

All In The Family: Looking at the intersection of family, community and disclosure in the lives of gay and lesbian elders

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All In The Family:

Looking at the intersection of family, community and disclosure in the
lives of gay and lesbian elders

Nerissa Irizarry

INTRODUCTION

America is getting old. Our aging population is one of our fastest growing populations, with medical innovations keeping us alive longer (Baca Zinn, 2008). The rate of America's aging population increased from 4.1% in 1900 to 12.4% in 2000 and is expected to more than double from 2010 to 2030 (Quadagno, 2005; Barker et al., 2006). Gays and lesbians are a part of that aging population. The gay and lesbian elders of the 21st century have endured an immense amount of social change. Such changes as the gay rights movement, civil rights movement, and women's rights have shaped their life experiences. This cohort has seen people brutalized by police for frequenting gay establishments and were forced to pass as heterosexual just to maintain employment and any semblance of quality of life. While social attitudes have generally improved, gays and lesbians still occupy an oppressed status in our society. In 29 US states, it is legal to fire someone for being lesbian, gay or bisexual (HRC, 2010). Similar discriminatory public policies affect gay and lesbian elders as well. In instances where a gay or lesbian senior is partnered, they face immense legal blockades which distinguish them from their heterosexual counterparts such as not being afforded the same social security benefits. Dubois (2006) points out gay and lesbian elders must engage in deliberate advance legal planning to protect themselves, their families and their property. Gay and lesbian elders must also cope with unique housing and medical challenges. In efforts to avoid interpersonal discrimination, many elders may conceal their homosexual identity. As of 2010, the United States Census does not count gay and lesbian couples. In many places throughout the United States, gay and lesbian community services do not extend care to the specific needs of older gays and lesbians. For such reasons, older gays and lesbians are a highly invisible population.

This study seeks to explore the ways in which gay and lesbian elders have negotiated their sexual identity within family and community settings. The process of coming out is a strong determinant for the quality of gay and lesbian peoples' interpersonal relationships. It is especially helpful to interview seniors because they represent a population whose experiences span a long period of time. These experiences are not only reflective of personal change and development, but also of societal and historical influences on the life course. By studying the intersection of family, community and coming out, which are all central to human identity, we can begin to address other social inequalities which plague groups. With that understanding, my study seeks to publicly highlight the familial and community experiences of an overlooked segment of our population.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The makeup of family has been an issue of debate in the moral and legal realms, with people fighting to claim the definition of a "real" family as legitimate over other's definitions. Those definitions vary depending on the demographic being studied, with Blacks, Whites, heterosexuals and homosexuals all viewed as holding parallel definitions of familial makeup (Baca Zinn et al., 2008). In the unique familial experiences of gays and lesbians, the existing literature surrounds two family models, chosen or created and biological (Weston, 1991; Patterson, 2000; Savin-Williams et al., 1998). For gays and lesbians age 50 and older, the research on familial constructions is obsolete and nearly nonexistent. With an understanding that choice/chosen family and biological family are normalized in our society as socially acceptable and are thus dominant, this literature review will set out to evaluate these models in the lives of gays and lesbians.

The majority of research surrounding biological family involvement in the lives of gay and lesbian people focuses on those relationships after coming out (Savin Williams et al., 1998; D'Augelli et al., 1998; Valentine et al., 2003). Considering the ability to conceal one's homosexual identity and pass as heterosexual, family members may be unaware of a relative's homosexual identity if it were not for the coming out process. Therefore, analyzing the relationships out gay people have with their families of origin can provide the most accurate picture of the influence of sexuality. Savin Williams (1998) tells us that a heterosexual parent's initial reactions to their children coming out is negative, characterized by feelings of grief, shame, guilt and shock. This research goes on to discuss the developmental process in which a parent's feelings toward their homosexual child usually shift to acceptance after time has passed. Similar research has found that disclosure of a homosexual identity during adolescence results in victimization within the family, often in the form of verbal attacks and less frequently in the form of physical attacks (D'Augelli, 1998). The finding in Savin Williams' (1998) research is consistent with the research on gay and lesbian senior's experiences with biological family. Rosenfeld (1999) and Muraco (2008) tell us that gay and lesbian elders find support in their biological family, especially when sexual identity is disclosed. In a study on the physical and mental health of older lesbian, gay and bisexual adults, results conclusively indicated that the most important factor identified by the participants in determining support satisfaction was that the support group member knew their sexual orientation (Grossman, 2006).

The majority of the research on out gay and lesbian people's experiences with biological families centers on the experiences of youth (14-21), leaving those that come out later in life grossly underrepresented. In the limited research that does address the role of biological family in the lives of older gays and lesbians, the issue of social support is a focus (Grossman et al.,

2000; Muraco et al., 2008). Muraco (2008) details how biological familial bonds among older gay men take on both negative and positive implications for the subjects. Further, outward disclosure of sexual identity among homosexual elders is often suppressed compared to the coming out experiences of homosexual youth (D'Augelli, 1998; Muraco, 2008; Rosenfeld, 1999). Given the generational variances within these two cohorts, research that treats gay and lesbian elders and youth as separate bodies is needed.

In the face of an often precarious experience with biological family, gay and lesbian people often adopt families of choice (Patterson, 2000; Orel, 2004). Orel's (2004) study followed 26 gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) seniors guided by questions in a focus group setting. The researcher's questions on family found that all participants had created families of choice throughout their lives. Beeler's (1999) study on 160 gay and lesbian people over the age of 45 found that 68% of their study's participants had families of choice. These GLB elders derived most of their social support from a friendship network, spending holidays with and relying on these networks of non-biologically related people when problems arose (Beeler et al., 1999).

The current, as well as historical, legal climate in the US has played a substantial role in structuring gay and lesbian peoples' interpersonal relationships. Such court decisions as *Bowers v. Hardwick* in 1986 and the Defense of Marriage Act in 1996 (DOMA) effectively criminalize and regulate the private actions and relations of lesbian and gay people. These cases are not isolated in a particular historical context, but rather reflect policy legacies. Miriam Smith (2008) writes that "policy legacies played a key role in reinforcing stigma for lesbian and gay political claims in the US." The Defense of Marriage Act marks the deliberate outlawing of same-sex marriage, simultaneously constraining the economic prosperity of coupled gays and lesbians and

illegitimizing those partnerships. The economic effects encompass unequal taxation and suspension of earned benefits (Badgett, 2007; Steinberger, 2009). These economic restrictions are felt particularly during later years, as gay and lesbian elders must take extra precautions just to have some semblance of security (Dubois, 2006). Further, gay and lesbian elders' understanding of traditional family undergoes a transformation as a result of discriminatory public policy (Barker et al., 2006). In the absence of accommodating laws, those individuals that comprise the social support network of gay and lesbian elders surpass being identified as solely friends and instead begin to take on roles conventionally reserved for biological family (Barker et al., 2006; de Vries & Hoctel, 2007). In de Vries and Hoctel's (2007) study of chosen families among older gays and lesbians, all but 1 of the 20 participants indicated that they considered their friends to be family. The participants indicated that their friends were loving, compassionate, loyal, dependable in times of need and overall accepting (de Vries & Hoctel, 2007). These findings led to the speculation that "the friends of older gay men and lesbians are defined in ways that one might expect would be applied to kin among heterosexual adults" (de Vries & Hoctel, 2007). These gay and lesbian elders negotiated the structure of their family life according to the social and legal limits imposed upon them.

By examining the existing research on GLB elders' familial experiences, we can conclude that there are large gaps. In particular, the characterization of family and roles family play in the lives of out GLB elders is only minimally addressed. Of the research that does exist on GLB elders' family relationships, only one delves into this group's concept of family as uniting both biological and chosen family models (Muraco et al., 2008). With this understanding, this paper looks to address some of these gaps. Given the research conducted on gay and lesbian

peoples' coming out experiences as they relate to family and community, I suspect that I will find my participants' experiences to reflect the stress that a stigmatized identity brings forth.

METHODS

Sample

The data analyzed for this study consists of interviews with 14 self-identified gay and lesbian elders conducted in mid-2010. Eleven of the participants reside in the greater Los Angeles area, 2 live in Philadelphia and 1 lives in Massachusetts. The sexes of these 14 elders were 12 females and 2 males. I used two sampling methods. For 5 of the participants, I used convenience sampling through the Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Center's (LAGLC) senior services program. Upon making contact with the LAGLC senior services coordinator, I was able to place an ad in their newsletter. Through that ad, 5 seniors who were interested in being subjects contacted. Of these 5 initial contacts, 4 of them became subjects. The fifth subject approached me while I was sitting in the courtyard of the LAGLC. The remaining 9 participants were obtained through snowball sampling. After initial contact with a few participants, I was able to gain access to more elders through referrals. In order to assure their comfort, the participants were allowed to choose the interview location. Those locations were often their homes, in one occasion I interviewed a subject at the LAGLC.

According to the LAGLC's criteria, individuals may receive senior services if they are at least fifty years of age. For this research, the LAGLC's age criterion of senior citizen is used. The subjects ranged in age from fifty to seventy-five, with one person being fifty and one being seventy-five. Eight of the subjects lived with a partner, the remaining six were single. Of the 6

that were single, one lived with a member of her biological family while the others lived alone. All of the subjects were White, and all were born in the United States. The majority (13/14) of the subjects had attained a college degree, and many had advanced degrees. Two of the participants were currently in graduate school, earning another degree to facilitate a career shift.

The interviews consisted of free form questions conducted over an hour to hour and a half period. The questions surrounded the general topic of community and narrowed to explore the concepts of family and community in the everyday lives of older gays and lesbians. All of the questions were constructed to address the familial experiences of the elders in their current life stage. In focusing on the elders' current life stage, I sought to capture the thoughts and perspectives which presently influence them. Additionally, the elders' sexual identity as gay or lesbian was viewed as heavily shaping those experiences. The questions were open ended, allowing the participants to answer freely and placing the elders' experiences at the forefront of the interview. Throughout the course of the interviews, I encouraged the participants to elaborate on their thoughts. This was a necessary step because the participants often made remarks chiding themselves for going off on tangents, stopped midway during responses or answered with a simple yes or no. Further, elaboration allowed for a richer analysis.

These in-depth interviews represented usage of a qualitative research technique. In light of the minimal research surrounding the topic of gay and lesbian elders, a qualitative approach proved to be the best research method. As Ambert et al. detail, qualitative research allows for "substantive contribution in studying those whose voices have not been heard before, groups that are difficult to access, and asking questions previously left out in prior research" (1995:883). The elders' narratives allowed for their diverse coming out experiences to emerge in the interviews,

providing an accurate representation of their concepts of family and community life. At the end of the interviews, I reviewed the participants' answers with them so as to ensure accurate representation of their experiences.

Coding

Analysis was performed at two separate times. First, I debriefed after each interview. By debriefing immediately after the interviews, I was able to record my first inferences. I began identifying common themes in these initial stages as well. Second, I coded once all of the interviews had been transcribed. This coding consisted of identifying and categorizing language under dominant themes. Two matters of importance emerged throughout every interview, the significance of disclosing a homosexual identity and the impact of identity on family and community relations. These dominant themes provide the basis for this paper.

RESULTS

When asked to define family, all of the participants noted their homosexual identity as influential on their familial experiences. This notation was particularly true when they listed biological family members. The participants regarded traditional family members such as siblings, children, parents, aunts and cousins as part of their familial makeup. Upon further questioning regarding support networks, all participants began to expand their definitions of family beyond exclusively biological ties. Throughout each of the participant's lives, friends, community members and exes filled the roles of support generally associated with blood relatives. These digressions from biological family revealed the creation of an alternative family form, recognized as chosen family. Often, they would comment that "family" was a very

complex word and holds many different meanings. An extended definition hinged on the elders' identity as an out gay or lesbian. Specifically, familial and community bonds endured transitions when the participant came out as homosexual. Those transitions both positively and negatively affected their interpersonal relations. Even for those that had been out for many years, disclosure of a homosexual identity continued to impact each and every relationship.

Intersection of family, community and coming out

The issue of disclosure was a recurrent theme in all of the participants' relationships with biological family. Many of the participants that shared their homosexual identity with family encountered considerable disruption to their familial bonds. This situation was even more likely if the biological family of a gay or lesbian person existed in an already precarious situation. For Derek¹, a gay man in his early fifties, rebuilding a relationship with his brother meant not only dealing with homophobia but other issues that strained their relationship. He chose to come out to his family many years ago. In Derek's case, coming out to his brother only further strained their relationship, resulting in a distant relationship between the two for many years. However, fully disclosing a homosexual identity resulted in a completely opposite reaction from Derek's mother. He expressed that his mother was supportive, and that they continued to maintain a loving relationship. Thus, disclosure affected Derek's familial relations differently as one bond was strengthened and the other broken.

Ben, a gay man in his late 50s, had a similar experience to Derek. Ben had come out as homosexual in his 30s, after a long-term heterosexual relationship. In Ben's coming out process,

¹ All names have been changed to ensure the confidentiality of participants' identity

he decided to include his mother, brother and sister. The reactions from his biological family were mixed. Ben's brother was harsh, as he initially wanted to sever all communication. In more recent years though, Ben told me that he has been working at rebuilding a relationship with his brother. On the contrary, Ben's mother and sister were supportive and he was able to retain close bonds with both women. Even though Ben had a close relationship with his mother, he acknowledged the tremendous effect coming out had on the relationship. He stated that "once you come out to your parents, the relationship is never really the same." Despite the risk of family opposition, coming out was necessary for Ben.

In my interviews with some of the participants, tension surrounding the participants' out homosexual identity hindered the ability to construct close bonds with biological family members. While all of the subjects had come out to the majority of their immediate family members by their current life stage, they had not always been so forthcoming. For Daphne, a lesbian in her late sixties, coming out was not the full disclosure process we know of today. Daphne moved across country for college, as means of separating herself from her parents so that they would not discover her lesbian identity. For many years, Daphne did not come out to her parents as a lesbian. In fact, it was not until her late 30s that Daphne had a conversation about her lesbian identity with her mother. Even then, Daphne only told her mother that she was living with "someone- a woman" when her mother was to come visit. Her mother's response of "Well, have you seen a doctor?" demonstrates the unwelcoming environment Daphne faced with her mother. For such reasons, Daphne chose to only have a marginal relationship with her biological family. To this day, Daphne maintains that marginal relationship. When I asked her what role her biological family plays in her life now, Daphne responded "If I completely fell apart, they would not know what to do with me."

For many of the participants, long-standing hostility characterized their current relations with biological family. When asked to define family, Star, a lesbian in her late sixties, said that she has a sister. She added, laughing, that she is not sure her sister could be considered her family. I asked her to explain what she meant and Star responded that her sister is Catholic and feels strongly about her “activity.” For Star, being an out lesbian to her sister meant renouncing any type of sisterly bond. Patty, a lesbian in her early 60s, had a similar experience when she came out to her mother. Prior to coming out as a lesbian, Patty was in a heterosexual marriage and had birthed children. She acknowledged her internalized homophobia as the reason for staying closeted for so many years. After being in a relationship with another woman for a few years, Patty realized she could no longer remain closeted. Patty came out to her mother by introducing her long-term partner. The mother-daughter relationship subsequently became troubled. Patty’s mother never fully accepted her daughter’s lesbian identity, instead referring to Patty’s partner as her sister. After reflecting on the story she had just told me, Patty stated that she could not go back in the closet and that all of her relationships had to have openness to them.

A few of the participants were able to preserve relationships with their biological family by not explicitly coming out to relatives. Daphne is engaged in a long (nearly quarter of a century) relationship with another woman. Daphne told me her biological family “knows” her partner is not a roommate or friend but a woman she is intimately involved with. Yet, Daphne’s family always referred to her partner as her “friend.” I mentioned earlier that Daphne only had a marginal relationship with her biological relatives and indeed, Daphne and her partner rarely visited her biological family. From our conversation, it seems that even these infrequent visits were only able to occur under the pretense of Daphne not fully expressing or disclosing her lesbian identity. In fact, Daphne shared that she has “lived her life under the radar and

(subsequently) avoided discrimination.” In concealing her lesbian identity, Daphne has been able to evade overt prejudices from her family and greater society.

For Star, concealing her lesbian identity to certain members of her community was a means of self-preservation. When I asked Star to describe who was a part of her community now, she told me about a senior center that she frequents. At this center, Star participates in potluck dinners and exercise programs. Star told me that she considers some of the seniors from this center to be her friends. However, this senior center does not have any programs aimed at serving gays and lesbians and serves a largely heterosexual population. Star had an expression of surprise when she reflected that she connected with heterosexual seniors. I asked her if she shared her lesbian identity with this group of friends. Star responded with vehemence “no, no, no.” In Star’s community, living as an out lesbian was not an option for all of her interactions.

A few of the participants had been previously married to someone of the opposite sex and have children as a result of those relationships. The children of all the participants are adults over the age of thirty. All of the participants had disclosed their homosexual identity to their children at the time of interview. This disclosure had both negative and positive effects on the parent-child relationship. Rita came out as a lesbian later in life, around the age of sixty. Upon accepting her lesbian identity, she decided to come out to her daughter. Rita revealed that coming out to her daughter was a huge mistake. Rita’s daughter reacted harshly, expressing to her mother that she wanted no part of her “lesbian lifestyle.” Rita explained that her daughter’s reaction meant sharing any feelings of coming out or dating a woman were unwelcome in their relationship. The instability of this relationship is exacerbated by the fact that Rita is economically dependent on her daughter. Rita told me that they have compromised amidst this conflict, resulting in Rita

denying her identity in the presence of her daughter. Consequently, Rita's relationship with her daughter surrounds economic dependence and is devoid of any emotional warmth. For Bev, a lesbian in her early sixties, her two children are split on accepting her identity. Bev stated that she has a close relationship with her daughter. The two visited frequently and Bev's daughter sought her mother's advice on life issues. Bev expressed that her lesbian identity was not a problem in her and her daughter's relationship, perhaps even spurring confidence. But Bev's relationship with her son was tenuous. She shared that they had little contact and that he had "different ideals" than she did.

Two of the participants I interviewed maintained close relations with their adult children after coming out as homosexual. For Pam and Patty, a lesbian couple in their 60s, their children from earlier heterosexual unions were a central part of their familial community. When I asked about family, both women proudly showed me pictures of their daughters. They both told me that their daughters visited and called frequently. Overall, the mother-daughter bonds were not negatively influenced by the mothers' identities as out lesbians. Indeed, Star's relationship with her daughter may be more profound because of Star's homosexual identity. Star's daughter identifies as a lesbian. In their shared identity status, the two share the intimate knowledge that comes along with being part of a stigmatized group.

Although many of the participants had tumultuous relationships with their parents and siblings, with ups and downs ensuing through the years, the presence of grandchildren and nieces and nephews proved to be sources of acceptance and understanding. Sue stated that she was "out to everyone," her biological familial network of nieces, nephews, and grandchildren were all aware that she is a lesbian. She made this statement with great pride, saying that all of the kids

loved her. Derek also had established bonds with his nephews, spending time visiting together in more recent years. Kathy, a lesbian in her mid-60s, also told me that she had close relationships with her nieces and nephews. For these three participants, disclosing their gay or lesbian identity to younger, extended family resulted in less disruption to the relationships. Kathy, Sue and Derek were able to find consolation in times of distress and share triumphs with extended, younger family members.

As was noted previously, nearly all of the participants came out later in life. Although, many did mention that they were aware of being homosexually oriented from a young age. Once the participants began to identify as gay or lesbian, their social networks endured tremendous change. The presence of a fictive kin network was consistent with an out gay or lesbian identity. All of the participants said that they considered friends, colleagues, exes or neighbors as comprising their chosen family community. Lucy, a lesbian in her late 50s, told me that she has been creating family for over 30 years. Lucy's community reflects her social status as a lesbian as well as her profession as an artist. Suzy, a lesbian in her 50s, was part of a women's softball league when she came out. The softball league was comprised primarily of lesbians. During Suzy's coming out process, her connection with the softball league transformed from just athletic to familial. The women's softball league also provided Suzy with a basis from which to begin building her connection to a gay community.

Throughout the majority of the participants' interviews, involvement in gay and lesbian oriented organizations was constantly discussed. Kathy and Jean, both lesbians in their 60s, were members of a local Quaker lesbian group for nearly 20 years. They characterized their experiences in the organization as a wonderful way to nurture camaraderie with other like-

minded women. Pam and Patty, a lesbian couple in their 60s, also had long-term ties with a lesbian group. They described the group as a “place where it is easier and safer to be yourself.” Pam and Patty’s community is diverse, consisting of heterosexual and homosexual people. But when the women discussed the heterosexual members of their community, they were explained as tolerant. Pam and Patty elaborated that their ‘core’ contains gay and lesbian people, but that they associated with understanding heterosexual people. Upon further discussion of their heterosexual network of friends, Pam and Patty deemed themselves the token lesbian friends. Suzy also reflected on her preference to having close relations with other lesbians. When asked how her community reflects her identity as a lesbian, she stated that “there is something comfortable” when her home is filled with lesbians. While association with heterosexuals allowed for some of the participants to consider them part of their community, strong chemistry was more often found with others who identified as being gay or lesbian.

For many of the participants, belonging to a specific group that reflected their identification as an out gay or lesbian person enhanced the depth of their interpersonal relations. Four of the women belong to an over 40 women’s group. This group is specifically for women who love women and members meet once a week for socializing. Nancy, a lesbian in her mid-70s, characterized the women’s group as “instant family and community.” Nancy joined the group several years ago, after being approached by two other members at a concert. She told me that this group represents the majority of her community now. In the past, Nancy established her community within the walls of gay bars. She acknowledged that at her current life stage, professional and physical maturity has altered her path to creating community. Through the women’s group, Nancy found built-in kinship. Finding already integrated connections was especially appealing for Star as well. In Star’s other community at the senior center, being

closeted hinders her ability to forge close bonds with members. This group has provided Star with opportunities to engage with other lesbians and create “family-like connections.” Through membership with the women’s group, several of the participants are able to foster relationships with people they know they can find comfort, safety and commonality.

DISCUSSION

My study gives insight to the distinct ways in which disclosure of a homosexual identity impacts gay and lesbian elders’ family and community life. The interviewee’s responses demonstrated how a politically and socially invisible group has navigated through obstacles to take control of their lives. In the face of bearing a stigmatized identity, these participants have re-created the traditional definitions of family and community to reflect their unique needs. The participants’ responses were parallel to the results of similar research (Muraco et al., 2008; Orel, 2004; Orel, 2006; Patterson, 2000). In exercising agency, these gay and lesbian elders have adopted family models akin to the “modern family form” (Baca Zinn et al., 2008). The common forms of family included families of origin as well as chosen family. Coming out had the most profound effect on each of the participant’s communal experiences. In outwardly declaring their homosexual identities, familial relations were challenged and reconstructed. Additionally, the dominance of homophobia in our society has shaped and transformed each of the participant’s lives. Operating under all of these contexts, gay and lesbian elders have pioneered the family form and created rules of their own.

An out gay or lesbian identity directly correlated with degree of closeness in all of the participants’ interpersonal relationships. Virtually none of the participants had explicitly identified as homosexual during their adolescence. Rather, some of the subjects had come out

after college, into their middle aged years, and even up until their senior years. Several people in this group had suppressed their identity for the majority of their life, passing as heterosexual by getting married to people of the opposite sex. Through a heterosexual union, the participants ascribed to a normative identity and concealed their sexually deviant one. Once the subjects moved toward accepting their gay identity and coming out, their social support networks entered transitional stages. The participants were effectively rearranging their interpersonal relations to reflect their out gay or lesbian identity. Those participants that had disclosed their homosexual identity to their children, parents and siblings and were met with loving arms stated that their relations with biological family were more meaningful. These accounts are consistent with Orel's (2004) study in which gay elders with positive familial experiences reported those experiences to be "extremely important for their sense of well-being." In contrast, participants who encountered hostility found kinship with friends, neighbors, community members, exes and colleagues. Thus, finding understanding and acceptance of one's gay or lesbian identity in others became critical in cultivating authentic familial bonds.

The formation of alternative family in the lives of gay and lesbian people has been widely researched and deemed 'chosen family' (Weston, 1991). In recent years, research has opened to recognize the unique familial experiences of gay and lesbian elders (Beeler, 1999; Muraco, 2008; Orel, 2004). These studies are consistent with my results of gay and lesbian elders' creation of chosen family as sources of primary support. By choosing one's family, oppressed people such as these subjects are able to gain the warmth and love they may otherwise be denied. A family of choice provides protection from a harsh, homophobic world. Notably, Beeler et al. found in their study that friendship networks may be among the most important sources of support for older lesbians and gay men (1999:38). Indeed, Bev stated that "the world is not friendly to us...we

must create our family.” For all of the participants that had created family, emotional investments in friends manifested into strong support networks. Chosen families for the participants filled a wide range of needs, all of which are typically regarded as organic of biological families. Baca Zinn (2008) tells us that cultural ideals of family as “a haven of primary fulfillment and meaningful experience” perpetuate myths of the monolithic family. Further, such ideals largely erase homosexuals from being part of the glorified nuclear family. The prevalence of chosen families in the lives of gays and lesbians defies the monolithic family model. Through observation of chosen family in the lives of these gay and lesbian elders, we may conclude that alternate family forms are enacted as means of coping with a socially stigmatized identity.

All of the participants indicated the importance of socializing with other out gay and lesbian people as essential to their high quality of life. The participants’ sexual identity gave them access to a community from which they built their chosen family. For these gay and lesbian elders, being part of a minority population contributed to their finding a place of acceptance. Throughout their lives, political activism and community resource centers have helped make like-minded folks a part of their chosen family. All of the participants expressed involvement in anti-GLB legislation, women’s rights or activities within GLB aimed senior services as a means of accessing friendships. Rita’s enrollment at a GLB senior poetry group gave her opportunities to a community in which to share her feelings surrounding coming out. Rita’s group is the ears and heart her biological family does not provide. Nancy also found kindness in her involvement with the over 40 women’s group. The women’s group saves Nancy from social isolation. These findings are mirrored in other research, in which Grossman (2000) found that gay and lesbian seniors received more social support from GLB friends than families of origin. Additionally,

Orel's (2006) study details that it was because of the LGBT community and other social networks that her participants were able to be comfortable with their own sexual orientation.

The idea of lesbian and gay family formation is rigidly regulated by the law in the United States. Because lesbian and gay individuals are unable to benefit from the federal recognition and protection of marriage, members of lesbian and gay communities are forced to create informal, and ultimately illegitimate, communities. The continuance of such discriminatory laws as DOMA and anti-sodomy laws up until 2003 impacted the life course of older gays and lesbians in a much more profound manner than did heterosexuals or even younger LGBT people. In the lives of older gays and lesbians, public policy intruded on their personal lives. Without legal legitimacy or recognition, the chosen family networks of gay and lesbian elders are precarious. The elders I interviewed were aware of their chosen family's legal instability, and attempted to compensate for those legal deficiencies through extensive planning. Dubois (2006) advocates for such preparation on behalf of gay and lesbian elders stating that "because of the rapidly changing area of LGBT rights, LGBT elders should consider regular legal consultations regarding appropriate legal documents and safeguards." For older gays and lesbians, discriminatory public policy that has transcended time became a backdrop to their daily lives.

CONCLUSION

Through this research, we are able to observe the critical role an out homosexual identity plays in the interpersonal relations of this largely invisible group. The fact that gay and lesbian elders have established and are able to maintain chosen family bonds is encouraging. Through the interviews, we can begin to understand the ways in which gay and lesbian elders have maneuvered through their stigmatized identity and created familial havens of their own. Their

perseverance in a world that does little to socially or politically reinforce their community is indicative of gay and lesbian elders' resilience. Although chosen family is a demonstration of exercising agency over one's life, fictive kin are not afforded legal sanctions. In situations where gay and lesbian people are thrust out and abandoned by their biological family, chosen families are not allowed to step in and take their place. In the face of the law's failure to recognize the legitimacy of gay and lesbian families, they are often left in legally and socially volatile situations. Given gay and lesbian elders physical issues associated with aging, they are even more vulnerable to such discriminatory public policies. In recent years our society has seen an increase in people coming out as lesbian, gay or bisexual at younger ages. In years to come, the gay and lesbian aging population will most likely expand. Our society cannot afford to ignore gay and lesbian elders much longer; the sheer growth of the population will push for acknowledgement. Soon, improved policies that target the needs of older gays and lesbians will be desperately necessary.

Lastly, but most importantly, I would like to extend a heartfelt thanks to all of the seniors. Their willingness to open their homes and share their stories with me was remarkably generous. Their openness to trust a curious student inspired me, and gives me hope in the humanity of others. I would also like to thank the Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Center. The help I received from the senior services office allowed for this research to leave the planning stages. All of the seniors have opened my eyes, and further motivated my passion for social change. My hopes are that I will see the day when a homosexual identity only serves to enrich one's life.

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