attend her commitment ceremony and that this was difficult for her. Felicia shared a similar struggle with her own sister. She stated that her sister expressed to her, "we will love you unconditionally as we are on earth because we may not be blessed to have you in the afterlife." Lynn described a somewhat negative reaction from her parents. She stated that after coming out to them as a young adult. Her parents told her that "I could do whatever I want, that is OUTSIDE their house."

Crystal thought that there were some in her extended family who did not accept her. During the interview, she described what it was like for her attending an extended family reunion:

> I can be confrontational and I am not going to sit by you if you do something that doesn't make me feel comfortable. So I try to keep the peace. You go over there, I'll go over here. Don't call me and I won't call you.

Crystal felt that there were family members that were not comfortable with her sexual identity and her response to this was to avoid them during the gathering.

Participants who did not have a negative reaction from their extended families after they came out (n = 6) reported: (a) quick acceptance by their families of origin, (b) their families already had some idea of their sexual orientation, or (c) that the family seemed accepting of their

identity as long as they did not make their identity public. Andi shared that the first extended family member that she came out to was her "Nana." She described the event stating, "she (Nana) said 'as long as you are happy, I am fine,' and she was like 'nobody in the family better not question me or say anything about it or send them to me.'" Nana positioned herself as Andi's social protector in her family. Francine was able to come out to her friends and family and felt accepted after the disclosure. She stated that "anybody that was a part of my life I told about it and they were pretty much like, ok, and that was it." Chris shared her coming out to her extended family at a young age. She stated, "they seen it coming" and continued, "I am glad it didn't get ugly, because people do get that way, and my whole family they love me to death and they never treat us different. They treat us with respect." Chris' partner Betty followed Chris's comments by stating "that is a blessing."

No cut-off from family. One clear theme regarding the disclosure of sexual orientation to family of origin and extended family, was that there was not a sense of individual cut-off following disclosure, despite the initial reaction. Only one individual, Andi, decided to remove herself from her family at one point because of the negativity that she was feeling from her family as a direct result of her coming out. Two other participants had a sense that they would be cut-off from their families of origin, but they were not. The other participants still held on to an individual connection of some kind with their families of origin and extended families despite revealing their lesbian identity.

Two participants reflected on the fear of being cut-off from their families of origin. Crystal feared coming out because she thought her mother would "disown" her, but she shared that this didn't happen despite her mother's strict religious identity. Another participant, Candice reflected on her fears. Candice feared that she would not have a relationship with her mother if it

weren't for her mother's love for Candice's child. Candice stated, "I strongly feel that if I did not have my daughter right now I wouldn't have my mother." Candice voices the strongest feeling of cut-off as a direct result of her sexual identity. Despite this feeling, Candice stated her mother "would rather have me there than not." Participants' extended families had a sense of connectedness and responsibility toward each other despite disagreeing or not accepting lesbian identity, coupling, and lesbian family commitment.

Figure 1. Simultaneous Coming Out Processes Toward Black Lesbian Couplehood.

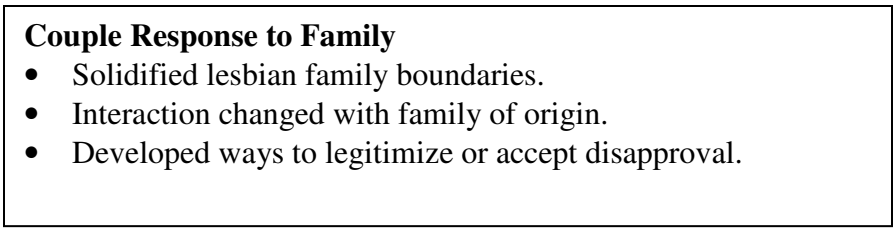


Figure 1. Figure above is a section of Figure 1.

Couple does not discuss relationship. The initial reaction of family of origin and extended family did not make a difference when it came to the feeling most participants had that they should keep sexual identity and couplehood quiet and hidden. The message was, "you can open the door to the closet, but don't come all the way out." This grew more complicated with specific participants. Once the committed couple became a family, living their life somewhat out and making a public and open commitment to one another was very important. This challenged extended families to deal with their personal responses to coming out more publically.

Lynn described coming out as a couple and how her family knows, but that they do not discuss it. She stated, "they don't talk about it…me and my mother and father, we don't talk.

We've been around each other, we just know things; we have a way of communicating without words." Rebecca shared a similar lack of communication around the topic of her sexual orientation with her extended family. She described what it is like bringing her partner Karla to family functions, stating, "I have never officially told my aunts, but I know they know" and "I think people, when we go somewhere, they already know. I was just like, this is Karla, but I think they know…it is not stated, but they know."

Lynn shared a moment when she brought a girlfriend bowling with the family. Her parents responded, "we know your lifestyle and we are starting to accept it, but it doesn't mean that you have to put it in our faces." The family desired keeping Lynn's sexual identity quiet and private. Danica responded to her mother who told her not to "shout it" from "one more rooftop" internally by deciding, "I refused to live in the closet I just resolved to not tell her or not share that part of my life with her, which of course caused me to be distant from her."

Participants gave in to their extended families' perceived uncomfortable feelings by adjusting to what they felt would make the family more comfortable. This change in behavior led to an eventual response by families of origin that was perceived as negative by the participants. Finally, this created a strong boundary around the current family for protection and validation.

Eventual response. As time passed, participants' families of origin and extended families developed ways to tolerate or accept the couple and family. Many individuals stated that their mothers may have initially reacted negatively, eventually tried to figure out a way to accept the couple and family. The extended family would develop fictive kin relationships to describe the wife/girlfriend's place in the family, without referring to them as a couple. In addition, similar to these fictive kin relationships, when one member in the couple relationship was either removed from their families geographically or because of death, or if the family was not as

accepting of the couple relationship, the other partner's family would absorb that partner into the extended family.

Figure 1. Simultaneous Coming Out Processes Toward Black Lesbian Couplehood.

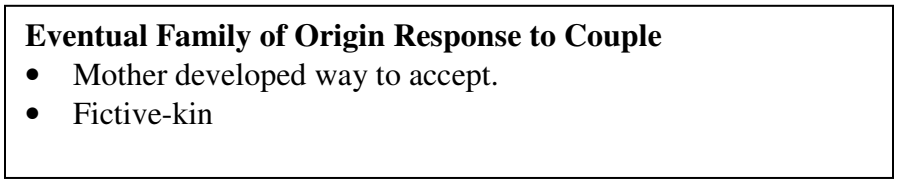


Figure 1. Figure above is a section of Figure 1.

Mothers find ways to accept child's partner. The importance of a mother's acceptance or the acceptance of mother-figures was prevalent in participant's descriptions of their coming out experiences. In time, mothers developed some type of acceptance of their daughter's identity and the couple and/or family they have created. Lora shared that over time her mother began to accept her sexual identity. She shared, "My mother came to visit us and stayed in the apartment with us. And I think that is when my mother really started saying that's ok, she is my child. I love her unconditionally and that is her life."

Candice, who really had a difficult time with her mother's negative response and continued to deal with her feelings related to this, stated that her mother in some ways has developed a way to accept their relationship. She shared the story: "She (Latasha, Candice's partner) called one day and said 'I am at the job and your Mom just introduced me as her daughter-in-law'…I would have never expected that." Shay also shared how her mother's reaction changed over time. She said, "Over time her perception has changed a lot." She continued, "When I go home…she will ask for my other half, like 'where is Crystal,' they love

her, they accept me for who I am." Crystal explained that her mother also had an initial negative reaction, but that her current family (partner and child) moved in with her mother for a short time and her mother seemed to adjust to them. Danica shared that her mother eventually began to respond to her family after she had a struggle with childbirth and her mother witnessed the support she only had from her partner and from her friends. Andi shared that her family seems to respect her family identity now. She stated:

> They see that it wasn't a phase and I did what I said I was going to do. I made it…I think they almost feel respect. I have my head on my shoulders…they are accepting of the relationship I am in now.

Fictive kin. The development of fictive kin labels and interactions was one mechanism used by both families of origin and extended families to assist in the acceptance of lesbian relationships. Participants' families developed fictive kinship names and relationships with the partner of their relatives. Francine stated that Danica's (her partner's) grandmother "refers to me as her granddaughter, her aunt refers to me as her niece." Hazel shared that her partner's mother "introduced me as her daughter at the last family reunion." Both Hazel and Andi, Hazel's partner laughed and joked about this change in Andi's mother's reaction to them as a couple.

In addition to making up kinship names, if one partner was distant from her family because of physical or emotional distance or even because of death, the other partner's family shows more acceptance. Candice shared the importance of bringing her partner to her family functions:

> Because of Latasha, I know that she does not have the ideal family, I want her to have that from my family and they love her so much, almost more than me. It makes me feel good to be around them when she is around.

Latasha agreed this involvement in Canidce's extended family was important to her. Tamara and Lynn discussed that Tamera was absorbed into Lynn's family of origin. Tamera shared that her parents were both deceased and described Lynn's family as being supportive over the holidays. She calls and talks to Lynn's mother when she has problems. Others mentioned their family "loved" their partner and invited them to gatherings and functions.

Boundary development. The coming out process along with the reaction pattern between the participants and their families of origin facilitated the process of building a boundary around lesbian families. These lesbian families felt they were only able to count on one another for support for their current family. In addition, they built in protections for their families of origin and extended families by both changing couple interactions patterns and legitimized or accepted disapproval of their relationship. To explain this in detail, I will return to the section of Figure 1 that highlights the couples' responses to their family of origin and extended family reactions.

Figure 1. Simultaneous Coming Out Processes Toward Black Lesbian Couplehood.

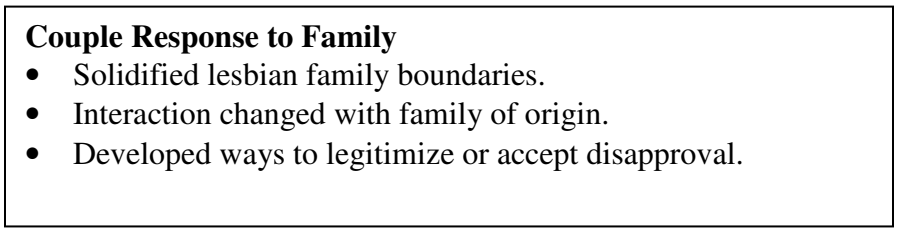


Figure 1. Figure above is a section of Figure 1.

Interaction changes. Participants respond to the messages they received as a result of their coming out individually and as a couple and family in similar ways. When participants

sensed their family members were uncomfortable with their lesbian identity, the couple changed their interactions with one another when they are with or around family.

It became apparent, with coupling and creation of family, there was typically a change in interacting as a couple. DeeDee and Anna shared that when they are around certain people in DeeDee's extended family that Anna was introduced as her "friend," she did not introduce her as her partner. Rebecca explained that she is very out in her urban community. She stated, "We can go down the street holding hands." However, when she is with her extended family, her interaction changed. She was more discreet about her relationship when talking to her aunts. She stated that she did not "bring it up" with them. Candice and Latasha shared a moment after a housewarming party where they changed their behavior because of her mother. Candice stated: "at the housewarming we had, we were all talking about going to the gay club together, but for my Mom's sake, we said we would go to the straight club." In addition to this change in couple interaction when faced with discomfort, participants found ways to legitimize their changing behaviors.

Couple developed ways to accept disapproval. As a method of legitimizing the discomfort of families of origin or extended families, a couple of participants mentioned "respect" for their extended families as a reason to accept their disapproval at their family identity. Felicia shared that she and her partner were not affectionate in her grandmother's house "because she is old school spiritual. It is a tolerance because we love you, not because we understand you." Lora shared that her sister did "not want it in her house." She explained further, "that is respect, you understand, even in my mother's house I would not sleep with her (partner). That is respect." DeeDee also talked about "respect" when it comes to interacting with her partner Anna around friends and family. She explained that she would not come out in public

around children. She stated, “If it is someone that has kids, I respect people and their children, because it is confusing to children. So, if this is someone and they have someone that is with them that is younger or whatever, then, this is my friend, Anna.” Felicia shared her feelings on her sister voicing that she did not feel Felicia would be with in “the afterlife.” She stated, “that is what she says and that is ok, because I know that it is out of love.” Felicia had figured out a way to deal with her sister’s feelings about her relationship and reasoned that her sister loves them.

Most couples and families developed strict, definable boundaries around their current family as a direct result of some of the reactions from their family of origin and extended family. With relation to coming out to family, these boundaries defined the couple and family and also set aside who and what was allowed to be apart of the open lesbian family.

As a result of this response cycle, the participants’ current family identity was more defined. Participants who had experienced a negative reaction from their families of origin and their extended families frequently did not force the issue of being out and open about their family identity. This reinforced boundaries within the couple and family. Because of the lack of communication, discussion, and outward expression of their relationship with extended families regarding sexual identity, these couples felt that they could only count on one another for genuine support.

Question 2: Interaction with Family of Origin and the Influence on Family Identity

Lesbian family identity maintained a central unit of control and boundaries with clear divisions of what was part of lesbian family identity and what was allowed in and out of the lesbian families’ lives. Figure 2 (see Appendix H for complete figure) represented this boundary formation. The darkened inner circle around lesbian family identity represented the non-permeable boundary. The non-permeable boundary is defined by the current family and was a

direct result of the interactions with families of origin, extended families, and their communities in general. The dotted circle around the thicker circle represented the aspects of participants' lives that they essentially allowed into the current family. This was labeled the permeable boundary. Children, rituals, and roles with families' of origin were all a part of this permeable boundary. The outer rectangles reflected the influences that symbolically build this lesbian family identity and boundary pattern. Through couple and family interactions and relationships with the outside world, this boundary was continually reinforced.

Figure 2. Lesbian Family Identity is Constructed by External Forces.

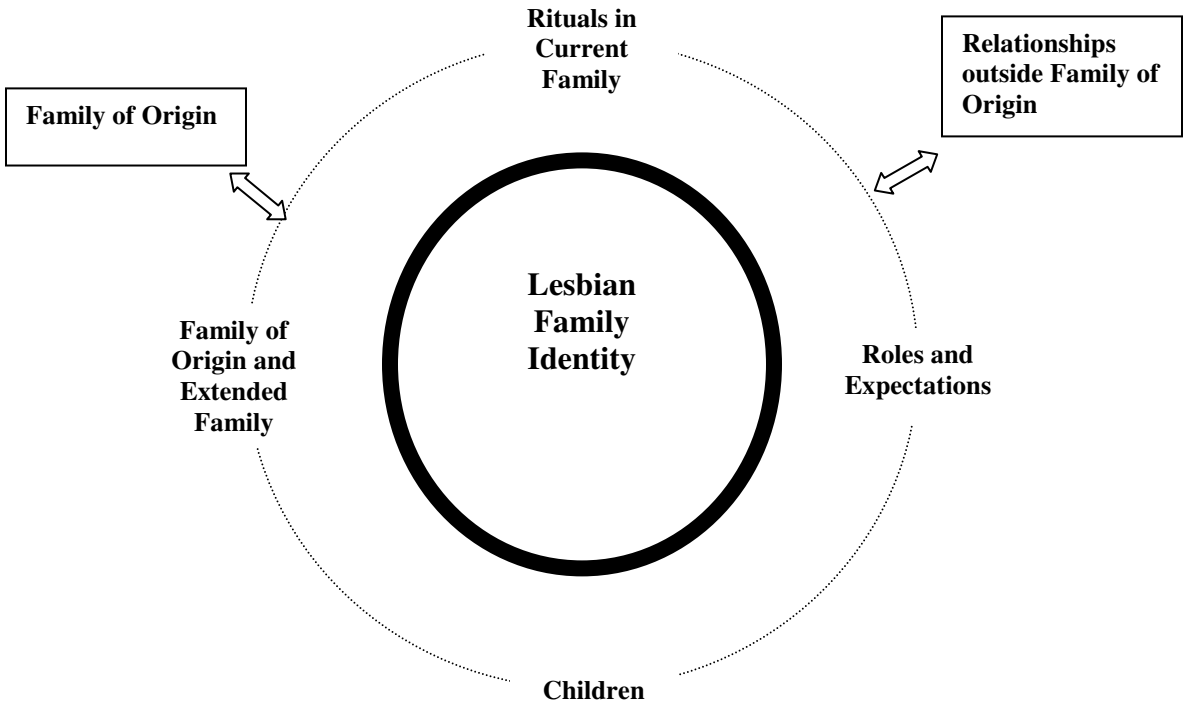


Figure 2: Figure represents a strong boundary that exists around lesbian family identity and the resulting influences that structure and maintain that boundary.

Boundary creation. The current family symbolically defined two boundaries: a non-permeable boundary and a permeable boundary. These boundaries were based on reactions from families of origin and extended families, as well as symbols and meaning generated from the community. I will highlight aspects of the non-permeable boundary and the permeable boundary.

The non-permeable boundary. There were two main aspects of how participants created, defined and maintained the non-permeable boundary: (a) how the family defines itself as a family unit and (b) the importance of the self-supporting nature of the relationship. Figure 2 highlights a non-permeable boundary, represented by a darkened wall around "Lesbian Family Identity." Analysis of data indicated that families set boundaries as they define themselves through time and through interacting with outside forces. Below is a subsection of Figure 2 that highlights this thick, non-permeable boundary. I will discuss what findings are associated with each aspect of lesbian family identity.

Figure 2: Lesbian Family Identity is Constructed by External Forces.

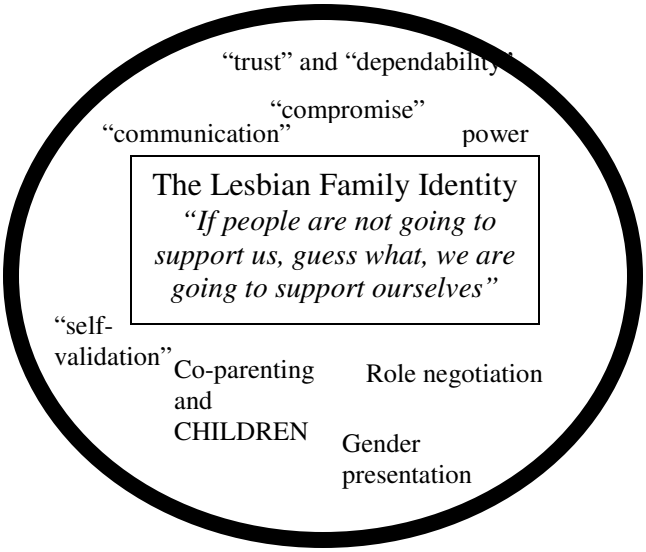


Figure 2. Figure above is a section of Figure 2. This section represents aspects of lesbian family identity recognized by participants.

The family unit. In order to detail how lesbian families ordered themselves, it is important to define lesbian families. Using the voices and descriptions of the participants I will provide a thematic guide to how participants define their families' identity. These components of lesbian family identity existed within the thick boundary. Children also defined lesbian families. All but one of the couples had children as part of their lives and living in their homes. The couples defined their lesbian family identity as "family" and as "children." Communication was one of the most frequently mentioned themes that define lesbian family identity. Other themes include: compromise and sacrifice, dependability, power and role negotiation, self-validation, support and struggle, and recreation and enjoyment.

According to participants, family was defined by children and child-rearing was an important theme throughout every facet of the lives of the couples interviewed. All but one of the couples interviewed considered themselves to be co-parenting. The one couple without children reported they plan to have children within the next couple years. Children, co-parenting, and child-rearing were important aspects of identity. Data suggested that there were aspects of child-rearing that are strictly enforced by lesbian family boundaries.

The family unit that was living in the same home is considered the main family unit despite the legal custody or child connection to other relatives from previous relationships, genetic relationships, or even current extended family. Negotiation of co-parenting in the family structure occurred quickly and reportedly without much internal difficulty from the biological mother, lesbian step-parent, or the children involved. In addition, this new family structure was recognized and the rules set by this current family were obeyed by those who had been involved in the children's lives previously. Children were at times in touch with other adults (e.g., their biological father, their biological father's extended family, their biological mother's ex-

girlfriends, their biological mother's ex-girlfriend's extended family, and their biological mother's extended family), who had been in their lives. These people were allowed access to the children in some capacity. I explore this theme later in the discussion of the permeable boundary. What was non-permeable in these couples was the current child-rearing decisions and responsibilities. Even the wording around "our" children suggested this building of a boundary around the children that defined the family.

Felicia gave advice about family boundary creation. She stated:

> One thing I would say to the person coming in that would possibly not have (kids) is that the person is a package and you cannot possibly accept them without accepting their children. Any woman who would not accept the woman and her kids as a package, I would walk away as fast as I can.

Felicia's partner, Shay, agreed this was important and continued to dialog with Felicia regarding her acceptance of the children.

Crystal shared the boundary creation she had with her partner (Shauna) and her child with respect to church, she stated she would not go to church because "we have a three-year-old, we have to make sure that they are not saying 'your loved ones are going to hell,' 'your Mama is going to hell." Crystal had birthed her child when she was in a previous relationship with a woman. She and her ex-girlfriend decided on insemination, birthed the child, and when their child was about a year old, the couple broke up. Crystal then became a committed family with Shauna. Crystal described the identity and boundary creation that she set up for her child, "I am going to have to start explaining to him (child)…he has two Moms and two step-Moms, and who knows one day his father might reappear and he will have a Dad."

Tamara and Lynn shared that they both had children at the start of their relationship and they had to merge households. When asked about how many children she had, Tamara shared "two that I birthed, one that I didn't." She explained that the children have grown to see each other as siblings and if "anyone tries to hurt" the younger one, the older one "takes care of her, real protective." The children in this relationship had developed and accepted the family boundary and had taken on their own boundary creation.

One of the families with children, Francine and Danica, decided together to have children and through artificial insemination from an unknown donor, they each conceived one child at different times. Their narratives suggested a slightly different negotiation of this non-permeable boundary. This couple did not have a paternal genetic connection to build up a boundary or former relationships that were part of the children's lives. Danica did describe being pregnant and going through labor. She shared that her mother was part of the labor process in which the couple defined a boundary with this extended family. Danica explained that it was her partner and not her mother who was the biggest part of the labor process:

> She (mother) didn't give Francine a hard time for being in the labor room, because at the end of the day, if the doctor had questions, Francine had the answers…she was basically, like, thank you for taking care of my daughter and it was like a big revelation to her, they are supporting each other.

This family defined their identity at this moment and in some ways, Danica's mother came to realize and accept this boundary.

Much of the language and discussion the participants had during the interviews indicated a definable boundary in the relationship and in the family. Participants defined themselves as families with children. Five out of the nine families, who brought in children from another

relationship, made references to the children as "our" children, despite genetic connections. Tamara and Lynn had a conversation about their children and Tamara stated "my kids and my grandchildren." After Tamara said this, Lynn jokingly stated, "That is on the record right, HER kids, HER grandchildren?" Tamara and Lynn both laughed and Tamara corrected herself, "let me rephrase, OUR children, OUR grandchildren." Felicia, who had been married for 11 years prior to becoming a family with Shay, comfortably put Shay in the co-parenting role and did not hesitate to share "we have four (kids), ranging in age from 17 to 11." Felicia never mentioned the children's' relationship to their biological father and referred to them only in relation to their parent-child relationship with Shay.

Hazel and Andi actually described the creation of this boundary. Hazel had been a single parent until meeting Andi. Hazel stated, "We actually decided to co-parent together." They created a lesbian family unit with the expectation that the couple would both be parents. With Candice and Latasha, Candice and Latasha discussed some struggles they had defining co-parenting roles. Candice stated she ultimately decided that she had "to let her (Latasha) be a parent and set rules and boundaries" with her daughter. Lora discussed her relationship with Veronica's children and bluntly stated, "This is my family now." Veronica followed up later in the conversation that she recognized Lora's place in the home and the subsequent boundary around the family identity as a result. Lesbian family identities had structured boundaries around the children and the roles of the couple with the children.

Self supporting family unit. Family structure was not all that defined this thick boundary. Participants frequently discussed their intentions to keep to themselves regarding certain aspects of their relationship. One important idea was the extent to which couples handle their issues "in house." In fact, all couples were asked a version of the question, "where do you feel like, as a

couple, you get the most support?" Eight out of the 11 couples responded almost immediately with "each other." At times, participants made this boundary very clear within their narratives. Crystal and Shauna discussed what happened when they argued. I asked the couple if there was anywhere they find support when they are arguing. Crystal shared that she would not talk to anyone. She stated, "I don't get into my personal stuff with anyone." Lora also shared that she doesn't discuss her current family issues with anyone. She said, "People just talk too much and people start stuff and I am not a chaotic person…I don't like chaos, I don't like drama, I don't like none of it, I keep it simple…" These families were typically fairly closed systems with respect to the community and their extended families in areas that concern their current family and current living arrangement.

Dependability and trust (n = 20) was frequently reported as important for extended families and was necessary in lesbian families. This reflected the self-supporting nature of the current family. Karla explained dependability in her relationship and how she would like for it to be defined. She stated,

> I think what would make our relationship better; I want Rebecca to depend on me more for certain things. She will just be upset and expect me to know, but not really say what is wrong and working it out more as a couple, like, this is the person I should depend on.

Rebecca followed with "She is very dependable, so when I need something, it is done," and "She has never given me a reason not to trust her." Karla returned the sentiment, "I trust her." Tamara and Lynn shared a story about a moment in their couplehood when Lynn was working a lot and Tamara began "reaching out" to "someone else." Lynn described that they were able to get through this issue by talking and understanding each other.

Another idea presented by participants was the importance of recognition and how lesbian families used self-validation (n = 22). The couples and their families validated themselves and their value as a family, particularly when others were not accepting. Lora offered some advice to others at the end of the interview, suggesting her own personal self-validation. She stated, "Living life on one's own terms is a beautiful thing…don't ever let anyone deter you or make your feel less because you have differences that other people cannot accept…I think living life as a lesbian is a beautiful thing." Chris stated, "I never change. My lifestyle is my lifestyle, but I am still me, it don't matter who I sleep with." Candice and Latasha discussed how they feel about a friend's negativity toward their relationship. Candice stated, "If people are not going to support us, guess what, we are going to support ourselves." This self-validation was an important theme in the face of extended family non-acceptance when there are no legal rights as a couple or family. Participants developed this validation in response to their environment, and, as with other themes in this defined lesbian family boundary, it was reinforced by outside forces.

Along with self-validation, couples defined their relationship through support and struggles (n = 16) in their lives. Relying on one another also worked to define boundaries in their relationship. Lora and Veronica shared that they had gone through a particular struggle and at the end of it Lora realized, "I am giving the love she always wanted, she told me the other day, and I am getting the love I always wanted. So I think that is making the relationship bond." Chris shared the importance of Betty being there for her during a recent struggle with an accident at work that affected her physically. She stated "When I am up or when I am down, she is there. I mean, that is big to me, like we are out here and I got my cane, I got hurt, and she is helping me and she is just supporting me." Tamara shared a situation with Lynn related to her health. Tamara said that when she was in the hospital, Lynn was there "when they brought me to the

room, she brought me flowers, spent the night, helped me get up and start walking, and anything I needed, trust me, she was out there like 'excuse me.'"

Recreation and enjoyment was an obvious defining theme of the participants' families and also reflected the self-supporting nature of the relationship (n = 14). The participants often shared that they enjoyed each other or found activities to do together as a family or as a couple that are important. Within these activities, there was a focus on specific activities that related more to the couple or family than with community, extended families, or even families of origin. Anna and DeeDee shared that they like to "go (traveling) together as a couple." When Betty and Chris were asked to share a memory of their relationship, Chris stated, "Everything with her I love…everything you (Betty) do makes me happy." Betty and Chris shared that they also like to travel together alone. Chris explained, "We are happy, we are together, we are having a good time and we didn't even do anything and we have a good time, just being with each other."

The importance of communication was a sub-theme with participants (n = 22), only with respect to their own internal (non-permeable) family boundary. Every single couple interviewed shared the importance of communication in one form of another, particularly related to couple issues and parenting, but also in reference to sexual identity. This was in juxtaposition to the lack of communication between these families and their families of origin and extended families around the same issues (n = 13). Anna and DeeDee discussed the importance of communication with their son. As Anna and DeeDee started defining their relationship, they stated the importance of "open communication" with him by allowing him to "voice the way he feels." They continued to describe a method of communication they developed him. They shared that they have "a little drop box" where if there is something they "need to talk about or discuss, if it is uncomfortable in person (they) will write it out and leave each other notes." Later in

discussing couple issues, DeeDee shared how they get through these issues. She stated, "We just talk." Anna agreed with her, "talking, talking works." When asked how they get through things, Karla and Rebecca shared "we talk a lot." Rebecca even defined communication to Karla during the interview. At one point Karla rolled her eyes at something Rebecca said and Rebecca stated, "Things like that, when I want her, I need to know that you are communicating and you are listening to me by looking at me." Candice explained how she and Latasha support one another. She stated, "I think we communicate, I know that in this relationship I communicate better (than in past), I listen much better in this relationship, I never cared to listen before." Tamara shared how she was learning to communicate better with her partner, Lynn. She stated:

> I am learning that when I communicate more with her then it doesn't feel like I am doing things secretly…she was kind of an open book with me and I felt like, I need to give that back, but I had to learn how to do that.

Shay discussed her thoughts on communication, "We just talk and we deal with whatever comes and it is not too much, especially when you love someone." Danica and Francine shared that they had issues with communication at first because Danica "was not very vocal about (her) feelings" and Felicia was "very vocal." They reported working on their different styles of communicating, but still felt that communication is important to their relationship. Andi shared some advice on communication, "my words of wisdom is to communicate, communication has the key, I think the communication can either make or break a relationship."

Another aspect of lesbian family boundaries was through compromise and sacrifice (n = 12). Lora shared how compromise fits into her relationship. "We can come to a compromise quicker because we are both women." DeeDee and Anna openly compromised. DeeDee explained that in a typical conversation, "we set goals about where we want to go, what we want

to be at, things we want to accomplish." Betty and Chris discussed that challenges with Chris's work schedule present struggles for them as a couple and family. Chris explained that setting aside time for family is important. She said, "If we don't make time for each other, we are not strong enough for the kids." Rebecca and Karla shared an issue about compromises surrounding work. Rebecca admitted to being busy and passionate about her work, while Karla struggles with this because she wants time with Rebecca. As a result, Karla helped Rebecca "prioritize" and allowed her to see that not everything has to get done. The couple discussed how Rebecca puts down her work to give more time to Karla. Rebecca shared "She is good at looking at the bigger picture and I focus on the smaller, it works out well. It is a good balance." Rebecca also shared how sacrifice is defined within the family identity with relation to her child. She stated, "I am a Mom. I have to make those Mom sacrifices…if she (daughter) is not gellin' with (partner)" then, she explained, she would have to end the relationship. Tamara shared that she and Lynn had to learn to compromise because she was "spoiled." She explained, "Lynn told me 'no' and I was like 'NO?'" The couple explained that Tamara had to learn that she will not always have her own way. Crystal and Shauna shared that they have to compromise at times because of their different interests. Crystal stated "the biggest thing we compromise on…like we went to price rings at the mall. So, the trade off was we had to go to the gun shop so I could look at the pistols." Hazel and Andi shared that their biggest negotiations were related to co-parenting. Hazel learned a lot about parenting from "classes in child psychology" and Andi had different ideas on parenting. Hazel stated, "We had to come to a compromise…Andi told me what frustrated her…even now we are two different kinds of parents…we just have to respect each other." She explained they do this by going "behind closed doors and deciding what was going to be acceptable and presenting that to (child)."

Power and role negotiation. Power and role negotiation was prevalent within lesbian couple relationships. Seven of the eleven couples commented directly on role negotiation within their relationship. Role negotiation was well-defined by most of the couples in some way or another. In some cases, role negotiation presented as simply a family negation of who is expected to do what in the relationship. In other cases, power and control were part of the family identity and defined by the couple. Lora and Veronica mentioned power frequently during their interview. Lora shared a story of how she stepped in when her partner Veronica's ex-girlfriend kept calling. She explained, "We (Lora and Veronica's ex) got into it one time. We had some words. I just told her, stop calling her, you had your chance." She continued to share how she exerted some control over Veronica by explaining to Veronica that she had to "tell her" (ex-girlfriend) not to call and continued:

> Because if you tell her and then it is not working, then I am going to step in and that is going to be it, if she don't get it from there, we will have to proceed in some other way…I am not going to find myself sitting in jail because of that.

Later in the interview, Lora shared the importance of power and control in the defining boundaries around her family. She discussed that her partner, Veronica, frequently took care of the needs for people outside of the family. Lora would limit these extra favors, reinforcing the family identity boundary. Lora expressed:

> One thing she (Veronica) knows for certain, I am not getting it from you. Then you are not doing it for someone else, because once we cross the threshold, this is my throne… (people) are going to respect my boundaries, because this is my home now.

Veronica accepted that Lora had a different role in the current family unit. Veronica shared that in a previous relationship she was given "freedom…maybe too much freedom." She continued

by stating that Lora was "aggressive." Later, Lora stated, "I just like to keep the people I love to myself." Lora and Veronica presented perhaps the most extreme example of how these roles are negotiated with the couples.

Betty and Chris also shared a power struggle they are currently negotiating within their relationship. Chris stated that Betty did not "want to be at home." She struggled because she felt she was "ready to settle down" and visualized Betty's desire to go out sometimes as a sign that Betty is not ready for the same thing. She attempted to exert control over the situation. She told Betty:

> I am ready to settle down and my partner wants to do it (go out)…if you need to run, then run, but you have to understand one thing, you are risking everything and by the time you finish running, I may not be there.

The couple continued to share that they "argue" about this frequently. They also attempted to define their roles and power later in the interview. Betty shared that she is "aggressive," but that Chris "likes (me) to be more feminine." Chris continued that she is "confused" at times because Betty was "aggressive" at one point and "feminine" at another point and she did not know what to expect. At another point during the interview, Chris defined her view of the couple's roles in the relationship. She stated, "I am the dominant. I feel like I am the breadwinner. She works, but I am the breadwinner."

Tamara and Lynn shared some of their struggles defining power and the role power played in their relationship. Tamara said that at one point she was not open with Lynn about other things in her life and she felt like "I am grown; I don't have to tell her." She continued by saying that being more open and realizing Lynn was not trying to control her was beneficial to their relationship. In addition, Tamara shared her view of Lynn's role at the beginning of the

relationship "I look at her as the dominant person in our relationship. So, you don't, you submiss, you know, you don't talk." As time passed, "She (Lynn) was telling me all the time 'if I do something that bothers you, you have to tell me.'" Tamara eventually opened up with Lynn, though still viewing her as the "dominant" role. The couple was able to negotiate this role label as their relationship evolved.

Felicia shared some of her concerns that Shay attempted to negate her feelings. She stated, "It is like she is like, I will do whatever it takes to keep my woman and I hate that because it is so much more than that. I need her to feel that my feelings are important." This couple was negotiating the boundary and the power issues in their relationship to better understand their lesbian family identity.

The permeable boundary. Participants developed boundaries that are more permeable to the outside world. These are depicted in Figure 2 in the dotted circle on the outside of lesbian family identities. Some of these more permeable boundaries were defined from the start and some evolved as time passed. The permeable boundary was defined by lesbian couples. The strength and non-permeability of the thick boundary define or create what the family agreed was in the more permeable boundary. It was as if these participants are saying, "here we are and this is how we are defining ourselves. This is what we will not let in and these are the things that we will allow in." Main categories presented as part of this permeable boundary were children and childcare, rituals, and roles with extended family.

Extended family involvement with children. Children were one piece of family identity that was defined by the current family in a thick boundary, but parts of child-rearing and children's lives were open and more permeable to surrounding factors. Children and child-rearing were important aspects of the extended family, fictive kin, and genetic (non-custodial)

families. As mentioned earlier, children were accepted and placed in the current lesbian family identity, regardless of biological or other connections. Once this identity and boundary was placed, there was some negotiation with extended family and others on childcare and child visitation. Nine of the eleven couples mentioned having additional biological parents, other stepparents, or other extended families in their children's lives. Veronica and Lora shared that Veronica's genetic children were very much a part of a previous same-sex relationship that lasted five years. Veronica's previous girlfriend wanted to continue being a part of the children's lives. The couple reported that there was a period of time where Lora was very strict about this interaction, signifying the non-permeability of the current lesbian family identity. After time passed, Lora eventually "allowed" the interaction between the ex and what she considered to be "my family now." Veronica stated, "within the past couple months, she (Lora) has come to a point where she can humble herself enough to allow (previous girlfriend) to come by and see (daughter), whereas, six months ago, it would have never happened." Through the course of time and the building of trust in the current relationship, pieces of the previous non-permeability opened up to others.

Candice and Latasha shared that they have negotiated with their daughter's biological father's family. Candice shared that her daughter was with "her Dad" while the couple was on a weekend trip. She continued, "I am still close to him." This open and fluid boundary with their child was easily negotiated with the child's genetic family, despite the strict non-permeability of the family identity and structure of co-parenting that Candice and Latasha presented.

Crystal and Shauna were raising a young child who was conceived and birthed while Crystal was in a previous same-sex relationship. The boundary negotiation with the extended family in their child's life seemed complicated, but the family had found ways to negotiate this

issue by communicating with one another regarding the boundary and what is best for the child. The child still had contact with the other mother from the previous relationship and the extended family from that relationship. Crystal shared "he (child) has two Moms and two step-Moms…he has four grandmothers." She explained that her ex-girlfriend's grandmother lived near them (her current family) and "she is coming up today." The current family had found a way to negotiate their child's extended family, while maintaining the strength of their current family boundary. The couple identified the role they play in the control and decision making process of the child's interactions outside the family, thus maintaining non-permeable aspects, while deciding together to allow these interactions because they are in the child's best interest.

Candice shared that despite her mother's lack of support for her relationship, "she (mother) picks up my daughter almost everyday from school." Shay described their children's involvement with Felicia's (her partner's) extended family. She stated: "Felicia's family loves her (daughter.) Her cousin would take her if she could, so she has always been an integral part of her life. They are very close with her." The couple agreed that this outside relationship was important to their child and maintained this connection.

Child negotiations existed within the boundaries of the current lesbian family identity. At times, the family identity was opened to the children who have existed as part of the lives of one of the partners in the couple (i.e. former girlfriends children) or children of family or fictive kin that remain a part of the individual's (and therefore the couples') lives. Chris shared "I had a couple children with other women, and so I had like, one or two (ex-girlfriends), one that is cool and another one that isn't cool, the only way to sum it up is my baby-mothers." The couple had worked on ways to negotiate this open-boundary and Betty (Chris' partner) reported difficulty

with this at times, “I like the kids, but not the Mamas, I love the kids.” Chris also shared that “she (Betty) actually has nieces and nephews and they are just as much our kids as our kids.”

Rituals. Rituals that existed within lesbian families and with extended families denoted a more permeable theme. Participants frequently discussed holiday rituals, commitment ceremonies, and extended family gatherings. These rituals invited others; couples’ families of origin were frequently part of these experiences.

Veronica and Lora shared that they opened their home up and have more of a permeable boundary around their rituals at the holidays. Veronica stated:

> For Thanksgiving, we had the lady who I call my Mom, and her partner, and my sister, them over. We enjoy just being the three of us, not that we are trying to shelter out the rest of the world, and Lora’s best friend and my friend we have become close, so now we have this big, huge extended family.

This family ritual invited families of origin and extended family (or in this case, fictive kin) and friends to the open family ritual.

Lesbian families participated in family of origin and extended family rituals. Rebecca and Karla shared that their openness about their relationship existed when visiting some of Rebecca’s family and participating in some of Rebecca’s extended family rituals. Candice and Latasha go to “the BBQs” with Candice’s family on a regular basis. Lynn shared that she brings Tamara to her family reunions. She asked Tamara:

> Do you know any part of my family who either treats you bad or doesn’t want you around? (Tamara shakes her head-no) We just came from a family reunion not long ago and we are getting ready to go to another one and they are like “hey (Tamara) how are you doing?”…and they know.

Shay and Felicia were asked about extended family rituals. Shay reported, “Every holiday, we are with family. I don’t think a holiday has gone by…my family is real close, we have family meetings two or three times a month…we go there, they come here.” Shay shared that her extended family rituals are similar, “We invite fellowship, on both sides…family is not an issue for us…going to family things and holidays and that kind of stuff.”

An obvious permeable identity piece of the current lesbian family identity was the inclusion of weddings and proposals in the families’ narratives. Four of the eleven couples have either had a commitment ceremony or had a date set and were planning the process. Of the remaining seven couples, four of these shared proposals or expectations of proposals in the near future. Even with the three couples who did not discuss weddings or proposals, at times words like “she is my wifey” and “she calls me her wife” described the couples’ identification of a non-ceremonial union, both in their lesbian family identity structure and in a way that is more public or fluid.

Participants who discussed their weddings or commitment ceremonies did so with much animation and excitement that reflected the importance participants placed on the event. These ceremonies were public displays of their commitments in a society that does not recognize their relationship legally. It was legitimizing in a personal sense as well, making a statement to one another about a promise of commitment. In addition, public commitment ceremonies told families of origin and extended families that lesbian couples had developed a strong relationship that is as valid as the other unions presented by weddings in their extended families. Essentially, participants at this point were stating to their family, we are joined together, inviting you to join us, but will remain connected despite your blessing.

At one point in the interview, Candice and Latasha shared a lack of communication about their "outness" with Latasha's family, yet the presentation of marriage seemed to cross this boundary. Latasha shared, "I told them (extended family) we were getting married and when we were getting married." Candice, Latasha's partner shared a similar sentiment with her extended family:

> We (Candice and her extended family) don't talk about it at all really. Basically it is what it is, she knows Tasha is my wife, or almost my wife and the person I want to spend the rest of my life with…we may not sit down and chit-chat about it, like, you know it is going to happen, whether you want to sit down and talk about it is your decision.

Public commitment ceremonies and proposals expressed the reality of the couple commitment despite the closed system of communication that exists between the outside extended family and the current lesbian family. In a couple instances, participants' families of origin were not as closed with regard to discussing lesbian relationships. Candice was more reassured by her family support because of the wedding. She stated, "I couldn't ask for a more supportive family, because I know they will be there on that (wedding) day." Attendance at the wedding ceremony was also one way that Felicia felt supported by an older sister who was not completely accepting of Felicia's relationship with Shay. She stated, "she (aunt)…plans to be at the wedding and will be present." Felicia also shared the extension of a marriage symbol that suggested a more permeable boundary with her family related to ritual. She said, "My father, he has given Shay his last name, he is perfectly ok with that. He trusts that she will take care of us and be the provider that she has been."

Francine and Danica shared their experiences related to their commitment ceremony. They invited family and friends and "got phones calls from people asking to be invited…they

just wanted to see what it was about, two women and you are having a ceremony and at a church, I think some people were just fascinated by that." Francine and Danica reported embracing this fluid boundary in their relationship. "Our RSVP card said something like 'I would love to see two women get married.'" Danica had some reservations from her mother about attending, but was surprised instead, "Even my Mother was amazed at the ceremony."

Individual roles and expectations. Expectations and responsibilities that the individuals in the couple had when it comes to participants' families of origin and extended families did not change despite the coupling, family identity, or the creation of a non-permeable boundary. Participants developed and maintained a sense of their own personal roles within the extended family structure that was fluid and more permeable. This connection to extended family came out in participant's feelings of responsibility to their mothers, siblings, grandparents, or other relatives. Rebecca and Karla discussed this connection to roles with extended family. Rebecca shared:

> She (Karla) gets frustrated because I will be like I have to do this for my Mom before I do that and she thinks I depend on them. They depend on me too much. Like, my sister doesn't have a car and I am always picking up my nieces from NC from school.

Gender presentation. Previously, I highlighted role negotiation within the non-permeable boundary. Another aspect of roles and identity revolved around gender presentation. Participants defined lesbian family identity using terms such as "aggressive" or "feminine." These roles were transferred, or open to the outside community based on their appearance and/or behavior. Despite discussion and communication with families of origin and extended families about sexuality, appearance and behaviors based on gender presentation placed sexuality open and out front in some instances. Betty shared that her partner, Chris "likes me to be more feminine." At

another point in the interview, Chris described Betty in this way, "This is my lady." Rebecca reported her open "femininity" by describing a cousin in her family who was "more on the masculine-side." Veronica explained that "Lora (her partner) is very aggressive." Tamara shared that she looked "at her (Lora) as the dominant person in our relationship." Shay said that she was a "tomboy." Felicia referred to Shay as "the provider" at another point in the interview. In addition, she described herself in this way "I am feminine…I appear feminine." Andi shared that coming out was expected by her family because she was "really aggressive." Hazel (Andi's partner) shared her public identity. She stated "I am fem and all my girlfriends are thugs…so I have never had to explain myself to anybody, they just knew what they saw."

Another example of roles with the couples existed in the permeable boundary is the proposal process. Many of the couples had a somewhat traditional proposal where one partner planned the proposal, purchased the ring, and actually asked publically. This went without question. Each couple had negotiated at some point who would take the role of the proposer and who would be proposed to. Candice shared how Latasha proposed:

> She had read me a poem with all her friends around me and she was telling me how much she loves me in the poem and at the end of the poem it said she wanted to spend the rest of her life with me…and she went down on one knee.

Lora stated "I am in the process of putting a ring on her finger." Hazel shared that one of her best memories as a couple was "the time she (Andi) proposed to me...it is a night I will never forget." It is not clear how this proposal expectation of roles was communicated in the couples, but there was a clear definition of who will do the proposing. This suggested an openness of that role and an expectation of that role.

Interacting factors. In addition to lesbian family identity and the permeability and non-permeability of some aspects of the family identity, there are interactive forces. Interactive forces were aspects that exist outside of lesbian family boundaries. These forces worked to define, thicken, and/or loosen lesbian family structure and boundaries that existed within this structure. Interactive forces defined by participants included: (a) family of origin structure and (b) family of origin social support.

Family of origin structure. Many of the participants shared stories about fictive kin, relatives who were not genetic relatives. This represented a value of the family of origin and an influencing factor on the family or couple identity. Tamara told me that her biological mother passed away and that her partner's family had embraced her as their "daughter." She stated, "Since I don't have a family, I can call her (partner's mother) Mom, I call her 'mother'…I am getting used to calling her 'Mom.'" Veronica shared a similar use of fictive kin. During the interview, Veronica kept referring to her "Mom." Near the end of the interview, her partner corrected her, "let's talk about your real Mom." Then, later, Veronica explained, "the lady who I call Mom," was not her genetic mother. As discussed earlier, many participants felt comfortable just bringing their partner around the family with no explanation. This provided the couples with comfort that their partners would be accepted on one level, while also reinforcing the boundary of lesbian family identity components to lesbian families only.

As discussed earlier in the coming out processes, participants suggested a matrifocal extended family environment. Matrifocality is the importance placed on women in Black extended family structures (Collins, 2000). Matrifocality influenced the formation and structure of lesbian family identity. In some instances, the participants' mothers, aunts, grandmothers, or other maternal figure defined lesbian family identity for themselves and for the extended family.

The matrifocal environment denoted a sense of respect for female elders' thoughts, opinions, and regulations. When Hazel shared her coming out story, there was a sense that her grandmother ("Nana") set the tone for how her lesbian family identity would be viewed by the family. Hazel stated "She (Nana) was like 'nobody in the family better not question me or say anything about it, or send them to me.'" Nana did not want the lesbian family identity out in the open. In addition, she was somewhat the gatekeeper on the information. Her words suggested she as saying, this is how it will be. Hazel and Andi were left to define their lesbian family identity within Nana's guidelines when they are around their extended families. The couple's compliancy led them to turn to one another for support. Their compliant behavior resulted in the building of a thick boundary around the couple relationship. Lora reinforced the importance of her mother. She stated, "it is not that my family don't accept it, it is who I respect or really not even respect, it is who I am mostly concerned about really to have any value to me about, and this is only my mother." Many other participants shared their mother's acceptance was of primary importance.

There was a message from participant's families of origin and extended families that indicated participants are conflicted between feeling independence in their own current family units while maintaining dependence to their families of origin and extended families. Rebecca shared that she feels obligations to her mother. She explained how this makes her partner (Karla) feel frustrated "because I will be like I have to do this for my Mom before I do that and she thinks I depend on them too much and they depend on me too much." Karla shared that her family, on the other hand, is very "rigid" and taught her to be "independent." The competing messages of independence and dependence factored in as the family defined itself. Karla stated that she wanted the relationship to change because she wanted Rebecca (her partner) to "trust me more" and "depend on me," while not depending as much on her family of origin.

Social support. The support or lack of support that lesbian families received from their families of origin and extended families played an intervening role in the creation of lesbian family identities. One clear message from families of origin was for participants not to discuss the current lesbian family identity or to not be open about their lesbian identity. Extended family rituals defined current activity with extended family, but more importantly, defined lesbian family identities and the rituals they had adopted from their extended families. Ritual was another way that lesbian families defined and supported itself as a result of family of origin and extended family experiences.

When families were disapproving, this was not typically communicated outright. Danielle shared that many of her relatives are "quietly disapproving." There was a sense that disapproval was there, but was not discussed. The same holds true with her partner (Geri's) family. Danielle discussed a feeling of being "out of place" with Geri's family. This feeling and lack of communication led to the couple to feel closed off when it comes to issues of family and their family identity.

Ritual in the history of the participants' lives had a large impact on decision-making and lesbian family identity. I previously mentioned ritual related to the couple and I will include it here as related to the perceived social support. A couple of the participants shared stories of family gatherings or family reunions and the inclusion or exclusion of their current family. This interacting force assisted in defining current family identity. Frequently, couples mentioned their own Thanksgiving and Christmas traditions. Marriage, weddings, and proposals are learned and experienced in the family of origin and translated to lesbian family identity.

The couples formed an identity of their family and their relationships often based on the type of support they received from their extended families. More embracing extended families

defined the structure of who is in and who is out (per se). At times, the more embracing family adopted the partner whose family may not be as embracing or is unavailable. Tamara shared that she can "call" her partner's mother "with medical things going on with me, since I don't have family, I can call her Mom…and ask her certain things." Less embracing extended families led to tighter boundaries around lesbian families. The level of familial support of the couple tended to develop lesbian family identity and the boundary surrounding it.

The continuing influence of messages and expectations from the outside world, along with experiences within lesbian families continually supported lesbian families' defining of boundaries. Lesbian family identity was formed by placing particular aspects of their identity within a thick boundary that served to both supported and protected the family. At times, lesbian families allowed permeability of this boundary. What was clear was the lack of support lesbian families felt from the world outside its sustained boundary for the couple and lesbian identity.

Question 3: Informal Social Support

The final research question explored informal social support available to participants. Figure 3 (see Appendix I) highlights responses related to family and couple informal social support. Participants discussed mostly informal social support within the family unit. The participants identified: (a) extended family support, (b) support from friends, (c) support from lesbian communities, (d) support from church, and (e) support in the workplace.

Figure 3. How Social Support was Provided to Black Lesbians.

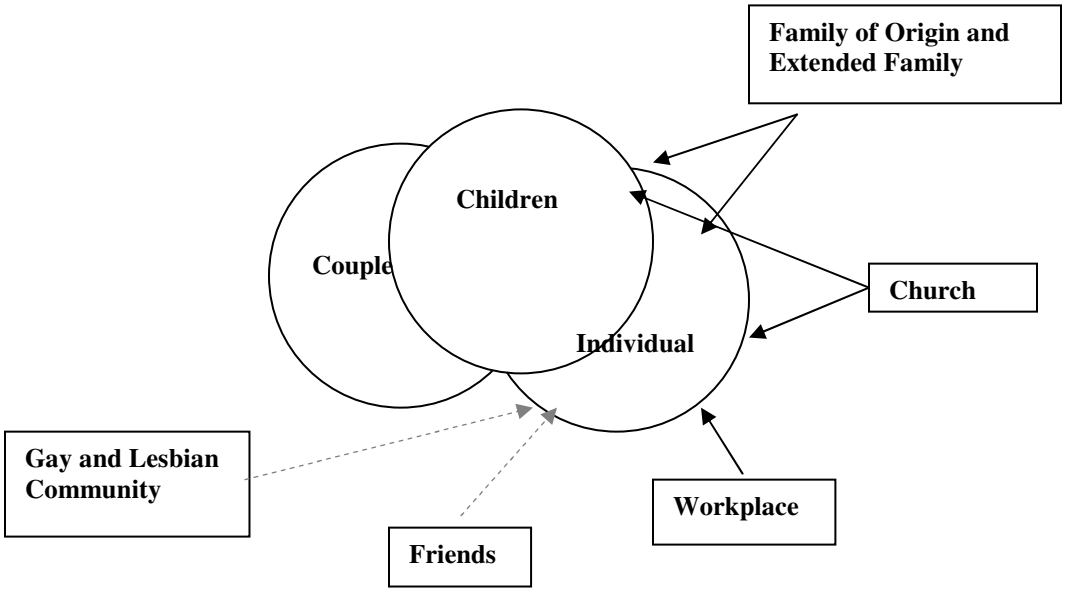


Figure 3: Individuals are supported by a variety of informal social support. Children also have a sense of support. Couples do not feel support for the couple relationship

The center of Figure 3 (i.e., couple, children, and individual) is a graphic breakdown of the non permeable boundary and lesbian family identity from Figure 2, see below:

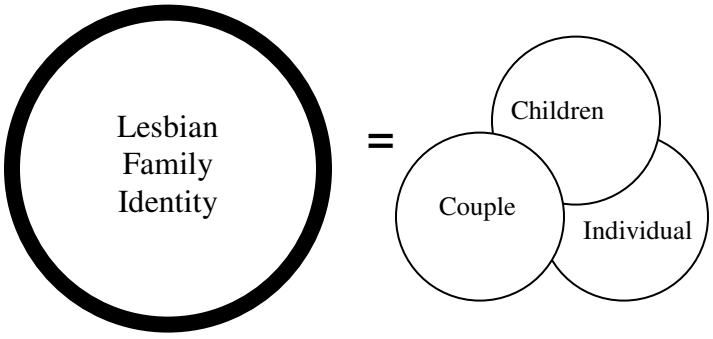


Figure 3 highlights the lack of informal social support for the family unit as a whole. The rectangular boxes around the central family unit represent the informal social support that was identified by the participants. The thicker, defined arrows signify a strong sense of support from that particular part of lesbian families. The dotted arrows define a weak or incomplete feeling of

support that part of the family unit. When no arrow is presented, it reflects a lack of support. In looking at gay and lesbian communities as an informal social support, one can observe that only one dotted arrow points towards individual. This arrow signifies that participants felt a slight sense of support from gay and lesbian communities on an individual level, but did not feel support from gay and lesbian communities as a couple or as a family. I will discuss each of the areas depicted in the figure in more detail using the participants' responses.

I will not directly address formal supports because participants did not frequently mention these. Two participants mentioned healthcare as an issue. One participant described her experiences negotiating with the hospital after her partner had surgery. Another participant discussed taking her daughter (her partner's biological daughter) to the physician and not being able to make medical decisions based on her lack of legal guardianship. Two other participants made brief comments about the legalization of gay marriage. Federal and state recognition of their relationships was a desire for some participants. With the infrequency of the discussion around formal support, I did not recognize it as a notable finding.

Lesbian family unit is primary support. Participants frequently mentioned individual issues that are worked out "in-house" through the couple relationship (n = 16). As I have mentioned before, couples shared their support for one another. They are the primary supporters of "each other." Crystal and Shauna quickly shared they would not "go to anyone" when asked by the interviewer who they turned to for support. When asked about support in her life, Rebecca stated, "I don't really talk to my friends. I just talk to Karla (her partner)." Betty explained concisely, "We don't have support."

Tamara and Lynn shared a story about their support for one another. Tamara stated that she had been in the hospital and Lynn "had been right there with me." Lynn was "there when I

went into surgery and when they brought me to the room, she was there with flowers." Tamara said that Lynn "helped (her) get up and start walking, getting (her) anything she needed," and even advocating for her with nurses and physicians. Betty shared her feeling of support from her partner, Chris. She stated:

> That is something big, when I am up or when I am down, she is there. I mean that is big to me. Like we are out here (at gay and lesbian pride festival) and I got my cane because I got hurt and she is helping me and she is just supporting me, you know the little things. That is really a lot of it.

Tamara and Lynn discussed how they have supported one another with their health issues. Tamara stated, "We stopped smoking together a little more than a year ago." The couple also reported "trying to exercise and walk together."

Trust was also an issue with regard to seeking outside support (n = 11). Participants shared stories about times when they felt trust was violated by a friend or family member. Candice shared she recently lost a friend who she "used to confide in." She stated, "I found out she was talking bad about us behind our back, and to my family." Lora explained that she cannot trust her friends with discussing certain personal issues. She explained:

> What I need to do it look at me and my part in what I do, see other people will let me bitch and moan and say all kinds of things, they will say 'girl, you know you are right,' but I don't want them to tell me that, I want someone who will help me understand and if I am right that is fine, but help me see the parts I am wrong.

Shay shared her thoughts on turning to others for support:

> I am just a person that, I don't know, I am stubborn. I feel there is no reason why we (Shay and partner) can't work it out. I have a problem with people being in my business.

> She (partner) says we both have best friends. I still keep it to myself, I may vent, but I never really put myself in it, I just don't like people in my business.

Other participants touched on trust being an issue with support. Hazel was discussing "emotional support" and shared that she had gone to a friend for support and it was a "mistake, because she was too close to us."

Participants also stated that they felt their main supporters (as a couple) were their children (n = 14). Tamara shared that her daughter's attitude toward lesbian coupling was evident when, "It was the first time (she) had seen me happy, (she) was like 'you're happy, you're alright.'" Felicia shared that her four children, "are fine:"

> We pretty much raised them to be open and to see that whatever is right for people is right for them…We discussed the lifestyle openly…They don't really have any questions they don't know the answers to…We are pretty much open with them and we have a happy household.

Hazel reflected on coming out to her family. She stated, "The only person I had to come out to was my daughter." She described her daughter's immediate support and acceptance. Her daughter said, "I know you like girls" and she was "ok" with her mother's identity. Participants discussed children being a part of their lives, where they both received support from them and gave support to them.

Family of origin and extended family. The extended families tended to support the biologically-related individuals and the children in the family, while giving "broken" support (signified by the dotted line) to the couples. Three participants felt as if they had support from their families of origin or extended families for the couple and family unit. The remaining 19

participants reported they did not have couple and family support at all (n = 9) or that they did not feel completely supported by their families of origin and extended families (n = 10).

The participants discussed their extended families in terms like "close knit," "strong," and "really tight." The extended family bond was labeled as strong. Crystal shared a story that highlighted the importance of her extended family and the sense of individual support with a feeling of lack of couple support. At one point, Crystal said that she and her partner separate for the holidays to participate in their own extended families' events. Crystal explained that her family was not always supportive of her relationship with Shauna:

> With my family, no matter who you are or what you are, we won't leave you. We might disrespect you all day, but when someone steps out of line from the outside, they jump in real quick. No matter what is said behind my back, I know that if something happens you will have my back essentially.

Crystal felt a sense of connection and protection from her extended family. This protective feeling was the individual informal social support she received. Crystal discussed her child's relationship to her extended family in a positive light. Betty commented about her and her partner's family by stating "we are both close with our families." Her use of the terms "both" and "our" depicted a sense of support from the extended families to the individuals themselves, not the family as a whole.

Rebecca felt some couple support from her mother, but she knew it existed on a more individual level. She said, "My Mom actually likes Karla (partner) a lot…she has been really open to Karla and I feel like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders because of that." Rebecca did qualify her statement, right after that she stated, "we never get, you are a great couple." This

was a feeling of broken support from her mother. Her mother supported Karla as an individual, but not Karla as her daughter's partner.

Extended familial support added to the feeling of belongingness for individuals and adds a sense of support for children, while not providing a sense of support for the couple relationship. Another participant, Candice, shared that her Mother is not comfortable with her lesbian identity and her coupling, but that she was a "big part" of her daughter's life. She assisted in childcare and "picks up (Candice's) daughter everyday from school."

There were a couple exceptions to a feeling of a complete lack of couple and family support (n = 3). Francine and Danica discussed their child's "Godmother" who was playing a notable role of support in the family. Francine stated, "She (the children's Godmother) has always been very supportive. She is just thrilled to be a part of anything involving us." Veronica shared that her father was deceased, but still felt couple support from him. "He didn't care who I was with as long as I was happy and as long as the person made me happy." DeeDee explained having a large family and attending "cookouts and birthday parties" with her partner and children.

Friends. Friendships were not a consistent informal social support for participants. Most participants (n = 15) reported very few or no friendships in their lives. Among the participants who did discuss friendships as being an important part of their lives (n = 7), these friendships were typically focused on individual informal social support (n = 5) and not supportive resources for the couple or family unit. Danielle and Geri shared they felt as if they had a lot of "gay friends" in their lives and they each have a "best friend." The couple discussed that most of their friends were gay and this is "unfortunate" because there was "so much drama." They shared that they were the only couple among their friends who has remained intact for any length of time

and they are the ones who others go to for couple support because they were "sort of the model of a relationship." They felt as if they have no role models or mentors for couple support for them.

When discussing a co-parenting issue during the interview, I asked Candice and Latasha where they got support for co-parenting issues with the children. Candice quickly stated, "We don't." I again asked about supports for parenting and Candice said:

> Well, I mean I have called my godmother a couple times and one of my friends, I asked him how he dealt with the fact that his wife has three kids and how he dealt with the discipline and I took some of his advice. He said you have to let her be a parent and set rules and boundaries with your daughter, otherwise your daughter will not respect her.

Candice's comments suggested that she felt like she did not feel support for parenting or couple issues, but she also was able to find some help for this issue. Later in the interview, the interviewer asked Latasha where she could find personal support. Latasha stated that she had a "best friend," but she said, "I guess we are not your traditional best friends. If I have a problem, maybe it is just me; I wouldn't go to her and confide in her." Candice concluded, "I read a book that one of the problems in gay relationships is that we want our friends to believe everything is perfect." Candice's partner, Latasha stated, "Why burden someone?"

Friendships are not mentioned as a main support for the individual, couple, or children in most cases, but are part of participant's lives. When asked about friends, many participants shared they don't have many friends and/or don't want friends. Others described their friendships as being a sense of personal support and recreation, but not a sense of emotional support.

Latasha described having friends, but not "confiding" in them. Karla also had a "lot of friends," but shared she did not ask for relationship support from them. She stated, "Whatever is

going on is going to happen between Rebecca (partner) and I." Rebecca had "friends" in her life, but stated, "I don't really talk to my friends, I talk to Karla (partner)." Candice expressed, "I don't have many friends," but the ones she does have, "I can talk to them about my problems." Veronica stated, "I have a best friend, a couple other people I consider my best friends, and I have associates, people I don't call on a regular basis." Lora said that she only had one friend, "That is my only friend. I keep it simple…People just talk too much and people start stuff and I am not a chaotic person…I don't like chaos, I don't like drama, I keep it simple." Lora's partner, Veronica, shared a similar sentiment, she stated that she has two friends because, "I am not a people person. I guess that is one thing that we have in common. We like to keep it close-knit and simple."

One couple was an exception. Francine and Danica found a lot of support in their friendship networks. Danica shared, "With our friends, we talk with them; we are close with them and a lot alike." The couple explained the role their friends played in their commitment ceremony, in their parenting decisions, and with their difficulties as a couple.

Church. Many individuals shared (n = 12) that they were a part of church communities. Church involvement was strong support for individuals, but not a support for the couples or families. Lora and Veronica explained that they don't go into church showing signs of couplehood. "We don't go into church holding hands and my hand is not on her leg…we don't go to church for that. We go for the Word." Lora shared that she gets a great deal from church. "I go to listen to the word of God…to get the message, for my sanity…" The couple also said that they sit in different spots in church. The couple felt this was a place for individual growth, support, and strength.

It was also clear that family acceptance, guidance, and support were not functions of their church. DeeDee stated, "We go to church. She (partner) sings in it and I attend church." The interviewer asked if they felt supported as a lesbian family in their church. DeeDee responded, "It is open and it is like you are there for a reason and it is not who you sleep with. This is about...main goal is God, your savior." Lynn and Tamara shared that church was a sense of support. Tamara stated that she attends regularly and sings "in the choir." She explained that Lynn will go to church "when the choir sings or (she has) something special." Tamara felt individual support at church.

Gay and lesbian community. Some couples felt connected to gay and lesbian communities in some way or another. Typically these connections met individual needs. Most couples (particularly those in smaller cities or rural areas) sought a stronger connection to gay and lesbian communities (n = 8). Crystal stated:

> There is really nothing here that is really for LGBT people. You have the support groups for the friends and family, but nothing here for us. There is no gay pride, there is no bookstore, no café, I am pretty sure there are no events, but they are kind of in the closet.

Lora and Veronica discussed that they would like to open up a "community place," where gay and lesbian individuals and their families can "go everyday, play pool," or "have a potluck." Veronica shared her frustrations about the lack of a community. She stated:

> That is one of my biggest issues about the area. There has got to be more (gay and lesbian families) and I just haven't met them…That is one thing I would love to see in this area, a gay and lesbian community.

During the interview, Lynn was discussing a lesbian cousin who lived nearby and who was the only gay person the couple were friends with. The interviewer asked if that was sufficient to

"getting their (supportive) needs met." Lynn responded, "Not necessarily, there is just not nothing around here. See I lived in DC for awhile and there was a lot for us, and there just isn't much here and what they do have is not worth going to."

A couple of participants (n = 4) stated their involvement in lesbian Greek fraternities and sororities. This was an additional individual support system for these individuals. Hazel shared that she and her partner were in different lesbian sororities. "Outside of family, that is a big part of our lives." This provided the women with recreation and connection to lesbian communities as individuals. Connections to gay and lesbian communities were most frequently mentioned as a challenge, and not a voiced support for the family as a whole.

Workplace. Career and supportive environments at work were mentioned by a couple of participants (n = 6). Shay explained that she is out at her work. "I run a restaurant…I have never been made to feel uncomfortable. All the other management, they all know who I am. My boss will ask about my partner, my kids…I don't have to hide the marriage." Shay felt this environment supported her as an individual and really supported her family.

Lynn shared a similar experience at her work. She stated that "everyone knows" and this is comfortable to her. She explained that when her partner (Tamara) calls, people ask "whose calling?" and Lynn comfortably stated, "That's my girl." Workplace provided some participants with an acceptance and a sense of individual and family support.

In conclusion, participants shared their experiences coming out both personally and publically. Participants discussed coming out to family and having both positive and negative reactions from key figures in their lives. Most individuals did not share any experiences that implied that the internal coming out process was challenging. There was a coming out process for the couple that included a three stage process: first the couple became a committed couple,

then the couple became a committed family, and then there was a public presentation of the couple. Couples discussed the roles that their extended families play in their current life, the messages and expectations of their extended families, and the resulting definition of family. Finally, participants discussed informal social support in their lives as individuals, couples, and families and the differing types of support systems.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

Participants reflected on their identity as a couple and family. In the interviews, the formation of Black lesbian family identification existed on both an individual level and through phases as a couple coming out process. The existence of their identity formation was related to the shared symbols and meanings interpreted from those symbols that exist within the culture. In particular, symbols and meaning of oppression and social constructions of family are inherently a dilemma for these families that do not fit the typical heterosexual family image. Black lesbian participants faced a lack of formal labeling and integration of their family relationship into their families of origin. There was a feeling among participants that families and communities were not comfortable defining or accepting their lesbian family identity. Through negation with participants' families of origin and extended families, participants constructed a boundary around their current family and defined what is allowed in or out of this boundary. This boundary ultimately led to a self-sufficient and self maintained family.

Family Commitment

Participants identified their initial current family identity through a series of three stages. I have defined these stages as the couple coming out process. Initially, participants committed to the couple relationship and then to the family relationship. Finally, the couple celebrated this commitment with a public presentation of their relationship. These three stages at times occurred simultaneously as some participants accepted their own lesbian identity during the course of the couple relationship. I will discuss the individual process of coming out and how it occurs with the couple coming out process and then I will highlight the three states of the couple coming out process.

Individual process. Many participants identified their own lesbian identity personally during the course of the relationship (n = 8). I mention individual lesbian identity development and the individual coming out process here to validate that many participants are going through an individual and couple coming out process simultaneously. In addition, the individual coming out processes actually are at times related to the participants' defining of their couple identity. I will discuss the individual process and findings related to this prior to discussing the couple coming out process.

"There wasn't much to it." Participants typically did not feel a sense of personal or internal difficulty related to the self-admission of their lesbian identity. Literature on identity process and identity formation of gay and lesbian individuals suggests a lengthy personal battle of recognition (Cass, 1979; Chapman & Brannock, 1987; Eliason, 1996). Personal identity formation is a struggle for gay and lesbian individuals, compared to sexual identity formation for heterosexuals (Eliason). The personal struggles of identity formation are based primarily on the cultural ideas and expectations and being "deviant" has created a dilemma for individuals coming to terms with their gay and lesbian sexual orientation (Eliason). Participants' experiences differed from those proposed by previous coming out theorists and researchers. Personal identity formation happened without much internal struggle.

One previous study focused on the differences in coming out between White women and "women of color" (Parks et al., 2004). Researchers found that "women of color" did seem to come to terms with their own personal identity more quickly than White women (Parks et al., 2004). The ability for Black women to adjust more easily to a minority status could be related to their experiences as a racial minority (Parks et al., 2004).

Symbolic interactionism suggests that women redefine themselves according to the messages they receive from interactions with others (Crooks, 2001). For many Black women that means a constant redefining of identity because of the prevailing images of women and Black communities in society. Collins (2000) stated that, for Black women "creating independent self-definitions becomes essential to…survival" (p. 112). In this light, participants' ease in lesbian identity formation could be related to experiences developing independent identities as Black women in the face of oppressive images.

Lack of cut-off. Research on adolescent individuals suggests that GLBTQ individuals go through a period of being disowned by families of origin (Cass, 1979). Participants' retrospective accounts and current experiences with coming out varied with current literature. Many participants did not even come out on a personal level or to families until adulthood which may or may not influence differences in stress and family reaction (Dube & Savin-Williams, 1999). LaSala (2000) labeled coming out experiences for gay men and lesbians as "the coming out crisis" (p. 67). He explained that coming out frequently leads to a "painful family crisis" that can be followed by cut-off from families of origin (p. 67). Other research reflects that coming out to families of origin is challenging and leads to issues of identity formation (Kaufman & Johnson, 2004; Oswald, 2002). None of the individuals in this study experienced cut-off from their families of origin.

Participants felt that their families of origin and their extended families were not accepting of their lesbian relationship or their lesbian identity. This feeling of a lack of acceptance was vague for participants and presented itself as a lack of communication about the issue of lesbian identity and the couple relationship. Families of origin and extended families would, at times, request participants to remain quiet about the relationship to others in the family

and community. Frequently this request was followed. One study mirrors some of the participants' coming out processes with their family. Mays et al. (1998) found that Black gay men and lesbians typically are out to their immediate extended families, but not to other relatives. In addition, Mays et al. (1998) found that cut-off did not happen as a result of coming out for Black gay and lesbian individuals. Mays et al. reflected that this lack of cut-off was a response to the need for family of origin and extended family to negotiate informal social support and be able to depend on one another. In this present research, participants seemed to follow similar patterns. Participants in this study frequently discuss interactions with family of origin and the resulting need to maintain the connection to this family based on expectations from their families of origin and feelings of comfort and safety.

Couple coming out process. The *couple coming out process* is a three stage process for participants and unique compared to traditional heterosexual coupling processes. Bepko and Johnson (2000) stated that "a socially ambiguous relationship often results, in which individuals must find their own rules to guide them" (p. 635). This is exactly what participants experienced. The traditional heterosexual coupling process comes with a set up symbols and rules that are typically understood and respected by society as a whole. This symbol of the heterosexual coupling pattern did not exist as such for participants. Participants defined their own rules related to their own desires and their personal defining of who they are as a couple and as a family. Participants progressed through three phases of the couple identity process: (a) couple commitment, (b) committed family, and (c) presentation of couple and family to family of origin, extended family, and community. This couple coming out process is not reflected in literature in this direct way.

Public presentation of couple. Marriage in our society is a symbol of commitment, a symbol of absorption of the previous non-related member of the union into the extended family and family of origin. Though heterosexual weddings and public commitment ceremonies are not always accepted by extended families, the symbol and meaning behind marriage and weddings is socially constructed and represented in this way traditionally in our society. Lesbian couples and families lack this legal formal institution to inform or legitimize their relationship (Oswald, 2002). What happens is that participants "construct meaning, use symbols, and determine their course of action" (Crooks, 2001, p. 12). Those that shared experiences of commitment ceremonies and proposal processes take the meanings generated from interactions with heterosexual wedding ceremonies and determine their own process to publically present the meaning of their own relationship.

Commitment ceremonies are the most common way participants present themselves publically. When these ceremonies are discussed, they are discussed with such importance and purpose. Marriage in our society is a symbol of commitment, a symbol of absorption of the previous non-related member of the union into the extended family and family of origin. Though heterosexual weddings and public commitment ceremonies are not accepted by extended families, the symbol and meaning behind marriage and weddings is socially constructed and represented in this way. Lesbian couples and families lack this legal formal institution to inform or legitimize their relationship (Oswald, 2002). What happens is that participants "construct meaning, use symbols, and determine their course of action" (Crooks, 2001, p. 12). Those that shared experiences of commitment ceremonies and proposal processes take the meanings generated from interactions with heterosexual wedding ceremonies and determine their own process to present the meaning of their own relationship.

Marriage and public commitment ceremonies were important to many participants. Participants discussed lavish proposal processes. In addition, they detailed the ceremonies and their personal reflections on the importance of the event. Commitment ceremonies were the final stage in the couple coming out process. In addition, these commitment ceremonies were pursued despite lack of support for the union from the families of origin or extended families. The meaning of the symbol of this ceremony is not only clear, but powerful.

Commitment ceremonies had a shared meaning for participants; these meanings are not always shared by families of origin or extended families. The public presentation of the couple assisted participants in validating their relationship and the commitment they shared while declaring that the relationship will exist despite resistance. Family of origin and extended family participation in the commitment ceremony was discussed among participants. Some members of the families of origin or extended family (typically mothers, grandmothers, or aunts) had difficulty with the ceremony and the symbol related to the ceremony. Participants discussed this conflict and their desires to have their families of origin at the event. Frequently, these individuals did attend the union for that one day. This was followed by previously laid out patterns among families of origin and extended families regarding keeping the relationship hidden or secret are maintained.

Participants frequently labeled their ceremonies “weddings” despite lack of legal recognition or even symbolic recognition of the couple’s union by their families of origin or extended families. To further complicate the issue of legitimacy, the current family worked to define itself within the context of Eurocentric ideals of marriage. Collins (2000) stated: “everything the imagined traditional family ideal is thought to be, African-American families are not” (p. 47). She described lesbian families as invisible related to this “traditional family ideal.”

Participants desired a way to legitimize their feelings and publically relate these feelings despite the lack of support or recognition from not just their families of origin, but from the larger systems in their lives. For participants, the commitment ceremonies and the meaning derived from the symbol of marriage were completely personal. Participants expressed their emotional desires for certain family members to attend. They also expressed hoping for legalization of their union.

One participant shared that her mother explained to her that she should not "shout" her lesbian identity "from the rooftop." Weddings ceremonies, for participants, were the one moment participants shouted "it from the rooftop." Even with this one shining moment, participants fell back into patterns with their families of origin or extended families where they changed their behaviors with certain individuals after their wedding day. Meaning generated from the wedding ceremony was not the same for the couple and their extended family members. In addition, meaning was derived from interactions with families of origin and extended families that indicated, despite public commitments, the couples felt they should remain closed and quiet about the current family identity after these ceremonies.

Participants and their families of origin typically had a shared meaning of what commitment ceremonies and the current family identity encompassed. The couples and their families of origin and extended families did understand this was a commitment and a public recognition of that commitment. For participants who had these ceremonies, this meant a unifying couplehood similar to traditional heterosexual coupling. For participant's families of origins and extended families the meaning was different. Families of origin and extended families may have participated in the event and understood the meaning in the moment. After ceremonies, the couple relationship went back to remaining hidden. Extended family members

did not acknowledge the current family identity because it did not fit with what they knew and understood to be an appropriate family form. On the contrary, the current lesbian families participated in public presentations of their unions because of the messages from community about how to present and label couple commitments.

Home

Burton et al. (2004) defined homeplace as "social attachments and relationships characterized by distinct cultural symbols, meanings, and rituals" which "shape individuals' and families' sense of social and cultural identity" (p. 397). Participants reflected this process of defining and labeling what home means to them. Homeplace included outside forces and interactions that influenced the core unit of family (Burton et al., 2004). Participants reflected on these influences to their current family identity. All the defining factors of identity that participants associated with their current family related to images and ideas construed from interaction with their own families of origin and extended families.

Most current research on Black families suggests that there are multiple factors that influence Black family identity (Allen, 1995; Staples, 1987). Family identity was developed by symbols participants have perceived from their environment and incorporated into their own understanding of the current family identity. Some of the factors of family identity for the participants were also recognized in research on Black family identity. Burton et al. (2004) described that Black families have a distinct connection to what bell hooks (1994) coined as "homeplace." Homeplace is a "physical space that elicits feelings of empowerment, rootedness, ownership, safety, and renewal (hooks, 1994, p.397)." These ideas were echoed by participants as they sought to define their current family identity. For participants, Black lesbian family identity developed partly from what they have interpreted from their environment and from their

social interactions. Other than symbolic ideas of home and homeplace, children and role negotiation were also essential aspects of participants' family identity development.

Family is defined as children. Previous research indicated that it is common for one member in a Black lesbian couple relationship to have children prior to the couple defining their relationship (Moore, 2008; 2009). This is certainly the case with participants; nine out of the eleven couples had children prior to the current couple relationship. In addition, research reflected a pattern of seamless integration of lesbian stepparents (Moore, 2008; 2009; Sassler, 2010). Collins (2000) discussed the importance of children and caretaking of children for Black women. In addition, she brought to light Black community raising children and the integration of children into female relatives' homes due to situational or economic restrictions. Research hypothesizes that this ease is due to the necessity of having a large and solid informal support network for both economic and caretaking obligations. Participants adjusted the message from their extended families of this integration into their own children's lives by comfortably adjusting to the new parenting role.

The current family was the central core or unit of participants' lives and was the primary goal, purpose, and responsibility of participants. Initially, this study and the questions presented were focused on the couple relationship. It quickly became obvious, during the data gathering phase of this study, that participants were focused on the family unit and their identity as a family. Participants created a core family unit encompassed by the children and the couple. They placed a solid and secure boundary around this unit. Children were an essential element in defining this unit. Lesbian couples became a family, a co-parenting family system. Participants were faced with co-parenting challenges and dilemmas. Their lives revolved around family

activities and meeting the needs of their children. Children that lived in the home were part of lesbian family identity regardless of their genetic ties outside the home.

As discussed previously, after the couple became a committed couple, the next phase of coupling was forming a committed family. In all but one of the couples with children, the children were conceived from previous relationships. This did not seem to make a difference when the family defined itself; the couple was considered the parents regardless of previous fathers or mothers. This sense of "ownership" is mirrored in heterosexual Black family identity (Burton et al., 2004). In interviews, participants labeled children who they were not previously kin to as "mine" or "ours." This practice of informal adoption seemed to mirror what goes on in heterosexual Black American communities (Johnson & Staples, 2005). Children, who are in need of residence, were frequently absorbed into relatives' homes or the homes of fictive kin (Johnson & Staples, 2005).

Research on heterosexual step-parenting and stepfamilies suggested that these families also go through a process of negotiation of roles and defining of home in the face of the traditional family expectation (Visher, 1994). Past research suggested that couple bonding, communication, and strength are important to children in stepfamily households (Visher). Black lesbian family identity for participants followed a similar pattern of the defining of family and roles of members despite the lack of legal recognition of the partnership and the current family unit.

Fictive kin. The creation of fictive kinships was one outside message that participants extended to their own current family identity. Fictive kinships are commonplace in many Black American families (Greene, 2000). The use of kinship names assisted participants' families of origin and extended families in defining same-sex partners when they may be uncomfortable

with naming the couple relationship. Fictive kinships have been important to Black American families historically (Johnson & Staples, 2005). Many enslaved families were unable to maintain ties to genetic family because of slave trading and selling. Family dynamics among enslaved individuals in one particular place were built regardless of genetic connection (Johnson & Staples, 2005). Littlejohn-Blake and Darling (2005) explained that a "noble strength in African American families is the willingness of families to absorb others into the household or kin-structured networks," (p. 462). These historians described the importance of fictive kinships for economic and emotional stress.

Participants and their extended families adapted their own understanding of the couple relationship by using fictive kin names and the surrounding meaning behind these labels. Families of origin and extended families developed ways to accept their female relative's lesbian partner by using fictive kinship labels to define the additional individual at family events and gatherings. With extended families and families of origin maintaining a strong sense of resistance to lesbian identities, fictive kinship names assisted in maintaining distance from lesbian identities and the nature of the couple relationship. In essence, families of origin adapted a previously designed symbol from the community to fit a relationship that was not accepted by the families.

Fictive kinship labels also exist in GLBTQ communities (Oswald, 2002). Research on (mostly White) gay and lesbian families suggested that because of the rejection and cut-off from biological families, gays and lesbians will frequently create kinship networks with friends, particularly gay and lesbian friends (Oswald, 2002). In addition, Oswald (2002) explained that the kinship networks among gay and lesbian individuals and fictive kinships among minority families have not been researched to determine similarities or differences. Unlike previous

research, participants did not report the creation of a non-biological family based on GLBTQ identity.

Power and role negotiation. Power and role negotiation was prevalent in the participants' lives. Previous research on gender relations in (mostly White) lesbian and gay couples suggested that division of economic resources and individual identity is on a continuum of androgyny (Marecek, Finn, & Cardell, 1983). Research indicates that both members of a (White) lesbian couple are typically more androgynous in their power and role negotiations (Marecek et al., 1983). This is contradictory to recent research on Black lesbian couples that suggests couples have more defined traditionally masculine and traditionally feminine divisions of labor, as well as, gender presentation (Moore, 2006; 2010). Participants' experiences paralleled experiences of Black lesbian couples in recent research (Moore, 2006; 2010).

Gender display and power negotiation with participants in this study was not viewed in a traditional "Eurocentric gender ideology" (Collins, 2000, p. 152). It is impossible to fit participants into these traditional views of masculinity and femininity because their lives and their views of what these words represent were not defined the same as this ideology. Collins (1990) expressed that, in Black communities, "gender proves to be a malleable category that often is not matched to the biological sex assigned to the individuals" (p. 45). Many participants did relate to partners in different ways, suggesting that they adapted behaviors based on constructions of gender from Black communities.

Greene (2000) suggested that previous cultural images of Black women reveals a masculine, domineering, and strong woman image that has a distinct impact on gender images of Black women. Black women, compared to White women, have had to negotiate family and household activities while more frequently working to meet economic needs (Johnson & Staples,

2005; Littlejohn-Blake & Darling, 2005). This has led to changes in power and role identification within the heterosexual Black community in general (Littlejohn-Blake & Darling). Young Black women were typically taught both the idea of being assertive and independent (Hill, 2002). According to the Eurocentric view, this gender image was typically labeled masculine (Collins, 2000). Black lesbians do not label their assertive or independent characteristic as "masculine" or "butch" and they do not feel these traditional words fit their identity (Moore, 2010).

Household division. Participants viewed their identity in their current family identity by both their division of labor and what Moore (2010) coined as "household authority" (p.352). Moore's (2010) research on Black lesbian couples indicated a frequent division of tasks is defined by partners in the couple relationship. These tasks are typically "more masculine" or "more feminine" in nature. In addition, couples in Moore's study presented a clear division of authority over household issues. Participants, in this current study, followed a similar trend. Certain household duties were designated for one or the other member of the couple relationship. These roles ranged from subtle presentations, such as division of certain household tasks, to more overt expressions of power negotiations. One participant described her role in the current family, "this is my throne now." This statement indicated her attentiveness to the power in the relationship and the degree to which this power role is defined for her.

Gender presentation. Along the same lines as defining power roles within the family unit, participants experienced a difference within couples in their gender presentation. This was visually obvious during my initial physical observations during the interviews. Typically one member in the couple was dressed in a traditionally "feminine" manner and the other member presented in a more "transgressive" style. Moore (2010) defined "transgressive" as a "woman with a masculine gender display" and an "assertive or dominant personality" (p. 126). I was

resistant to label participants' gender presentation as "butch/femme" because I felt that simplified the meaning for these participants and denoted a "butch-femme" subculture that may or may not fit for participants (Moore). There is, however, a clear division gender presentation that was somehow defined and maintained by participants. Participants discussed their differences in gender display openly and frequently.

All but one of the couples discussed difference in gender presentation between the individuals in the couple and presented with physically different gender presentations. The one couple that did not identify their roles as different or as on different ends of a masculine and feminine image shared some reflections on this. They indicated they felt different within the Black lesbian community because they did not fit into different gender presentations. They shared that they did not have any Black friends and were not part of the Black community. They also shared that when they see Black lesbians in public there is usually a "stone cold Butch" with a "Fem wearing high heels." This indicates the perception of insiders that differences in gender presentation are a reality with many Black lesbians.

Matrifocality. The matrifocal center was a key element of the structure of most of participants' extended families. It was a symbol of power, responsibility, and structure that merged into the current family identity. The message of this symbol is that mother figures are important, respected, and they define what is allowed. As previously discussed, the participants all placed an importance on coming out to their mothers or female family members. Matrifocality played a role in what was expected from the individuals in the current family. They frequently found themselves changing their identity in the face of their mother's expectations. This was the cultural message received through a lifetime of interaction with the family of origin

and extended family. Participants frequently mentioned feeling a need to do things for or with these female models in their lives.

A notable finding that evolved from the interviews was that 15 of the 22 participants never mentioned a father or male father figure during the entire interview. Of the seven that did mention a father or male father figure, only three placed importance on this individual in their lives. The other four stated their father or father figure was not part of their life. Participants' focused on the female figures in their lives while revealing father figures were not present in their lives. The participants' lack of focus on their father figures could indicate that father figures as a symbol in families of origins is relatively non-existent or is not important. Or, simply, it could indicate fathers and father figures physically do not exist in the lives of participants. Further research could explore how lacking father figures could influence many aspects of Black lesbian family identity or Black lesbian identity.

Participants' Current Families are Self-Supporting

Mays, et al. (1999) found that gay and lesbian families turn to each other when faced with lack of support and connection from families of origin. Greene (2000) stated: "any lesbian of color is confronted with the task of finding and maintaining intimate relationships in a social environment that provides little or no support." (p. 247). This dilemma was key to understanding participants' identification of boundaries surrounding their relationships. Participants focused on current partner and children as the main support network. This was a direct result of the relationship the family had with their extended families and with other intervening individuals. The participants' interactions and shared experiences indicated they are only able to find support for lesbian couples and families within their couple relationship.

Black lesbian relationships are invisible and unsupported (Greene, 2000). Participants turned to "each other" (the couple relationship) in response to this perceived lack of support. Slater and Menscher (1991) explained:

> Verification of the lesbian family's existence may become a task relegated almost solely to the couple themselves. The bond between partners must be strong enough to compensate for both the denial and the danger that the family faces from the society at large. This burden seldom placed on heterosexual families, inherently validated as they are by every norm and ritual assigned to them. (p. 376)

To balance this oppression, Black lesbian families built a symbolic boundary around their relationship to shield them from this threat. This boundary creation defined and defended the current family unit based on the messages and interactions received by those around them.

Collins (2000) discussed the importance for Black women to have a safe space related to their race. She stated: "extended families, churches, and African-American community locations are important locations where safe discourse can occur" (p. 101). Essentially, everything that many participants have learned about what is important about family, does not exist for their current family and couple relationship. Participants do have this "safe space" individually for support of their racial identity. For most participants, their only safe space with respect to their lesbian identity was the couple relationship. The message received by these participants is that they must self-validate and support one another. Issues of safety are only addressed in their families of origin or extended families when it comes to their racial identity, not their lesbian identity.

Who's in and who's out. Allowing families of origin, extended family, and community into the current family was carefully monitored and maintained by the participants. Boundary

creation became an important structure in lesbian family identity for these participants. Different aspects of Black lesbian family identity were defined by the couples as either permeable or non-permeable to the outside world. The extent and condition of their permeability was determined by the extent in which lesbian family units benefited from the exchange (e.g. informal social support and financial support). The permeablility of the boundary changed slightly with the passage of time. The boundary was clear and definable to participants.

The non-permeable boundary was created to help the family "cope" with outside messages that suggested their relationship was not valued or supported elsewhere. Slater and Menscher (1991) shared that one of the coping mechanisms lesbian couples use as a result of feeling a sense of not being a recognized family system is the adoption of a 'two-against-the-world' stance and by making their boundaries as a couple rigid" (p.378). This present study added the family identity to this dynamic; instead of taking a "two-against-the-world" stance, participants added the 'family-against-the-world' stance.

LaSala (2002) examined the extended family relationships of gay and lesbian couples. He found that these extended family relationships had a negative effect on the couple relationship. He suggested that this was due to gay or lesbian individuals not setting appropriate boundaries related to prioritizing the couple relationship over their relationship with their extended families. He found that this was the exception and lesbian and gay individuals were typically able to create boundaries around their immediate couple relationship (LaSala, 2002). This boundary was similar to the one identified by participants in this study. Participants in this study were able to build strength and identity a clear current family boundary. They focused their energy on their current family, meeting their families' emotional and physical needs. They defined themselves as

a solid family unit despite challenges and possible discomfort their families of origin and extended families felt with regard to their current family.

Gay and lesbian community support. Typically, White gay and lesbian couples and families find support in gay and lesbian communities (Kaufman & Johnson, 2004; Patterson, 2000). Gay and lesbian communities failed to be a source of informal support for participants in this study. Participants sought a supportive lesbian community. Only one of the couples shared frequent connections to the larger gay and lesbian community. Black lesbian individuals and families are, at times, faced with feelings of racism in the White gay and lesbian communities and feeling of homophobia in Black communities (Collins, 1990; Johnson & Staples, 2005; Lehavot, Balsam, & Ibrhim-Wells, 2009). Participants did not discuss a feeling of racism in the larger gay and lesbian community; however, participants' lack of active participation compared to White lesbian couples begs further investigation.

For the participants who did mention notable support and connection to gay and lesbian communities, it was individual participant support, not familial. For example, a couple participants (n = 4) noted their participation in gay and lesbian Greek fraternities or sororities. This activity was done individually, not as a couple or family. At times, participants shared going to a gay bar or pride weekend festivals and noted the importance of these occasionally in their lives for recreation and validation, but these events were rare and infrequent for most couples.

In conclusion, the creation of the family boundary was vital to the sense of support and the key factors involved in that boundary are strong and well-defined. This sense of boundary created a strong current family unit and strong sense of family. This had both positive and negative implications. Participants adopted a support network within their couple and current family arrangements. This assisted the family in building a foundation and feeling their family is

supported in the face of possible feelings of rejection based on family identity. The challenge with this boundary creation was that the couple did not reach out at times when it might be useful to assisting the family with challenges or dilemmas. Participants noted struggles they had within their extended families and the challenges this placed on the couple relationship and the family. These struggles and interactions led to lesbian couples define themselves in a way that assisted them in making sense of the message around them.

Limitations

A limitation of the current study was the minimal sample size. It was important to my research design to use participants where both members in the couple identified at Black, Black American, or African American. This study was an initial exploration of Black lesbian couples experiences with their families of origin. I felt that adding in other aspects of racial identity would lead to more complicated results in an initial exploratory study. This led to a small sample size. The experiences presented are limited to the 22 individual participants and 11 couples.

Geographically, this study focused on the central east coast. This was designed for ease in both finding and interviewing participants. It is unclear if a national sample of participants would have similar experiences. In addition, none of the participants in this study lived in states that recognized gay marriage as a legal institution. This could have impacted the climate issues related to participants' experiences and the influence on their family dynamics and identity.

I identify as White. My racial identity limited my own personal experiences and projections related to this research study. I also am partnered with a Black woman. My perceptions of her experiences are not that different than the experiences reported in this study. My own personal biases have been explored throughout the research process by both formal investigative values and personal reflection. This current study was grounded in professional

literature and guided by theory to assist in minimizing bias. Personally, I kept a journal through this research process and engaged in personal discussions with my dissertation advisor, a Black feminist family scholar. This reflection process limited the amount of personal bias and projections.

My race and possibly my socioeconomic status may have played a role in participant responsiveness. I attended a couples' workshop at a Black Pride weekend in Washington, DC in order to find and recruit participants for my study. I entered the room at the end of the workshop and felt I was invading the space set aside to discuss being a Black lesbian couple in a White dominated world. I only got one participant from this workshop and feel this was related to my race and possibly my lack of tact in entering a space that was not appropriate at that time.

Those that agreed to participate in the study presented a bias themselves. In about half of the couples, one individual in the couple was either a therapist or currently in graduate school. Some mentioned one of the reasons they participated was because of this feeling of "helping out" a colleague or because they knew they would be doing research in the near future. I did have couples that were not in these professions, but the counseling and graduate student population in the study was greater than in Black lesbian populations. Given the difficulty of finding participants, I kept this unbalanced difference while keeping in mind this limitation throughout the data analysis process.

Practice Implications

Prior research on Black families and gay and lesbian families identified struggles and challenges of these populations (Bowleg et al., 2004). Black racial identity, Black family identity, and gay and lesbian identity have been explored. Research has not addressed Black lesbian families, the strength of the internal family bond within the family, the relationship these

families have with families or origin and extended families, how these families define themselves, and the resulting challenges or needs. Bowleg et al., (2004) explained that there has been:

> Abundant literature on Black LGBT laments Black families' and communities' lack of support for Black LGBT members…specifically, research is needed to investigate how black families' provision of social support or lack thereof influences the mental health of Black LGBT. (p. 237)

This research has assisted in contributing to the knowledge of Black lesbian families and messages from participants could assist mental health professionals in their awareness and sensitivity to certain aspects of Black lesbian families that may enter for services.

Lesbian families in this current study have a closed system and a clear boundary. It may be challenging for mental health professionals to be allowed in or trusted initially. While most participants did state they would be comfortable with therapy, building rapport and establishing trust would be key to getting a sense of honesty about the couple and family issues. In addition, participants in this research do not have a sense of outside support for their families. The main supports in their lives (extended family, friends, church, and gay and lesbian communities) provide mostly broken support and not support of the family as a whole. Identification of informal supports is an essential element of family therapy with Black lesbian families.

Five participants stated they were not comfortable with therapy. Two of these individuals had negative reactions that suggested cultural reasons for their resistance. One participant shared: "all this therapy stuff is for White people." Another shared: "in the Black culture, therapy has a stigma to it. You don't go see a shrink, because if you do, you are crazy." These statements reflected a resistance or distrust to therapy by some Black lesbian couples and families.

Knowledge of Black culture and an understanding of resistance could be a useful tool in building on the therapeutic relationship with Black lesbian families. In response to this, an open and honest environment would build trust and communication with these families. Seventeen participants stated they would be comfortable with seeking therapy. Five of these individuals reported current involvement with a therapist or counselor and were generally positive about their experiences.

It is unclear if church or pastoral counseling would be most beneficial for Black lesbian families. Of the five individuals that reported having sought out counseling prior to the interview, two individuals stated they had individual counseling with a pastor at their church. This environment might be one way to assist Black lesbian families in need of mental health services. At other times, participants shared skeptical feelings of trust in their pastors or in the church in general.

Research on gay and lesbian mental health needs suggest a sensitive focus on the coming out experience and the challenges individuals go through in this identification process (LaSala, 2000). It is interesting that participants never mentioned personal struggles of coming out and sexual identity issues. Given the previous focus on coming out issues in a therapeutic context, I would caution against assuming coming out is intense issue in the lives of Black lesbian families.

Clinically, it is important for therapists to recognize the similar struggles that exist between lesbian families and heterosexual families (Means-Christensen, Snyder, & Negy, 2003) particularly with the introduction of children (Twenge, Campbell, & Foster, 2003). Participants in this study seemed to be most concerned about their children and the issues surrounding co-parenting. As a result, these families may enter into mental health arrangements because of problems with children or parenting. Co-parenting issues with the parents, child acceptance of

step parent, and coping with possible disconnection with biological parent are factors mental health professionals would have to be aware of. Twenge et al. (2003) suggest that with support (in heterosexual families) the stress of children entering their lives can be minimal. Black lesbian families might need a supportive base to discuss issues involved with introducing children into the couple dyad.

Also, in discussing children in Black lesbian families, almost all couples with children discussed some aspect related to their children's dealing with their own, personal feelings regarding their parents' sexual identity or their feelings about the societal impact on their children. Prior research on children from (mostly White) lesbian families, suggests some ways that children in lesbian homes deal with personal and social issues surrounding having lesbian parents (Patterson, 2000). The research suggests that children's self esteem and family openness and communication are key factors in promoting healthy adjustment to parent's lesbian identity among children in these homes. Though coming out to children and fears of outside pressures due to sexual orientation were a concern for many participants, many stated this was not that big of an issue for their children. Participants cited "communication" with their children as an important aspect of this ability to deal with the societal view. Clinically, it may be of benefit to validate these fears of homophobia and heterosexism in the community and with children and also build on the current communicative strength Black lesbian families may have with their children surrounding these issues.

Black lesbian families, in this study, presented a strong, non-permeable boundary around their relationship. The role of this boundary and the strengths and challenges it presented could be addressed in mental health interventions. Validating and appreciating the role of this boundary and the safety of it in the lives of these women is important, as well as supporting the aspects of

support that may not exist for these families. First steps in building therapeutic relationship might be to ask Black lesbian families about the role of boundaries in their relationship and the feelings associated with this structure.

Education on gay and lesbian issues, as well as, issues on other areas of diversity: economic, racial, cultural, religious, and otherwise, is essential for therapists working in the field (Liu, Pickett, & Ivey, 2007; Smith, Foley, & Chaney, 2008). Cultural competency among mental health professional can assist in working with Black lesbian families (Savin-Williams, 1996). This can and should take place on a personal level, like addressing one's own privilege (Liu et al., 2007). In addition, it should take place throughout mental health education (Smith et al., 2008).

The field of marriage and family therapy lends itself to working with Black lesbian families because of the focus on the nuclear family dynamics (Hall & Greene, 2003). Traditional family systems work, identifying genograms and family structure would assist Black lesbian families in looking at extended family influences and the role in their current family. Other approaches, such as, strength-based, solution-focused, narrative, and feminist family therapy could prove useful in working with these families (Hall & Greene, 2003). Narrative incorporates a sense of legitimization and ownership of the previously set story and allows the family to assist in the redefining of the problem (Hall & Greene, 2003). Feminist family therapy could assist families in recognizing climate for race and sexual orientation and the influences on the family (Hall & Greene, 2003).

Future Research Directions

Research on Black lesbians and Black lesbian families is lacking. This current study led to further questions of inquiry regarding this population. Class issues were not explored in this

study and some results suggest that class could influence differences in Black lesbian family identity. Blended families and lesbian step-families is also an area to focus on with regard to Black lesbian families. The families of Black lesbians and their responses and feelings with regard to their lesbian identified family member could be a crucial point of this research. Finally, Black gay male couples are also not frequently identified in current research. Their experiences could also benefit the body of knowledge regarding Black gay and lesbian culture and experiences. The inclusion of Black men and their experiences would present more comprehensive picture of Black gay and lesbian family life.

Class issues. An in-depth study of the effects of socioeconomic status was not conducted in this study. Individual income was used as a marker for present socioeconomic status of lesbian families. The family of origin socioeconomic status was not tapped in this study. Given this limitation, it was difficult to determine what findings, if any, were associated with class differences. In the discussion I included notable findings regarding gender presentation in the couple dynamic that seems to differ with class differences. Moore (2010) has also found some differences in power relationships among Black lesbian families of different economic statuses. The ideas of both gender presentation and power negotiation within Black lesbian families with relation to class differences warrant further investigation.

Power and role negotiation among participants was related to class. As I shared previously, I was cautious about over-analyzing findings related to class. Given recent research does indicate that there might be class differences related to role negotiation and power in Black lesbian couples (Moore, 2006; 2010), it is important to reflect on possible findings in this study related to class. The participants in this study from working-class backgrounds seemed to discuss power and roles within their relationships in more specific detail, more frequently, and with more

defined gender role negotiations than the participants from middle-class backgrounds. Limitations related to class in this study have led me to cautiously include it here as a possible finding; however, I find it is notable and relates to previous research.

Blended lesbian families. Blended lesbian households with children and co-parenting issues for blended lesbian homes is in need of further research (Patterson, 2000). This current study suggested that blended families are fairly common for Black lesbian individuals. Research on lesbian families with children identifies some of the challenges children have growing up with lesbian parents, but the issues related to step-parenting challenges is not addressed (Patterson, 2000). These studies on children in lesbian households have focused primarily on White, middle-class families who chose to have children in their current lesbian partnerships (Patterson, 2000). Information from these participants suggested that children are a large part of Black lesbian families and their challenges, concerns, strengths, and other issues may warrant further research.

Black gay male experiences. A study exploring Black gay male family identity would be an interesting complement to the data acquired in this study. Black gay male experiences in couples and in their extended family environments may or may not differ from their lesbian counterparts. The role of children in the lives of Black, gay males also may or may not mirror those of lesbian participants. Another piece of this that may or may not coordinate with Black gay men is a more intensive look on the idea of the matrifocal family environment on lesbian or gay family identity. Is the matrifocalitly reflective of the importance participants place on children in their lives? Does the role of women in extended families play a role in public coming out and family expectation? A further study could explore these dynamics.

Extended families. Couples and families find their main familial support within the couple relationship. For heterosexual married couples, lack of seeking out extended family for

support has become more common in recent history (Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2008). This change in inward support for heterosexual couples is due to changes in time demands, economic structure, and demographic distance (Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2008). Participants do suggest similar changes in seeking support from extended family. Further research could assist in identifying Black lesbian couples reasons for not seeking family of origin support.

As I completed my data analysis, I began to become curious about the families of origin and extended families that were discussed by participants. Given the lack of discussion around sexual orientation in participants' families, I wondered how interviews with families of origin or extended families would progress. I think the extended family view of relative's sexual orientation and family environment would possibly close a gap of understanding in the lives of Black lesbian individuals and families. How do the extended families of these participants feel about participants' relationship with a woman?

Conclusion

Three research questions were formulated at the initial stages of this research project:

1. What is the coming out process for Black lesbian couples?
2. How does the relationship with the extended family influence lesbian couple relationships and identity with the passage of time?
3. What supports are available to Black lesbian families?

After interviewing 22 remarkable individuals, they presented me with an open and rare look into their lives, their connections with family, their view of the strength of their current family, as well as, struggles and concerns.

Audre Lorde (1995) explained:

> Racism, the belief in the inherent superiority of one race over all others and thereby the right to dominance. Sexism, the belief in the inherent superiority of one sex over the other and thereby the right to dominance. Sexism, the belief in the inherent superiority of one sex over the other and thereby the right to dominance. Ageism. Heterosexism. Elitism. Classism.
>
> It is a lifetime pursuit for each one of us to extract these distortions from our living at the same time as we recognize, reclaim, and define those differences upon which they are imposed. (p. 115)

She concluded that this feeling of domination "results in voluntary isolation" (p. 115). Lorde's description of her view of oppression and its' influence on individuals reflected some of the process of participants in this current study. Participants were not asked directly about the role of racism, classism, or heterosexism in their lives, but they all found their way towards identity through all these "distortions." Isolation (or as I termed it, "boundary making") occurred as a result of the multiple oppressions in the participants' lives.

Participants frequently shared their fondness for and their pride in their current families. They suggested their current families are well-bonded, communicative, and are physically and emotionally there for one another. They suggested a separation between their current families and extended families and outside community in some aspects. The addition of the importance placed on wedding and proposal rituals suggest there is a presentation of family in a formal way to extended family and community despite living as if their relationship was disregarded at times to accommodate those individuals who do not accept their living arrangements.

As I entered this research, I was worried about resistance and guarded responses, partly because of being White and the stigma I felt I would face as not being trusted or not

understanding their possible struggles. What I faced, I felt, was the opposite. Almost all of the couples thanked me after their interviews. Though undocumented, at least three couples stated they had a really good time doing the interview. The women seemed quick to warm up to me and eager to share their stories. Two couples wanted me to use their real names (I did not) and they were disappointed when I told them I could not. I speculated that these women do actually feel invisible and underappreciated. By presenting themselves and discussing their lives with me for that hour or so, they felt someone actually wanted to know and understand them. They felt validated for their thoughts and experiences as a couple, something they shared they infrequently feel from their own informal support networks. I was welcomed into their homes; I was touched by their stories and their lives; and I feel honored to be presenting these stories.

REFERENCES

Allen, G. (1980). A note on interviewing spouses together. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 42*, 205-210.

Allen, K. R. (1997). Lesbian and gay families. In T. Arendall (Ed.), *Contemporary parenting: Challenges and issues* (pp.196-218). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Allen, K.R. (2000). A conscious and inclusive family studies. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 62,* 4-17.

Allen, K.R. (2001). Feminist visions for transforming families. *Journal of Family Issues, 22*, 793-811.

Allen, K. R. & Demo, D. H. (1995). The families of lesbians and gay men: A new frontier in family research. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 57*, 111-127.

Allen, W. R. (1995). African American family life in societal context: Crisis and hope. *Sociological Forum, 10*, 569-592.

Allen, W.R., & James, A.D. (1998). Comparative perspectives on Black family life: Uncommon explorations of a common subject. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies, 29,* 1-12.

Awkward, M. (1995). *Negotiating difference: Race, gender, and the politics of positionality.* Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Battle, J. And Lemelle, A. J. (2002). Gender differences in African American attitudes toward gay males. *The Western Journal of Black Studies, 26*, 134-139.

Battle, M. (2006). *The Black church in America: African American Christian spirituality*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.

Beale, F. (1995). Double jeopardy: To be Black and female. In B. Guy-Sheftall (Ed.). *Words of fire: An anthology of African-American feminist thought* (pp. 146-156). New York: The New Press.

Bepko, C. and Johnson, T. (2000). Gay and lesbian couples in therapy" Perspectives for the contemporary family therapist. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 26*, 409–419.

Bernauer, J., & Mahon, M. (1994). The ethics of Michel Foucault. In G. Gutting (Ed.). *The Cambridge companion to Foucault* (pp. 141-158). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic interactionism: Perspective and method*. Englewood Cliffe, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.

Borhek, M. V. (1993). *Coming out to parents: A two-way survival guide for lesbians and gay men and their parents.* Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press.

Bowleg, L., Craig, M., and Burkholder, G. (2004). Rising and surviving: A conceptual model of active coping among African-American lesbians. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 29*, 229-240.

Bridges, S. K., Selvidge, M. M., Matthews, C. R. (2003). Lesbian women of color: Therapeutic issues and challenges. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development, 31*, 113-130.

Burton, L. M., Winn, D., Stevenson, H., Clark, S. L. (2004). Working with African American clients: Considering the "homeplace" in marriage and family therapy practices. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 30*, 397-410.

Cass, V. (1979). Homosexual identity formation: A theoretical model. *Journal of Homosexuality, 4*, 219-235.

Caraway, N. (1991). *Segregated sisterhood: Racism and the politics of American feminism*. Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press.

Chapman, B. E., & Brannock, J. C. (1987). Proposed model of lesbian identity development: An empirical examination. *Journal of Homosexuality, 14*, 69-80.

Chatters, L. M., Taylor, R. J., and Jayakody, R. (1994). Fictive kin relations in extended black families. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies, 25*, 297-313.

Clarke, C. (1983). The failure to transform: Homophobia in the black community. In B. Smith (Ed.), *Home girls: A Black feminist anthology* (pp. 197-208). New York, NY: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press.

Cohler, B. J. (2005). Backward socialization and gay identity negotiation in families. In V. L. Bengtson, A. C. Acock, K. R. Allen, P. Dilworth-Anderson, & D. M. Klein (Eds.), *Sourcebook of family theory and research* (pp.155-157). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Collins, P. H. (1989). The social construction of Black feminist thought. *Signs, 14*, 745-773.

Collins, P. H. (1990). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and politics of empowerment.* Cambridge, MA: Unwin Hyman Ltd.

Collins, P. H. (1991). Learning from the outsider within: The sociological significance of Black feminist thought. In B. Fawcett, B. Featherstone, J. Fook, & A. Rossiter (Eds.), *Practice and research in social work: Postmodern feminist perspective.* (pp.35-59). New York: Routledge.

Collins, P. H. (1998) Intersection of race, class, gender, and nation: Some implications for Black family studies. *Journal of comparative family studies, 29*, 27-37.

Collins, P.H. (1998). It's all in the family: Intersections of gender, race, and nation. *Hypatia, 13,* 62-83.

Collins, P. H. (2000). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment.* New York: Routledge.

Collins, P. H. (2004). *Black sexual politics: African Americans, gender, and the new racism*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Collins, P. H. (2006). *From black power to hop hop: Racism, nationalism, and feminism.* Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Combahee River Collective (1995). A Black feminist statement. In B. Guy-Sheftall (Ed.). *Words of fire: An anthology of African-American feminist thought* (pp. 232-240). New York: The New Press.

Consolacion, T. B., Russell, S. T., Sue, S. (2004). Sex, race/ethnicity, and romantic attractions: Multiple minority status adolescents and mental health. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 10*, 200-214.

Crawford, I., Allison, K. W., and Zamboni, T. S. (2002). The influence of dual-identity development on the psychosocial functioning of African-American gay and bisexual men. *The Journal of Sex Research, 39*, 179-188.

Creswell, J. W. (1994). *Research Design: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Dade, L. R., & Sloan, L. R. (2000). An investigation of sex-role stereotypes in African Americans. *Journal of Black Studies, 30*, 676-690.

D'Augelli, A. R., Hershberger, S. L., & Pilkington, N. W. (1998). Lesbian, gay and bisexual youth and their families: Disclosure of sexual orientation and its consequences. American *Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 68*, 361-371.

D'Emilio, J., & Freedman, E. B. (1997). *Intimate matters: A history of sexuality in America.* Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Davis, A.Y. (1989). *Women, culture, and politics.* New York: Random House.

Dey, I. (1999). *Grounding grounded theory: Guidelines for qualitative inquiry.* San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

Dill, B. T. (1983). Race, class, and gender: Prospects for an all-inclusive sisterhood. *Feminist Studies, 9,* 131-150.

Dubé, E. M., & Savin-Williams, R. C. (1999). Sexual identity development among ethnic sexual-minority male youths. *Developmental Psychology, 35*, 1389–1398

Eliason, M. J. (1996). Identity formation for lesbian, bisexual, and gay persons: Beyond a "minoritizing" view. *Journal of Homosexuality, 30*, 31–58.

Ellison, C. G. (1997). Religious involvement and the subjective quality of family life among African Americans. In R. J. Taylor, J. S. Jackson, & L. M. Chatters (Eds.), *Family life in Black America* (pp.117-131). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Farganis, S. (1994). Postmodernism and feminism. In D. R. Dickens, & A. Fontana (Eds.)., *Postmodernism and social inquiry* (pp.101-126) New York: The Guilford Press.

Fawcett, B., & Featherstone, B. (2000). Setting the scene: An appraisal of notions of postmodernism, postmodernity and postmodern feminism. In B. Fawcett, B. Featherstone, J. Fook, & A. Rossiter (Eds.), *Practice and research in social work: Postmodern feminist perspectives* (pp. 5-23). New York: Routledge.

Few, A. L., Stephens, D. P., & Rouse-Arnett, M. (2003). Sister-to-sister talk: Transcending boundaries and challenges in qualitative research. *Family Relations, 52*, 205-215.

Fonow, M. M., & Cook, J. A. (1991). Back to the future: A look at the second wave of feminist epistemology and methodology. In M. M. Fonow, & J. A. Cook (Eds.), *Beyond methodology: Feminist scholarship as lived research* (pp. 1-15). Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Fontana, A., & Frey, J. H. (2003). The interview: From structured questions to negotiated text. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.). *Collecting and interpreting qualitative materials* (pp. 61-106). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Foucault, M. (1970). *The order of things: An archaeology of human sciences.* New York: Random House.

Fox, G. L., & Murray, V. M. (2000). Gender and families: Feminist perspectives and family research. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 62,* 1160-1172.

Freedman, J., & Combs, G. (1996). *Narrative therapy: The social construction of preferred realities.* New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

Giovianni, N. (1972). The world is not a pleasant place to be. In N. Giovianni. *My house* (p. 15) New York: William Morrow & Company.

Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory.* Chicago, IL: Aldine.

Gold, J. M. & Morris, G. M. (2003). Family resistance to counseling: The initial agenda for intergenerational and narrative approaches. *The Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families, 11*, 374-379.

Grassie, W. (1997). Postmodernism: What one needs to know. *Zygon, 32,* 83-94.

Greene, B. (2000). African American lesbian and bisexual women. *Journal of Social Issues, 29*(4), 239-249.

Greene, B. and Boyd-Franklin, N. (1996). African American lesbians: Issues in couples therapy. In J. Laird and R. J. Green (Eds.), *Lesbians and gays in couples and families: A handbook for therapist* (251-271). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Greene, B. (1993). Ethnic-minority lesbians and gay men: Mental health and treatment issues. J*ournal of Consulting & Clinical Psychology. 62*, 243-251.

Hall, R.L. & Greene, B. (2003). Contemporary African American families. In L .B. Silverstein and T. L Goodrich (Eds.), *Feminist family therapy: Empowerment in social context* (pp.107-120). Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association.

Hare-Mustin, R. T. (1987). The problem of gender in family therapy. *Family Process, 26*, 15-27.

Hare-Mustin, R. T. (1994). Discourses in the mirrored room: A postmodern analysis of therapy. *Family Process, 33*, 19-35.

Harper, G. W., Jernewall, N., and Zea, M. C. (2004). Giving voice to emerging science and theory for lesbian, gay, and bisexual people of color. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 10*, 187-199.

Hewitt, J. P. (1998). *Self and society: A symbolic interactionist social psychology.* Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

Hines, P.M., Preto, N.G., McGoldrick, M., Almeida, R., Weltman, S. (1999). Culture and the family life cycle. In B. Carter, and M. McGoldrick (Eds.), *The expanded family life cycle: Individual, family, and social perspectives* (pp.69-87). Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

hooks, b. (1984). *Feminist theory: From margin to center*. Boston, MA: South End Press.

hooks, b. (1994). Homeplace (a site of resistance). In D. S. Madison (Ed.). *The woman that I am: The literature and culture of contemporary women of color* (pp. 448-454). New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.

hooks, b. (2006). *Outlaw culture: Resisting representations.* New York: Routledge.

hooks, b. (2004). *The will to change: Men, masculinity, and love.* New York: Atria Books.

hooks, b. (2004). *We real cool: Black men and masculinity*. New York: Routledge.

Johnson, L. B., & Staples, R. (2005). *Black families at the crossroads: Challenges and prospects.* San Francisco, CA: Josey-Bass.

Johnson, T. W., & Colucci, P. (1999). Lesbians, gay men, and the family life cycle. In B. Carter, & M. McGoldrick (Eds.), *The expanded family life cycle: Individual, family, and social perspectives* (pp.346-361). Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Kaufman, J. M., & Johnson, C. (2004). Stigmatized individuals and the process of identity. *The Sociological Quarterly, 45*, 807-833.

Keddy, B., Sims, S. L., & Stern, P. N. (1996). Grounded theory as feminist research methodology. *Journal of Advanced Nursing, 23,* 448–453.

Kerr, M. E., & Bowen, M. (1988). *Family evaluation: An approach based on Bowen theory.* New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

Klein, D. M., & White, J. M. (1996). *Family theories: An introduction.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Kong, T. S. K., Mahoney, D., & Plummer, K. (2003). Queering the interview. In J. A. Holstein, & J. A. Gubrium (Eds.), *Inside interviewing: New lenses, new concerns* (pp. 91-130).. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Kritzman, L. D. (1988). Introduction: Foucault and the politics of experience. In L. D. Kritzman (Ed.), *Michal Foucault: Politics, philosophy, culture.* (pp. ix-2). New York: Routledge.

Laird, J. (1996). Lesbians and their families of origin. In. Laird, J. and Green, R. (Eds.), *Lesbians and Gays in Couples and Families.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, Inc.

Larkey, L. K., Hecht, M. L., & Martin, J. (1993). What's in a name? African American ethnic identity terms and self-determination. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology, 12*, 302-307.

LaRossa, R. (2005). Grounded theory methods and qualitative family research. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 67*, 837-857.

LaRossa, R., Bennett, L.A., & Gelles, R.J. (1981). Ethical dilemmas in qualitative family research. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 43*, 303-313.

LaRossa, R. and Reitzer, D.C. (1993). Continuity and Change in Middle Class Fatherhood, 1925-1939: The Culture-Conduct Connection, *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 55, 455-468.

LaRossa, R. & Wolf, J. H. (1985). On qualitative family research. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 47*, 531-541.

LaSala, M. C. (2000). Lesbians, gay men, and their parents: Family therapy for the coming out process. *Family Process, 39*, 67-81.

LaSala, M.C. (2002). Walls and bridges: How coupled gay men and lesbians manage their intergenerational relationships. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 28*, 327-339.

Lipsitz, G. (1995). The possessive investment in Whiteness: Racialized social democracy and the "White" problem in American studies. *American Quarterly, 47*, 369-387.

Littlejohn-Blake, S. M., & Darling, C. A. (1993). Understanding the strengths of African American families. *Journal of Black Studies, 23*, 460-471.

Liu, W.M., Pickett, T., & Ivey, A.E. (2007). White Middle-Class Privilege: Social Class Bias and Implications for Training and Practice. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development, 35*, 194-206.

Loiacano, D. K. (1989). Gay identitiy issues among Black Americans: Racism, homophobia, and the need for validation. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 68*, 21-25.

Lorde, A. (1994). Learning from the 60s. In D. S. Madison (Ed.), *The woman that I am: The literature and culture of contemporary women of color* (pp. 454-462). New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.

Lorde, A. (1984). *Sister outsider: Essays and speeches by Audre Lorde*. Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press.

Lorde, A. (1995). Age, race, class, and sex: Women redefining difference. In B. Guy-Sheftall (Ed.), *Words of fire: An anthology of African-American feminist thought* (pp. 284-291). New York: The New Press.

Lorde, A. (1982). *Zami: A new spelling of my name*. Trumansburg, NY: The Crossing Press.

Malley, M. and Tasker, F. (1999). Lesbians, gay men and family therapy: A contradiction in terms? *Journal of Family Therapy,* 21, 3-29.

Martin, B.L. (1991). From Negro to Black to African American: The power of names and naming. *Political Science Quarterly, 106*, 83-107.

Martin, E. P., & Martin, M. (1978). *The Black extended family.* Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Mays, V. M., Chatters, L. M., Cochran, S. D., & Mackness, J. (1998). African American families in diversity: Gay men and lesbians as participants in family networks. *Journal of comparative family studies, 29,* 73-88.

Mays, V. M., & Cochran, S. D. (1999). The Black women's relationship project: A national survey of Black lesbians. In R. Staples (Ed.), *Black family: Essays and studies* (pp.59-66). Belmont, CA: Wadesworth Publishing.

McGoldrick, M. (1980). The joining of families through marriage: The new couple. In E. A. Carter, & M. McGoldrick (Eds.), *The family life cycle: A framework for family therapy* (pp. 93-120). New York: Gardner Press.

McIntosh, P. (1990). White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack. *Independent School, 49*, 31-36.

McKinnon, J. D., & Bennett, C. E. (2005, August). *We the people: Blacks in the United States* (Census 2000 special reports). Retrieved March 18th, 2007, from U.S. Census Bureau Web site: http://www.census.gov/prod/2005pubs/censr-25.pdf

Means-Christensen, A. J., Snyder, D. K. & Negy, C. (2003). Assessing nontraditional couples: Validity of the marital satisfaction inventory—revised with gay, lesbian, and cohabitation heterosexual couples. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 29*, 69-83.

Moore, M. R. (2006). Lipstick or timberlands? Meaning of gender presentation in Black lesbian communities. *Signs, 32,* 113-129.

Moore, M. R. (2009). Independent women: Equality in African American lesbian relationships. In B. J. Reisman (Ed.), *Families as They Really Are* (pp. 214-227). W. W. Norton

Moore, M. R. (2010). Black and gay in L.A.: The relationships Black lesbians and gay men have to their racial and religious communities. In D. Hunt and A. Ramon (Eds.), *Black Los Angeles: American Dreams and Racial Realities* (pp. 188-212). New York: NYU Press.

Moore, M. R. (2010). Gendered power relations among women: A study of household decision making in Black, lesbian stepfamilies. *American Sociological Review, 73*, 335-356.

Murphy, B. C. (1989). Lesbian couples and their parents: The effects of perceived parental attitudes on the couple. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 68*, 46-51.

Neal, A. (2001). The naming: A conceptualization of an African American connotative struggle. *Journal of Black Studies, 22*, 50-65.

Neckerman, K.M., Carter, P., & Lee, J. (1999). Segmented assimilation and minority cultures of mobility. *Ethnic and Racial Studies, 22*, 945-965.

Neighbors, H. W. (1997). Husband, wives, family, and friends: Sources of stress, sources of support. In R. J. Taylor, J. S. Jackson, & L. M. Chatters (Eds.), *Family life in Black America* (pp. 279-294). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Nichols, M. P., & Schwartz, R. C. (2001). Family therapy: Concepts and methods. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Norris, C. (1994). What is enlightenment?: Kant and Foucault. In G. Gutting (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to Foucault* (pp. 159-196). New York: Cambridge University Press.

O'Hanlon, B. (1994). The promise of narrative: The third wave. *Family Therapy Networker, 18*, 18-29.

Olsen, V. (2005). Early millennial feminist qualitative research: Challenges and contours. In N. K Denzin, & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The sage handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 235-278). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Patterson, C .J. (2000). Family relationships of lesbians and gay men. *Journal of Marriage and Family Relations, 62*, 1052-1059.

Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Parks, C. A., Hughes, T. L., & Matthews, A. K. (2004). Race/ethnicity and sexual orientation: Intersecting identities. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 10*, 241-254.

Pinn, A. B. (2006). *The African American religious experience in America*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

Reinharz, S. (1992). *Feminist methods in social research.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Roberts, D. (1997). *Killing the Black body: Race, reproduction, and the meaning of liberty.* New York: Pantheon Books.

Rosario, M., Schrimshaw, E. W., & Hunter, J. (2004). Ethnic/racial differences in the coming-out process of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youths: A comparison of sexual identity development over time. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 10*, 215-228.

Rostosky, S. S., Korfhage, B. A., Duhigg, J. M., Stern, A. J., Bennett, L., & Riggle, E. D. B. (2004). Same-sex couple perceptions of family support: A consensual qualitative study. *Family Process, 43*, 15-50.

Rowell, C.H. (1991). Above the wind: An interview with Audre Lorde. *Callaloo, 14*, 83-95.

Sarkisian, N., & Gerstel, N. (2008). Till Marriage Do Us Part: Adult Children's Relationships with Parents. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 70*, 360-376.

Sassler, S. (2010). Partnering Across the Life Course: Sex, Relationships, and Mate Selection. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 72*, 557–575.

Savin-Williams, R. C. (1996). Self-labeling and disclosure among gay, lesbian, and bisexual youths. In J. Laird and R. J. Green (Eds.), *Lesbians and gays in couples and families: A handbook for therapists* (153-182). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Savin-Williams, R. C. (2001). *Mom, Dad. I'm gay: How families negotiate coming out.* Washington, DC: APA.

Scott, J. W., & Black, A. (1999). Deep structure of African American family life: Female and male kin networks. In R. Staples (Ed.). *Black family: Essays and studies* (pp.232-240). Belmont, CA: Wadesworth Publishing.

Seibold, C. (2000). Qualitative research from a feminist perspective in the postmodern era: Methodological, ethical and reflexive concerns. *Nursing Inquiry, 7,* 147-155.

Shange, N. (1972). i talk to myself. In N.Shange. *nappy edges* (pp.17-18). New York: St. Martin's Press.

Slater, S., & Mencher, J. *(*1991). The lesbian family life cycle*. Journal of American Orthopsychiatry, 61,* 372—382*.*

Smith, B. (1983). Introduction. In B. Smith (Ed.), *Home girls: A Black feminist anthology* (pp. xix-lvi). New York, NY: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press.

Sprague, J. (2005). *Feminist methodologies for critical researchers: Bridging differences.* Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.

Sprey, J. (1988). Current theorizing on the family: An appraisal. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 50*, 875-890.

Staples, R. (1987). Social structure and black family life: An analysis of current trends. *Journal of Black Studies, 17*, 267-286.

Staples, R. (2006). *Exploring Black sexuality.* Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Springer, K. (2002). Third wave Black feminism? *Signs, 27*, 1059-1082.

Stivers, C. (1993). Reflections on the role of personal narrative in social science. *Signs, 18*, 408-425.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Suter, E. A., Dass, K. L., & Bergen, K. M. (2008). Negotiating lesbian family identity via symbols and rituals. *Journal of Family Issues, 29*, 26-47.

Taylor, R. J., & Johnson, W. E. (1997). Family roles and family satisfaction among Black men. In R. J. Taylor, J. S. Jackson, & L. M. Chatters (Eds.), *Family life in Black America* (pp.250-263). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Taylor, R. J., Tucker, M. B., Chatters, L. M., & Jayakody, R. (1997). Recent demographic trends in African American family structure. In R. J. Taylor, J. S. Jackson, & L. M. Chatters (Eds.), *Family life in Black America* (pp.14-62). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Taylor, U. (1998). The historical evolution of Black feminist theory and praxis. *Journal of Black Studies, 29*, 234-254.

Thompson, L. (1992). Feminist methodology for family studies. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 54*, 3-18.

Thompson, L., & Walker, A. J. (1995). The place of feminism in family studies. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 54*, 847-865.

Todosijevic, J., Rothblum, E. D., & Solomon, S. E. (2005). Relationship satisfaction, affectivity, and gay-specific stressors in same-sex couples joined in civil unions. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 29*, 158-166.

Trinder, L. (2000). Reading the texts: Postmodern feminism and the 'doing' of research. In B. Fawcett, B. Featherstone, J. Fook, & A. Rossiter (Eds.), *Practice and research in social work: Postmodern feminist perspectives* (pp.39-61). New York: Routledge.

Twenge, J. M., Campbell, W. K., & Foster, C. A. (2003). Parenthood and marital satisfaction: A meta-analytic review. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 65,* 574-583.

Valentine, G. (1999). Doing household research: Interviewing couples together and apart. *Area, 31*, 67-74.

Visher, J. (1994). Stepfamilies: A work in progress. *The American Journal of Family Therapy, 22,* 337-344.

Wallace, M. (1995). Anger in isolation: A Black feminist's search for sisterhood. In B. Guy-Sheftall (Ed.), *Words of fire: An anthology of African-American feminist thought (pp. 219-227)*. New York: The New Press.

West, C. (1994). *Race matters.* Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

White, M., & Epston, D. (1990). *Narrative means to therapeutic ends.* New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company.

Wiggins, D. C. (2005). *Righteous content: Black women's perspectives of church and faith.* New York: New York University Press.

Wright, D. (1990, Oct. 30th). American, not African-American. *Wall Street Journal*, p. A20.

Appendix A

Interview Protocol
Black Gay and Lesbian Couples and their Relationship to their Families of Origin

1. Tell me the story of how you met.
   (PROBES)
   a. How do you define your relationship?
   b. How long have you been a couple?
   c. What are some tough times you have been through as a couple? Have you resolved those issues? What helped you get through?
2. Have you "come out" to your families? If so, tell me about that experience, if not tell me why you have not. (Allow each member in couple to share).
   (PROBES)
   a. (If out) Does your family discuss your sexual orientation since coming out? How?
   b. (If out) have things changed since you first came out? How?
   c. (If not out) Do you think your family is aware of your sexual orientation? What makes you think so/not?
   d. (If one is out and the other isn't) How is your couple relationship influenced by her/him not being out to their family?
   e. Who are you "out" to outside of your families or the gay and lesbian community?
3. Tell me about your relationship with your families. (Allow each member in couple to share).
   (PROBES)
   a. (If out) Is your family aware of (or met) your partner? If so how is your partner's relationship to your family? If not, why not?
   b. (If out) How comfortable is your family with you as a couple?
   c. How is your partner introduced to family members or friends of your family members?
   d. How do you interact together while you are with your families?
   e. What do you do to fit in with your families?
   f. Does your family have pictures in their home of you and your partner?
   g. What is your role as a couple during family vacations or holidays?
   h. (If negative family relationship) Do you find people in your life that fulfill the role of family for you?
4. Tell me about significant relationships in your life other than your families.
   (PROBES)
   a. What kinds of things do these people provide for you?
5. What are some things that you do as a couple?
   (PROBES)
   a. Church?
   b. Gay community?
   c. Extracurricular activities?
6. Where do you feel like you get the most support as a couple?
   (PROBES)

   a. Financial?
   b. Emotional?
   c. Familial?
   d. Sense of community?
   e. Education (about life issues)?
   f. Love?
   g. Acceptance?
7. When you have issues with your families or as a couple, have you considered therapy? Why or why not?

Appendix B
IRB Research Project Proposal
Title: Black Gay and Lesbian Couples and their Relationships with their Families of Origin

Investigators:

- Principal Investigator-April Few, Professor, Department of Human Development, Dissertation Advisor
- Co-Investigator-Valerie Glass, Graduate Student, Marriage and Family Therapy, Department of Human Development

Purpose of this Research Project

The current qualitative study will explore Black gay and lesbian couples relationships with their families of origin. The research will involve semi-structured, in-depth interviews with Black gay and lesbian couples regarding their experiences with their families and the resulting meaning and identity creation. The investigators want to learn how Black gay and lesbian couples negotiate their relationships with their families of origin and in the larger social context, and further examine how these factors influence the couple relationship. The data from this study is intended to be presented at professional conferences and published in professional journals. Research questions to be addressed are as follows:

4. How does the relationship with the family of origin influence the gay and lesbian couple relationship?
5. How are gay and lesbian identities and the construct of "gay" and "lesbian" constructed by the family meta-story as time passes?
6. What is the "coming out" process for Black gay and lesbian couples?
7. If individuals in the couple relationship experience cut-off from their families, what supports are available to the family?

Results from this study will:

1. Assist in building a broader understanding of Black gay and lesbian individuals and how Black families and communities respond to these members of their community;
2. Provide useful information to therapists and other mental health workers when working with these populations;
3. Assist in identifying the needs of Black gay and lesbian couples; and
4. Be presented in at least one professional journal or scholarly conference to add knowledge to the field of family studies.

The results of this study are important to the continued exploration of Black gay and lesbian couples. Homophobia in the Black community is pervasive and the effects that it can have on the gay and lesbian population are extensive (Collins, 1990). Research suggests that gay and lesbian relationships are sometimes hidden or unacknowledged in Black families (Loiacano, 1989). This experience of having a family secrets and lack of support can lead to extreme stress in the gay and lesbian couple relationship (Greene, 1993; Laird, 1996; LaSala, 2002). In many Black families and communities, the family of origin is viewed as a support and comfort from the outside oppressive world (Greene, 2000). Black gay and lesbian individuals who disclose their sexual orientation to their families may face the consequences compromised access to safety in the family setting (Greene, 2000). This fear of isolation from the extended family seems to have further implications for research and therapy. In addition, Black gay and lesbian

individuals are faced with oppression based on both their race and sexual orientation, which makes this population unique in the struggles that they face (hooks, 1984).

Issues specific to Black gay and lesbian couples and their relationships with their families of origin have not been specifically addressed in research. Studies have addressed gay or lesbian couples and their families of origin, but the subjects in these studies have typically been White (Greene, 1993; Laird, 1996; LaSala, 2002). In addition, the field of family studies is limited in its description and representation of diverse families (Allen, 2000). This study will add to the diversity in both gay and lesbian research and family studies research.

Participants will include 15-30 Black gay and lesbian couples. Both individuals in the couple will self-identify as "Black," be in a committed relationship for at least one year, and be between the ages of 25-40. The couples will be interviewed together, resulting in 30-60 actual participants. The participants will be acquired through a snowball sample, using word of mouth advertising. The participants will live within 5-6 hours of Blacksburg, Virginia.

Procedures

Participants will be recruited through word of mouth advertising, referrals from friends, and connections that the research team has in the communities. The participants will be known only through pseudonyms and, if necessary, specific identifiers (such as occupation, age, or location) may be removed or changed if the researchers feel this could lead to identification of the participant (Larossa et al., 1981). Black gay and lesbian community organizations within 5-6 hours of Blacksburg, Virginia will be contacted by email or phone regarding the study and asked to disseminate the information to their list serves, email connections, or at community meetings (see Appendix A for copy of email and Appendix B for phone narrative).

Both members of the couple will have to consent to the interview (see Appendix C for consent form). Interviews will take place at the couple's home or a neutral private location (such as a library meeting room, community center, or church). The couple will be able to choose the most comfortable location. Participants will be paid $30.00, in the form of a gift card, for their participation. Interviews will take approximately one hour and thirty minutes. Interviews will be tape recorded and transcribed by the researcher. The Principal Investigator and the co-investigator will be the only individuals with access to the contact names and identifiers related to the participants. This information will be kept in a locked file cabinet throughout the duration of the data collection, data analysis, and results presentation. Data checks will be utilized to clarify any complications in the data. This will be done by contacting the participant directly. In addition, the researchers will provide transcripts to participants if it is requested. This interview questions will ask participants details about their current relationship, their relationship with their families of origin, and the influence that the family and community has on their relationship (see Appendix D for interview protocol).

Risks and Benefits

The proposed study will involve no more than minimal risks. Subjects will be asked to disclose information about their personal relationships and about their sexual orientation identity. They will also be asked questions regarding their view of Black culture and Black experience. Survey questions could evoke emotion from participants depending on their relationships. Risk will be minimized by including a statement about possible risks on the informed consent and by making it clear at the start of the interview that participants may skip any question in the interview and they may end participation at any point during the interview without penalty. In

addition, participants will be provided with community resources, such as counselors, churches, or community centers, in case of participant's need to process their emotions or need counseling assistance.

Benefits include a greater understanding of Black gay and lesbian couples and the influence of family and community on the lives of these individuals. In addition, this study will add implications for family therapy. The inclusion of this diverse topic will add to the growing and diversifying field of family studies. Benefits to participants could also include greater self-awareness. This could increase communication between the couple or the family of origin. It could assist the couple in identifying issues or reasons for certain behaviors or actions. Couples may also find benefit in knowing that their voices and experiences will be represented to a wide audience.

Confidentiality/Anonymity

All the data will be kept confidential. Participants will be known only as pseudonyms at the time of transcription. The PI and the co-investigator will be the only ones with identifying information. This information will be kept confidential and lock in a file cabinet. Some identifiers may be removed from the transcript if the information may lead to identification of the participants.

Interviews will be tape recorded. These tapes will also be kept in a locked file cabinet. Once transcripts have been created and pseudonyms have been put into place, any audio recordings will be destroyed.

Compensation

Participants will receive a $30.00 gift certificate (per couple) for their participation in the research project. This will be disseminated to the couple regardless of if they finish the interview completely. This compensation is a thank you for the time and energy the couple takes to participate in the interview.

Informed Consent for Participants In Research Projects Involving Human Subjects

Title of Project: Black Gay and Lesbian Couples and their Relationships with their Families of Origin

Investigators: April Few, Ph.D. Valerie Glass, M.S.

I. Purpose of this Research/Project

This research project addresses Black gay and lesbian couples and their relationships with their families of origin. The information gathered and used in this project will help further the fields of marriage and family therapy and family studies by increasing the knowledge of an under-represented population. It will explore Black gay and lesbian couples experiences with their families and how their family experiences influence their couple relationship. I want to understand how Black gay and lesbian couples negotiate their relationships with their families of

origin and in the larger social context, and further examine how these factors influence the couple relationship. All participants will be Black gay and lesbian couples.

II. Procedures

Interviews will take place at the couple's home or a neutral private location (such as a library meeting room, community center, or church). The couple will be able to choose the most comfortable location. Both members of the couple will have to consent to the interview. Interviews will take approximately one hour and thirty minutes. Interviews will be tape recorded and transcribed by the researcher. The Principal Investigator and the co-investigator, Valerie Glass, will be the only individuals with access to the contact names and identifiers related to the participants. This information will be kept in a locked file cabinet throughout the duration of the data collection, data analysis, and writing up our findings. In the interview, I will ask participants about their current relationship, their relationship with their families of origin, and the influence that the family and community has on their relationship.

III. Risks

The risks to participants in this study are minimal. Participants will be asked to disclose information about their personal relationships and about their sexual orientation identity. They will also be asked questions regarding their view of Black culture and Black experience. Interview questions could evoke emotion from participants. If participants find any part of the interview distressing, they may skip any question in the interview and they may end participation at any point during the interview without penalty. In addition, participants will be provided with community resources, such as counselors, churches, or community centers, if they request assistance in dealing with difficult emotions.

Another possible risk for participants in this study includes introspection. When people look carefully at their experiences and beliefs, they might see things with which they are not pleased. While this introspection is integral to the topic of this research, it is not always comfortable. The researchers will have available referrals to mental health and community resources for all participants.

IV. Benefits

Although no benefits are guaranteed, participants may gain a greater understanding of how their couple relationships are influenced by their families and communities. They may also appreciate knowing that their experiences and voices will be heard by a wider audience.

V. Extent of Anonymity and Confidentiality

The confidentiality of each participant will be carefully preserved in the verbatim transcripts and in the writing of the study. The audio tapes will be stored in a locked file cabinet and destroyed once the transcripts are complete. Participants will only be recognized through the use of a pseudonym. Identifying information will only be viewable by the primary investigator (Dr. April Few) and the co-investigator (Valerie Glass). Information that might be used to identify participants (such as age, location, or other information) may be removed at the time the transcripts are created if it seems possible to identify participant from the information.

It is possible that the Institutional Review Board (IRB) may view this study's collected data for auditing purposes. The IRB is responsible for the oversight of the protection of human subjects involved in research.

VI. Compensation

Participants will be provided with a $30.00 gift card (per couple) for their participation. This compensation is meant as thanks for the time and energy the participants put into the interview.

VII. Freedom to Withdraw or decline parts of the discussion for usage [should we include this part to comply with what you have written previously in the description?

Participants are free to withdraw from this study at any time without penalty. Participants are free to refuse to answer any of their answers to any questions as they choose without penalty. Subjects will be fully compensated if they complete any portion of the interview process and will still be compensated if they wish to not answer particular questions or decide to stop the interview because they are uncomfortable with the questioning or if they feel the information is too personal or emotional.

VIII. Subject's Responsibilities

I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I have the following responsibilities:

1. Allow my responses in the interview referred to above to be transcribed by the investigators and used in this research project. I understand that the audio recordings made of the interview will be the source of data as well as generalized demographic information.
2. Permit disclosure of identity to researchers with the understanding that identity will be changed to protect confidentiality.
3. Complete an interview with the co-investigator, Valerie Glass. The interview will last approximately an hour and a half.
4. Permit contact from the interviewer after the interview if there are any discrepancies in the data that need to be clarified.

IX. Subject's Permission

I have read and understand the Informed Consent and conditions of this project. I have had all my questions answered. I hereby acknowledge the above and give my voluntary consent:

_____ _____

Subject Signature Date

_____ _____

Subject Signature Date

Should I have any pertinent questions about this research, I may contact:

Dr. April Few, faculty advisor	540-231-2664	alfew@vt.edu
Valerie Glass, co-investigator	540-557-7278	vqglass@vt.edu
Joyce Arditti, PhD., department reviewer	540-231-5758	arditti@vt.edu

If I should have any questions about the protection of human research participants regarding this study, I may contact Dr. David Moore, Chair, Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects, telephone: (540) 231-4991; email moored@vt.edu; address: Research Compliance Office, 1880 Pratt Drive, Suite 2006 (0497), Blacksburg, VA 24061

This Informed Consent is valid from June 1st, 2007-June 1st, 2008.

Appendix C

Table 1 Demographics of Participants

		Residence	Rural/ Urban	Time Together	Age-approx	Education	Job	Class	Children (biological)	Children in home (biological)
Couple 1	Veronica	VA	Rural	2 years	mid 30s	no college	unemployed	working	2	1
Couple 1	Lora	VA	Rural	2 years	late 40s	no college	unemployed	working	3	0
Couple 2	Anna	NY	Urban	5 years	mid 30s	some college	therapist	working	2	2
Couple 2	DeeDee	NY	Urban	5 years	mid 30s	unsure	security	working	0	0
Couple 3	Rebecca	DC	Urban	1 year	late 20s	graduate school	teacher/graduate student	middle	1	1
Couple 3	Karla	DC	Urban	1 year	late 20s	graduate degree	administrator	middle	0	0
Couple 4	Betty	NJ	Small city	6 years	mid 40s	no college	factory	working	3	1
Couple 4	Chris	NJ	Small city	6 years	late 40s	no college	supervisory	working	0	0
Couple 5	Candice	DC	Urban	1 year	late 20s	college	social work	middle	1	1
Couple 5	Latasha	DC	Urban	1 year	early 30s	no college	security	middle	0	0
Couple 6	Tamara	VA	Small city	5 years	early 40s	no college	factory	working	3	0
Couple 6	Lynn	VA	Small city	5 years	early 40s	no college	factory-supervisory	working	1	1
Couple 7	Crystal	NC	Rural	2 years	early 30s	graduate school	graduate student	working	1	1
Couple 7	Shauna	NC	Rural	2 years	late 20s	some college	nursing aide	working	0	0
Couple 8	Shay	NC	Urban	9 years	mid 30s	college	Resturant manager	middle	0	0
Couple 8	Felicia	NC	Urban	9 years	mid 30s	college	customer service	middle	4	4

Couple 9	Francine	NC	Small city	10 years	mid 30s	graduate school	counselor	middle	1	1
Couple 9	Danica	NC	Small city	10 years	mid 30s	graduate school	student affairs	middle	1	1

Couple 10	Hazel	MD	Urban	4 years	early 30s	college	teacher	middle	1	1
Couple 10	Andi	MD	Urban	4 years	late 20s	some college	security	middle	0	0

Couple 11	Danielle	NC	Urban	8 years	late 20s	college	sales	upper/middle	0	0
Couple 11	Geri	NC	Urban	8 years	late 20s	college	teacher	upper/middle	0	0

Appendix D: Question #1: Coming Out-Coding Matrix

OPEN	AXIAL	SELECTIVE
CO=Coming out		
Coming out stories	Coming out story	Individual Coming Out
CO-Tell Mom first	Matrifocal	
CO within relationship	Simutaneous development	
Co prior to relationship		
First lesbian relationship		
CO no distress		
knew early		
"out" (in community)		
Relationship status		
Move in/living together	Couple Commitment	Couple Coming Out
Co parenting	Couple Becomes Commited Family	
CO tell mother	Couple Comes out to Extended Family	
"just there"	Couple Comes out to Community	
proposal/wedding		
Ceremony		
dated		
"our children"		
CO Mother react negative	Family Response initially	Process of Coming Out
CO Mother react ok	Family Response over time	
CO Mother response important	Couple Response to family reactions	
CO keep quiet		
CO not cut off		
CO boundary created		
CO ultimatium		
CO accept disapproval		
CO family disapprove		
CO fictivekin		
CO act different/interaction change		
CO change behavior with EF		
CO "know/don't talk"		
CO mother eventual acceptance		
"keep it in-home"		
partner attend family ritual		
CO Family embraces partner		

Appendix E: Question #2: Boundary Creation-Coding Matrix

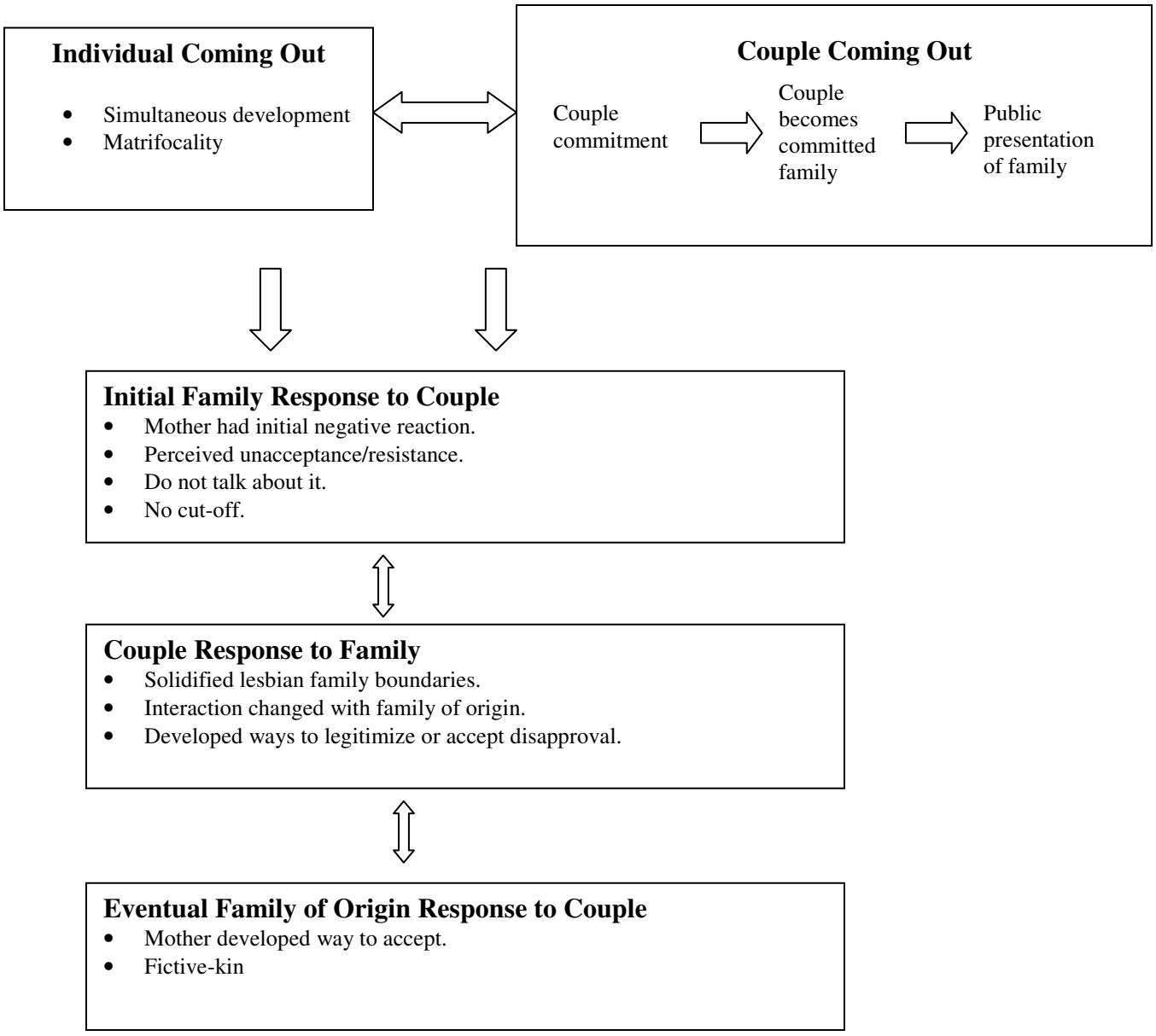
OPEN	AXIAL	SELECTIVE
communication key	Lesbian Family Identity	Non Permeable Boundary
coming out story		Permeable Boundary
compromise		Intervening Variables
sacrifice		
dependable		
strong		
role negotiation/"butch/fem"		
"masculine"/"feminine"		
self validation		
support		
struggle		
protective		
fun		
children/"our" children		
co-parenting		
comfort		
commitment		
"home"		
"sweet talking"		
balance		
proposal/engagement	Rituals in Lesbian Family	
wedding	Rituals in Extended Family	
fictive-kin	Childcare	
matrifocal/"mom"/"grandma"/"aunt"	Roles	
EF independence		
EF non-communicative		
EF ritual		
childcare		
EF message/EF expectation	Extended Family Structure	
EX (relationship with ex partner)	Extended Family Support	
EF not support relationship	Relationship with past partner	
EF support partner/adopt		
Change behavior (with EF)		
"know"/"don't talk"		
Define family-close (EF)		

Appendix F: Question #3: Support-Coding Matrix

OPEN	AXIAL	SELECTIVE
(EF=extended family)		
EF-ritual	Extended family support	Individual support
EF-connection	Ritual	Couple support
EF-activity family	Sense of individual belonging	Child support
EF-adopt partner	Childcare	Family support
EF-Childcare		
Church-not family support	Church support	
Church-"the Word"	Worship	
Church-connection	Sense of individual belonging	
Church-activity	Ritual	
Church-Trust		
Church-important		
Work	Work support	
Work positive	Acceptance of lesbian identity	
Work out	Acceptance of family	
Friends fun	Friends	
Friends connection	Recreation	
Friends talk/share	Self disclosure	
Friends trust issue	Problem solving	
GL social groups	Gay and Lesbian community	
GL connection	Leisure time	
GL seek community	Sense of belonging	
GL resources		
"each other" (EO)	"each other"	
EO talking		
EO communicating		
EO emotional support		
EO financial support		
EO parenting support		
EO life decisions		
EO fun		
EO individual growth		
EO couple problems		
needs/relationship need		
Therapy-ok		
Therapy-no		

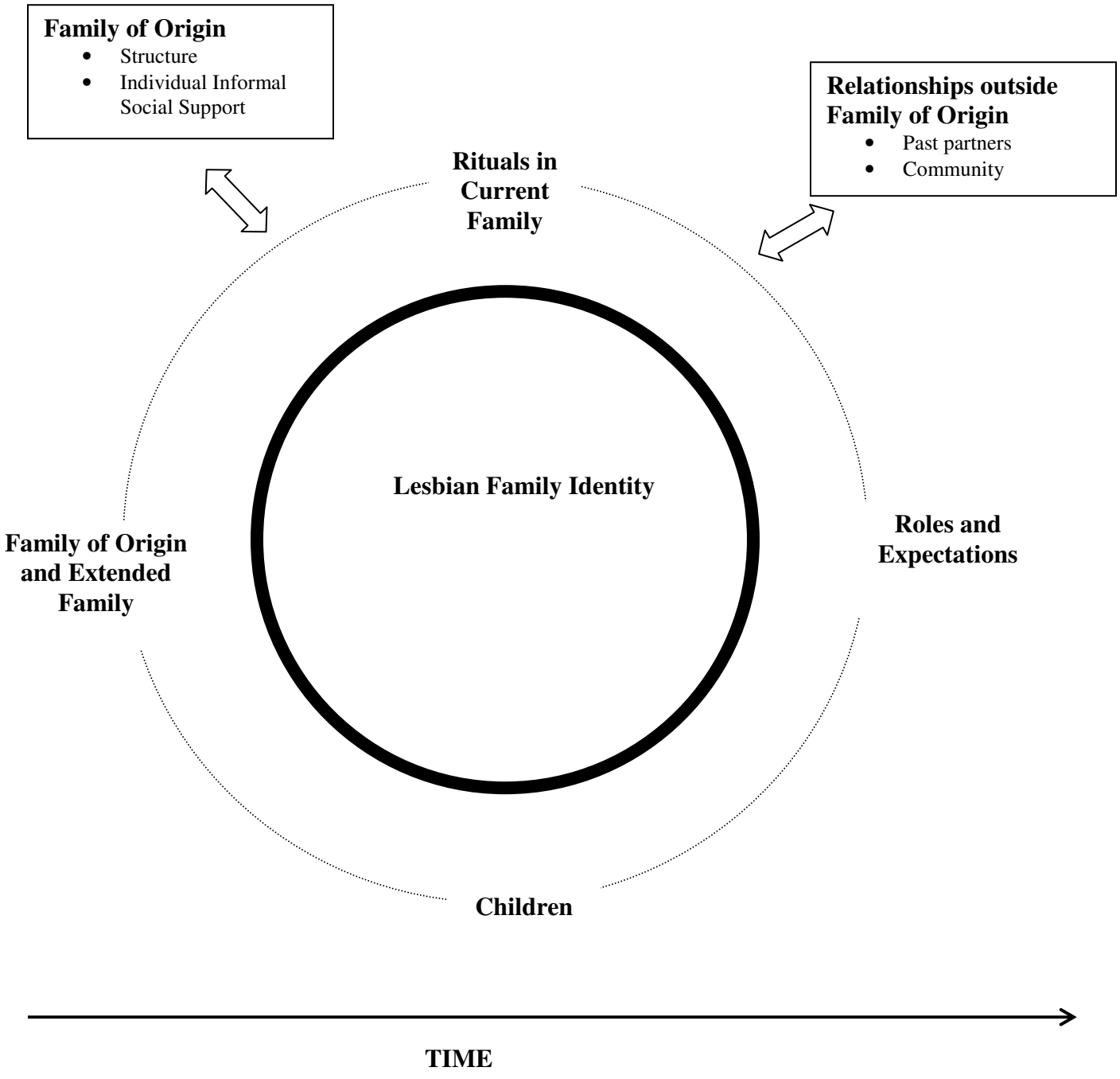
APPENDIX G: Figure 1

Figure 1: Simultaneous Coming Out Processes Towards Black Lesbian Couplehood



APPENDIX H: Figure 2

Figure 2: Lesbian Family Identity is Constructed by External Forces



APPENDIX I: Figure 3

Figure 3: How Social Support was Provided to Black Lesbians