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The Process of Becoming a Strong GLBT Family: A Grounded Theory

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THE PROCESS OF BECOMING A STRONG GLBT FAMILY:

A GROUNDED THEORY

by

Maureen E. Todd

A DISSERTATION

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THE PROCESS OF BECOMING A STRONG GLBT FAMILY:

A GROUNDED THEORY

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University of Nebraska, 2011

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Using the qualitative method of grounded theory, data were collected from 21 couples who identified as Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and/or Transgender (GLBT) from across the country. The purpose of this grounded theory was to generate a model that explains the process of developing family strengths in GLBT couples. In-depth interviews (both in person and phone interviews), observations with field notes, and member checking were used. A theoretical model was developed describing 1) the central phenomenon of strong GLBT families, 2) the contexts in which GLBT families thrive, 3) the various strategies GLBT couples use to build and maintain their strengths, and 4) the intervening conditions and outcomes of these strengths. These findings support the notion that strong GLBT families are more similar to strong heterosexual families than they are different and offer alternatives to the standard problem focused approach to studying GLBT families. This research can assist clinicians in helping GLBT couples bolster their strength and suggests implications for public policy.
To my family, extended, nuclear and created.
I am grateful to the many people in my life who helped me write this story. First and foremost, I could not have completed this dissertation or graduate school without the love and encouragement my family continually provides. This project would not have taken shape without the support of my husband, Buster Cunningham. Your willingness to engage in numerous dinnertime conversations about the questions and issues I grappled with in this dissertation has enriched my thinking about this manuscript. Your tireless notes on earlier drafts of this text kept me sane, made me laugh and above all, made this a better paper. I love you. My parents, Sandra Meyers, Larry Todd, and Becky Thomas made this dissertation and degree possible. Thank you for encouraging my curiosity, showing me that school actually is interesting if you find the right subject, and helping me discover that data truly can be fun, provided it is not damn numbers. To Meagan Todd and Peter Dam, thank you for listening to me and helping me in so many ways I have lost count. I am equally grateful to my friend family across the country (particularly my sisterfriends, Misty and Carly). Thank you for attending my presentations, asking me about the progress of my ideas when writer’s block had silenced my words and helping me let the ideas come in their own time.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL ORIENTATION

Much of the existing research conducted on families is problem focused. This is especially true for gay and lesbian families. In most studies, the current trend in family research is to compare gay and lesbian families to heterosexual families (Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). In this hierarchical arrangement, if differences between the two groups emerge they are often characterized as deficiencies of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) families (Baumrind, 1995). Many of the current research designs place the burden of proof on same-sex families to prove how “normal” they are and that they are worthy partners and parents (Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). Additionally, much of the research that compares same-sex families to heterosexual families has been designed to address negative assumptions that are present in judicial proceedings, legislative initiatives and public policy pertinent to the family lives of same-sex couples (Patterson & Redding, 1996). Thus, research focusing on the unique strengths same-sex families possess, particularly considering the adversity they face needs to be conducted. Today we have an International Family Strengths Model that proposes six major qualities that provide a supportive foundation for strong heterosexual families (DeFrain & Asay, 2007; Stinnett & DeFrain, 1985). However, there has never been a strengths-based study focusing on the traits that help gay and lesbian families cope with the challenges they face in
life from their cultural perspective. Clearly, exploratory research needs to be conducted in this area.

Lack of institutional and social support for any family type often results in negative consequences for the family. For example, a lack of emotional and tangible support is linked to poorer physical and mental health for nonparent caregivers (Williamson, Softas-Nall & Miller, 2003; Hill, 2010). Moreover, data from the 1999 National Survey of America reveal that children living in two-parent biological cohabiting families often have worse outcomes, including poor school performance, psychological distress, and behavioral problems, than children living with two-parent married biological families (Brown, 2004). Many factors contributed to the worse outcomes for these children, including economic hardships, psychological resources, behavior of the children, and a lack of institutional support for cohabiting couples. This deficiency of institution and social support has serious implications for gay and lesbian couples as they lack the right to legally marry and have that marriage recognized in many states (Harris, Teitelbaum, & Carbone, 2005). As the institutional support for gay families increases, there will be less stigma associated with being gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender identified and more people will feel able to be out with their families. As this takes place, we will potentially see an increase in the number of gay and lesbian families and an increase in social support. Thus, an understanding of the strengths gay and lesbian families have is important to improving the institutional support these families receive.

Additionally, there is a large overlap in the distributions for relational functioning and quality for both same-sex headed families and heterosexual headed families. This means that gay and lesbian couples are as happy in their relationships and have as many of the same
strengths as heterosexual couples (Kurdek, 2004; Kurdek, 2006; Gottman, Levenson, Gross, Fredrickson, McCoy, Rosenthal, Ruef, & Yoshimoto, 2003; Kurdek, 1998; Koepke, Hare, & Moran, 1992; Patterson, 2000; Moore, 2008; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). Consequently, gaining a more comprehensive understanding of relational functioning and family strengths that this dissertation will provide is needed.

The knowledge gained from family strengths-based research with GLBT couples will help to expand the current literature on this often marginalized population. It will give family practitioners a lens through which to see gay and lesbian families and assess these family types. Additionally, it will give social servants an understanding of family strengths to work with gay or lesbian families in any number of public agencies. It will shift the burden of proof from homosexual families and allow researchers to explore the positive aspects of same-sex relationships and address how these aspects can be built into the lives of other families.

The purpose of qualitative research is to understand and explain the meaning participants give to the central phenomenon of the research study (Morrow & Smith, 2000). More specifically, Creswell (2007) defines qualitative research as an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a real setting. Thus, using a qualitative methodology allowed the researcher to study the phenomenon of strong gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) families in a naturalistic situation.
Rationale for Use of Qualitative Methods

Qualitative research is well suited for this research problem as the voices and complex views of this marginalized group will be captured. Qualitative investigation also will allow the context of the current political debate about family rights of GLBT individuals, the context of the geographical region of the participants and the context of their own families to enter into the analysis. The contextual factors add a complex layer to the research problem, yet with rigorous qualitative research, rich descriptions of complex phenomenon can be created (LaSala, 2005). Additionally, although researchers have an understanding of the variables that make up a strong heterosexual family, it is not known if they are the same variables that make up a strong same-sex family. Thus, exploration is needed.

Grounded theory is a method of qualitative inquiry in which a new theory is developed. It is an inductive method of theory development and is grounded in the views of the participants (Creswell, 2007). The grounded theory approach is well-matched for this research problem as an existing social science theory. Due to the results of the current study, the International Family Strengths Model has now been modified and shaped to create a family strengths model for GLBT couples. Moreover, grounded theory is well suited for expanding the research area of family strengths as it will add the element of the developmental progress of strengths and increase of strength over time to the current literature which mainly focuses on qualities and characteristics of strength. The potential to yield concepts that generate new behavioral theories is just one of the many ways qualitative research is particularly well-matched for the research problem (LaSala, 2005).
Purpose

The purpose of this grounded theory study is to generate a theory that explains the process of developing family strengths for GLBT couples across the country. At this stage of the research, family strengths will be generally defined as the key qualities that provide the supportive foundation strong couples and families need to succeed and flourish (Olson, DeFrain & Skogrand, 2011). Further, this project assesses the dynamic and reciprocal progression of gaining family strength and becoming a strong family.

Research Questions

Major Questions

1) What is the process of becoming a strong GLBT family?
2) What are the qualities of strong GLBT families?

Subquestions:

1) What is the most important part of the process of becoming a strong family?
2) What contributes to this process?
3) What/who are the important parts in becoming a strong family?
4) What are the outcomes of this process?

Worldview

The worldview that will be used in this dissertation will be post-positivism. Post-positivism uses multiple perspectives from participants and avoids the perspective of a single reality (Creswell, 2007). Post-positivism also espouses thorough data collection and analysis of the data. For qualitative research to be rigorous, well respected and heard within the scientific community, a certain precision must be used (Creswell, 2007). Further, to fully hear the voices of many individuals, not just the lump of responses one attains in quantitative data, researchers must respect multiple perspectives and move away from the idea that there is only one reality.
that can be generalized to the rest of the population. This is what makes qualitative inquiry interesting and unique. This worldview will inform this dissertation by setting a rigorous foundation of data collection and analysis with validity checks along the way (Creswell, 2007). Moreover, in working with this marginalized population it will allow individual voices to be heard. As this study will demonstrate, not all GLBT individuals have the same experiences within their relationships. The process of becoming a strong family is shaped by community, extended family, friends, work and numerous other factors. A post-positivist lens will allow both the author and the readers to fully access these multiple perspectives on family.

**Theoretical Perspective**

The theory that will guide this project is the International Family Strengths Model. It was developed by Stinnett and DeFrain (1985) and expanded to a global perspective by DeFrain and Asay (2007) as a positive approach to studying couples and families. While the original Family Strengths Model was developed based on research with family members in the United States, this model has been expanded and reconceptualized over the past 30 years. This model is now based on research from 27,000 family members in 38 countries around the world (DeFrain & Asay, 2007; DeFrain, 2011, personal communication). Thus, this model is now referred to as the International Family Strengths Model. The International Family Strengths Model, as it stands today, proposes six key qualities that provide the supportive foundation strong heterosexual couples and families need to succeed and flourish (DeFrain & Asay, 2007). These qualities are: commitment, appreciation and affection, positive communication and conflict resolution, enjoyable time together, spiritual well-being and shared values, and effective management of stress and crisis. All of these qualities interact with each other and are interrelated, meaning
that, for example, how well a heterosexual family is able to effectively manage stress and crisis has an impact on how able they are to spend enjoyable time together.

For relationships to be strong, commitment is essential. Showing commitment to each other means “investing time and energy in family activities and not letting their work or other priorities take too much time away from family interactions” (Olson & DeFrain, 2006, p.72). Family members show appreciation and affection by letting others know how deeply they care (Olson & DeFrain, 2006, p. 71). Behaviors that convey appreciation and affection in other ways include: caring for each other, having fun together, respecting individuality, playfulness, and humor.

A third quality of strong marriages and families is positive communication. Communication fosters sharing which promotes connection between marriage partners and other members of a family. Through sharing feelings, giving compliments, avoiding blame, being able to compromise, listening, and agreeing to disagree, families display positive communication patterns with each other (DeFrain & Stinnett, 2002).

Enjoyable time together as a couple and family is identified as a fourth quality of strong families. DeFrain and Stinnett (2002, p. 50) state, “quality time in great quantity, the belief that good things take time, enjoying each other’s company, simple good times, and sharing fun times” are elements that foster enjoyable time together. The fifth component of strong families is spiritual well-being and shared values. In their research, DeFrain and Stinnett (2002) found that having a sense of hope, faith, humor, compassion, shared ethical values, and oneness with humankind are among the elements contributing to a sense of spiritual well-being.
The final quality of strong marriages and families is their ability to effectively manage stress and crisis. DeFrain and Stinnett (2002) suggest that adaptability, seeing crises as both challenges and opportunities, growing through crises together, openness to change and resilience are important elements in developing strength-inducing responses to stress and crisis. Most families face a multitude of crises throughout their lives together, but what sets strong families apart is their effectiveness in dealing with these problems.

These six tenets of strong families and the family strengths theory will be the theoretical lens used through which to view the data. While a theory of GLBT family strengths will be developed based in the qualitative data analysis (the theory will be grounded in the data) this social science theory will guide and inform the research process. The ways in which this theoretical perspective guided and informed this project are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Studies conducted in the grounded theory tradition develop a theory that is grounded in the views of the participants (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). The International Family Strengths Model was not used as a framework until after the new theory was developed. The grounded theory was generated based on a qualitative analysis and only then was it compared to the International Family Strengths Model to explore similarities and differences. This way, the researcher was not biased and unnecessarily tied to the existing theory, and this allowed the new theory to emerge from the participants’ views. The comparison to the existing International Family Strengths Model informed the final stages of theory development and served as a means of comparison.
A large amount of data have been collected about family strengths, yet researchers have never explicitly asked participants if they identified as GLBT, nor have they specifically focused on a GLBT population. This is truly a critical addition to our understanding of family life and dynamics. Yet, heterosexual families are not the only family type in the United States. GLBT families, while always in existence, have recently begun to emerge as a legitimate, and accepted family type among the general population.

**Terminology**

As the basis of this project and much of the literature discussed in the current study relates to people who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual and/or transgender (GLBT), a discussion about the common terms and phrases associated with the gay community is warranted. While the reader may be aware of some of the more common terms, some complex ideas surrounding the differences between and intersection of sexual orientation and gender identity are important to disentangle. The following section will serve to provide a basic understanding of GLBT terms used within this dissertation. It is important to note that each person uses terms in her or his unique way and there are some regional differences in the meaning of terms. Thus, a full discussion of every term used and associated with the gay community is outside the scope of this dissertation. For further information on terms and symbols, please see Campos, 2005.

The term sexual orientation describes a person’s emotional, physical, and sexual attractions to other people. When one is attracted to persons of the other sex, their sexual orientation would be heterosexual; when attracted to the same sex, their sexual orientation would be gay or lesbian. An attraction to both the other gender and the same gender would indicate a sexual orientation that is defined as bisexual. The term sexual orientation has to do
with a person’s core erotic inclination, and not necessarily her or his sexual history or activity. For example a gay man may be married to a woman, but feel sexually and emotionally attracted to men (Campos, 2005).

Gender identity relates to a person’s self perception or self acceptance of being male, female, both or neither. To ease the discussion of this gender continuum, the alternate gender neutral pronouns of ze and hir are preferred by some gender variant persons. Ze and hir replace he/she and his/her, respectively. A person’s gender identity is not necessarily congruent with his or her biological sex. For example, a biological woman may identify more as a man, or identify as transgender. The term transgender describes people whose gender identify and/or gender expression does not match their biological sex. Often people who identify as transgender elect to have gender reassignment surgery and are surgically modified so that their body matches their gender identity. A woman who identifies as a man may have a hysterectomy to remove her ovaries and/or uterus, take male hormones such as testosterone to stimulate the growth of facial and body hair and deepen the voice, or remove her breast tissue to appear and feel more male. This individual would often be referred to as someone who is a Female to Male (FTM) or as a Transman. On the other side of the gender continuum, if a biological man identified more as a female, ze would be referred to as someone who is Male to Female (MTF) or as a Transwoman. Transgender persons can identify as heterosexual, gay, lesbian, or bisexual (Transacademics.org).

The intersection of gender identity and sexual orientation has the potential to become complicated, particularly when someone is in the process of transitioning, or beginning to dress and live in the manner of the gender they identify with (e.g., an FTM would be in the process of
transitioning if ze was taking hormone replacement therapy and dressing exclusively as a man in hir daily life). A woman who identified as a man (i.e., FTM) who was sexually and emotionally attracted to women would probably identify as a heterosexual as hir gender identity was male and ze was attracted to females (Campos, 2005).

The idea of coming out of the closet or coming out relates to the ongoing process of unveiling one’s sexual or gender identity. The closet is a metaphor for hiding or keeping a secret and through the process of coming out, a GLBT identified person would reveal his/her/hir sexual orientation or gender identity to others. While the coming out process is different for every person, it generally follows the pattern of a person first recognizing and acknowledging his/her/hir non-heterosexual status and then deciding to reveal it to others. It is important to note that this is an ongoing process and each time someone reveals this information to another person, he/she/ze is coming out of the closet. It is through this process that people can be out in some places and to some people, but not out or closeted in other situations.

Finally, the term queer while once used as offensive slang to describe GLBT persons, is now an umbrella term signifying the GLBT community’s strength and pride. In the 1980’s a political activist group, Queer Nation, which will be discussed in greater detail later in this dissertation, reclaimed this derogatory term with their mantra “We’re here! We’re Queer, Get used to it!” (Campos, 2005). This term, as with many reclaimed terms, is still used as a slur in some situations, is offensive to some and certainly still politically charged, and should be used with caution. That said, queer has become a term of empowerment and some academic discourse is assigned under Queer Literature, many universities have Queer Studies programs, and a large body of literature was born out of Queer Theory (discussed at greater length later in
Moreover, the term _queer_ is seen by some as the most inclusive way to describe the GLBT community, as not all people identify in the same way and providing the _alphabet soup_ of adding more letters onto the acronym GLBT becomes cumbersome (Campos, 2005). The terms discussed in this section will be used throughout the dissertation and a basic understanding of them will aid the reader.

**Outline of Dissertation**

This dissertation is divided into five chapters and an appendix section. The first chapter provides a brief introduction, discussing family strengths research and theory, the GLBT community, the rationale for the study, the rationale for using qualitative research methods, a statement of the problem, and the research questions used in this study. This chapter will acquaint the reader with a basic understanding of terminology used in the following chapters as well as provide an argument about the significance of the research. Chapter Two presents a comprehensive review of the literature, including a brief history of GLBT relationships in America and the GLBT movement. This history is important as it impacts and shapes the current climate regarding GLBT families. In order to gain a complete understanding of the _how and why_ of GLBT family strengths, it is important to know the progression of events that led to this discussion. The third chapter describes the research methods including selection of participants, the forms of data collection, data analysis, the validation strategies use to increase the validity and reliability of the study, potential ethical issues, and the role and background of the researcher. Chapter Four presents and highlights the results of the open, axial and selective coding analyses with thick and rich quotes representing different perspectives and a path model of the results. This is arguably the most important section of the dissertation as the
research questions and sub-questions will be answered and the purpose of the study will be addressed. The fifth and final chapter expands the results of the study by way of discussion, the implications for theory development, practice, public policy, future research, the strengths and limitations of the study, conclusions, as well as the references used in all chapters of this dissertation. This section will move from specific to general and the focus will shift to the abstract ideas shaped by this dissertation. There will also be an appendix that will include copies of the Institutional Review Board approval from UNL, a blank copy of the informed consent forms, a copy of the interview and observation protocol, and the recruitment flyer.
CHAPTER TWO:

LITERATURE REVIEW

The visibility of GLBT issues has never been greater than it is today. What was once an ignored and hidden aspect of human development and family relationships in western cultures is now a part of public dialogue (Patterson, 2008). There has been a flurry of activity in recent months and years surrounding the rights of gay families. Until recently it was illegal for gay couples to marry in every state in the United States (Harris, Teitelbaum, & Carbone, 2005). Therefore, gay couples could not reap the societal and legal benefits of marriage. They could not adopt children together, could not share in making medical decisions and could potentially be asked to vacate the home they had shared together if one partner passed away (Harris, Teitelbaum, & Carbone, 2005).

Currently, there are five states and the District of Columbia that allow marriage between members of the same sex: New Hampshire, Vermont, Connecticut, Iowa and Massachusetts, yet often these marriages are void if the couple crosses state lines (www.lambdalegal.org). Other states allow civil unions, domestic partnerships, or designated beneficiaries that afford the participants some of the same rights as a marriage in terms of hospital privileges and taxes, but not all. However, 40 states, Nebraska included, currently have legislation to prohibit marriage between 2 people of the same-sex (Diamond, 2008). With the passage of Proposition 8 in 2008, an act that banned gay marriage in California, Florida and Arizona, 18,000 marriages between same-sex partners have been called into question. With this change in policy, the families of gay and lesbian couples have been thrust into the spotlight. While gay and lesbian individuals have always had to deal with these issues, it has recently
become a national matter. Because of this attention more researchers have been focused on the lives of gay and lesbian people, and the family lives of these individuals in particular.

**Research with the GLBT community.** Due to issues addressed later, there is an underrepresentation of gay and lesbian families in U.S. Census data. Due to social stigma and fear of homophobia, it is believed that many potential participants do not come forward for studies. Thus, researchers who focus on GLBT issues are often forced to conduct their work in liberal, metropolitan geographical regions using convenience sampling or snowball techniques (Sullivan, 1996; Kurdek, 2004, 2007, 1996). This means that a random sample of gay and lesbian families is not readily available; hence, the data collected cannot be generalized to the entire population. Moreover, studies that examine same-sex couples and parenting practices almost exclusively examine gay women. There is still a sizable social stigma about gay men parenting, particularly parenting young children. Further, the cost of artificial insemination is much higher for gay men as they will also need to find a surrogate, whereas one partner in lesbian couples can choose to carry the child (Berkowitz & Marsiglio, 2007).

That said, the available data are collected and analyzed with rigorous methodology and subjected to peer review. Additionally, research on sexual orientation has flourished in recent years (Patterson, 2008). Research that runs the gamut of GLBT issues is now available. What was once a new frontier of study has expanded into a multifaceted and quickly growing knowledge area. As more research is conducted in the field, the methodological concerns mentioned previously will diminish. This dissertation will fill one gap in the GLBT literature, a lack of strengths-based research, and will therefore, expand the field and contribute to better methodological rigor.
The Family Research Institute. A critique of the current state of research on GLBT families would not be complete without some discussion involving Doctors Paul and Kirk Cameron and the Family Research Institute (FRI). Dr. Paul Cameron is the Chairman of the Family Research Institute as well as author of over 90 articles and Dr. Kirk Cameron is on the board of the FRI and their statistician. Both Dr. Paul Cameron and Dr. Kirk Cameron have taken a specific interest in same-sex headed families (called homosexuals in the FRI research and in this section by this author for the sake of consistency) and have spent much of their careers writing on this topic. They have been clear in their research agenda that they believe same sex relationships are threatening to traditional families and children. Equally clear is the mission of the Family Research Institute and an excerpt is presented below. Some of the statement was omitted due to relevance to this dissertation and considerations regarding length. The full mission statement can be found at this website: http://www.familyresearchinst.org/

“The Family Research Institute was founded in 1982 with one overriding mission: to generate empirical research on issues that threaten the traditional family, particularly homosexuality, AIDS, sexual social policy, and drug abuse. FRI believes that published scientific material has a profound impact, both in the United States and around the world....
Family Research Institute is a non-profit scientific and educational corporation that believes the strength of our society depends on preserving America's historic moral framework and the traditional family. FRI is working to produce sound, scientific data on pressing social issues — especially homosexuality — in an effort to promote traditional policies. We welcome all who would join in the fight to restore a world where marriage is upheld and honored, where children are nurtured and protected, and where homosexuality is not taught and accepted, but instead is discouraged and rejected at every level.”

Numerous articles have been published by the FRI and findings invariably point toward the notion that 1) gay individuals die at younger ages than their heterosexual counterparts, implying that homosexual partnering is hazardous to men’s health (Cameron, 2002); 2)
homosexual persons have a lower moral character than their heterosexual counterparts and are disproportionately more harmful to their children than their heterosexual counterparts (Cameron & Cameron, 1998); 3) participating in homosexuality is “dangerous to society and not compatible with full health” (Cameron, Cameron & Proctor, 1989, pg 1); 4) domestic violence is more frequently reported in same-sex unions than in marriage, owing to the more violent nature of homosexual individuals (Cameron, 2003) and that; 5) children of homosexuals have more problems and concerns than children of married heterosexual parents (Cameron, 2002). Dr. Cameron’s research has been cited in numerous court cases, including one in which foster child placements were restricted to married heterosexual persons (Stacey & Biblarz, 2001).

It is important to note, however, that much of the research listed on the FRI website is published by the Family Research Institute and thus has not undergone the necessary peer review required by outside scholarly publications. Additionally, no other research corroborates the findings of these studies. In fact, as the reader will see in the following sections, other scholars have conducted research on GLBT identified individuals and families and these results are in direct opposition to the information published by the FRI. While it is certainly important to acknowledge that this strand of research exists and is in the public rhetoric regarding GLBT families, it is equally important to examine all research with a critical eye and encourage high quality utilization of research including replication, peer review, and checks for reliability and validity.

**Why homophobia is harmful.** Homophobia is a prejudice against, or fear and dislike of people who identify as gay or lesbian (Campos, 2005). Homophobia is behaviorally expressed in many ways such as teasing, threats, harassment and assault (Espelage, Aragon, Birkett &
Koening, 2008). Homophobia and anti-GLBT rhetoric are often prevalent in high schools and associations have been found between homophobic content and aggression (Poteat & Espelage, 2005). In fact, nearly nine-tenths of students (86.2%) reported being verbally harassed (e.g., called names or threatened) at school because of their sexual orientation and two-thirds (66.5%) of students were verbally harassed because of their gender expression (GLSEN, 2009). Almost half (44.1%) of students had been physically harassed (e.g., pushed or shoved) at school in the past year because of their sexual orientation and 30.4% of students were physically harassed because of their gender expression. For some, victimization was even more severe; 22.1% reported being physically assaulted (e.g., punched, kicked, injured with a weapon) because of their sexual orientation and 14.2% because of their gender expression (GLSEN, 2009).

This harassment and physical assault is linked to higher levels of anxiety and depression for those targeted in attacks (Poteat & Esplege, 2005). Furthermore, 31.7% of GLBT students missed a class because of feeling unsafe, compared to only 5.5% of a national sample of secondary school students and 32.7% of GLBT students missed a day of school because of feeling unsafe, compared to only 4.5% of a national sample of secondary school students (Harris Interactive & GLSEN, 2005). It then follows, that the reported GPA of students who were more frequently harassed because of sexual orientation or gender expression was almost half a grade lower than for students who were less often harassed. Moreover, 41.5% of students who experienced high frequencies of physical harassment did not plan to go to college, compared to 30.1% of those who had not experienced high frequencies of physical harassment (GLSEN, 2009). Clearly, homophobic harassment and assault effect more than the high school years for
GLBT students. With heightened levels of depression and anxiety, coupled with a lack of safety in schools, grades and college aspirations plummet, having a potential influence on the rest of a GLBT individual’s personal and professional life.

With all the damage caused by anti-GLBT rhetoric and homophobia, the unique strengths of GLBT individuals can become buried. Yet, GLBT individuals find sources of strength and resilience in confronting internalized homophobia, community, successful political change and numerous other factors (Russell & Richards, 2003). Additionally, many individuals who identify as GLBT pursue higher education and have successful career development (Lyons, Brenner & Lipman, 2010). While homophobic and anti-GLBT content are unquestionably damaging and certainly need to be addressed, a focus on the strengths they have as individuals and as families is needed.

**Prevalence of Gay and Lesbian Families**

Knowing the actual number of gay and lesbian families living in the United States is very difficult for many reasons. The U.S. Census did not begin to distinguish between roommates and “unmarried partners” until the 1990 census (Rosenfeld & Kim, 2005). As discussed previously, most states do not recognize marriages between two people of the same sex. Thus, many same-sex couples who are in committed, cohabiting relationships consider themselves married. These couples would have been considered ‘roommates’ in past years (Rosenfeld, 2007). Census data also include only the gay families who feel comfortable being *out* and exclude couples who refer to themselves as roommates to avoid the social stigma that is placed on gay people. Lastly, the Census Bureau *corrects* data they believe are impossible, typographical or inconsistent (Rosenfeld, 2007). Thus, if two members of the same sex live...
together and marked that they are married; their data are lost due to its impossibility. All of these factors lend themselves to an under representation of both gay and lesbian individuals, as well as gay and lesbian families.

To complicate matters further, the assessment of sexual orientation itself is “a notoriously challenging topic,” (Patterson, 2000, pp. 1052). For example, a woman who is primarily attracted to women is generally assumed to only have sexual relations with other women and identify as a lesbian. However, this is not always the case. People may choose not to identify at all, or have sexual relationships with people of both sexes (Diamond, 1998; 2008). All of these complications make it difficult for researchers to frame questions that address sexual orientation in an inclusive and meaningful way.

Certain methods have been used to get around these problems in recent years. Using weighted Census microdata, which allow research at the individual level, Rosenfeld (2007) found that in 1990 there were approximately 174,000 same-sex cohabiting couples. As the Census Bureau changed the phrasing of certain questions for the 2000 census, there appears to be a nearly four-fold increase in the number of gay and lesbian families from 174,000 in 1990 to 670,000 in 2000. Rosenfeld’s (2007) adjustments of the data to account for changes in data collection procedures indicate that the more accurate number of cohabiting gay couples would be 145,000 in 1990 and 593,000 in 2000. While this means the number of gay and lesbian couples only tripled instead of quadrupled, the increase is noteworthy. This means that there are over a million individuals who are known to be in this type of relationship. According to some researchers, a rise in non-traditional unions, such as gay and lesbian families should be expected over the next decade (Rosenfeld & Kim, 2005; Cherlin, 2004). Additionally, survey
research suggests that 40-60% of gay men and 45-80% of lesbians are involved in committed romantic relationships (Peplau, Venigas & Campbell, 1996). Thus, understanding the dynamics of this large and growing population is very important for family researchers.

**Emergence of Nontraditional Family Structures**

The rise in interracial and same-sex unions in recent years suggests changes in the family structure in our society (Rosenfeld & Kim, 2005). Young adults used to marry younger, and thus much of the time lived with their parents until they married. As young adults are marrying later (25.2 years old for women in 2000 and 27.0 years old for men), they live on their own for a period of time prior to marriage. This independence has reduced parental control over mate choice and, consequently, more young adults are freer to engage in nontraditional unions. Furthermore, those who do engage in non-traditional unions are more geographically mobile than those who engage in more traditional unions (Rosenfeld & Kim, 2005).

In addition, the correlation between nontraditional unions and geographic independence indicates that nontraditional unions are becoming more accepted in communities of origin (Rosenfeld & Kim, 2005). This is particularly salient, since this will potentially increase the number of people who feel more able to engage in nontraditional unions anywhere in the country, not just in the urban centers far from home. Thus, the number of couples who are out may increase, further creating a need to better understand the unique strengths and challenges these families face, without reference to more traditional, heterosexual families.

As more States begin to recognize gay marriage there will be less reporting error and more institutional support for gay families (Rosenfeld, 2007). As mentioned previously, children
living with parents who are cohabiting often have more psychological distress, more behavioral problems and poorer school performance than children living with two-parent married biological families (Brown, 2004). Many factors contribute to the worse outcomes for these children, including a lack of institutional support for cohabiting couples. Although these data look at heterosexual families, there is also a lack of institutional support for gay and lesbian families, a potentially large contributor to negative child outcomes (Brown, 2004). This lack of support has serious implications for gay and lesbian families, as their children may be suffering from these worsened child outcomes. Unavailability of institutional support could undermine the stability of GLBT families and contribute to poorer parental psychological wellbeing and parenting practices (Brown, 2004). As the institutional support for gay families increases, there will be less stigma associated with being GLBT identified and more people will feel able to be out with their families. As this takes place, we will potentially see another increase in the number of gay and lesbian families, and possibly, an increase in the stability of GLBT families.

**GLBT individuals and Their Family of Origin**

Relationships with one’s family of origin are an important source of support for many people, and gay and lesbian individuals are no exception (Oswald, 2002a). Furthermore, having an affirming family of origin can improve the relationship quality of same-sex couples (Caron & Ulin, 1997). Moreover, support from family and friends of one’s same-sex relationship (along with personality traits, effective conflict resolution and dependence on the relationship) are statistically linked to relationship commitment (Kurdek, 2008b). This is challenging as the most common initial reactions to the news that one’s son or daughter is identifying with a non-heterosexual orientation are negative (Cohen & Savin-Williams, 1996; LaSala, 2000a). Negative
reactions are more likely if parents are older, have less education, or if the relationship between the parents and the child was troubled previously. The majority of parents tend to react with shock, disappointment and shame (Patterson, 2000; LaSala, 2000a). Moreover, this disclosure can lead to a painful family crises and even an estrangement between the GLBT identified individual and other members of the family (LaSala, 2000a). Be that as it may, gay men report that it is beneficial to their unions to be out to their parents and their partner’s parents, even if there is parental disapproval of their relationship (LaSala, 2000b). Over time, parental disapproval often evolves, shifting from profound disapproval to ambivalence at the least and acceptance and support in the most positive cases (LaSala, 2001). Thus, it is important for GLBT people to manage their disclosure and create boundaries in which they bring GLBT affirming family members closer and while distancing themselves from family members who are more hostile, at least in the beginning of the coming out process (Oswald, 2000). The management of this disclosure is an ongoing process that occurs to different people at different times throughout the GLBT individuals’ life (Oswald 2002a,c). Additionally, couples often must go through this process again when they introduce their partner or significant other to their families.

Unlike other types of minority status such as race or ethnicity in which people are often raised within a supportive context, sexual minorities are often raised by heterosexual parents who assume their children will grow up to be heterosexual as well. Thus, family members may have to unlearn heterosexist bias to rebuild the family relationship after a family member has come out (Oswald, 2000). Coming out to family members can be a very difficult progression but can be helped through the process of communication (Oswald, 2000). Family members must
take the time to grieve the loss of the life they expected or hoped their son or daughter would live and by gaining accurate information about GLBT issues, begin to imagine a more accurate picture of what their life may be. For example, instead of picturing a heterosexual wedding in the future, they may begin to picture a wedding or commitment ceremony with their daughter and her lesbian partner, or adoption as a means to having grandchildren who may not be biologically conceived (LaSala, 2000). If family members communicate with the person who has come out, it indicates that this identity is an important one and will not be ignored.

The visibility of partnerships is an important factor for the families of origin of same-sex couples (Oswald, 2002a, 2003). That is to say, the more visible a partner is, the more likely it is he or she will be invited to family rituals such as weddings or graduations (Oswald, 2002a, 2003). This is quite important for the partners in the same-sex relationship as the ability to integrate gay and lesbian loved ones into family of origin rituals is critical to sustaining family resilience (Oswald, 2000, 2002a,b,c). Furthermore, parents and siblings often act as gatekeepers for extended family members, so if the relationship with parents and siblings is supportive, then extended family members have a tendency to follow suit (Oswald, 2002b). It is important to note however, that whether or not same-sex couples are invited to family rituals can be a challenging issue in and of itself. Even if the couple is invited, the ritual itself is a coming out process. For example, in her study of urban gay and lesbian partners who attended rural family weddings, a participant in Oswald’s (2002b) study stated this (pp. 336):

“...they started the family introductions. “...and this is my brother Danny, he is number 7, and this is his friend Jack.” And I just wanted to walk out. I mean, I just... that made me feel furious. And Jack and I have been together for almost 10 years.”
As this passage indicates, even when couples are invited to rituals and feel mostly supported by their family of origin, they can still feel a resounding lack of support for their relationships.

Intentionality refers to the strategies (some listed below) used by gay and lesbian individuals and their heterosexual loved ones or family of origin to create and sustain a sense of family within our socially stigmatizing society and culture (Oswald, 2002c). As much of American culture does not provide social or legal recognition to many same-sex family network relationships, gay and lesbian families must intentionally create supportive networks through the processes of choosing kin, managing disclosure, ritualizing, building community, and taking steps to legalize their relationships (Oswald, 2002c).

The process of choosing kin is a practice that has been noted in anthropology for decades, and is quite relevant to the family lives of same-sex partners (Oswald, 2002c). In her comprehensive ethnography of 80 ethnically and racially diverse gay and lesbian individuals, Weston (1991) explored the lives of people who organized their families by choice. Gay and lesbian participants who had chosen kin shared meals together, cared for one another’s illnesses, raised their children together, spent holidays together and even were able to maintain a sense of family after the end of romantic relationships (Weston, 1991). This ethnography paved the way for other studies to examine fictive kin and the practice of GLBT individuals choosing their families. Many family organizations of choice are present in the GLBT community and they can take on many different forms. For example, lesbian mothers may examine their social network to find male role models for their children (Gartell, Hamilton, Banks, Mosbacher, Reed, Sparks, & Bishop, 1996), ex-partners may serve as surrogate grandparents to the children of lesbian mothers (Patterson, Hurt, & Mason, 1998), and gay men from Mexico who are
immigrating to the U.S. often create resources with other gay men as opposed to their biological families (Cantu’, 2001).

**GLBT Families with Children**

In previous years, stereotypes existed that GLBT couples did not have or raise children. Many GLBT couples either have children or would like to have children (Patterson, 1994). As such, a great deal of attention has been paid to gay and lesbian couples as parents in recent years (Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). In fact, many legal rulings hold that bans on marriage between people who are the same sex are in place to protect children (Harris, Teitelbaum, & Carbone, 2005). In Hernandez v. Robles, the New York Court of Appeals held that restricting marriage for same sex couples was not unconstitutional because it was designed to protect the best interests of children and is “preserving traditional marriage.” Many other courts have held similar standards (Nebraska Legal Statutes). However, while adoption agencies vary in their policies, practices and attitudes towards gay and lesbian couples adopting children, many are willing to work with gay and lesbian prospective parents (Brodzinsky, Patterson, & Vazari, 2002).

Due to these legal factors, various studies have examined whether or not parental sexual orientation has an impact on child wellbeing. According to U.S. Census microdata about 1 in 571 children lives with a same-sex cohabiting parent (Rosenfeld, 2007). This is about 126,000 children and could be an under-representation. Further, as the legal debate over same-sex marriage continues, more and more children could begin to live with same-sex cohabiting parents, creating a greater need for research on this topic. Results of these studies suggest that children raised by gay or lesbian parents are very similar to children raised by heterosexual
parents in terms of development, psychological outcomes, school outcomes and romantic attachment (Chan, Brooks, Raboy & Patterson, 1998; Koepke, Hare, & Moran, 1992; Patterson, 1992; Patterson, 2000; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001; Wainright, Russell, & Patterson, 2004).

Additionally, meta-analyses indicate that children are just as close to same-sex parents as they are to heterosexual parents, lending support to the assertion that parenting style and parental investment of same-sex parents is comparable to heterosexual parents (Stacey & Biblarz, 2001).

Studies of children of gay parents have varied theoretical orientations and examine children at many different points in their development; however, there has been particular interest in the period of adolescence. Adolescents raised by queer parents do not differ significantly from adolescents raised by heterosexual parents in terms of psychological adjustment, school outcomes, and romantic relationships (Wainright, Russell & Patterson, 2004). Adolescents did fare better, however, if they perceived more caring from adults in their lives and when they reported a close relationship with their parents, regardless of the parents’ sexual orientation (Wainright, et al., 2004). This has important implications for the notion that it is important to provide institutional support for families with same-sex parents.

Other studies have found that there is not a significant difference in the functioning of peer relationships and the quality of those relationships between groups of adolescents raised in gay families compared to those raised straight families (Wainright & Patterson, 2008). It is important to note that this study not only examined self-report data to assess peer relationships, but also peer-reported measures as well. This means that both the children of gay parents and peers of the teens thought their social functioning was intact. These findings are particularly important as poor peer relationships in childhood/young adulthood are associated
with problems in psychological adjustment (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 1998). As noted earlier, children, regardless of parents’ sexual orientation, were likely to have better peer relationships if they had closer, more satisfying relationships with their parents (Wainright & Patterson, 2008).

Other researchers have found that younger children conceived via donor insemination tend to be functioning well (Chan, Raboy, & Patterson, 1998). Child psychosocial functioning is unrelated to structural variables within the family, such as sexual orientation of the parents or number of parents in the home. Children exhibited greater behavior problems when parents had higher levels of stress, conflict, and lower levels of love for one another (Chan, Raboy, & Patterson, 1998). These results held true for both teacher reports and parent reports, which is a more solid indication of actual child behavior, since children often behave differently at school than at home. This finding carried over into adolescence as adolescent functioning was not associated with family type and adolescents whose parents describe closer relationships with them report less delinquent behavior and substance use (Wainright & Patterson, 2006). These findings suggest that it is the quality of the parent-child relationship, not parental sexual orientation that is important in adolescent functioning. These results speak to the need for both institutional supports for GLBT families to lighten their stress load, and positive, family strength-oriented studies to uncover factors that help families succeed, as it is these factors that are related to child outcomes, not merely sexual orientation.

In studies of child outcomes related to parental sexual orientation, it is important to distinguish between children conceived or adopted in a previous heterosexual relationship and those in which children were conceived or adopted after parents came out as gay or lesbian
(Patterson, 1992). Children whose parents split up and are now in GLBT step-families have to deal with different reorganizational issues that children born into GLBT families do not. Although both families may have had to deal with judicial and legal issues related to their children, the family structure of each family may be drastically different, which is important to keep in mind when conducting research.

While the literature cited above illustrates the similarities between same-sex couples and heterosexual couples, some differences in child outcomes do exist, although they are not large. Children of same-sex parents tend to have less rigid gender roles than their heterosexual counterparts and are more open to homoerotic experiences (Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). In essence, the children of gay and lesbian parents are no more likely than children raised in a heterosexual family to identify as gay or lesbian as adults, yet they are more open to experimentation with the same sex. While these differences do exist, meta-analyses indicate that the difference is actually an indirect effect of gender and is not directly linked to the sexual orientation of parents (Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). This means that the effects of parental gender are actually more influential than the effects of parental sexual orientation.

The idea that children of GLBT identified parents are more prone to experimentation with same sex age mates is also related to certain aspects of queer theory. Scholars of queer theory place sexual difference at the center of inquiry in many fields, particularly sociology and gender studies as opposed to the periphery. Additionally, queer theory is the direct result of the increasingly visible politics and grass-roots activities of the Gay Rights movement, which is discussed in greater detail later in this dissertation (Stein & Plumber, 1994). Among numerous other facets, queer theory is dedicated to the deconstruction of the naturalized binary of
heterosexual and homosexual and posits that sexuality is fluid and on a continuum (Callis, 2009). Heterosexuality is therefore queered, as it loses its status as the original or default sexuality and becomes rather one half of a binary in which each side is understandable only in relation to the other (Stein & Plummer, 1994). This means that as opposed to a sexual binary in which heterosexual and homosexual are two distinct camps, sexuality is a range in which heterosexuality is at one end and homosexuality is at the other and individuals can fall at either end, or anywhere along the spectrum. Specifically the idea of the sexual continuum deals with the fluid characterization of sexual identity, and the discrepancies that can exist between claimed sexual identity, desires, and sexual behaviors. Due to the fluid nature of sexuality, children of GLBT identified parents may be more inclined to embrace this flexibility and not engage in black-and-white thinking about their own sexuality, thus being more open to same-sex experimentation (Callis, 2009). This is not necessarily indicative of the fact that these children will develop a GLBT identity as an adult.

**Relational Quality of GLBT Couples**

As the quality of relational functioning is linked to child outcomes, work performance, mental and physical health issues and many other issues, understanding relationship functioning for gay and lesbian couples is quite important (Patterson, 2000). Although the research on heterosexual marriage has been well documented, less attention has been given to cohabiting couples (Diamond, 2008). This includes couples who are heterosexually cohabiting, as well as many committed gay and lesbian couples, due to a lack of legal and institutional recognition of their relationships.
Gay men and women generally express great relationship satisfaction and report that they are happy within the context of the couple relationship (Patterson, 2000). As with the research on child outcomes, there is a large overlap in the distributions for relational functioning and quality for both gay families and straight families (Gottman, Levenson, Gross, Fredrickson, McCoy, Rosenthal, Ruef, & Yoshimoto, 2003; Koepke, Hare, & Moran, 1992; Kurdek, 1998; Kurdek, 2004; Kurdek, 2006; Moore, 2008; Patterson, 2000; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). Moreover, when compared to all other partners with children, lesbian couples with children reported the highest level of relationship quality and partners from both gay and lesbian couples showed very little change in relationship quality over a 10 year period (Kurdek, 2008a).

Often, unique research protocols are needed to fully assess the relational quality in couples, as self-report data can be flawed. One form of this distinctive research is videotape and physiological data, which can be used to assess relationship satisfaction and likelihood of relationship dissolution in same-sex couples (Gottman, et al., 2003). Committed gay and lesbian cohabiting couples engaged in two audio and video-taped conversions after being apart from one another for 8 hours, as well as traditional survey methods. These analysis strategies, created and tested on heterosexual couples, predicted relationship satisfaction and likelihood of dissolution equally well for homosexual couples. Their findings support the idea that correlates for relationship satisfaction and dissolution are the same for heterosexual couples as they are for homosexual couples (Gottman, et al., 2003).

Additionally, married heterosexual couples and gay and lesbian cohabiting couples are quite similar to each other in terms of intimacy, autonomy, equality, constructive problem
solving, and barriers to leaving (Kurdek, 1998). It can be reasoned that because in most states, gay and lesbian couples lack the right to legally marry, cohabiting couples in committed relationships could be considered *married* for the purposes of research. Although some differences were found between the straight couples and the gay and lesbian couples in terms of relationship satisfaction quality, those differences were very small and could possibly be attributed to other factors (e.g., greater levels of autonomy found in lesbian couples could be due to geographical distance from family of origin as proposed by Rosenfeld (2007) and nontraditional gender norms.

It is important to note that relational quality varies widely depending on whether or not children are present in the home, and it is therefore critical to study relational quality in childless couples as well. Gay and lesbian and heterosexual partners without children do not differ in levels of psychological adjustment, neuroticism, and agreeableness (Kurdek, 2004). Heterosexual parents perceived more social support in their lives, while gay and lesbian partners had slightly higher levels of extroversion, openness, had higher levels of equality, more symmetrical communication, and better conflict resolution. Psychological adjustment, neuroticism, equality, ineffective arguing and satisfaction with social support all predicted items as well for gay and lesbian partners as they did for heterosexual parents, meaning that many of the same assessment tools can be used for both gay and straight couples (Kurdek, 2004). Additionally, both lesbian couples who have children and those who do not reported solid, happy relationships (Koepke, Hare, & Moran, 1992).

Executing legal documents, such as power of attorney, is one way same-sex couples establish structural commitment, as they do not have the legal right to marry in most States
(Oswald, Goldberg, Kuvanlanka, & Clausal, 2008). Additionally, some same-sex couples choose to change their name to solidify the fact that they are a family to outsiders, as well as to establish a legal record of the relationship (Suter & Oswald, 2003). Gay men and lesbians with children are also likely to have some sort of formal commitment ceremony to illuminate their moral commitment to one another (Oswald, et al., 2008).

In a comparison to same-sex couples who had participated in a civil union and those who did not, no differences were found on any measure, indicating no difference in commitment between the couples (Balsam, Beauchaine, Rothblum, & Solomon, 2008). However, same-sex couples who did not participate in a civil union, were more likely to have ended their relationship than heterosexually married couples and same-sex couples who did participate (Balsam et al., 2008). When relationships dissolve in the GLBT community, it is often more difficult to study and measure than relationship dissolutions in heterosexual relationships. It is of interest, however, that both same-sex couples who had participated in a civil union and those who did not reported greater relationship quality, lower levels of conflict and higher intimacy than their heterosexual married counterparts (Balsam, et al., 2008).

**Division of Household Labor in GLBT Relationships**

If married couples feel that the distribution of household labor is unfair it can lead to negative marital outcomes (Grote & Clark, 2001). Division of labor in same-sex couples is important in this regard as they cannot rely on societal norms to allocate who does what work at home. They must develop a system that could potentially be more equal and based on more relevant criteria than the sex of the partner, i.e., if one member of the partner is afraid of heights, it would make sense for the other partner to clean the gutters or hang Christmas lights.
This information could lead to a greater understanding of couple dynamics and could potentially be useful for heterosexual couples who are struggling with their own division of household labor.

Same-sex relationships are structured like heterosexual relationships in terms of division of household labor (Moore, 2008). Division of household labor has implications for child outcomes, as well as relationship satisfaction (Moore, 2008). Although findings of division of household labor are somewhat mixed, this finding lends credence to the idea that gay and lesbian couples share many of the same characteristics of heterosexual families and thus need not be compared to one another.

More often than not, heterosexual couples divide housework and childcare along gendered lines, often leading to women shouldering the burden of the second shift (Hoschild, 1989). How then do same-sex headed families organize their division of labor? They cannot fall back on the societal norms that dictate their gender roles, as there is an obvious overlap and the traditional division of labor is not as applicable. It is a widely held stereotype that in couples of the same gender one individual holds the traditionally female role and one individual holds the traditionally male role. However, this is rarely if ever found to be the case in empirical studies (Kurdek, 1995; Peplau, et al., 1996). Further, like their heterosexual counterparts, the majority of gay and lesbian couples consider an equal balance of power within the relationship advantageous. By some accounts, these couples are more committed to a level of equality within their relationship (Peplau & Cochran, 1990; Kurdek, 2007; Peplau et al., 1996).

Thus, as gay and lesbian partners do not fit into stereotypically male and female roles they speak to the importance of equality in their relationships. Same-sex couples also, on
average, have a more balanced and equitable distribution of household labor (Chan, Brooks, Raboy, & Patterson, 1998; Kurdek, 2007; Patterson, 1995; Patterson, 2000; Sullivan, 1996). In general, lesbians alternate chores and take turns with the housework (Coltrane, 2000; Kurdek, 2007). This means that, for instance, each partner would do the dishes or make dinner every other day, alternating with her partner. Gay men, on the other hand, are more likely to split up the chores and give each partner specific tasks (Coltrane, 2000; Kurdek, 2007). In this case, one partner in a couple may make dinner while the other partner does the dishes. The overall frequency of the chores completed was not significantly different between gay men and lesbian women however. Partners in same-sex couples divided the housework based on the skill and interest of the individuals in the couple, arguably a more equal division than by gender (Kurdek, 2007). In contrast, within heterosexual couples the woman would potentially do all of these chores at the expense of her leisure time or sleep (Hochschild, 2003).

Often there is a difference between the reported division of household labor and the actual division of household labor. While both heterosexual and same-sex headed couples often report an equal division, in one study same-sex couples actually did divide childcare tasks, outside employment and other household duties more equally than the heterosexual couples (Chan et al., 1998). Same-sex couples, also report that they were more satisfied with the relationships and as such had children who had fewer behavior problems, speaking to the importance of the correlation between division of household labor and marital dynamics (Chan et al., 1998).

However, this is not always the case. In a study of high income lesbian women with children conceived mostly through artificial insemination with a sperm donor, a slightly
different picture emerges. The majority of women in this sample reported an equitable division of household labor (Sullivan, 1996). That is to say that most women reported that they shared not only the housework, but the child care equally. There were a minority of parents, however, who reported a more traditional breadwinner/caregiver arrangement. In these instances it was the partner with the greater power and income who did less of the second shift and the caregiver who did more an arrangement very similar to heterosexual couples (Sullivan, 1996).

Similarly, while most lesbian parents reported sharing household tasks equally, biological mothers reported doing a greater proportion of the childcare while their partners spent a greater amount of time in the paid workforce. Further, couples were happier and children were better adjusted when the second shift was divided more equally (Patterson, 1995).

**The impact of children on the division of household labor.** Conclusions about equality in the relationships of gay and lesbian couples are further confounded by the presence of children in the home. Many lesbians bring children from previous relationships or marriages into the home. This is due to several factors. Most notably, women are generally awarded primary custody of minor children (Morris, Balsam, & Rothblum, 2002). Thus, many of these women have already experienced the *second shift* in their previous heterosexual relationship. By default and habit, these women can potentially bring gendered ideas and habits into their current same-sex relationship.

Even when partners are the same sex, they structure and organize their household labor along gendered lines. When one member of the couple is a biological parent, she assumes more of the household and childcare responsibilities than her partner (Moore, 2008). Similarly,
when one partner picks up more of the second shift, this partner is more likely to be a birth mother than a co-mother (Sullivan, 1996). Social demands are still influential and thus many characteristics of the family are infused with gendered interaction, even in same-sex couples. It is important to note, however, that biological mothers may bring the notion that their child is their responsibility and assume more of the childcare tasks out of parental responsibility, not gendered interaction. Moreover, gender is not necessarily what is inside individuals, but what is induced by their setting, situation and family life (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Society still demands that women with children be good mothers and this often translates into taking more responsibility in terms of childcare and rearing as well as the emotional work that comes with raising a child. Furthermore, much of the research on the division of household labor in same-sex relationships is often based on Caucasian, college educated lesbians who share ideological thoughts about the equality of a partnership (Moore, 2008). It is therefore important to take race and ethnicity into account when examining division of household labor in same-sex families. For example, black lesbian couples often keep separate financial accounts, as opposed to a one pot approach to family finances their Caucasian counterparts are more likely to adopt (Moore, 2008).

**History of Same Sex Relationships in the U.S.**

To fully examine how the discussion of strong relationships between people of the same sex came about, it is important to see the gay community taking shape in historical context, as well as understand the contributions each successive generation built upon their predecessors. The strengths of this community are better illustrated when they are juxtaposed with the many struggles of this community has dealt. Furthermore, this brings the context of GLBT individuals
into the exploration of GLBT family strengths. Without a firm grasp on the oppression and marginalization this community has been confronted with in the past, the strengths they possess fail to represent the entire picture. This is by no means a complete history of the Gay Rights movement, yet it gives enough background to create a frame of reference for GLBT issues and opens the dialogue about these crucial matters.

The years during World War II and beyond were instrumental in creating the possibility for gay men and lesbian women to have the opportunity of a life together as a heterosexual couple might (Faderman, 1991). Prior to WWII the idea of living as an openly gay person with a partner was not seen as an option. Today there is discussion in legal and political arenas to allow same-sex partners not only to live together without fear of persecution—but to be married and share that symbolic statement of love and commitment with their friends, family and the state.

**World War II and the Creation of a Gay Sub-Culture.** Few women served in the army during WWII, but of the ones who did, many were lesbians (Faderman, 1991). For many women, the opportunity to be working independently and with many other women was a very exciting one. The fact that the army was a “breeding ground for lesbians” was very worrisome to the government officials who tried to ferret out the lesbians by asking very pointed questions and giving “hygiene” lectures to discourage lesbian activity in the barracks (D’Emilio, 1998).

Gay men were focused on less in the military during WWII. Due to misconceptions and stereotypes that were rampant in the 1940s, many officials assumed that there were no gay men in the military as they would be much too feminine to tolerate military work (D’Emilio,
Thus, gay men were less targeted than lesbians during this period of history. Lesbian activity was mildly tolerated during the war as women workers were so desperately needed. However, after the war ended this activity led the military to round up the lesbians after the war was over on “queer ships” and drop them off at the nearest U.S. port (Faderman, 1991). The women mainly stayed where they were dropped off (i.e., New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Boston), creating significant numbers of women interested in other women largely concentrated in certain parts of the country. Ironically, and undoubtedly much to the military’s chagrin, this was critical in forming many of the gay subcultures that became more and more prevalent over the following decades.

This discrimination against the gay community caused many to become even more paranoid about their private lives, a sentiment that for some lasted a lifetime. Some gay women even engaged in front marriages with gay men to protect themselves against the harassment (D’Emilio, 1998). This sense of mistrust would later cause women in the following generations to take a much different path toward the life they felt they deserved. The pervading discrimination of the times also led lesbians further underground, often into bars.

In the 1950s a large lesbian subculture developed. The war brought many lesbians together in certain cities. This phenomenon added to the idea that being a lesbian was a pathology and the fear of persecution sent these women in search of others like them. Gay women were forced to hide as they learned they were not safe from persecution from straight people and even if they were safe they were too disgraceful to be in among the “normal” people. As a consequence of this persecution, a great many lesbians often hid behind bottles with alcohol.
Working class and young lesbians of the 1950s had no previous history that has guided other minority groups in the past. Because no other period in history allowed openly gay women, lesbians of the 1950s had no idea how to conduct and organize themselves. There was no ghetto in which women were assured they would meet others like themselves, so bars that catered to gay clientele were typically their only option (Faderman, 1991). Some gay women formed softball teams, which presented an alternative to the bar scene, but the teams were usually sponsored by the bars. This established an unspoken rule that the teams would go to the bars that sponsored them after the games were over, added to the connection between lesbians and alcohol. Some women were also fearful of sports teams because informants and police officers were often placed on the team to try and ferret out who was gay (Kennedy & Davis, 1993). Because of the fear the McCarthy era instilled and the fact that informants could potentially be watching, working class lesbians who frequented the bars developed a very structured pattern of behaviors, such as following social rules about the style of dress partners should have (i.e. butch versus femme). Even with this code of behavior raids were still frequent and women were often arrested simply for being inside gay bars.

**The Stonewall Riots.** Throughout the 1950s and much of the 1960s things carried on much as they had in the past. Meaning, a majority of lesbians gathered at bars, their only somewhat safe haven, even though raids were still frequent. In 1969 that all changed.

The Stonewall Inn was a gay bar in Greenwich Village in New York City. In June of 1969 the police raided the bar, but unlike other raids, the patrons, mostly gay men, began to fight back. As people were escorted out of the bar a large crowd formed on the street and by many accounts grew to upwards of 2000 people (D’Emilio, 1998; Faderman, 1991). Patrons of the
bar were fighting back against the 400 police officers, breaking police property, starting fires, and even using a parking meter as a battering ram while shouts of “Gay Power!” echoed through the streets. Stonewall was an important turning point in lesbian culture and gay culture as a whole. By the end of July, the Gay Liberation Front was formed in New York, while gay men and lesbian women became much more vocal about the respect they deserved.

**Shift to Moderate.** The 1980s saw the pendulum swing in the opposite direction of the lesbian-feminists of the 1970s. Ronald Reagan was elected President in 1980 and reflected the growing rightwing backlash. The AIDS crisis encouraged safer sex practices and discouraged same-sex individuals, particularly gay men, from engaging in the non-monogamous, casual sex they had in the 1970s. A clean and sober lifestyle was encouraged after the decades of GLBT individuals congregating in bars. The butch/femme roles of previous decades became much more flexible and the *lipstick lesbian*, with a more mainstream approach became increasingly popular. Gay men and women did not retreat into the shadows, but blended more into the mainstream with high powered jobs, disposable income, and many of the rights their predecessors bestowed upon them (Faderman, 1991).

Along with these new values and perceptions came a new emphasis and understanding of issues of diversity in the gay community. Many gay individuals of color felt they had no place in the world as they could not fit into the heterosexual mainstream, their cultural arenas, or the gay community. After the rigidity of previous decades subsided a bit, the community became more attentive to inclusiveness for all people, not simply white people. Bisexuality, which had been shunned by the Lesbian Nation of the previous decades, was no longer considered a return to patriarchy. The community also began to understand the complexities of the
differences among them. In preceding decades there had been so much discrimination and harassment of the gay community that many people were simply glad to find anyone who shared a homosexual orientation. Individuals now saw that to form a relationship, people often needed more in common than attraction to the same sex, thus creating an atmosphere in which unity and diversity of opinion were further encouraged (D’Emilio & Freedman, 1988).

**Queer Nation.** In the 1990s and into the 2000s, as often happens, the pendulum swung back the other direction. Many gay and lesbian individuals became fed up with the government’s apparent lack of action regarding the AIDS crisis. The group ACT-UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) was formed by gay men and women who felt that a more abrasive brand of activism was needed to create awareness of their cause (Faderman, 1991). ACT-UP used tactics such as staging mass funeral processions to commemorate those who died of AIDS and outing respected political officials who were closeted homosexuals. Several individuals from ACT-UP branched off to form Queer Nation in 1990, a group designed to focus on broader gay and lesbian issues. Queer Nation groups used slightly less aggressive tactics and employed strategies such as kissing in public, wearing confrontational T-shirts and conducting marches in predominately straight neighborhoods.

Around the same time period, GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation), founded in 1985, began to take off. In 1992 GLAAD was listed as one of the most powerful entities in Hollywood by *Entertainment Weekly* (glaad.org). GLAAD continued to advocate for gay and lesbian rights and against homophobic language in the media and in 1991, due to urging from GLAAD Hallmark removed the word *lesbian* from its list of banned words.
Through the work of ACT-UP, Queer Nation, GLAAD and other organizations, GLBT people become more visible and thus more acknowledged by the public. In 1997 comedienne Ellen DeGeneres, star of the popular TV show *Ellen* came out as a lesbian in her personal life. While this was a powerful message in GLBT history in and of itself the character DeGeneres portrayed in the sitcom came out as well, marking the first time in history a character on a primetime television series was openly gay (glaad.org). Since that time various other television shows incorporated gay characters (e.g. *Will and Grace, Sex and the City, Queer as Folk, Queer eye for the Straight Guy*, and others) and the road was paved by a primetime star depicting a lesbian woman.

**Hate Crimes.** The gay community sprang into action again in October of 1998 following the death of University of Wyoming student Matthew Sheppard. Sheppard was a 21-year-old gay man who was savagely beaten and left tied to a remote fencepost outside Laramie, Wyoming. The incident received nationwide attention as a hate crime, although the men charged with his crime would later report that drugs and money fueled their actions, not the fact that Sheppard was gay (spectrum.edu). Advocacy groups banded together to encourage stronger hate crime legislation. At the time of Sheppard’s murder, crimes against gay persons were not included in the hate crime legislation of more than 28 states. Although the murder of Matthew Sheppard brought national attention to a significant problem, 10 years later on December 5, 2007 legislation expanding hate crime laws to include attacks on gay and lesbian individuals was not passed, much to the outrage of advocacy groups (ap.com).

Today, the gay and lesbian community continues the crusade to eliminate homophobia and fight for the rights of people who are GLBT. In many ways the current decade is a marriage
between the radical 1970s and the moderate 1980s. Many GLBT individuals are still activists, but perhaps in a more moderate and mindful way.

**Influence of the Gay Rights Movements**

Many of the social and historical factors mentioned previously moved America toward the consideration of gay marriage. For many women, prior to WWII, being in an openly homosexual relationship was outside the realm of possibility. WWII was instrumental in not only bringing lesbians together in the military, but also by concentrating lesbian women in port cities, thereby spearheading many of the lesbian actions of the times. While many of the lesbian movements of the 1950s and 1960s were very underground and somewhat slow to progress, they paved the way for the *in your face* style of the 1970s, which was instrumental in many of the changes to come.

Although many probably found the radical lesbian feminism of the 1970s brash and a little too aggressive, it actually functioned to propel the Gay Rights Movement. America needed to be confronted with many of the images they saw in order to get the message out. Since this time, many studies have been conducted showing that the more exposure and interaction people have with the gay and lesbian community, the less prejudice and discrimination they feel towards that group (Evans, 2002; Evans & Herriott, 2004; Harro, 1996). This is often known as the *contact hypothesis*.

When lesbians became more vocal about their sexual orientation it gave others the opportunity to not only get to know a lesbians, but also acknowledge that many women they knew and liked were lesbians. This made it more and more difficult for people to pigeonhole women and group all lesbians into an *odd girl* category. This is often called the *mere exposure*
effect, based on the idea that the more exposure we have to a certain stimulus, the more we like it (Zajonc, 1968). This happens with catchy songs on the radio and when individuals have more exposure to people who are different than themselves, such as GLBT individuals.

GLBT groups formed in the 1970s through the present have done a great deal to raise awareness of GLBT issues and promote an atmosphere of tolerance. Organizations like NOW, GLAAD, ACT-UP, and Queer Nation brought the lesbian agenda into the mainstream, and changed the way the media both experiences and portrays gay individuals. Without these groups GLBT rights and family life would be much farther behind.

**Cross Cultural Family Strengths Research**

As noted previously, the Family Strengths Model developed by Stinnett and DeFrain (1985) has been expanded by additional researchers and now includes cross-cultural data making it the International Family Strengths Model (DeFrain & Asay, 2007). By using data collected from 38 countries around the world, family strengths researchers posit that the qualities that make up strong families are more similar than they are different and no matter the culture, what makes families strong can be reduced to a small number of straightforward ideas (DeFrain & Asay, 2007). While theorists often use culturally specific and appropriate terms to describe the qualities that strong families need to succeed and flourish, more often than not they are saying very similar things. That said, in order to fully understand family strengths, one must also understand the cultural context in which the family lives.

Studies of family strength have been conducted in all of the seven major geocultural areas of the world: Africa, The Middle East, Asia, Oceania, North America, Latin America, and Europe. In many war-torn and disempowered countries, it is all the more remarkable that
families have strength and resilience in the face of so much adversity. In some parts of Africa, the threat of war and HIV/AIDS can greatly disrupt family life and create huge external stressors. Yet families still note that a mutual respect for each other (Njue, Rombo, & Ngige, 2007), positive communication of needs and wants (Mberengwa, 2007), having social capital when resources are scarce (Nkosi & Daniels, 2007), as well as appreciation and affection for one another (Koshen, 2007) help keep families strong in spite of so much hardship.

In the Middle East, ethnic and religious tensions can lead to an uncertain future and numerous struggles for families. However, commitments to family tradition, support and faith in Israel (Younes, 2007) and family cohesion and support in the Sultanate of Oman (Al-Barwant & Albeely, 2007) speak to the similarities all families have in spite of cultural differences. In China, equity in the marriage, and family support are listed as important to family strengths (Xu, Xie, Liu, Xia, & Liu, 2007), whereas in Korea, the pursuit of coexistence and a sense of we-ness help strengthen families (Yoo, Lee, & Yoo, 2007). In Mexico, the economic context which includes poverty, migration and crime are mitigated by family cohesion, flexibility and communication (Esteinou, 2007) and, in Brazil, focus on familial interdependence and a collective orientation buffer against adverse conditions (Carlo, Koller, Raffaelli, & de Guzman, 2007). Finally, in Europe themes of familial communications (Zubkov, 2007) and enjoyable times together (Kaldi-Koulikidou, 2007) prevail.

This section serves as a very brief overview of the cross-cultural research that has been collected with a strengths-based focus. These studies illustrate the need to take context into account when assessing family strengths. Without an understanding of the cultural context of war, poverty, HIV/AIDS, a collectivistic nature, a history of oppression and famine, or a feeling
of being at peace with nature, the specific strengths of a particular culture do not make sense. Thus, it is important to take the context of GLBT rights, history, and climate into account when exploring GLBT family strengths. Moreover, while the depth and breadth of this cross-cultural method of inquiry is striking, the focus has not been on GLBT families. The current study will aim to fill this gap.

**Summary of the Literature**

There are over a million individuals, based on under-reported numbers, who are in a same-sex relationship. Additionally, a rise in non-traditional unions, such as gay and lesbian families should be expected over the next decade, speaking to our need for a more comprehensive knowledge of this family type (Rosenfeld & Kim, 2005; Cherlin, 2004).

It is known that relationships with family of origin are an important source of support to many GLBT identified people (Oswald, 2002a). Having an affirming family of origin can improve the relationship quality of same-sex couples (Caron & Ulin, 1997) and support from family and friends of one’s same-sex relationship is statistically linked to relationship commitment (Kurdek, 2008b).

Yet, as many families of origin initially react negatively to the news that their child is GLBT identified, (LaSala, 2000a) many family organizations of choice are present in the GLBT community. Fictive kin often help care for the children gay or lesbian partners have (Westin, 1991). This is significant because 1 in 571 children in the United States lives with a same-sex cohabiting parent (Rosenfeld, 2007). Due to many factors, but due in part to families of choice, children raised by gay or lesbian parents are very similar to children raised by heterosexual parents in terms of development, psychological outcomes, school outcomes and romantic
attachment (Chan, Brooks, Raboy & Patterson, 1998; Koepke, Hare, & Moran, 1992; Paterson, 1992; Patterson, 2000; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001; Wainwright, Russell, & Patterson, 2004).

Furthermore, gay men and women generally express great relationship satisfaction and report that they are happy within the context of the couple relationship (Patterson, 2000). As with the above research in reference to child outcomes, there is a large overlap between the relational functioning and quality for GLBT families and straight families (Gottman, Levenson, Gross, Fredrickson, McCoy, Rosenthal, Ruef, & Yoshimoto, 2003; Koepke, Hare, & Moran, 1992; Kurdek, 1998; Kurdek, 2004; Kurdek, 2006; Moore, 2008; Patterson, 2000; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001).

As with child outcomes and relational quality, but perhaps more surprisingly, same-sex relationships are structured much like heterosexual relationships in terms of division of household labor (Moore, 2008; Sullivan, 1996). Even when partners are the same sex, they structure and organize their household labor along gendered lines speaking to the need for a greater understanding of the mechanisms at work in these families.

Finally, the status of GLBT individuals as a marginalized and often ostracized group is paramount in understanding how GLBT relationships grow and flourish in today’s society. However, we cannot begin to appreciate these issues without a basic understanding of the history of oppression and subjugation suffered by GLBT individuals and the triumphant (albeit ongoing) success of the gay rights movement. Moreover, an understanding of family strengths from a cross-cultural perspective shaped the International Family Strengths Model and has greatly contributed to the overall understanding of strong families around the world.
Knowing what we know about GLBT individuals, relationships, their families and their children can be an important contributor to the success of GLBT couples and families everywhere. Yet, we know very little about the family strengths that these couples enjoy. As qualitative research is so well suited for this research issue (LaSala, 2005), this study will generate a model that explains the process of developing family strengths for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender couples.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

The data presented in the following chapters come from 21 semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted with GLBT couples (42 individuals). All names in the following chapters have been changed to protect participant confidentiality. In fact, some couples even chose their own pseudonyms like Mack did, “Also, if you assign pseudonyms to us, could you make mine really butch? Like Mack or Colt?” Below, the details of recruitment, the interview process, sample demographic information, and data analysis are discussed.

Participants and Sample Demographics

Participants consisted of couples who had been in a committed relationship with a member of the same sex and living with that partner for at least two years, or couples in which one or both partners had undergone a gender transition or was in the process of transitioning from one gender identity to another. All participants were 19 years or older. The two year cutoff allowed the researcher to focus only on committed, marriage-like relationships, and not couples who are casually dating. Of the 42 participants, 26 (62 %) were female, 14 were male (33 %) and two identified as transgender (5 %). Both transgender participants in the current study were female to male individuals (i.e., they were born with a female body and transitioned into a male body). The sample is predominately white, with 37 participants (88 %) identifying as Caucasian. Three participants identified as African-American (7 %) and two identified as Multi-Racial (5 %). See Table 1 for an overview of demographic information.

Regarding educational level, nine individuals (21.4 %) had a college degree and 23 individuals (54.8 %) had an advanced degree or were currently in pursuit of an advanced
degree, nine individuals (21.4%) had attended some college and one participant had attended some high school. Some couples in the sample had children; four individuals (9.5%) had adopted children, ten (23.8%) had biological children and four individuals (9.5%) had step-children. This leaves 24 individuals or 12 couples (57.1%) with no children. The age range of the sample was from 26-70 years old and the range of relationship length was from 2-22 years.

Most of the participants were from the same Midwestern region as the researcher and 12 couples lived within a 100 mile radius. Phone interviews were conducted for the rest of the sample, with participants interviewing from many regions of the country, both urban and rural. For ease of illustration, the participants’ locations were divided into Metro, Urban, and Rural areas. According to the United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Services, all areas of the United States are divided into Rural-Urban Continuum codes (ers.usda.gov). Areas with more than 250,000 residents are considered Metro, areas with populations between 250,000 and 20,000 are considered Urban and areas with less than 20,000 residents are considered Rural (ers.usda.gov). In the current sample, 15 couples lived in Metro areas, five in Urban areas and only one couple lived in a Rural area. Again, see Table 1 for a complete listing of all demographic information.
Table 1. Participant Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>61.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transgender</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race/Ethnicity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>88.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-Racial</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Highest Level of Education Reached</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some High School</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>21.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College or Trade School</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>21.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced Degree (Or in pursuit of)</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>54.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Children</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adopted</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biological</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>23.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Children</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>57.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step-Children</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Location</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>23.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metro</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>71.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mean</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>45.6 years old</td>
<td>26-70 years old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of Relationship</td>
<td>10.6 years together</td>
<td>2-22 years together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 couples</td>
<td></td>
<td>21 couples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42 individuals</td>
<td></td>
<td>42 individuals</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Procedure**

Basic grounded theory generation uses an approach with open, axial and selective coding, which will be discussed in greater detail in the data analysis section. Immediate data analysis is crucial because if a researcher waits to analyze data until all interviews have been
conducted it limits the theory development and does not allow for theoretical sampling (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). Thus, all data were transcribed and coded very soon after the conclusion of each interview by the researcher. This also allowed for memoing, diagramming and shifts in the direction of the research as the data collection process unfolded. All data were transcribed from digital recordings to text transcripts, yielding 278 single-spaced pages of data (with the median length of text per interview at 14 pages). All transcriptions were conducted by the researcher.

**Sampling method.** Theoretical sampling is the process of gathering data based on the concepts in the evolving theory and the idea of making comparisons across people, places and groups. This allowed the researcher to capitalize on opportunities to discover variations among concepts and create richer and more persuasive categories in the data (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). Once a few categories had been developed, theoretical sampling permitted refinement and saturation of these categories. As this dissertation focused on a small yet marginalized population, theoretical sampling was only used for the construct of gender. The researcher attempted to interview a similar number of both lesbians and gay men to create a theory that will apply equally well to both gay men and women. Women made up 61.9% of the sample, men made up 33.3% of the sample and transgender individuals made up only 4.8% of the sample. While both gay and lesbian couples were interviewed to create a theory of strength for gay, lesbian, and transgender couples, other theoretical sampling techniques were too lengthy and time-consuming for this project.

Therefore, the sampling method for this dissertation was primarily a convenience/criterion sample. The researcher asked professors and colleagues if they knew of
any dedicated gay, lesbian or transgender couples who had been living together for at least two years (the criteria needed for participation) and would be willing to take part in the project.

Once the researcher made contact with a few potential participants within the GLBT community, they were asked if they would be willing to pass out a flyer (See Appendix D) to others who might be interested in the project and who may meet the inclusion criteria. Additionally, the flyer was sent via departmental listservs throughout a large Midwestern University and the researcher contacted the assistant director for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Ally (LGBTQA) Programs and Services at the university as a gatekeeper and reference guide for the project. This director passed information about the project to couples she knew or thought might be interested. This gatekeeper was essential in introducing potential participants for this dissertation to the researcher.

Additionally, the investigator was invited to speak about GLBT research at an event for the community, after which participants were recruited for the project. OUTLinc is a social network and community center for the GLBT community that provides support for communities, families, hosts social events and provides resources. The researcher introduced the project to the audience and handed out flyers with contact information. Two couples who attended this talk agreed to be interviewed.

Finally, the investigator joined and posted comments on The Gay Christian Network website (gaychristian.net). This is a social networking site and ministry that is committed to serving Christians who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. Anyone is free to join the Gay Christian Network and post on any of the numerous discussion threads and message boards that cross various topics, as long as they observe the websites rules for conduct that
include posting etiquette, inappropriate content and other regulations. The researcher looked through various posts about relationships and found over 20 individuals who stated that they had a strong relationship that met the two year criterion mark for participation in the current study. Out of the 20 individuals contacted, only one couple agreed to be interviewed.

**Permissions needed.** As this dissertation involves human subjects, Institutional Review Board permission was required. The project was approved by the IRB (IRB#: 2009039635EP). Additionally, each participant read and filled out an informed consent form before the interview began (see Appendix C for the Informed Consent Form). The informed consent form stated the purpose of the research and the rights of the participants. By signing the informed consent document the participants acknowledged that he, she, or ze understood his, her, or hir rights as a volunteer for the project, thereby giving permission to the researcher to use any data collected.

**Reflexive statement.** Reflexivity refers to the part one plays in the generation of knowledge (Lincoln & Guba, 2005; Denizin & Lincoln, 2005). Qualitative researchers are fully involved in the generation of knowledge and thus, are not objective observers. A hallmark of reflexivity is the willingness to engage in continuous self-criticism and self-reflection, including the questioning or rejecting of the traditional stance of the researcher as the expert. Being reflexive is important in rigorous qualitative research as well as when the population to be studied is marginalized and the researcher is an outsider. Therefore, the investigator ensured that she was positioned to engage in continuous reflection throughout the research process.

The researcher grew up in rural Wyoming, the *Equality State*. However, Wyoming was also made famous in the winter of 1998 when two men savagely beat Matthew Sheppard, a gay
man, and left him tied to a fencepost outside of town for dead. Having GLBT rights thrust into the spotlight in such a violent manner genuinely shaped the researcher’s perception of the fairness of getting to love whomever you choose. This event is compounded by the fact that the sole researcher has a very positive outlook toward life (one reason strengths based research is such a good fit). The decision to pursue a degree in family studies to support all family types and advocate for these families is something she takes very seriously. Thus, the researcher’s desire to see gay and lesbian individuals have the family life they want and deserve certainly has the potential to color the results. It is for this reason that the worldview for this project is post-positivism, and does not include an advocacy orientation. A post-positivist lens will help the researcher to see the data clearly and allow the participants to tell their stories, without her focus being clouded by past experiences. Furthermore, as this topic is a passion of the researcher, several validity strategies, which will be discussed later, will be employed to ensure valid data analysis.

Reciprocity. Reciprocity is a hallmark of good qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Many qualitative projects approach the research questions from an advocacy standpoint, or use qualitative design to study marginalized populations (Creswell, 2007). Thus, it is important to give something back to the participants who have graciously helped to shape the research. While the dissertation is fashioned with a post-positivist lens, the very nature of the questions create a form of advocacy, although the project is not advocacy-oriented. The current literature indicates that gay and lesbian couples have very normative and strong relationship patterns (Kurdek, 2004; Kurdek, 2006; Gottman, et al., 2003; Kurdek, 1998; Koepke, Hare, & Moran, 1992; Patterson, 2000; Moore, 2008; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001;
Wainwright, Russell, & Patterson, 2004; Paterson, 1992; Chan, Brooks, Raboy & Patterson, 1998), yet no one has addressed their relationships from a strengths perspective. By continually approaching GLBT families from a problem focused lens, researchers unwittingly imply that problems are more important and perhaps more common than strengths.

Furthermore, the current trend in family research tends to compare gay and lesbian families to heterosexual families in most studies (Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). In this hierarchical arrangement, if differences between the two groups emerge, they are often characterized as deficiencies (Baumrind, 1995). With this system, even researchers who are advocates for all types of family diversity must find no difference between the two family groups, which is a questionable assumption.

Thus, research focusing on the unique strengths GLBT families possess, particularly considering the adversity they face, is reciprocal in and of itself. Many of the current research designs place the burden of proof on same-sex headed families to prove how normal they are and that they are worthy partners and parents (Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). As there are over a million individuals who are in a cohabiting same-sex relationship (Rosenfeld, 2007), this is a population of families too big to be ignored. While the current study does not have an advocacy orientation, its focus on marginalized and sometimes ostracized families creates an advocacy lens, and is thus reciprocal in nature.

**Types of data collected.** Both interview data and observational data were collected (see Appendix A for Interview Protocol and Appendix B for Observational Protocol). Participants were interviewed as a couple in any location of their choice, although many participants chose to be interviewed in their home. The interviews were all audio recorded using an Olympus WS-
210 S digital voice recorder and then transcribed for analysis. The recordings were destroyed after transcription and all names and identifying information were changed or removed so the identity of the participants remains confidential.

**Observations and field notes.** As opposed to simply conducting interviews, the researcher also observed the couple in their home and their interaction with one another or their children (if they had children) as well as writing field notes including both reflective and descriptive information. Of the 21 interviews that were conducted, 12 (57%) were conducted face-to-face. These interviews took place in the participants’ home or in the researcher’s office on a university campus. While the face-to-face interviews were being conducted, the researcher wrote down field notes, and jotted down impressions of the couple. This afforded a source of triangulation for the data, as well as providing a more complete picture of the couple. After each of these interviews, additional descriptive and reflective notes were compiled. The process of compiling field notes was also conducted after telephone interviews, but this information was limited as the investigator was not in the physical presence of the couple. However, reflective notes about the demeanor and communication style of the couple were still compiled. Moreover, additional clarification was needed for phone interviews, as the researcher was not in the presence of the couple. The researcher added additional statements to check for understanding and illumination throughout each phone interview, as well as additional notes about impressions and observations of each couple. In this way, the researcher was able to ascertain other aspects about the strength of GLBT couples and triangulate the information by using multiple forms of data, sources, and methods to corroborate the evidence that was uncovered (Creswell, 2007).
Additionally, field notes aided the researcher in ascertaining the level of agreement each couple had. As mentioned previously, a unique and important aspect of this study was that all couples were interviewed together. During each interview the researcher collected information about whether or not the couple agreed on the answers their partners provided and the importance of each quality or strength or piece of the process. The field notes further served to triangulate the verbal confirmation many couples provided when they agreed with an answer their partner had given or expanded on the importance of the response.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis was based on immersion in the data, repeated memos, codes, sorting of the data and comparisons across participants. The analysis began with open coding, which is the analytic process in which the researcher identifies concepts and their properties and dimensions are discovered in the data (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). In the next step in the data analysis process, axial coding, the researcher relates categories to their subcategories (concepts that relate to a category, further specifying and clarifying it). This way, the data are assembled in a new way and the researcher identifies the central phenomenon, specifies strategies, context and intervening conditions (Creswell, 2007). Selective coding is the final coding process that integrates and refines the theory and finds the story that can integrate what has been identified in open and axial coding. The researcher repeated this process until theoretical saturation had occurred and no new properties, dimensions or relationships emerged in the data. The computer data analysis software MAXqda2 aided in data analysis (maxqda.com).

**Memos and diagrams.** It is essential in all qualitative research, but especially grounded theory, to let the research guide the questions. The sample, questions, and focus shift as
analysis is underway and the investigator begins to get a better idea of the direction the research is headed. Memoing is the grounded theory process in which the researcher writes down ideas about the evolving theory in the form of hypotheses, emerging categories, or the connection of categories in axial coding (Creswell, 2007). Memoing is essentially a written record of analysis that helps the researcher to formulate the theory and conceptualize the process at hand (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). The use of memos is extremely important to avoid bias and to aid in working through the researcher’s ideas and gain “analytic distance” (Strauss & Corbin, 2008, p. 218). This is even more important in the case of this dissertation as there is a sole researcher and there is no other investigator to confer with and from whom to gain insight.

As the data were analyzed using MAXqda2, which has a memo function, memos were written throughout the data analysis process. Further, a diagram was constructed after the first interview. The researcher took the idea for this diagram to the next interview, where it was revised and improved. This diagram changed and shifted after each interview until it was representative of the process of becoming a strong gay, lesbian, or transgender family.

Validity Strategies

As qualitative research is interpretive research, it is important that researchers use high standards of quality and verification techniques. The researcher could, for example, spend a prolonged time in the field gathering data (Creswell, 2007). In the current study, this meant that there were as many interviews conducted as possible until all the categories were saturated and no new themes emerged. This resulted in 21 interviews with 42 individuals before saturation was reached. After the building of rapport and trust, a handful of participants were able to introduce the researcher to other potential participants.
As mentioned previously, the researcher also triangulated the data by using multiple forms of data, both in-depth interviews and observations and field notes to corroborate the evidence that was uncovered (Creswell, 2007). Clarification of researcher bias is one validity tactic that is unique to qualitative research. Stating from the beginning what previous experiences, biases, and orientations the researcher has is illustrative of the reflexive nature of qualitative research (see reflexive statement above for the clarification in the current project). This allows the reader to understand the position of the author and allows the researcher to identify any biases that may shape inquiry and analysis (Creswell, 2007).

Perhaps the most important verification researchers can use in qualitative studies is member checking (Creswell, 2007). Member checking involves taking all data analysis back to the participants so they can check the accuracy and credibility and to see if their voices are adequately reflected in the results. Rough drafts of the project were sent to the participants (all names and identifying characteristics were either changed or omitted) in the current project. Participants were then able to reply to an email as to whether they agreed with developed codes and themes. Many participants were more than willing to provide member checking and even stated that they enjoyed seeing their participation taking shape in the form of a research project. Of the 21 couples who were interviewed, 17 stated at the time of the interview that they would be willing to participate in member checking. Copies of the project overview, purpose and interview protocol as well as rough drafts of the results and discussion sections were sent to these 17 couples. However, only four couples responded to the request for member checking (23%), though all of these four couples reported that the results of the dissertation and resulting theory that had been developed were both accurate and credible.
Additionally, all four couples felt that their voices had been truly heard and represented in the grounded theory. In fact, two couples even recognized their own quotes in the overview, furthering their feelings of accurate representation. These four couples reported being “excited” and “interested” about the resulting theory, and stated that it “makes sense.” All four couples requested final copies of the dissertation, which they will be provided as another form of reciprocity.
CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

As a reminder, the purpose of this grounded theory study was to generate a theory that explains the process of developing family strengths for GLBT couples across the country. Throughout the data analysis, family strengths were generally defined as the key qualities that provide the supportive foundation strong couples and families need to succeed and flourish (Olsen & DeFrain, & Skogrand, 2007). Furthermore, this project also assessed the dynamic and reciprocal progression of gaining family strength and becoming a strong family.

The results section will be organized in conjunction with the process of data analysis in grounded theory research (Creswell, 2007). Figure 1 is a visual diagram of this data analysis process. Open coding will be briefly discussed in table form at the beginning of each section in this chapter, with much more emphasis placed on axial and selective coding.

As noted in the methods section, open coding is the first step in data analysis of a grounded theory. In open coding, the researcher forms initial categories of information about the phenomenon being studied, in this case GLBT Family Strengths, by segmenting the information (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). In axial coding, the categories generated in open coding are positioned within the theoretical model, and then finally elucidated into a story based on the interconnections of these categories in selective coding (Creswell, 2007). It is through this process that the theory development will be displayed as the more concrete aspects of GLBT family strengths are refined and integrated into more theoretical and abstract ideas.

For ease of compiling information, the researcher developed a small number of categories and then narrowed it down to the six major themes of the project, as recommended
by Creswell (2007). The open codes are presented to illustrate the development of the theory throughout the data analysis process. While some open codes became subthemes, others were integrated into different themes, or deemed less influential on the process of becoming a strong GLBT Family as the data analysis progressed. Additionally, as data analysis evolved, some codes were regarded to be a better fit in other parts of the process, and were thus moved and reintegrated.

The axial coding model will be presented through a process in which the central phenomenon (the central category of strong GLBT families) will be identified. After the central phenomenon is discussed, causal conditions will be explored (categories of conditions that influence the strength of GLBT families) and strategies used for maintaining and building strength will be indicated. The causal conditions and strategies will lend themselves to a discussion of the context and intervening conditions in GLBT families that succeed and flourish. Finally, the consequences, or outcomes of these strategies will be discussed. Below, Figure 1 presents a logic diagram, or coding paradigm for grounded theory data analysis. This figure represents the reciprocal and reflective nature of the data. While this coding paradigm served to guide the data analysis and presentation of results, it also demonstrates how each characteristic of strong GLBT families is interconnected and influential. Moreover, this paradigm illustrates the process of developing into a strong GLBT family. Results will be presented in terms of this model to keep within the grounded theory tradition of data analysis.
After the central phenomenon, causal conditions, strategies, context, intervening conditions and consequences of becoming a strong GLBT family are discussed, a supplementary section relating only to the transgender couples who participated in the study will be incorporated. While these two couples are included in the GLBT family strengths theory, transgender couples represent a distinct subset of the GLBT community. This section will honor the diversity of the population and highlight distinct differences between issues related to sexual orientation and issues related to gender identity. After a thorough discussion of each of these facets of axial coding, conditional propositions or hypotheses about what it means to be a strong GLBT family will be presented. In the final coding process, selective coding, the theory is refined and integrated (Strauss & Corbin, 2008) and in this case, best depicted in a path model (See Figure 2 on page 111). In this way, all of the steps in the process and results of the grounded theory coding paradigm affect one another in a temporal progression.

The following brief overview will create a frame of reference and provide context for the rest of the results section. The central phenomenon of strong GLBT families is commitment to each other and to the relationship itself. The causal conditions that influence commitment’s
importance to GLBT families is the idea that while there are more similarities than differences between heterosexual families and GLBT families, differences do exist between the two family types. The main strategy that GLBT couples use to build and maintain strength is communication. The context GLBT couples need to succeed and flourish is one of support, while intervening conditions that contribute to the couple’s strength are having shared values. Lastly, the outcomes of the process are 1) more egalitarian relationships and 2) improved strength.

The initial categories that were formed in open coding were commitment, communication, honesty, coming out process, political openness, geographical location, and extended family support. Out of all of these codes, commitment to 1) each other and 2) the relationship emerged as the central phenomenon of the research and the most important part of building a strong relationship for GLBT couples. The final model developed in the selective coding stage of the project for the process of becoming a strong gay or lesbian family is represented in Figure 2 on page 111.

Central Phenomenon of Strong GLBT Families:

Commitment

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<th>Example Sentence</th>
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<tr>
<td>Symbolism</td>
<td>“Well I think these things are symbolic, but I think that for me exchanging the rings sort of, it was a statement of entering a partnership in this relationship with someone that I cared for very much.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>“I think trust is an important thing.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>“And then just a history. The mere fact that we've played bridge together three times a week every week for the last ten years. And gone on a thousand trips together. That old song, 'I've come accustomed to her face.' In a way it's true. The mere fact of being together and not killing one another, actually generally working positively with a partner, builds a strong relationship.”</td>
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| Formal | “We know that we're committed to each other, but it is something to do it in
Commitment to the church, the ceremony, it meant something to us. More than it would be going down to the court house and do it that way.”

As GLBT couples are part of an often ostracized and stigmatized group, their commitment is what sets the foundation for their strength. Commitment to each other and to their relationship is something that is so crucial and central to the process of becoming a strong GLBT family that it was mentioned in some form by 19 of the 21 couples participating (90.4 %), and all 42 individuals (100%) indicated that they agreed on the importance of this aspect. As one lesbian couple who had been together for 22 years stated when asked what the most important process of becoming a strong couple was: “I think it’s the same as it is for any family. I think it’s love and commitment.” As this couple indicated, commitment is an important aspect for all couples, but it is particularly important for GLBT couples. Many participants spoke of the importance of a strong sense of commitment to one another as there is often a pronounced lack of cultural or institutional ways to declare that commitment for GLBT relationships, such as engagement or marriage. Thus, couples must be especially strong in their commitment and share that sense of strength with one another and their extended families. Another lesbian couple who had been together for 11 years confirmed: “I think that when we did our first commitment to one another the act or the ritual of doing that. People do that because of their strengths, but by doing that you gain strengths also.” In this way, commitment is both a cause and effect of the family strengths shared in the relationship. It is what makes a relationship a partnership as opposed to a friendship.

Commitment manifests itself in many ways in a GLBT relationship. This can be a simple idea or an understanding between partners that there is a sense of permanence in their
partnership. All couples in the current study lived in the same home as this was a requirement for participation, but that act alone speaks to their level of commitment as well. Several couples had both signed leases to rent their living space together. While signing a lease together is a small form of commitment, it illustrates that the partners are dedicated to being together for at least the foreseeable future. Additionally, many couples had purchased their homes together and made remodeling and renovation decisions as a team. Many couples even spoke of the renovation periods as benchmarks in their relationship. They were not only committed to the debt involved in the renovation and the new design together: “It’s our property and stuff, it’s our debt, you know” (Lesbian couple, together ten years), they felt if they could get through the stress of having their home completely remodeled with construction workers trekking through all day, they could weather anything. As one gay couple who had been together six years stated, “And we did one big house remodel, that was another big benchmark to get here. You don’t realize, you think oh I can handle remodeling, I can handle not having a kitchen for three weeks. And not having a shower for four days! Sink baths aren’t exactly fun, I don’t care how Bohemian you are! (Laughter) You don’t realize how forgiving your partner is until after a home remodel.”

Another way in which couples demonstrated their commitment to one another was through children. Unlike heterosexual relationships, there are no accidental pregnancies in monogamous GLBT relationships. Therefore, if a couple decides to have a child together, it is a conscious choice and often a long road through adoption agencies or doctor visits. Two couples in the sample adopted children together, which speaks to their understanding with one another that they are a family and have elected to mutually raise a child. Moreover, another two
couples in the sample decided to have biological children together via sperm donors or surrogacy. Again, these pregnancies were another way to cement the commitment between partners and the family.

**Trust**

Often, commitment was discussed in terms of trust; both trust that one’s partner has their best interests at heart, as well as the confidence that the other partner will stick around through thick and thin. As one lesbian couple who have been together 12 years described it, “Trusting each other’s judgment and trusting each other in terms of fidelity and trusting that that person will be there when you need them.” The need for this trust in many ways has to do with the lack of institutional support GLBT families face. This concept of dealing with a lack of support for GLBT relationships and families will be mentioned frequently throughout the results section as it affects nearly every aspect of GLBT family life and is the biggest factor contributing to the differences between strong GLBT families and strong heterosexual families. Because there are fewer legally recognized options for formal commitment in GLBT couples, partners must trust that they will stay together through good times and bad. Here, Judy, who has been with her lesbian partner for ten years, talks about this idea:

“For me it means that I can make mistakes. And I cannot always be on, like I don’t always have to be the best me. I try to be the best me, but I’m not always the best me. And she’s going to stay. And even if I’m grumpy or sad or distant, she’ll help me bring it back. That there is a touchstone there. Yeah, that she’s going to be there. The future is kind of set in that we’re going to go through it together.”

Because Judy and her partner may not have the option of a legally binding ceremony of commitment, they need to develop a sense of trust in one another. In fact, this sense of trust is deeper than what a heterosexual couple would need, because a heterosexual couple has the
option available of their commitment being formally and legally recognized by the State and federal government. Yet, as with all couples, this trust is not something that happens from the very beginning of a relationship, or a characteristic that is intrinsic in GLBT relationships. In fact, as Kyle puts it:

“I think he [author note: ‘he’ refers to Kyle’s partner who had previously been speaking about trust] has mentioned trust a number of times, and trust isn't something that you have from day one. I think that as you go through life together and get through hurdles and challenges and joyous occasions, you realize that this person has my back and is going to be there for me, and I'm going to be there for him as well.”

-a gay couple, together six years

Trust is something that needs to be built over time and often through an intentional process, which will be discussed in greater detail later in this section. Nevertheless, because strong GLBT couples have built a sense of trust, they can feel secure in their commitment to their partner even though there is no legal recognition of their commitment or legal recourse if the relationship dissolves.

**Lack of Institutional Support**

As mentioned previously, the need for heightened trust and commitment often stems from a lack of institutional support for GLBT relationships. While this lack of institutional support is clearly something that influences the significance of commitment in GLBT couples, it will only be discussed briefly, as a more in-depth discussion will occur later in this section. Because there is less of an opportunity for recognized vows, couples need to fill this void with their own commitment. Here, Dan, a FTM transgender individual who has been with his partner for three years describes this idea:

“Well, society doesn't grant us a whole lot of kudos for our relationship. Much less any legal standing. So, the commitment that you make to each other has to stand for
everything. You don't have the big wedding and you don't have all the in-laws coming and I've been to too many commitment ceremonies where the parents won't come. So the commitment that you make in the GLBT community to each other is probably closer to bedrock, I think, in some ways.”

As Dan suggests, because there are so many forces that serve to nullify GLBT relationships, the commitment individuals have to one another is very important. Moreover, this commitment is more essential to GLBT couples than it is to heterosexual couples, as straight couples receive support in the form of legal, cultural and everyday recognition. What’s more, it is not simply that GLBT relationships are on average not legally sanctioned, they are in fact attacked. The officially authorized commitment that same-sex couples are allowed to make is often up to voters to decide, as discussed previously in the context of Proposition 8. As such, there are often vitriolic public conflicts between groups who support marriage equality and those who oppose it. While one side in the controversy is in support of same-sex couples, the other side has the potential to be destructive and caustic. Listening to pundits fight with one another about the decision whether or not legalize marriage between same-sex partners not only a lack of institutional support, but an opposition of it. This can weigh heavily on a GLBT relationship, unless the commitment between partners is intact. As a gay couple who had been together for 16 years noted:

“I think you have to be a little stronger in your commitment to one another. There isn't the outside, there isn't the outside push to keep you together. There is a total invalidating force “you don't count, you're wrong, you're illegitimate, you don't belong together.” And a straight couple it's like ‘oh, they're in love, lets push them together’.”

It is important to note, however, that another way GLBT couples choose to reinforce the commitment they share, even in the face of invalidating outside forces, is to mark it with some sort of formal and often public ceremony.
Formal Commitment

In addition to the informal ideas of commitment each couple has within their relationship, there are also formal ways to mark the commitment between partners. In fact, ten couples in the current sample (48%) made some type of formal commitment for their relationship. As mentioned previously, marriage between two people of the same sex is not legal in much of the United States. While some participants in the current study had traveled to States in which same-sex marriage is officially permitted, the legality of their marriage license is null and void once they return to their home State (Harris, Teitelbaum, & Carbone, 2005). This, of course, begs the question of “Why do it?” Joan, a lesbian who has been with her partner for 21 years, answered the question this way:

“There are several reasons, for me, that gay marriage is such an issue. One of them is simply financial, that she ought to be my beneficiary for my Social Security and vice versa. We should be able to automatically inherit and that kind of thing. But, rituals are important to humans. And it is important to the strength of any couple, to have stood up publically and to say I do take this woman. I do give myself to this woman forever and ever in the sight of God and man and my mother and my kids and everybody. In front of the community. That it is important for the community to be able to support a couple that is willing to stand in front of them and say we are coming to this community as a couple. And I think that is one of the handicaps for gay couples, there are more and more places we can overcome that, but I think it is important to make a public vow, a public declaration. And every so often you have to sit down and remind each other that you have done that and is it still important, “Hell yes it is!”

It is important to point out that Joan has eloquently described two different types of formal commitment that GLBT couples can have, if they live in a State that does not recognize same-sex marriage or civil unions: **structural commitment and moral commitment**. Structural commitment can be seen as the execution of legal documents, such as power of attorney, right of survivorship documents, wills, whereas having a public commitment ceremony is an example
of moral commitment (Oswald et al., 2008). Joan also describes the importance of the ritual of
a public declaration, both to the community and to each other. A public declaration not only
helps to solidify a couple’s commitment for family, friends and community, but also for the
couple themselves. This declaration helps others to see the couple as a family unit and helps
the couple communicate their nuclear family identity, which is crucial due to the invalidating
forces described previously. But, as Joan reminds us, it is also a touchstone for the couple to
remember when times get tough.

Some participants only had a communicated commitment between themselves and
some couples only had structural commitment (Lesbian couple, together for ten years):

“Living wills, power of attorney, I have to sign a form every six months in front of a
notary that says Courtney [the speaker’s partner] can make medical decisions for Eric
[the son of both partners].”

Some couples had moral commitment (Gay couple, together 11 years):

“We both wear rings. Well I think these things are symbolic, but I think that for me
exchanging the rings sort of, it was a statement of entering a partnership in this
relationship with someone that I cared for very much”

Yet, some couples had each aspect of commitment. Whichever form of commitment couples
had, it was central to the strength of their relationship.

Causal Conditions of Strength:

“We’re the Same, Yet Different”

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<tr>
<td>Regular Folks</td>
<td>“I think one of the most important things gay people tend to do, even more important than writing letters to senators, because you just get a form letter back is living your life as if you were actually a perfectly ok person. And letting people see that the little faggots do exactly the same things we do.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parades</td>
<td>“The stuff you see at parades, which is representative of some people, but</td>
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The causal conditions or categories of conditions that influence the strength of GLBT families have to do with the reality that GLBT relationships develop and thrive in the same ways that heterosexual relationships do, with a few exceptions. Every couple other than one (95%) agreed with one another regarding this causal condition. Because GLBT families are often not legally recognized and are often socially ostracized, they develop differently in some ways than their heterosexual counterparts. As was discussed previously with the central phenomenon of commitment, both heterosexual couples and same-sex couples are strengthened by commitment, but GLBT couples often have to develop their own terms of commitment due to the fact that their relationships are not legally or culturally recognized. As a transgender couple who have been together for three years put it: “I think that our relationship is structured a lot like straight people’s relationships. We met, we fell in love, we got closer, we built a life. It’s the same story.” Clearly, in many respects, both relationships develop in the same way, in that there a similar trajectory and many corresponding important elements. This sentiment was echoed by a lesbian couple who had been together for five years: “The thing is that I don’t think there are any differences. It’s the same. I think that’s the nice thing that maybe this [dissertation] will show, is I don’t think it was any different. I think it’s the same process that a heterosexual couple goes through. It’s the same process we see our strong heterosexual friends
go through. Same process, same issues.” While unmistakably, many fundamentals of the two relationship types are similar, the lack of institutional support GLBT couples feel creates differences. This is demonstrated by juxtaposing this statement, made by a lesbian couple who have been together for 20 years, has with the previous statement: “You can never, ever just believe that our relationship can develop just the same as a straight person’s relationship. Because of all the barriers that culturally are put up ... There are all kinds of barriers. And they are there all the time.” Here, the challenges that GLBT couples face are acknowledged. As will be discussed later in this section, the lack of support GLBT couples face is a driving negative force in relationships between GLBT persons. Thus, GLBT couples need to develop additional strengths, such as creative ways to form strong commitment that heterosexual couples do not need. This idea of the intersection between family strengths and the overarching cultural and community strengths will be discussed in greater detail in the discussion section of this dissertation. One of the ways these variations manifest themselves is through the need for queer couples to be carefully intentional about their relationships.

**Intentionality**

While in many ways individuals in GLBT partnerships are “everybody,” in other ways they need to be much more intentional about their relationships. There is no culturally prescribed way in which GLBT relationships play out and as such, GLBT identified people need to make their own rules in many respects. This is seen as both a positive aspect and a negative aspect of being in a GLBT relationship. Aaron, a gay man who has been with his partner for three years describes this idea: “But you know it’s, the important thing is that we don’t feel like we’re bound by any sort of straight couple roles about who does what. In one sense being a gay
couple means we can define what all those rules are for ourselves.” Here, the lack of prescribed norms for GLBT relationships is described as a positive thing. Rules that do not fit for one couple can be discarded while new, more precise rules can be applied. GLBT couples must then discuss these issues together and decide the best course of action to maintain or develop a strong relationship.

Whereas this intentional rule-making is positive in some ways, it can create an uneasy lack of direction in others. Kyle, a gay man who has been partnered for 11 years, describes how difficult and challenging this ambiguity can be: “Heterosexual couples in kind of a generalization will start dating and it's sort of preordained for them, we're going to date and if things are good, we'll get engaged, we'll get married and we'll have kids. And that blueprint is different for homosexual couples. How do we know what to do?” Clearly, not all heterosexual couples get married and/or have children, but the general timeline and course of heterosexual relationships is culturally understood. Often in the United States since same-sex couples do not have the right to marry and the decision to have children must involve adoption, surrogacy, artificial insemination or other means of producing a biological child. And yet, for heterosexual couples, these issues hold much less potential for complication.

Along with these concerns of being intentional about the rules and institutions surrounding strong relationships, couples in the study described other ways of being intentional. It is clear that for a GLBT relationship to be strong, it needed to be a top priority for both people in the relationship. Margot, a lesbian who has been with her partner for 19 years, discussed one of the ways intentionality was important to their strength: “I think probably putting the relationship first. I feel like as long as we're on the same team and things are good
between us, then everything else will eventually fall into place.” Here, the relationship has top priority over all other aspects of this couple’s life. With all of the stress and hassle of daily life, putting the relationship first is not always an easy thing to do. People become tired and torn by other responsibilities, which is why the idea of intentionality is so critical. Beatrix described the ways she gets around the daily struggles with her partner of ten years in this way: “We really made a commitment to each other that we would continually work on our relationship all the time. And that we would never allow it to stagnate or get in a rut or get to where we're just two people living together.” Beatrix is recounting how easy it is to become complacent in a relationship, to take your partner for granted. What strong couples do to avoid this problem is to intentionally work to maintain strength, whether it is by making up their own rules, or by committing to work on keeping the relationship a top priority. However, even with the need to be more intentional regarding GLBT relationships, and the freedom to make rules that fit more specifically to the relationship, queer couples described how “normal,” “boring” and “regular” their relationships truly are.

“We’re Everybody”

While there are undoubtedly differences between the ways in which strong heterosexual relationships develop and strong GLBT relationships develop, there was a keen sense of normalcy described by participants in the current study. Strong GLBT relationships are more similar to heterosexual relationships than they are different. While some qualities of strong families need to be heightened in GLBT relationships and there are some issues queer couples need strength to deal with that do not affect heterosexual couples, the similarities are everywhere. As Gwen, a lesbian who has been with her partner for 12 years puts it: “I get
frustrated when people think that our relationships are so much different, because I don't, maybe I'm too close to the forest to see the trees, is that the right expression? That it isn't different, the only thing different is the sex of the couple in the relationship. And we've got bills, we've got chores." As Gwen states, the daily interactions that strong GLBT couples have, are much like those of heterosexual couples. So much so, that several couples described frustration and annoyance at persistent stereotypes about the way GLBT individuals act. Often this was discussed in terms of gay pride parades.

Gay pride parades are events that take place all over the world as a way to celebrate GLBT culture (Campos, 2005). They are annual events that often take place in June to commemorate the Stonewall riots that took place on June 28, 1969 which are often thought of as the beginning of the gay rights movement. Much in the same way that the term queer is used to empower the GLBT community and reject oppression, gay pride parades serve to pay tribute to sexual minority status and often call attention to current political debates, such as issues of marriage equality or employment protection (Campos, 2005). The parades include floats and an exaggeration of GLBT stereotypes such as flamboyantly-dressed men and people dressing in drag as well as groups of lesbians riding motorcycles known as Dykes on Bikes. Because of this, the pride parades weather some criticism from sectors of the GLBT community because the highly-publicized parades are not representative of the entire GLBT population and have the potential to promote negative stereotypes. Couples in the current study expressed that they are more like their heterosexual counterparts than their GLBT brothers and sisters in the parades in terms of daily life. A lesbian couple who have been together for 21 years stated, “It’s not what they see on Fox News at Halloween at the Castro. That’s a great party, but that’s
not everyday life [laughter]. Not for most of us. [Author note: the Castro is a district in San Francisco, CA and is widely considered the country’s first, largest and best-known gay neighborhood. It is purported that the first gay bar in the nation was in the Castro.].” A transgender couple of six years concurs with this sentiment by affirming, “The stuff you see at parades is representative of some people, but certainly not all.” Strong GLBT couples, more often than not have the same qualities that strong heterosexual couples do and affirm that their daily lives look very similar to strong heterosexual relationships. As Mary and her partner of 21 years remind us, they’re everybody: “I think that's kind of my mission, is to be there for them to know that they do know a lesbian. That we are real and we talk and walk and have the same, we’re not the one that's in the gay pride parade and we don't all look like that, we don't all act like that. We're everybody.”

**Strategies for Becoming a Strong GLBT Family:**

**Communication**

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<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>“We just don't let it sit there and fester. You've got to talk about it and get it out and go on.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Time with Extended Family</td>
<td>“Now that the baby is born, we spent a lot of time with her family. And that helps. It has opened the lines of communication”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Talking through problems</td>
<td>“It's not fun and it doesn't make your day go real well, but sometimes you just have to do those things to clear the air. And I think we've spent the first three years of our relationship talking.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Asking for help</td>
<td>“We did, we went to a counselor who again was kind of a nice, outside perspective to listen to us individually and listen to us together and offered some really good feedback and things that we work on are things that he recommended that we took to heart.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Coming-out processes       | “I was like 35 when I came out to my parent. I'd been married once for about four years when I was in my early 20s. This topic had never, and I
“I think mutual respect is another thing that is premier with us. We don't argue, we don't fight or go off half-cocked or go out and get in the car and drive off, we just don't. We just don't behave that way. I think that has a lot of bearing.”

As with any process, not just the process of becoming a strong GLBT family, there are specific strategies that are used to achieve the desired result. One of the main strategies used by these couples for maintaining and building strength is communication. This was such a huge piece of the puzzle that of the 20 couples, every pair except for 1, (95 %) discussed their communication style as being strategically important to their strength as a couple. Moreover, every couple (100%) agreed with one another about how important effective communication was to their strength as a couple. A lesbian couple described the magnitude of constructive communication between partners in this way: “Open lines of communication. Number 1, 2, 3. Up in the top three.” Another lesbian couple put it this way, “You've got to be able to converse about anything and everything that you're feeling. And not let what you're saying or what you're hearing become an accusation in your mind.” The importance placed on communication takes several forms, such as seeking help when needed, conflict resolution skills, and communicating with extended family members. While communication between partners is crucial, it is not the only form of communication that is important. Couples discussed communication with extended family, friends, and colleagues as also being vital to their relationship. As same-sex couples are part of an often stigmatized and ostracized group, the ways they communicate to one another and their larger family is what sets the foundation for their strength. This communication allows couples to fully understand the other person, share
their principles and life histories, and learn enough about each other to know if they want to pursue a relationship. As this gay couple of 12 years stated, “I think we have the ability to communicate our feelings, needs and desires to one another and being able to trust the other person to take them seriously and listen helps to make us a strong couple.” Here, being able to have honest communication and trust that your partner will hear you and take your feelings to heart is fundamental to strength. Further, once a relationship is established, skilled communication allows the couple to build strength and resolve conflict. Here, a lesbian couple who have been together for 11 years discusses these ideas: “Communication for us is something that we value and it’s something that we’re strong in doing. We’re able to fight. And we don’t fight that much at all, but I think we are able to fight pretty well most of the time. And that we do have conflicts and I think that we handle them well.”

Yet, as with any couple, communication is not always about conflict, it is also about communicating what is going on in day-to-day life. It is also important to tell one’s partner when something at work or in life outside the relationship is upsetting. This way the other partner knows the problem is not relationship based and can adjust his/her/hir communication accordingly and provide support. Having this open communication about annoyances is a strategy that keeps arguments from occurring. David, who has been with his partner for 11 years, explains on this idea:

“And so we have really good open communications, as well as the ability to, if you have a bad day at work you can come home and say I’m crabby. And then the other person knows ok, no big deal and I just will go do something else. It's just supportive that we have those open communications times. I think that is one of the things that has made us a strong family.”

By strategically creating a safe space for communication and providing a frame of reference for
one’s partner, communication becomes a tool for strength maintenance. If arguments continue to crop up due to outside forces, the potential for alienation from one another is high. That, said, conflicts are bound to transpire, but handling them in a positive and healthy manner is a key to creating strong GLBT families.

**Conflict Resolution**

Even strong couples fight, and when they do, knowing that both partners will fight fair and really listen to each other’s views helps problems get solved. As Mike states in reference to his three-year relationship with his partner, “You have to realize that strong doesn't mean perfect. And you have to be willing to tackle those times head on and not just let them fold you.” This hits on a few major ideas. Here, Mike states that strong indeed doesn’t mean that people never fight. Conflict happens to everyone and is healthy when it is handled appropriately. When couples “sweep everything under the rug”, or let them “fester” they do a disservice to their relationship.

By the same token, if couples are too aggressive with one another, problems can occur. Jim, a gay male who has been with his partner for 11 years, states: “Well, I think one thing we've done is to develop an escape mechanism when we get into an argument spiral. And that can happen fairly easily. We're both strong-willed persons. If we just let go, it can result in total ugliness, so we have worked out a little phrase that says ok, we have to stop this now before we get into trouble.” Instead of sweeping things under the rug, this couple perhaps has a greater tendency to lash out in anger toward one another, which could lead to hurt feelings and emotional distance. By developing what they call an “escape mechanism,” they have created a language to aid in their communication efforts to ensure all parties are being kind and fair.
Moreover, it is important for GLBT couples to remember to “compromise” with one another, to “talk things out” and to “learn to deal with each other’s style” of argumentation. As Rebecca points out about her problem solving style with her partner of 19 years: “Also, this probably sounds like something you’d see on a refrigerator magnet or something but I often say to myself (in all kinds of situations) “do you want to be right or do you want to solve the problem?” Most of the time, Jan and I just want to solve the problem.” Here, communication helps to emphasize the overall health and happiness of the couple and the pride of the individual is pushed to the side. In many ways, the overall happiness of the family means the extended family as well.

*Communication with Extended Family*

It is clear that positive communication and conflict resolution with one another is critical. No family is an island, and the idea of *family* often includes families of origin, extended family and even friends. Thus, it is important for GLBT families to keep the lines of communication open with their extended family as well. As a lesbian couple who have been together for five years put it: “I think we could have done it [become a strong couple] without our families’ support, but not without our families knowing.” Here, the importance of communicating a family identity to extended family members is highlighted.

Family identity is quite important for GLBT couples, as some of the traditional markers of family are often not present. In heterosexual relationships a decision to commit is often accompanied with an engagement, which frequently includes a ring and/or a party and is then followed by a public and legally sanctioned marriage ceremony. These are ways in which heterosexual couples communicate their family identity without having to be explicit about it.
Thus, GLBT couples need to be more intentional about their communication with extended family. This can be done in a positive way. One couple explained that, having a child together solidified their relationship in the eyes of extended family members. Conversely, this communication can manifest itself in more outwardly negative ways, and still culminate in positive results for the couple relationship. For example, Ella discusses how hard it was for her to be with her in-laws as they were snide to her and did not recognize her as part of the family. Having her partner of ten years on her side to communicate their love to the family was meaningful to her: “Some of it was strengthening for me in our relationship, when Cathy really stood up for me with her family. And I think it was really healing for Cathy when my mom just really accepted her with open arms.”

The significance of this communication can also be seen in the feelings that follow coming out. As the reader will remember from the terminology section, coming out of the closet is the term for the process GLBT identified people go through when they disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity to other people. Again, this is an ongoing process. Each time a new person is told, whether it is a doctor, a co-worker, a salesperson or anyone else, this is another form of coming out. Participants described what follows as a sense of “wholeness” and “euphoria.” Interestingly, several couples in this sample were not out with their families before meeting their current partner. It was the strength of the relationship and the commitment the couple shared that pushed some participants to tell their parents that they identified as GLB or T in order to share their relationship.

Additionally, according to a lesbian couple who have been together for 21 years, after you come out to your family, “For the first time in your life you feel like a whole human being.
You feel honest and the air even breathes better. I knew I was a lesbian all my life, and you just, in the era we grew up in you stifle that. You stifle it big time.” Because individual mental health and happiness affect the couple relationship, it is not surprising that feeling euphoria and a sense of wholeness creates positive change in the couple relationship as well. While this disclosure was met with anger and/or confusion for some families, it was again seen as a way to convey to extended family members the importance of the couple relationship. Here, Rochelle discusses what pushed her to communicate her family identity to her extended family:

“Well, for me, it was telling my parents, because I hadn't told anyone. My sister knew. And that was it. I hadn't told anyone else in my family. We were together a couple years and we were looking to buy the house and I said, ok, I’m not going to buy this house and then live a lie in it and every time my folks are going to come over to visit we gotta set up the other bedroom to make it look like I live there and hide all the pictures. I said,” I'm done, I'm done, I'm done!” and I need to tell my family, my parents. So for me that was a huge step because I knew Misty was the one, I was done looking, that was it.”

The couple went on to describe how difficult this was and how painful this information was to Rochelle’s parents. Yet, they knew it was important to convey to others the fact that this relationship was committed and long term. They went on to describe how this admission relieved stress within the couple relationship and solidified their commitment even further, creating a more supportive foundation. Also, after many years, Misty was listed as Rochelle’s partner in a family obituary, a measure of tacit support that was a meaningful family moment.

**Context Needed for Strength:**

**Support**

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<td>Role models</td>
<td>“I think our strength as a couple has come from the way we were raised or the way we grew up and our own learning over the years.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stability</td>
<td>“We've gone from us being a couple as being strange and new and exciting</td>
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and us being a couple as being normal and everyday.”

Mental Health  “So we knew we were bad people and we knew we were sinners and we knew that we could actually go to jail for what we were doing. It can’t be very good for your psychological self-image!”

Social Support  “Our family is really supportive.”

Government Support  “It’s legal to get married here, totally standard for everyone.”

External Stressors  “I oversee the large lawsuits and to me my job is very stressful. I couldn’t do it if I didn’t have such a strong loving home to come home to. I just can’t have stress at work and at home.”

As noted previously, one of the hallmarks of qualitative research is the ability to take cultural, historical and societal influences into account when analyzing the data and telling the participants’ stories. The context of the time and place, both geographically and historically creates a frame of reference from which the research question can be understood. The main contextual consideration for the strength of GLBT families is the idea of support. This can take the shape of support of one’s partner, support from extended family and community, and institutional support (or lack thereof in this case). This context of support is fundamental to GLBT family strength. So fundamental in fact, that all but one couple in the sample (95%) discussed the importance of one of these aspects of support and every couple who mentioned it as important (100%) agreed with each other that it was imperative to have a context of support in order to build a strong family.

Some measure of support is something that every couple needs. Of course couples need to support each other, but support from outside sources is also quite significant. This is even more important for gay and lesbian couples as they often are not supported by their extended family
and the outside community. This lack of institutional support, as discussed previously, has many detrimental consequences (Brown, 2004). Thus, it is not surprising that lending support to GLBT couples serves to make them stronger.

This support can come from community, religious institutions, family, friends or any other area of a person’s life. The simple act of treating a GLBT couple as any other committed couple is also an important source of support, as this couple of 16 years stated: “And that is a strength. The fact that everybody, even outside of our church family, our biological family, our friends, business associates look at us as a couple and would not think of inviting me without Paul.” Support from outside sources can be something that couples don’t need to seek out and be “purposeful” about but it is very helpful to build a strong relationship: “We have a ton of support, not only from our families, but from dozens of friends who are really um, you know there for us and I don’t know. Just a sense of community in our lives that is really helpful.” As a gay couple together five years stated in an interview: “There have to be appropriate supports from wherever you can get them, the kind of reinforcement that you might not expect that people need....And it will probably be as individual as the person.” This support can come from any part of a GLBT couple’s life, and sets the context for their family formation.

Without this support, it puts many challenges and strains on the couple and family relationship: “Yes, the children’s father’s family is not very supportive. So those are challenges and we have to protect them.” Thus, either a supportive environment or a lack of support can shape how two people relate to each other and the world around them. This affects their strength as a couple.
Lack of Institutional Support

One of the most striking examples of support (or lack thereof) was described in terms of a deficiency of institutional support for GLBT families. This lack of support was made evident in many ways. It was expressed in terms of frustration due to lack of rights, the inherent difficulties involved in having no legal recourse when discrimination was present, dealing with insurance predicaments, and just plain dissatisfaction. Here, Gary discusses some of the ways this particular lack of support harms his 11 year relationship:

“Well and you have social support, you have governmental support, you have religious and church institutional support, for straight heterosexual marriages...It becomes so painful to sort of see what a struggle that we continue to face. We've come light-years, but, we still are a second class minority.”

Gary went on to say how much easier it would be for various aspects of his relationship if the supports he mentioned were afforded to him and his partner. What’s more, these supports would also be financially beneficial to GLBT couples. Here, a lesbian couple of 10 years who had just welcomed a son, Eric, through artificial insemination, discuss how their parenting practices were determined by the financial constraints of their non-marital status:

“But it is frustrating, if we had decided that one of us wanted to stay home with Eric, the other one would have the only health insurance because of partner benefits. And, full time when two married people both work at the university, you get a small break in insurance that we don't get.”

Because this couple did not have health insurance through one another’s place of employment, they were limited in the decisions they could make about childcare. Again, if this couple were heterosexual, they could make the decision whether or not to marry, have health insurance, and would have had the option for one partner to stay home and provide care for Eric.

In addition to the frustration mentioned above, there is also a distinct fear associated
with not having the same rights as heterosexual couples. One woman described being thrown in jail due to her “homosexual tendencies” when she was a teenager, another woman described not being out at work for fear “they'll [her co-workers] say well, she's the big old diesel dyke and she can handle it by herself. Let's see how tough she really is, and let me get my ass kicked to prove a point.” Even when steps had been taken to provide security for the relationship, the anxiety was still present. Here, Julie, a lesbian who has been with her partner for 12 years addresses her fear of legal protections not being sufficient.

“Well and since we live in [name of State] one of the most oppressive states in the union, um, my fear is if anything every happens to me, I swear to God, I'll crawl out the ambulance before I'll go to [name of hospital] That's a Catholic hospital and we have durable powers of attorney and we have it for health decisions, living wills, all that stuff, but a hospital can say, no we're not going to honor this, and no you can't go in to see her.”

This couple knows, that even with durable power of attorney (which this couple had to pay a lawyer to construct) there is a chance they may not be able to make medical decisions for one another. This, of course, would not be the case if they were a married couple. These fears due to a lack of support, create an additional layer of tension and discomfort in the lives of GLBT couples. Strong GLBT couples find ways to get support from alternative sources to deal with the stress caused by absence in other areas.

More often than not, however, GLBT couple just felt insulted that two people of different sexes could be married even if they did not like one another, or had only known each other a few days. Several couples discussed how maddening it was to watch television shows in which contestants fought with one another to win the hand of a celebrity or millionaire. Many couples recounted tales of family members or friends who had been married in a whirlwind romance only to have the marriage crumble soon after. As this lesbian couple of 12 years put it:
“And part of it is, you know, we should have the same rights as everybody else. There are thousands of straight marriages out there that cannot hold a candle to ours. And we should have the opportunity to make it or break it just like everyone else. We should have the opportunity to get divorced, as well as all the good stuff. It was a political statement, it was the name thing [both partners in this couple had picked a common name that was meaningful to them and both changed their name following their wedding in a State that allows same-sex marriage] that was proof positive that we are a family.”

Yet, the most remarkable way the damage this lack of support causes was made clear when the ice breaker question, “Tell me about your family” was asked in each interview after a brief description of the purpose of the study. In 18 of the 21 interviews (86 %), couples who had agreed to participate in a study specifically exploring their GLBT relationship answered the question about their extended family. Participants discussed parents, siblings, even cousins they had not spoken to in years, but did not talk about the relationship they had together. It is important to note that many people don’t define a couple as a family. Yet, even couples with children did not speak of their relationships with one another and many participants never mentioned their partner in this context.

Two couples (a lesbian couple who had been together for ten years and a transgender couple who had been together for six years) talked about their “nuclear family” meaning the two of them. As an interesting side note, both of these couples also mentioned pets in this nuclear family. The remaining couple, lesbians who had been together for 19 years, answered the question in this way:

“It’s funny, when you ask about “family” my first thought is that you mean my parents and siblings, rather than my partnership w/ Ellen—which is kind of ironic given the purpose of the study. The fact that I can forget for a moment that a 19 year marriage is also a “family” goes to show how ingrained our culture’s brainwashing is, even on the someone like me who has been “out & proud” for decades. Maybe if we had kids I would naturally assume you meant my lesbian family and not my family of origin.”
Here, Nancy really gets to the core of just how harmful lacking societal supports can be for GLBT couples. It is so damaging that the majority of the couples in the study, even knowing what the purpose of the study was, did not think of their relationship as a form of *family*. This lack of institutional support for GLBT relationships is one of the many reasons support is such a huge contributor to strong GLBT families. As it is not granted by society at large, the government, or even most religious institutions, it becomes crucial for GLBT couples to fill this void elsewhere.

**Community**

The lack of institutional support GLBT couples face leaves them to find support in other areas of their lives. As such, many couples discussed the importance of community to their strength as a couple. This community support came from friends, organizations the couple was involved in, the GLBT community on a local and national level, as well as the physical community in which the couples lived. As this gay couple of six years reported, “The community really is nice here. Well we have our friend family.” The idea of “friend family” or fictive kin was incorporated in the process of becoming a strong couple for many of the participants. Another gay couple, together 16 years, described how all of these aspects of supportive community come together to authenticate to their relationship, “Our bio family, our church family, the neighbors, the friends at work. We belong to the theatre arts guild, it’s all the groups that we belong to and each one makes you stronger” All of these aspects of community are forms of support for GLBT relationships, which they may not be getting from the larger society.
Multiple couples discussed the support they get, not only from formal organizations, but from fictive kin and friends as well. Moreover, couples described both the importance of having friends who were in committed GLBT relationships, as well as being seen as equals to married heterosexual friends and family. This gay couple of three years discussed the importance of seeing committed GLBT relationships in their community and “friend family”:

“That circle of friends is very supportive as well. That group has a number of gay and lesbian couples, mostly lesbian couples who have been together for a very long time. Those folks just knowing that there are those really long-term committed relationships, that is helpful. To see that support is great.”

On the other hand, here a gay couple who have been together for 11 years describe a dinner club they are involved in. Numerous couples take turns hosting a dinner party that takes place once a month and every other couple is a married, heterosexual couple: “We're accepted as strongly into their lives and we're accepted and part of their lives. We're treated as if we are a loving, family and relationship. So our relationship with our friends is very comfortable and supportive.” This couple described a sense of nervousness when joining the group, as one partner was involved in the dinner club when he was married to a woman. Yet, they were accepted into the club just as any other couple would be. They described this acceptance as an encouraging decision by all the members of the club to support their relationship just as they would any other couple in the group.

**Respect**

One of the ways couples gain strength is to be supportive of one another in their relationships. This involves shared decision making, listening to the trials and tribulations of one another’s daily lives, and encouraging the other person to pursue his/her/hir dreams. One of the biggest ways each of these aspects of support can be accomplished is through respect, both
for one’s partner and for the relationship. As this lesbian couple of four years put it, “I think another core [of being a strong couple] is respect. And not only respect for the relationship, but also that, it's important to me that I have respect for Dolores as a person.” Many other couples, such as this gay couple of 11 years echoed the idea of these forms of respect, “Well, for me it is probably mutual respect and admiration. I think we both see the other person as a strong capable individual and, of course, there is the emotional attraction.” It is through this quality of respect and admiration that strong GLBT couples make the decision to sacrifice for their partner and their relationships as a way to support the mutual decision to be a family.

**Appreciation and Affection**

Just as “admiration” and “respect” are qualities that strong GLBT couples have, so too are appreciation and affection. In order to make sacrifices for one’s partner he/she/ze needs to be appreciated and this appreciation is often expressed through affection. Couples demonstrated their appreciation and affection for one another in many ways. They smiled at one another, they touched, they laughed at one another’s jokes, they flirted, they held hands and they expressed their appreciation and affection verbally as well. Couples said things to each other during the interviews like, “That she's so cute! [laughter]” and “I don't know where I'd be without you” [Looking at her partner] to which her partner responded “I feel the same” [Looking back] and in describing the ease of their relationship, “It’s just natural [Isaac says “it’s just natural” at the same time, they look at each other and smile]. See!” [laughter]. When these exchanges took place, the love and affection partners had for one another was clearly present.

Demonstrations of appreciation and affection were not the only ways in which couples supported their relationship. Participants also recounted stories of how these two aspects were
advantageous. One couple described the ways in which this affection was carried out in their
daily lives, “Margot has throughout our entire relationship has made, the 20th is the date of our
anniversary, but the 20th of each month I have been given a card and we recognize that day in
some way. Every month that we have been together.” It is important to note that this couple
had been together for 19 years. They used this marker of the 20th to remind one another that
they still valued the relationship, appreciated each other and were able to show affection.

Perhaps more notably, many couples spoke of how crucial it is never to take one’s
partner for granted. Several couples discussed trying to remember to appreciate their partner,
as this transgender couple of six years did:

“I find myself having to remind myself that Shelly is-when I first met her I saw her
totally. And she just dazzled me, literally because she was remarkable. But then what
happens is that you spend every day for seven years and remarkable turns into
everyday. And you forget and you start thinking of this person as a spouse or a wife, or
girlfriend or as an anything. And so to constantly, not constantly, but from time to time
when I really need it, I'm able to go back to seeing her that way. And that's totally free
of anything that I am, or anything that I do. I love that this person is here with me. That's
been something that has been helpful for me.”

Here Cory describes what other couples discussed in terms of “not taking your partner
for granted” and “remembering what a catch she is.” Couples, especially long term couples,
have a tendency to get caught up in the daily hassles and hardships they have. The remarkable
becomes everyday and the potential to lose sight of how lucky one feels to be with his/her/hir
partner is great. One way to regain the feeling of remarkable is to take the time for a self-
reminder. When the relationship begins to lag or one person is not feeling appreciated,
remembering how the first blush of romance felt helps strong GLBT couples appreciate their
partners. Yet, while engaging in a self-reminder is important, being able to convey appreciation
and affection to the other person is perhaps more important.
Finally, strong GLBT couples are not afraid to tell each other how valued the relationship is. Couples discussed the importance of thanking one another, saying “I love you,” and simply expressing their love for one another. The following exchange between a gay couple who have been together for six years illustrates both appreciation and affection. Roger begins by telling his partner and the interviewer by proxy how much he appreciates certain aspects about his partner and how he knows they will always be present. Clearly feeling touched, his partner smiles, turns to the interviewer and communicated his affection for Roger:

“There’s the two things I will always remember that will never change for you and that’s the gleam in your eye and your smile. We might get fatter, we might loose hair, but those two things are never going to change.”

His partner replied: “And who doesn’t want to spend the rest of their life with someone who says something like that.”

As noted, when this exchange occurred, the couple was looking at each other and smiling with clear affection. While this couple did not explicitly state how the affection they shared and appreciation they expressed was important, observations of body language, tone of voice and the couple’s verbal exchanges clearly indicated the weight of these aspects.

**Intervening Conditions Influencing Strength:**

**Shared Values**

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<tr>
<td>Similarities</td>
<td>“I think we’re a strong couple and I think in the sense that we share our lives almost totally together. We spend so much time together, but basically our interests and activities and hobbies are together, which I think is a good thing. We probably are together 24/7 [Laughter] we have many mutual interests that we share and love.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>“We’ve been through lots of transitions—the death of her father, the loss of a couple of beloved cats, a scary lawsuit, moving to different states and changing jobs and so forth—I’m sure all that shared history has brought us strength.”</td>
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Commitment to God
“Well, we answer to God, not the government, so we feel like we are married.”

Differences
“We are exact opposites, which I think in some regards strengthens us”

Laughter
“We love to laugh together”

As individuals, we all have a set of values. As a couple, these values must be reconciled with each member of that couple. For the purposes of this dissertation, shared values are not only large ideological similarities, but also a simple correspondence in the activities the couple enjoys participating in and can take part in together. Eighteen couples (86%) reported that shared values influenced their strength and every couple (100%) agreed with his/her/hir partner regarding these values. Strength emerges when these values are shared as this gay couple who have been together 16 years indicated: “I think we have quite a bit in common in terms of the things that we value and the things that we enjoy doing. I think that helps.” Again, in this sense values can mean many things. Values can be political affiliations, shared interests in enjoyable activities, or as this lesbian couple of 21 years put it: “Yeah, we have similar values and stuff. Both of our value systems are the rebels, we both understand each other’s rebellion.” Here this couple demonstrates that it is beneficial for both partners to have a frame of reference for what the other partner feels and is going through. Couples often spoke of having a very complete sense of shared values in their relationship.

Strong GLBT couples not only shared a spiritual understanding and a sense of social justice or political ideals, but also enjoyed similar pastimes such as softball, live music, house projects, pets, or bridge. Or, as this gay couple who have been together for 12 years put it: “I think another important feature of our relationship is that we just really enjoy each other's
company, and we enjoy being goofy together.” While this couple values a sense of humor, laughter and “goofiness,” another couple may value quiet, peace and respectful conversation. Thus, it can be hypothesized that it is advantageous if this shared sense is present in multiple aspects of a couple’s life. The fact that strong GLBT couples enjoyed spending time together was clear throughout the interview process. During the 21 interviews, couples laughed together 517 times. Participants would joke with each other, laugh at shared memories, or laugh when telling stories about children or extended families. In fact, evidence of their laughter can be seen in many of the participant quotes throughout this dissertation. It was evident that these strong couples enjoyed each other’s company and valued the personality and humor of their partner. However, enjoyable time together was often linked with a sense of principles and values.

Here, a lesbian couple who have been together for 11 years discuss the philosophy they share as partners:

“To us, faith is a shared thing. And that’s partly about traditional religious practice, but it’s also about just a sense of how you live your life and, I mean we’re both really interested in living in a way that, I don’t know that has a positive aspect. Kind of concerned about giving to others and valuing, peace and justice, and trying to live sustainably.”

This couple clearly share a sense of the way they should try to live their lives. The fact that both partners feel that living sustainably and valuing peace and justice are important allows them to enjoy these parts of life together. If one partner valued living sustainably and the other partner felt it was her right to sap the environment and community of its resources, the potential for conflict and alienation is apparent.
This concept was made clear by two couples the researcher interviewed on the same day. The first couple was a gay couple who had been together for 11 years; Derek and Chris. The second couple, who will be discussed in later paragraphs, was a transgender couple who had been together for six years; Cory and Shelly.

Derek and Chris, the gay male couple of 11 years, were both highly educated and economically successful retirees who live in a large house with a lush garden and a swimming pool. They were very vocal about how much they valued collecting fine art, attending the symphony and the orchestra, and being financially sound. Here, Derek describes this idea: “It’s also helpful that we’re comfortable. For richer or for poorer is nice, but think it’s probably good for us that we are comfortable. I don’t think if we didn’t have money it would cause problems, but certainly having some money makes life easier and therefore makes the relationship easier.” Moreover, it was very important to this couple and described as beneficial to both individuals in the relationship that each partner has “a level of competence that is acceptable.” Here, Chris describes the value both partners place on some of the refinements of life:

“For me, I have to feel that I’m appropriately paired... I don’t want an incompetent partner. And I don’t have an incompetent partner. And that sounds very selfish and egotistical, but I mean it’s just the way that I am. I think Derek certainly wouldn’t want to be partnered with somebody who didn’t know how to eat in a restaurant and didn’t know how to appreciate an opera.”

Throughout the entire conversation, both partners mentioned these topics and reported that the fact that they both valued these things was favorable to their relationship.

Cory and Shelly have been together six years and began their relationship as a lesbian couple. Several years into their relationship Cory began identifying more with a transgender identity and began his transition. Shelly holds a Bachelors degree and Cory attended some
college, but left before he finished a degree. This couple, who described themselves as “really existential” spend much of their marriage being involved in a marriage workshop for queer couples and were involved in many different aspects of what they termed “social justice” and “volunteer work.” They also spend large amounts of time debating philosophical ideas and discussing gender in myriad ways. After Cory and Shelly had only known each other for six months they flew to Australia together with only a backpack each and no return ticket. Cory and Rebecca are both committed vegans (which they describe as “a shared passion”) who spent three years of their marriage living “off the grid” in a one room cabin with no running water or electricity. Here, Cory describes this adventure:

“But having a shared dream and vision has been a huge thing that keeps us together. Then when we came back we decided to live off grid. So we built a house with no electricity or plumbing, it just had a well and we lived that way for three years. I’m sure if we both didn’t think that it was a valuable thing to try doing, that would have been problematic! [Laughter]”

Cory and Shelly express very clearly not only the strength GLBT couples get from having shared values and passions, but the potential problems that could arise if a couple did not share these ideals. Both Derek and Chris and Cory and Shelly have very strong relationships and really enjoy spending time together. Both couples share values with their partner and reported that this helped them stay strong and connected and have fun together. Yet, as these couples demonstrate, the important aspect is not the content of the shared passion, but the fact that it is shared. If Derek was in a relationship with Cory, for example, the innumerable problems that may arise are not difficult to imagine.

This is not to say that GLBT couples cannot have any differences of opinion in the way they view the world, but that shared perspective can serve to foster strength. Many couples in
the study held different political philosophies, had different pastimes, enjoyed different kinds of music or movies, had different stances on numerous social issues, or just plain different outlooks on life. Here, Robin describes the fundamental core differences she and her partner of 12 years have:

“Ok, so we're driving the other day, this shows the differences in our personalities. So we're driving down the street and a car goes by and honks at us and I'm like [mimes flipping the bird] and she's doing this [mimes waving happily]. That is totally us though. I'm like, “who the fuck is honking at us?” And she's like “oh, maybe we know them!” [laughter]”

While this story clarifies some of the fundamental differences these two individuals have, the couple maintained that these differences were also a source of strength. Moreover, the story was told with both partners laughing and enjoying the fact that they had never lost their own sense of self.

*Fit Together*

Many of the couples in the current study described the fact that they fit together well with one another, even if they did not agree on every issue. This was often seen as one partner’s strengths filling in for the other partner’s shortcomings. For example, this lesbian couple, who have been together for 21 years, put it this way: “We are exact opposites, which I think in some regards strengthens us, because where I'm short, she's strong and where she's short I'm strong. And so that in itself is another thing that we have going for us.” This sense of balance was discussed in terms of household chores, communication styles, and social situations among others. This fit together was even clear during the interviews, as Doug and his partner of 16 years said, “And as you can tell, he's more the talker than me [Laughter], I'm more quiet.” Or as this couple gay couple of 6 years stated:
“I think one of the things that makes us strong is that, there are a lot of opposites in him and myself that complement each other. He’s Mr. Personality, I tend to be a little bit more reserved, so he brings me out of my shell. And he’s mister neat. I love things neat, but I can be a slob. He’s a night person and I’m a day person, so we force each other to enjoy as much of the day as possible.”

A strong couple’s fit together is paramount in terms of external stressors and conflict. As GLBT couples often do not get the familial or institutional support that heterosexual couples receive, external stress has the potential to wreak havoc on a relationship. Having individual strengths and placing value on each set of strengths, helps to ease this situation however. As a lesbian couple of ten years stated, “When life throws us something difficult, we try to focus on staying on the same side. We take turns freaking out and talking each other down.” This balance not only plays off individual strengths, but also allows each partner to maintain a sense of individuality.

The stability of one’s couple self and individual self was described by many of the couples interviewed for the study as crucial to helping couples moving through life together, rather than growing apart. As a gay couple of 12 years stated, “Couples have to navigate that balance between growing as individuals and growing as a couple.” This sense of cohesion and connectedness is critical to feeling united and committed to one’s partner, but at the same time individuality is also needed as this couple expressed: “You can’t lose your sense of humor, you can’t lose your sense of self, you just have to create this personality that’s a couple. In which 2 people live and have their own personalities.” [Lesbian couple, together 21 years]. Both partners have to value the idea that the balance of separate and together is of consequence in order to grow as a couple and as individuals. If this ideal is held by only one partner, the potential for a negative cycle in which one partner demands time and the other continually
withdraws is heightened. As Jennifer and her partner of 12 years mentioned, “I think part of it too is making room for each person to be an individual and, to kind of preserve that sense of self differentiation even in the midst of unity. I think sometimes people just drown in that oneness and then they aren't really happy.”

**Parallel Attitudes Regarding Public Disclosure**

Straight couples do not have to decide whether or not they will tell the larger community about their sexual orientation or that they are in a heterosexual relationship. Queer couples are faced with this choice whenever they begin a new job, join a new club or other community organization. This has the potential to create unrest in the relationship. If one partner is very politically active about his/her/hir orientation and the other partner does not feel safe being out at work or with certain groups of friends, this could cause problems that straight couples do not have to worry about. This idea was demonstrated as many couples reported a shared level of openness in the community around them. As a lesbian couple of 12 years said, “I think it is also really important to choose to be who we are and to be open about that. Not abrasively, but just unapologetically. I think that that helps strengthen us together a lot and sometimes when people kind of hide that weakens their relationship.” This strong couple feels that it is important to be quite open about their sexual orientation. Another strong lesbian couple (of five years) feels differently:

“I think we both know enough of how to protect ourselves in situations when we’re unfamiliar with people. I don’t think as lesbians we ever go out in situations and one of us wants to buck the system and say forget it, let’s hold hands. We’re both more protective of each other. We’re not scared of who we are, but we also know we are in [name of conservative State] and there is a certain way we have to act.”
It is not difficult to image the struggle that might occur if these two couples switched partners. Whereas one person would like to be “unapologetic” about her orientation, the other would not feel comfortable holding hands in public. Thus, it is not important where in the continuum of attitudes about public disclosure the couple lies, it is simply important to their strength as a couple that they share similar values about that place on the continuum.

**Consequences of the Process:**

**Egalitarian Relationships and Improved Strength**

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<tr>
<th>OPEN CODE</th>
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<tr>
<td>Gender issues</td>
<td>“For our generation I think that the institutionalized sexism was much more of an issue in relationships with men, so it was really kind of a welcome relief not to have to deal with that. [Laughter]”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Balance</td>
<td>“But the house is jointly owned with right of survivorship and all of the expenses other than those things that are specifically related to the value of the house are 50/50.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Division of Household Labor</td>
<td>“And of course, I enjoy cooking. And I guess basically, I take care of the house and the cooking and stuff, and he does the laundry.”</td>
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<td>Sexuality</td>
<td>“If you and your partner aren't physically happy with each other, you will resent it. And one person will keep working at it and the other person will be pushing away and you get this really unhealthy dynamic going on. And you know, if your partner and you are physically compatible, and everything is great in that arena, really, you know, you have so much more free time because you're not obsessed about it. And you're not going you know, “Oh my God, they were doing this and I wanted them to do this.” It's great, you don't worry about it and you have more time to think about other things, like, hiking or whatever.”</td>
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<th>OPEN CODE</th>
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<tr>
<td>Better over time</td>
<td>“It has just gotten stronger and better over time”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Takes time to build strength</td>
<td>“You need to get out of that puppy dog love stage. You need to have some fights and realize your partner will be there. Through thick and thin. And that”</td>
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As with any process, there are outcomes or consequences of being a participant in that process. The consequences or outcomes of taking part in the process of becoming a strong GLBT couple are positive in nature. Over time, strong GLBT relationships become 1) more egalitarian and 2) stronger and all participants in the current study (100%) agreed with each other that their relationship had improved over time and was more egalitarian than previous relationships. Participants in the study described an initial phase of dividing household labor and childcare and working together to ensure that each partner feels valued and on equal footing. A lesbian couple of five years stated, “I think it’s more of a... we realize that we have a partnership and we realize that there has to be kind of an equal balance to it.” This process is also a continuing negotiation as jobs, children, or other circumstances change in the relationship. Several couples in the current study were at transition periods of employment in which one partner was retired and the other was still working outside the home. This inevitably changed the proportion of household tasks for each partner was involved in. For example: “I still work, so I'm out. So I do the shopping, the errands, the mail, the gifting, the drug store, pharmacy. I come home and take her to the doctor and do those type of things. She does all the house, all the garden, all the laundry.” As the roles of employment changed, so did the domestic tasks for this lesbian couple of 19 years. The partner who was at home more frequently did more of the chores inside the home, while the partner who was still working did more of the chores outside of the home, like the grocery shopping. The partner in the home may do a greater proportion of the housework: “But just during the daily stuff, maybe like 70-30. He'll do laundry when I'm gone... yeah 70-30 during the day, but then our actual like
Saturday clean the house is more like 50-50” (a transgender couple, together six years), the partners in this situation believed there was an equal balance in this arrangement, because one partner had more time to devote to the daily chores.

Additionally, several other couples had outside help with cleaning in the form of a cleaning service, a strategy used specifically to keep the housework equal. While one partner (most likely the female, see Coltrane, 2000) in a heterosexual couple may simply take on more of the household burden, if both partners in a GLBT couple really hate doing housework, they will outsource the problem. This, of course, depends on the financial situation of the couple, as this lesbian couple of 12 years states: “Neither one of us likes to clean house. So if we could put it in the budget, we'd have someone come in. One of our good friends has got a cleaning business and he does a really good job, but I don't know that it's in the budget, so we struggle along with that.”

One of the ways GLBT couples manage to keep their relationships egalitarian in terms of housework is to divide tasks up evenly. “We do what we like to and don't do what we don't like to do [laughter]. So it really comes down to, or it's maybe if we don't mind doing something. I don't care to do the dishes so he usually does dishes. That doesn't mean I never do them, but it means that he usually does them. Likewise, laundry, I usually take care of that.” Despite the fact that this couple performs different tasks, they are both tasks that frequently need to be done and there is not a lot of wiggle room in their necessity.

While heterosexual couples have to negotiate gender roles too, the process is a bit more clearly laid out. A heterosexual couple for example, would never have to decide who would stay home with children on maternity leave or who would carry a child. One lesbian couple who had
been together for 11 years and were welcoming a daughter via adoption only 1 week after their interview described it this way:

“Well and I think we are also, renegotiating the roles in relation to each other and stuff. Because I’m not working right now, so I’m going to do more of the child care and more of the housework. And Lusa will be the breadwinner and how do we deal with that and feel about that. I mean we kind of balance that out so neither of us are too bogged down. She doesn’t feel like she’s not equally a parent and I don’t feel like I’m worthless for not bringing home any money stuff.”

This consequence of having an egalitarian relationship is even more pronounced for those couples who had previously been in heterosexual relationships as this lesbian couple indicates:

“Having been in a heterosexual relationship and experiencing that unequal power dynamic and coming into an egalitarian- truly egalitarian relationship was truly just a breath of fresh air. It was absolutely awesome.” This statement indicates how important being a part of an egalitarian relationship is to this person, as well as indicating the idea of shared values.

**Improved Strength**

Just as more egalitarian relationships are a consequence of becoming a strong GLBT family, so too, is a sense of improved strength. It is not surprising that by following the processes of becoming a strong GLBT family outlined in the results section and demonstrated in Figure 2 (page 111), that the outcome of this process is improved strength in the couple relationship and strong, healthy GLBT families. When asked “How has your relationship changed over time, if at all?” 19 couples (90% of the sample) indicated that their relationship had “grown,” “improved” and “become stronger.” It is important to note that this question simply addressed change (positive or negative) over time, neither strength nor improvement.
Yet nearly all couples in this sample indicated that there was improvement in their relationship and their relationship was better than ever.

While participants spoke of the work and dedication they put into their relationship, nearly all echoed the same refrain of gradual strength building over time. As one lesbian couple who had been together 11 years stated: “I think it’s matured in many ways. I think it’s become easier, and more satisfying. There are always those challenges and changes, but I think it’s really fun to think it gets better and better.” Many couples spoke of how their relationship was now easier and more fulfilling than it had been at the beginning. Often this was described in getting past the initial relationship formation stages when puppy love and intrusive thinking about one’s partner dominate. As one lesbian couple of four years described this improvement, “Just in the way that any relationship changes from that overly ridiculously smitten, puppy love kind of ridiculousness to the trust, commitment, deeper love, reliability, all that kind of stuff.” After this preliminary phase, couples became more comfortable in their roles with one another, matured in their individual selves as well as together in the relationship, became more committed to each other, and learned the best ways in which to communicate with one another.

Couples discussed the idea of working out their differences early on in the relationship and learning from the mistakes they made along the way. Nearly all couples discussed how their communication and conflict resolution skills improved over time and they learned the most effective ways to relate to one another and to enjoy their time together, “I think Colt has already said that there are fewer conflicts and when they do occur we manage them better.” (gay couple, together 12 years). This greatly contributed to more comfort in the relationship,
enhanced ease of being together and improved strength over time. As a lesbian couple of 5 years stated, “Those growing pains in the beginning of trying to figure out where we all fit in as a family in the relationship. I think, yeah, it has matured. It’s more comfortable now. I still think it’s, we still have a spark, and we’re not boring at least [laughter]. It’s gotten stronger over time.” By following the progression of the data analysis: central phenomenon, the causes, creating strategies, having a good context having appropriate intervening conditions, the clear outcome for this process of becoming a strong GLBT family is improved strength.

**Honoring Diversity in the Sample:**

**Transgender Couples**

Because gender identity and sexual orientation are two distinct, albeit intertwined characteristics, what follows is a brief discussion of the two transgender couples in the sample. Both transgender couples were included in the generation of the GLBT Family Strengths model and their quotes can be read throughout the results section of this dissertation. Yet, as a way to honor the diversity of the GLBT community and avoid generalizations across divergent groups, more discussion about their particular strengths and challenges is warranted.

As stated previously, two of the 21 couples in the current study identified as transgender couples, including one partner who is an FTM (Female to Male) transgender individual. The first couple, Laura and Tom, have been together for three years. Laura is 66 years old and Tom is 48 years old. The second transgender couple in the sample is Shelly and Cory who have been together for six years. Shelly is 26 years old and Cory is 28 years old. Both couples began their relationships before Tom and Cory transitioned into male bodies and as such, were partnered during and throughout the transition process. This gave both couples the
unique perspective of being in both a same-sex relationship and a heterosexual relationship with the same partner. While the two couples lived in very different geographical regions, were different ages and had very different interests, common themes rang true for both couples.

Both Shelly and Laura identified as being both physically and emotionally attracted to both men and women, making their partners’ decision to transition somewhat less complicated. Both women were supportive and encouraging about their partner’s transition. It is then not surprising that both Tom and Cory discussed this support as helpful and integral to their own decision to begin the transition process. At the time of the interviews, Tom had been living as a man and taking testosterone injections for over a year. He had undergone a complete hysterectomy and had top surgery, in which the breast tissue is removed and the chest is contoured to look more masculine scheduled. Cory had been taking testosterone and living as a man for three years and had completed both a full hysterectomy and top surgery. While Cory was now comfortable being “flat all over” and was not considering further operations, Tom was unsure where his transition would come to an end. While the current theory does apply to these couples, there are a few issues they discussed that were not relevant to the 19 same-sex couples in the sample.

Both couples reported that they disliked classification, which they saw as an asset to their current situation. Because being a lesbian couple that is now a heterosexual couple is somewhat difficult to categorize, the fact that “I’ve always liked that grey area anyway,” made the transitions easier. One couple stated, “Well you have to [laugh off the confusion other people have about your relationship], and it is funny. It’s so intricate and intertwined. Definitions just go out the window.” Being comfortable in the grey area that comes with gender
transition was a strength both couples reported. If strict boxes and categories were important to a couple, being in the limbo of changing genders and shifting placement on the sexual orientation continuum could pose a serious challenge.

The comfort with ambiguity was also important in terms of dealing with gender role issues that arise when someone switches gender. One couple saw a large shift in gender roles when the transition began and the other couple saw no change other than the FTM partner being happier and more content with life. For the couple who saw differences, they affected many of the same areas heterosexual couples often see challenges. For this couple, there were distinct negative changes in communication, changes in who initiated sex, and division of household labor issues. This posed a serious challenge to the strength of the couple relationship. As the female in the couple stated, “Now I just feel like we’re back to gender role kind of things and I’m not real happy sometimes about feeling like I am the second class of the couple, whereas before I felt a greater equality.” Both partners of this couple thought the change was directly related to testosterone, and even saw differences between when the ten day dose was administered (and presumably stronger) and the end of the cycle. This is an interesting finding that will be addressed in the future directions section of this dissertation.

Moreover, both couples saw the transition process as something strengthening in their relationship. As discussed in greater detail later in this dissertation, individuals’ well-being has a direct impact on the well-being and strength of a relationship. Both couples discussed how positive the change was for the transgender individual, which in turn impacted the health of the relationship. Things as simple as feeling at ease in a public restroom had a large impact on the
happiness and comfort of the FTM partner. Here, one partner describes the feelings of freedom that come with transitioning:

“And I’m quite happy with having transitioned. I recognize that it is sort of very extreme to change your body, but it really makes a whole lot of difference when you’re someone like me. And then that’s done. And the brain is totally liberated from that anxiety, from that constant state of, they call it dysphoria and it’s really that. Not recognizing something as part of you and that’s a very, uh, it’s not a feeling that goes away. You live with it every day, all day. So it’s just such a lightening of the person I think, and a freeing in a way that has totally changed who I am, and how I approach things and what I work towards and how I respond to Shelly and as a husband, right, rather than as a wife [authors note: this couple lived in an area in which same-sex marriage is legal. Thus, the couple was legally married as a same-sex couple before Cory transitioned].”

By recognizing the fact that a paradigm shift needed to be made, and being able to make that shift was a fortifying aspect for both transgender couples in this study. That, said, transition was not without its drawbacks.

While both couples in the sample expressed joy and relief in their new bodies, a distinct sense of loss came with the process. Both couples had been female same-sex couples previously and identified strongly with this community. Through the process of transition, labels such as lesbian feminism, women-centered, and even female suddenly held different meaning. While their relationship was once viewed by others as a radical testimonial or making a political statement it was now seen as very mundane and every day. Moreover, the transgender community is often excluded from certain rallies and political events such as those for women born women. Here Tom discusses some of the parts of his lesbian identity he has lost:

“I feel a little bit of loss really. We get this magazine called lesbian connection and it has just little bits and pieces from lesbians all over the nation and I feel like an outsider now. I’m like I want to tell them this and I can’t. I don’t belong anymore. I feel a little sense of loss. And all the women’s festivals are coming up, it’s summertime in Iowa and Wisconsin, Minnesota. All these women’s music festivals are coming up and I’m an outsider now, I can’t go. I’d be escorted off the property if I showed up.”
While transitioning was a positive change in many ways, both personally and for the couple, certain challenges are present for the transgender community that are not there for gay and lesbian individuals.

A second challenge described by both couples in the sample was the idea of needing to come out twice, once as lesbian and once as transgender. While this was difficult for the individuals coming out, this posed more of a challenge for extended family and community. Family often responded with confusion and shock. Just as they were getting accustomed to the idea of having a gay daughter, they now had a heterosexual son. While family members were became supportive over time, transitioning complicated family dynamics. Additionally, people who had known one partner as an outspoken lesbian feminist were shocked to meet her new male partner, as Tom explains here:

“The last person who asked me, we were at the Unitarian church, must have been PFLAG. This woman introduced herself, looked at my name tag and [seeing the same last name] asked if I knew Laura and then the look on her face when I said I was Laura’s partner was like “Poor Laura, we’re going to have to have a talk with her” [laughter].”

Laura: “I’ve gone back to the other side.”

These hiccups did pass in time, but without the strong foundation of support and personal conviction regarding the decision to transition, serious problems could arise.

On the other hand, both couples described how the new appearance and gender of the FTM partner made some social interactions easier as the couple was now able to pass for straight. When talking with casual acquaintances or new business colleagues the pronouns he and his as well as the term husband as opposed to wife meant that these individuals were not having to continually come out unless they chose to do so. When interacting with people the
couple did not know well or would never see again this made some social interactions easier and also assuaged some forms of external stress for the couple.

While the theory posited in this dissertation will apply to transgender couples, there are clearly some issues described in this supplemental section that transgender couples must face that do not apply to same-sex headed families. More research is needed in this area to fully disentangle the strengths needed for GLB and T couples to succeed and flourish as well as the challenges they face that do not affect the rest of the GLBT community.

**Propositions of the Theory**

As stated previously, in the selective coding phase of grounded theory research, the investigator refines the theory that has been developed and presents propositions, or hypotheses about the story line of the theory (Creswell, 2007). Each of the qualities identified as part of this progression (commitment, differences between GLBT and heterosexual couples, communication, support and shared values) are integral in the process of becoming a strong GLBT family and are steps along the way. However, there are additional factors to consider that relate to this theory. Here three propositions about the current theory are presented with a brief description of each.

1) *This process leads to improved strength for GLBT couples.* As stated previously, if couples have the qualities listed in the results section and follow the process that is outlined, the outcome is improved strength of the couple relationship.

2) *The qualities GLBT couples need to succeed and flourish are more similar to the qualities heterosexual couples need than they are different.* As discussed in the causes section of the dissertation, the qualities that make GLBT couples strong are
more similar than they are different to their heterosexual counterparts. There are significant differences in the challenges the two family types face owing to a lack of institutional support, discrimination and minority stress, but the underlying strengths are remarkably similar. Therefore, while GLBT couples may need to bolster their commitment and support, strengths-based theories (such as the International Family Strengths Model) for heterosexual families would also apply to GLBT couples. The current study sheds light on how GLBT couples use their strengths effectively in a uniquely-challenging cultural environment.

3) These qualities are the same for most GLBT couples, yet there are some differences in the challenges faced across the sexual orientation and gender identity continuum and attention must be paid to honor the diversity of the GLBT community.

The theory generated in this dissertation applies to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender couples. That said, there is considerable diversity in the GLBT community. Thought their strengths appear essentially the same, the challenges faced by each of the segments of the GLBT population are somewhat different. Thus, more research on how each group uses their strengths to meet somewhat unique challenges each group faces is necessary, and the theory of GLBT family strengths developed here should be considered and applied with prudence.
Figure 2: Theoretical Model of the Process of Becoming a Strong GLBT Family

The axial coding model presented in Figure 2 represents the process through which GLBT families become strong. This figure represents the reciprocal and reflective nature of the data. It also demonstrates how each characteristic of strong GLBT families is interconnected and influential. As the reader can see, the central phenomenon, or central category of strong GLBT families, commitment is identified first. After commitment, causal conditions, or categories of conditions that influence the strength of GLBT families, and strategies used for maintaining and building strength are indicated next. The causal conditions, “We’re the same, yet different” and strategies of communication lend themselves to the context of support and intervening conditions of shared values that GLBT families that succeed and flourish. Finally, the consequences, or outcomes of these strategies, egalitarian relationships and improved strength are represented in the last box of the diagram. Again, this paradigm illustrates the process of
developing into a strong GLBT family. Results were presented in terms of this model to keep within the grounded theory tradition of data analysis.
CHAPTER FIVE:
DISCUSSION

The major finding of this grounded theory is that to become a strong GLBT family, commitment, both to the relationship and to each other, are essential. Indeed, commitment was the central phenomenon of strong GLBT families. As commitment is an important facet in the lives of heterosexual couples also, the theme of commitment highlights the causal conditions of strong GLBT families: the fact that while there are many aspects of GLBT relationships that are similar, there are also differences between the family types. The main strategy that GLBT couples use to maintain their strength is communication. Further, it is helpful if the couple has a context of support from extended family and community to provide some external encouragement for the relationship. The intervening condition to strength in GLBT families is the sharing of values. These values are broad ideological values as well as enjoyable time together and a shared passion for similar pursuits. Lastly, the consequences of being a part of the process of becoming a strong GLBT family are a more egalitarian relationship as well as improved strength.

Commitment

Not only is it one of the key qualities of the International Family Strengths Model, there is a large body of research linking commitment to happy relationships. Previous research has also highlighted the importance of formal recognition. In fact, same-sex couples in legally recognized unions report less internalized homophobia, fewer depressive symptoms, lower levels of stress, and more meaning in their lives than those in committed relationships (Riggle, Rostosky & Horne, 2010).
It is important to note, however, that some same-sex couples choose to marry to increase the societal knowledge of gay and lesbian relationships (Schecter, Tracey, Page, & Luong, 2008). Increasing the societal knowledge of heterosexual relationships is not something any straight couples need to consider. As with many of the previously discussed ideas related to commitment, this too, is one of the ways in which the commitment between heterosexual couples and same-sex couples is different.

Another important aspect of commitment to consider is the cohabitation effect, in which premarital cohabitation is associated with higher rates of divorce (Stanley, Whitton, & Markman, 2004). In fact, premarital cohabitation is linked to more negative and fewer positive marital interactions, lower levels of marital quality, higher rates of wife infidelity and more physical violence (Cohan & Kleinbaum, 2002; Kline Rhoades, Stanley & Markamn, 2006; Brown, 2004; Kline et al., 2004; Stanley et al., 2004; Kamp Dush, Cohan, & Amato, 2003). The cohabitation effect relates to commitment in that many theories make a distinction between forces that support individuals in forming and maintaining close relationships (dedication commitment) and forces that heighten the costs of leaving (constraint commitment) (Johnson, Caughlin, & Huston, 1999, Stanley & Markman, 1992). Dedication commitment refers to intrinsic interpersonal commitment and is characterized by working as a team, a desire for a long-term future together, a readiness to give one’s partner or the relationship high priority, and a willingness to make personal sacrifices for the good of one’s partner or the relationship (Stanley & Markman, 1992). Constraint commitment on the other hand, refers to external forces for relationship continuance such as financial considerations, the perceived low quality
of other potential partners, ideals about divorce, and/or the complexity of terminating the relationship (Stanley & Markman, 1992).

The constraints are believed to help explain the inertia of cohabitation, or why some couples who cohabit, even high-risk unions develop into marriages (Stanley, Kline Rhoads, & Markman, 2006). This is important to consider with GLBT couples, because most couples are not afforded the right to marry and more likely than not, will choose to live together in the same home. This begs the question of what cohabitation effects, if any, are there in GLBT relationships, and what the impact on commitment would be.

Moreover, pre-engagement cohabitation is associated with marriages in which the husband is less dedicated than his wife (Kline Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2006). This research indicates that women and men who are cohabitating experience commitment differently. Women are perhaps more likely to see cohabitation as a step towards marriage or a signal of increased commitment than men. While the vast majority of participants in this study indicated that commitment is important, the above research suggests how male same-sex couples and female same-sex couples interpret commitment may be very different. Hence, it is important for all GLBT couples to have conversations with their partner prior to moving in together about their level of dedication, the meaning of cohabitation and the future of the relationship. Additionally, even though commitment emerged as the central phenomenon of the process of becoming a strong GLBT family, what exactly commitment means may differ for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender couples.
We’re the Same, Yet Different

As was discussed earlier, formal commitment is one of the many ways in which the differences between same-sex and heterosexual couples emerge. As same-sex couples have been historically denied legal recognition for their relationship as a way of formalizing and socially endorsing their bond, many couples decide to have commitment ceremonies (Schecter, et al., 2008). Many of the couples in this sample were married in their churches or in their own private ceremonies as a way of conveying their love and commitment to their friends, family and community. As there is no traditional script for a commitment ceremony, the couples who choose this route need to be intentional about their decision and have the right to make up their own rules. Again, this is not something most heterosexual couples need to address. If a heterosexual couple decides to make a formal commitment to one another in front of friends, family and community, more often than not they will choose to marry.

While there are more similarities between heterosexual families and GLBT families than there are differences, a few important distinctions should be made between the two family types. While many participants in the current study highlighted the fact that love and commitment, which are hallmarks of heterosexual relationships, are equally important in GLBT relationships, GLBT couples need to be very intentional in the way they form these commitments. More care needs to be taken in filing legal documents, having children together and finding appropriate support for their bond.

Another way in which family strengths develop differently for GLBT couples is due to heteronormativity. This term refers to the multiple ways in which heterosexuality structures and orders our everyday existence (Martin & Kazyak, 2009). Heteronormativity means that our
social life is structured such that heterosexuality is assumed, privileged, expected, and seen as natural and ordinary. For example, being a grown-up is often described to children in terms of meeting a so-called opposite sex partner, falling in love, and getting married (Martin, 2009). Additionally, one’s sexual orientation is rarely mentioned unless it is something other than heterosexual, illustrating the idea that queer identities are seen as being other (Martin, 2009). Moreover, it gives privilege to particular aspects of heterosexuality such as being married, monogamous and procreative. This means that the idea of being married to a monogamous partner and having children with this partner is often seen as the end goal for relationships. It is important to note that this idea is different than homophobia or heterosexism in that it is often unintentional, but can potentially be damaging (Martin, 2009). By dealing with the effects of heteronormativity on a daily basis, the feeling of being an other could potentially develop into internalized homophobia, depression and other mental health issues.

Sex outside the couple relationship is an empirically replicated difference between heterosexual couples and some GLBT couples. Yet, extra dyadic sex did not emerge in the results section of this dissertation because it only applied to one couple in the current sample. The idea of negotiated non-monogamy or having an open relationship is estimated to be between 37% and 68% of male same-sex couples (Wheldon & Pathak, 2010; LaSala, 2004). Non-monogamous relationships have been found to be more common among older men, and men in relationships of a longer duration (Wheldon & Pathak, 2010). Research on sexual behavior often indicates that men are more interested in casual sex than women (Okami & Shackelford, 2001). Hence, it follows that in a romantic relationship in which both partners are men, extra dyadic sex would be more appealing. This difference is often described in terms of
psychobiological theory, which posits that men have a biological imperative to father children with multiple partners, whereas women are motivated by a desire to be supported in childbearing and childrearing (Buss, 1994). As noted previously, monogamous relationships are prized and expected in United States culture. As such, sex outside the primary relationship is often pathologized and seen as indicative of trouble in the primary relationship. Yet it would be a mistake to categorize these relationships as troubled or involving dysfunctional boundaries, as many gay male couples in non-monogamous relationships report high levels of relationship satisfaction and quality (LaSala, 2004b; LaSala, 2004a). While there were too little data in the current study to investigate the idea of negotiated nonmonagamy and the impact of open relationships on gay men’s family strengths, it is a noteworthy difference between heterosexual couples and gay male couples. Thus, more research is needed in this area.

Minority stress. The concept of minority stress compounds the notion that GLBT couples need to enhance their family strengths in ways that their heterosexual counterparts do not. The minority stress model is a conceptual framework for understanding the negative effects on psychological health and well being caused by a stigmatizing social context (Meyer, 2003). This chronic social stress is above and beyond everyday stress and consists of several factors, including experiences of discrimination and the need to hide identities (Rotosky, Riggle, Gray & Hatton, 2007). Because this stress is chronic and in addition to normative daily stress, it is not surprising that minority stress factors are linked to lower relationship quality scores and incidents of domestic violence (Balsam & Szymanski, 2005). The concept of minority stress is in direct relation to the notion put forth in this dissertation that while GLBT relationships develop along the same lines as heterosexual relationships and many of the qualities of strong families
are the same for both family types, the lack of support for GLBT families creates different challenges. GLBT couples need to be more committed and communicate more clearly with one another to be strong. What’s more, they need to seek out support to fill the void left by the lack of institutional support they receive. Minority stress is a large part of this difference.

*Family, community, and cultural strengths.* While the International Family Strengths Model will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter, concepts posited by this cross-cultural strengths-based research help to clarify these ideas of difference. DeFrain and Asay (2007) created this Venn diagram, denoted in Figure 3, to represent how family, community, and cultural strengths all intersect.

Figure 3. The Relationships of Family, Community, and Cultural Strengths: A Venn Diagram (DeFrain & Asay, 2007).

This figure represents the idea that if a couple has several important strengths and they live in a supportive community and a cultural context which is also supportive, they have significant advantages over couples who may have significant relationship strengths, but do not live in a community or cultural environment that is supportive (DeFrain & Asay, 2007). Thus, this figure is also useful in understanding the similarities and differences in family strength due to sexual
orientation and gender identity. In many ways, GLBT couples and heterosexual couples live in two different worlds. Heterosexual families live in overall cultures and communities that are supportive of their relationships (in Figure 3 this is represented by a fairly large sweet spot where the strengths of the family, the culture and the community all intersect), GLBT families often do not. As discussed previously, many of the strengths of GLBT couples are the same as the strengths of heterosexual couples. However, the cultural environment in which GLBT couples and heterosexual couples live is very different due to factors such as heteronormativity, lack of institutional support, and minority stress (Brown, 2004; Martin, 2009; Rotosky, Riggle, Gray & Hatton, 2007). Thus, the lives of GLBT individuals may look more like Figure 4. While their family may be strong, the overall cultural and community context may not be supportive, leaving a small amount of overlap in the three forms of support.

Figure 4. The Relationships of Family, Community, and Cultural Strengths for GLBT Couples: A Venn Diagram
GLBT couples must develop additional family strengths, such as creating a context of support, to overcome their lack of community and cultural supports. That said, strong GLBT relationships are more similar to heterosexual relationships than they are different. While some qualities of strong families need to be heightened in GLBT relationships and there are some issues queer couples need strength to deal with that do not affect heterosexual couples, the similarities are everywhere.

**Communication**

There are many reasons communication was such an important strength for GLBT families, but one of them is that it relates to a sense of safety, or lack thereof, in intimate relationships (Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002). Moreover, negative interaction between partners or destructive communication is linked to lower relationship satisfaction and higher rates of dissolution of the relationship (Gottman & Notarius, 2000) illustrating the importance of healthy communication as a strategy for increased strength.

This is also significant regarding the current theory as there is a relationship between negative interaction and levels of commitment (Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002). For both men and women, the more negative interaction and destructive communication present in a relationship, the lower the levels of friendship and commitment are. Clearly, these two major aspects of strong GLBT relationships are interconnected, which is critical for several reasons. This finding not only validates the importance of both communication and commitment to GLBT relationships, but also suggests that if one of these areas is improved, the other will improve as well. For example, if a GLBT couple seeks therapy for communication issues and leaves therapy with a renewed sense of how best to share ideas, thoughts and resolve conflicts
they may also have an improved sense of commitment to the relationship. Moreover, if lesbians participate in some form of formal commitment, such as a civil union, it is more likely that they will disclose their relationship to both family members and non-family (Oswald, et al., 2008). Expression of family identity and sexual identity were both important pieces to the strategy of effective communication. Thus, the strengths of commitment and communication are inextricably linked.

**Support**

As has been discussed elsewhere in this study, commitment is paramount to strong GLBT relationships. However, most same-sex couples in the United States are unable to legally commit to one another due to a lack of government support for their unions. As noted previously, same-sex couples who are in legally recognized unions report less psychological distress, i.e. internalized homophobia, symptoms of depression and stress. And they report a higher level of well-being than same-sex couples who are informally committed (Riggle, Rostosky & Horne, 2010). It follows that being in a legally recognized relationship affords protective effects against depressive symptoms, stress, and internalized homophobia (Riggle, Rostosky & Horne, 2010). This research is illustrative of the benefits of support. By legally and formally supporting GLBT couples, their psychological well-being is improved. When an individual’s psychological well-being is improved, the quality of his/her/hir relationship is also improved.

Moreover, marital status is not linked to mental health alone; it is also linked to physical health. People in happy marriages have lower blood pressure than single individuals (Holt-Lundstad, Birmingham & Jones, 2008). Again, this speaks to the importance of institutional
support of GLBT relationships. Legal recognition and institutional support of GLBT relationships will not eliminate minority stress from the social stigma that comes with being a member of the GLBT community, but it is an important factor that contributes to the physical and mental health of same-sex couples (Riggle, Rostosky, & Horne, 2010; Holt-Lundstad, Birmingham, & Jones, 2008). Clearly, the importance of supporting GLBT couples is evident on many ecological levels.

**Shared Values**

The intervening condition needed for GLBT families to become strong was a sense of shared values, which include both broad ideological values as well as a shared enjoyment of leisure activities. All couples co-create their own principles and meanings of family within their relationship. In so doing, they develop shared meanings and understanding (Hohmann-Marriot & Amato, 2008). Without this shared perspective, partners perceive events differently and may have difficulty understanding one another, which has the potential to lead to stress, conflict and lower quality relationships (Hohmann-Marriot & Amato, 2008; Kenny & Acitekki, 2001). In fact, a lack of shared values has been linked to lower relationship quality in interethnic-couples (Hohmann-Marriot & Amato, 2008). While more research needs to be conducted on this topic, the potential implications for GLBT families are considerable. As GLBT couples are more likely to be interracial than heterosexual couples (Rosenfeld, 2007), discussing worldviews and values prior to beginning a committed relationship is critical for GLBT couples. As will be discussed in greater detail later in this section, the quality of shared leisure pursuits, or enjoyable time together is a component of the International Family Strengths Model.
Parallel attitudes. The idea of parallel attitudes regarding public disclosure put forth in this dissertation is very similar to the critical distinctions of influence attempts and emotional expressiveness in John Gottman’s Sound Marital House theory (Gottman, 1999). While this portion of Gottman’s theory deals with communication and conflict resolution, the concept behind the parallel attitudes hypothesis is the same. In the Sound Marital House theory, there are three different types of people: volatile, validating, and conflict avoidant (Gottman, 1999). While each of these three types of individuals are equally suited to be good partners and parents, trouble arises if the members of the couple are mismatched (i.e. a volatile individual with a conflict avoider etc.). It is in this way, that parallel attitudes regarding public disclosure in gay and lesbian couples is similar. As stated previously, it does not matter where on the continuum a couple is in terms of their public openness about their relationship, yet the couple needs to be in the same location on the continuum as his or her partner. The couple may change together, but it is when the mismatch occurs that this aspect of the relationship may slip from a strength to an area of potential strain.

Fit together. The idea that strong GLBT couples feel that they fit together well and create a balance between their individual selves and their couples selves is supported by the Couple and Family Systems Model, which is sometimes called the Circumplex Model. This model includes three major dimensions of communication, flexibility and cohesion (Olson & Olson, 2000). This theory posits that the notion of cohesion, or a feeling of emotional closeness with another person, is most functional when it is balanced. The balancing of separateness and togetherness is critical for healthy families (Olson & Olson, 2000). Both partners need to value this equilibrium and gain strength when they share these views. This idea runs parallel to the
notion of fitting together and balancing individual selves and couples selves as a strength in GLBT relationships.

**Egalitarian Relationships**

*The Second Shift*, an idea that refers to the belief that even if a woman is working outside the home in paid employment, she still performs the majority of the housework and childcare duties in a heterosexual relationship (Hochschild, 1989). Hochschild (1989) found that women work an extra month of 24 hour days over the course of the year as compared to their husbands. One of the factors that plays a role in women’s extra month of work in heterosexual relationships is that many jobs in the home are divided into traditionally male jobs and traditionally female jobs (Coltrane, 2000). This work has also been defined as high control tasks, the male work, and low control tasks, the traditionally female jobs (Bartley et al., 2005). The low control tasks have to be done every day at specific times. For example, cooking dinner, washing the dishes, bathing children and putting them to bed must be done at roughly the same time every single day. In fact, the five most time consuming chores are all traditionally associated with women: meal preparation, laundry, washing dishes, shopping for groceries and general housecleaning (Coltrane, 2000).

The high control tasks (men’s tasks) can be done at the workers discretion, have a concrete start and end point, and have no specific time frame for completion. These jobs are often home repairs, taking the garbage out, vehicle maintenance, or mowing the lawn/shoveling snow (Coltrane, 2000). Home repairs are sporadic and can often be put off until there is time to do them. Outside home care, such as mowing the lawn or shoveling snow is seasonal and again, does not require completion in a time crunch and does not impact others in
the family by and large. Hence, when the household division of labor is partitioned in this way, women end up performing significantly more work that they have less flexibility and control over. In this gendered heterosexual arrangement, even if both partners have an equal number of tasks, women are putting in more time and energy.

It is interesting to note that while many GLBT couples in the current study reported that their housework load was fair and balanced, one partner exclusively did the high control tasks and one partner did the low control tasks. Here are two examples of this phenomenon. The first quote is from a lesbian couple of ten years, the second is from a gay couple of three years:

“Cathy does all of the outside stuff. And mostly because I won't. (Laughter) I do, some, a lot more in the summer, in the summer I do more of the inside stuff, when she is mowing weekly and doing that kind of stuff. Otherwise we split it up pretty even. I think we pretty much split it up even most of the time. She won't clean the bathroom. I won't mow the lawn or pick up the dog poop. Yuck!”
- Lesbian couple, together ten years

“I basically take care of the house on the inside and he takes care of the house on the outside. Or things like, when we eat at home together he almost always cooks, but that is because he enjoys cooking and I’m sort of indifferent to it. I love working outside in the yard, I don't mind doing the tedious things like mowing the lawn, and he hates it.”
- Gay male couple, together three years

In both couples, one female and one male, one partner was responsible for the outside and one partner was responsible for the inside. This indicates that GLBT couples may not be quite as egalitarian as they may like to think. That said, all the couples in the sample reported that both partners were getting a fair shake, even if the percentages of who did what were not equal. Clearly, more research into dynamics of household labor and power differentials is needed for this population.
The International Family Strengths Model

As the current study was conducted in the grounded theory tradition, wherein a theory that is grounded in the views of the participants is developed (Strauss & Corbin, 2008), the International Family Strengths Model (IFSM) was not used as a framework during theory development. As such, the present grounded theory was generated based on the qualitative interviews, observations, and analysis only. That said, the International Family Strengths Model is derived from 37 years of research in 50 states in the United States and 38 other countries and is therefore an important lens through which to examine the contemporary theory (DeFrain & Asay, 2007). In the following pages, the process of becoming a strong GLBT family will be compared to the International Family Strengths Model. The comparison to the existing International Family Strengths Model will inform the integration of theory development.

It is important to note that the theory generated in the current study not only identified characteristics of strong GLBT couples, but also examined the dynamic progression of strength over time together. This is an asset of the current theory as context and couple dynamics were taken into account. By examining the relationship as a unit and identifying couple agreement in both the qualities of strong families and the process over time the International Family Strengths Model has been expanded and enhanced. Moreover, because a strengths-based study has never been conducted with GLBT families, the current theory filled a gap in the International Family Strengths Model.

The International Family Strengths Model (IFSM) was developed by Stinnett and DeFrain (1985) as a positive approach to studying couples and families. The ISFM, as it stands today, proposes six key qualities that provide the supportive foundation strong couples and families
need in order to succeed and flourish (DeFrain & Asay, 2007). These qualities are: commitment, appreciation and affection, positive communication and conflict resolution, enjoyable time together, spiritual well-being and shared values, and effective management of stress and crisis. All of these qualities interact with each other and are interrelated, meaning that, for example, how well a family is able to communicate with one another in turn influences how committed they are to one another. These qualities are so interconnected, that in many ways, they are impossible to disentangle from one another.

Many of the findings of the current study run parallel to the six strengths laid out by the International Family Strengths Model. While some of the language used to describe the qualities is at times slightly different, the two models are in many ways using different terms to say the same things. As is discussed in the future directions section of this dissertation, a next step in this research is a more complete and in-depth theory integration within the system of researchers studying family strengths, the International Family Strengths Network.

The IFSM indicates that just as every family has a unique assemblage of strengths that is different than every other family, each culture’s family strengths are unique and different from every other culture (DeFrain & Asay, 2007). That said, family strengths from family to family and culture to culture are remarkably similar (DeFrain & Asay, 2007). This, too, is the case for family strengths of heterosexual and GLBT families. While the marginalized status of GLBT families creates some differences in the ways they become strong, what makes both families strong is more similar than it is different.

The IFSM posits that both positive communication and commitment are tenets of strong marriages (DeFrain, Olson, & Skogrand, 2007); what's more, these are the two qualities that are
the most comparable in terms of language and definition between both the current dissertation and the IFSM. While communication and commitment contribute to strong marriages, they also contribute to strong long term relationships for GLBT couples.

Commitment. Showing commitment to each other means “investing time and energy in family activities and not letting their work or other priorities take too much time away from family interactions” (Olson & DeFrain, 2006, p.72). Commitment includes a number of elements: trust, honesty, dependability, and faithfulness. Couples in this dissertation described commitment as central to their strong relationship. In fact, GLBT couples described having to be even more committed to their partner and relationship due to the lack of institutional and legal recognition they receive for their relationships. Sometimes families, friends and work colleagues were not supportive of participants’ relationships, so they had to be even more sure and steadfast in their commitment to each other. This attribute, more than any other, was fundamental to both models of family strength.

Communication. This strength fosters sharing, which promotes connection between romantic partners and other members of a family. Through sharing feelings, giving compliments, avoiding blame, having the ability to compromise, listening, and agreeing to disagree, families display positive communication patterns with each other according to the IFSM (DeFrain & Stinnett, 2002). As mentioned previously, every couple in the current sample except one stressed the importance of communication in their relationship. Couples did not always state that communication came easily to them, but they worked at building a foundation of positive communication and over time found constructive ways to discuss issues and ideas with each other.
Spiritual well-being. While the IFSM makes it clear that this dimension includes organized religion in the lives of many families, it means many more things. Some express spiritual well-being in terms of ethical values or commitment to important shared causes. Others talk about faith in God, hope for the future, or an optimism both partners feel for life (DeFrain & Asay, 2007). In this way, the IFSM is much the same as the idea of shared values presented in this dissertation. The intervening condition of shared values was something that was expressed by many couples in the sample. Many discussed a shared sense of faith or a commitment to God as something that nourished and strengthened their relationship. This was also expressed in terms of a shared sense of social justice or a common sense of duty to be politically active. Moreover, it was also expressed in terms of living sustainably or peacefully and passing collective values on to their children, if children were present in the home. Clearly, this sense of shared values or spiritual well-being, no matter the title, is a very similar concept.

Enjoyable time together. In addition to the impression of shared values being similar to spiritual well-being, it is also analogous to the IFSM quality of enjoyable time together. According to DeFrain, Asay and their colleagues (2007), enjoyable time together is what most people discussed when they were asked to share their happiest memories. These were typically memories of the family being together and enjoying each other’s presence. In the current dissertation, shared values also includes a sense of sharing and valuing enjoyable activities together. Some couples discussed how much they enjoy playing certain games, such as bridge or softball together, enjoying the theatre or live music together, while others discussed both enjoying home-improvement projects or gardening together. Still others described being involved in a book club, a brunch group, or a mixed chorus together. All of these activities were
important to couples because they could enjoy them with their partner. This allowed couples to build their shared history and look forward to working and playing together in the future. For both strong heterosexual couples and strong GLBT couples, these enjoyable times and happy memories were rarely dependent on money. Couples in the current study had disparate income and financial positions, some were renting small apartments, some owned large homes; some were students with hardly any income to speak of, some were very financially sound, but all of these couples discussed the benefits of sharing time with their partner and engaging in shared leisure activities.

*Effective management of stress and crisis.* Effective management of stress in the IFSM deals with the ways in which strong families manage both serious crises and daily life stressors effectively (DeFrain & Asay, 2007). Often families do this by reframing the problem, or looking at it from a different angle. This runs parallel to the communication subtheme of conflict resolution, as well as the support subtheme of dealing with external stressors in this dissertation. Couples discussed the importance of working together to handle the stress that stems from work, extended family or the lack of institutional support they feel as a GLBT couple. Moreover, couples discussed how their strategies of effective communication helped them resolve conflict in a kind and caring manner. Again, both ideas are using different words to discuss the same issues.

*Appreciation and affection.* Appreciation and affection is another aspect of the IFSM that was relevant in the current dissertation. Appreciation an affection is shown when partners not only care deeply about one another, but tell and show each other frequently. While there was no overarching theme of appreciation and affection in this dissertation, this idea wove
itself though every other aspect of strong GLBT families. Couples were affectionate to one another during the interview and often discussed their love and appreciation for their partner. This quality fits into the broader themes of support, shared values and communication most readily. Participants communicated their affection for one another through jokes, exchanged glances and shared smiles throughout the interviews. Often, when one partner was recounting a particularly difficult memory or experience, the other partner would place his/her/hir hand on his/her/hir shoulder or leg in a show of support. Often, no words of encouragement were expressed, but with body language, one partner would communicate to the other a feeling of support. Again, this was expressed in terms of parallel attitudes regarding public disclosure. Often couples would have to find private ways to show their partner appreciation and affection as they did not feel safe outwardly expressing it in public in some cases, demonstrating that while there are many similarities between the two models of family strengths, there are some essential differences.

Overall, the GLBT Family Strengths theory and the IFSM are remarkably similar. Both models use different language to say the same things. While GLBT families must develop additional strengths to effectively and creatively meet the challenges they face as a marginalized group, the basic qualities present in strong families have are very comparable. Perhaps most importantly, both models focus on how families succeed and have the potential to inspire others to work toward more satisfying relationships (DeFrain, 1999; DeFrain & Asay, 2007).
Implications

The implications for this project are numerous and cross many different fields of study. Most important among them however, is the simple fact that gay and lesbian individuals create strong, loving families all over the country, even when faced with so much adversity. Thus, in order to keep these families strong and encourage other strong gay or lesbian families, they must be given support. This support can be in many forms and should be both informal and institutional. As was discussed in the results section of this paper, a context of support is paramount for GLBT families. Authentication of this kind will allow couples to communicate more clearly and directly with the families thus improving their commitment. And, as a consequence, they will have families that emerge even stronger.

There are clear links between the support GLBT families need to flourish and public policy. As mentioned in the introduction to this dissertation, there are only a few States in the U.S. that allow marriage between people of the same sex, which is a considerable form of institutional support. Other displays of public support for GLBT families include hospital visitation, Social Security benefits, immigration, health insurance, estate taxes, family leave, nursing homes, home protection and pensions (hrc.org). Moreover, support for non-biological parents in same-sex relationships is also linked to public policy in terms of adoption, foster care, health insurance, medical decision making and hospital visitation, to name just a few. If more States or the federal government granted more rights to same-sex partners, such as the hospital visitation regulations initiated by President Obama on April 15, 2010 allowing patients to designate their visitors (whitehouse.gov), GLBT relationships would be more supported and
consequently strengthened. Additionally, these families would be protected in the event of non-supportive extended family, employers or others.

In addition to granting more rights for GLBT families as a way to show institutional support and bolster relationships, the abolition of public policy that specifically restricts the rights of GLBT families would be a supportive measure as well. There are numerous public policies do restrict the rights of GLBT individuals, such as the recently repealed “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy that kept openly gay individuals from serving in the military. Yet, the policy that perhaps affects GLBT families the most is the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) the Clinton-era law that bans federal agencies from recognizing the legal marriage of gay and lesbian couples and defines marriage as between one man and one woman (DOMAwatch.org). This act is important to the institutional support of GLBT couples because even if they are legally married in their home State, the federal government and other States do not have to recognize the marriage and some States include legislation bans them from ever reaching marriage equality. What’s more, if DOMA were overturned, and same-sex couples were allowed to marry, same-sex couples who chose to marry would receive more than 1,100 federal benefits (hrc.org). Currently, partners who cannot marry must file their taxes separately, cannot access their partner’s pension plans or benefits, and cannot claim their children on tax forms if they are not the biological parent, to name just a few benefits they do not receive. Clearly, this public policy is not supportive of GLBT relationships and is contrary to GLBT families becoming or staying strong. It is important to note that even if same-sex couples choose not to marry or register for partner benefits, the institutional support granted by public policy, while not
impacting them directly, is still an important form of support that will positively influence all GLBT relationships.

Along with implications for public policy and those in the political sector, the qualities that help GLBT families succeed and flourish are beneficial to clinicians from all disciplines, particularly marriage and family therapists. To know the characteristics that strong GLBT families possess is to be able to help these families enhance their strengths. By helping struggling couples work on dealing with concerns regarding commitment, communication, and providing a supportive space to face these issues, therapists can help strengthen GLBT families.

Moreover, by using a therapeutic technique that is strengths-based, such as solution focused therapy (de Shazer, 1985; Lipchik, 2002), in conjunction with the GLBT family strengths model, clinicians will further support GLBT families by elevating their struggle from one of victimization and marginalization to one of strength. In the solution-focused approach, therapists help clients to shift from a traditional problem focus, to one of solutions and future possibilities (de Shazer, 1985). Through a process of setting goals that are concrete, measureable and attainable, clients can begin to see their own strengths resources to solve problems (Lipchik, 2002). If a solution-focused therapist used the GLBT Family Strengths perspective in session, clients could find ways to improve upon areas of strength in their relationship, such as shared values or commitment, and set concrete goals to improve upon areas of development, such as, communication or conflict resolution.

Too often the challenges GLBT families encounter are the focus of both practice and research. Looking at both challenges in life as well as strengths is a balanced approach. We need to focus not only on the problems families face, but also on their strengths, because they
use their strengths to effectively meet the challenges they face in life. This theory will help clinicians to shift the problem focused lens and bolster strength. Giving GLBT couples the tools they need to become strong and stay strong not only has implications for the couple relationship, but relationships with children as well.

There are numerous GLBT families across the country with biological, adoptive, or step-children. As was discussed previously, children from two-parent families often have better outcomes than children raised by single parents (Brown, 2004). By supporting GLBT families, policy makers, therapists, and other social servants actually help improve child outcomes as well. If parents have strong, successful relationships, children are less likely to fall below the poverty line, they perform better in school, and have improved peer relationships and greater psychological adjustment. Additionally, parents in strong, healthy relationships are more likely to have superior psychological adjustment and in turn, provide better parenting as a result (Brown, 2004). Thus, by supporting GLBT relationships, the entire family reaps the benefits.

Finally, and perhaps most important, this study expands not only the dearth of research on GLBT families, but family strengths research as well. Because families, even in all of their diversity are the basic foundation in all human cultures, a joint effort has been proposed uniting a global community of researchers, practitioners and families to look more closely at family strengths (DeFrain & Asay, 2007). This study expands the current family strengths literature by examining another form of diversity in families living in the United States. By adding this knowledge to the wealth of strengths-based literature we will have yet another group of strong families to inspire and to model healthy dynamics for others.
Limitations

This study has several strengths. First, a rigorous and persuasive grounded theory project would include 20-30 participants to allow for full saturation of all the categories, which this study accomplished (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). Thus, as this study included 21 couples, a complete theory of GLBT Family Strengths was produced. Additionally, both partners in each couple were interviewed to get a well-developed understanding of the couple. Previous research has demonstrated that couple level data are important to fully assess many aspects of relationship development (Kline Rhoades, Stanley & Markman, 2006). Couple interviews were linked with multiple forms of data, i.e., in-depth interviews and observations/field notes. This helped to create a rich and thick pool of data from which to draw conclusions. In sum, this theory facilitates the arduous task of disentangling the various aspects of strong GLBT families.

However, while there are limitations to the current study, it must be acknowledged that GLBT couples are a hard-to-reach population, and as such the limitations of this research are best accounted for by the consequences of their marginalized status, rather than flaws in the methodological design. Of the 42 participants, 26 (62%) were female, 14 were male (33%) and 2 were transgender (5%). This is not entirely surprising considering the lessened social stigma for gay women as opposed to gay men (Rosenfeld, 2007). Therefore, the current theory is potentially slanted to apply more directly to lesbian couples/families.

Further, both transgender participants in the current study were female to male individuals, i.e., they born with a female body and transitioned into a male body. This is a very small portion of the sample and this small portion is further impacted by the fact that both transgender participants were female to male (FTM) individuals. Further, both participants
identified as female at the beginning of their relationship and were therefore in a same-sex relationship with a bisexual identified partner. At some point during their lesbian relationship, one partner began the transition to a male gender identity, creating a heterosexual relationship. Their stories have the potential to be very different from the stories of those who were born with a male body and transitioned into a female body (MTF), or from individuals who had transitioned before they met their current partner. Male to female individuals often have remarkably different perspectives on the transition process as the transition is frequently more challenging (Megan Smith, personal communication, July, 2010). A greater amount of money and time needs to be spent on electrolysis of the face and body, as well as on voice coaches to feminize the vocal chords and lessen the presentation of the Adam’s apple. People who identify as MTF have a more difficult time passing at work or in their social life, creating the potential for stress and difficulty within their relationships. While the participants in the current study greatly enhanced and broadened the theory, a great deal more research on the family strengths of transgender families is needed before drawing hard conclusions about what it means to be a strong transgender family.

Despite purposeful sampling efforts, obtaining a diverse sample of same sex couples with regard to race and ethnicity was challenging, resulting in the sample being predominately white, with 37 participants (88 %) identifying as Caucasian. While three participants identified as African-American (7 %) and two identified as multi-racial (5 %), this is hardly a racially or ethnically representative sample.

Moreover, in terms of educational level, nine individuals (21.4 %) had a college degree and 23 individuals (54.8 %) had an advanced degree or were currently in pursuit of an advanced
degree, for a total of 32 individuals (76.2%) who had completed a bachelor’s degree or at least some part of advanced degree. This is not surprising given that same-sex identified people tend to be highly educated (Patterson, 2000); yet having such a lopsided sample could certainly influence the applicability of the theory.

The term ecological niche refers to specific settings (e.g., metropolitan versus rural location), and resource availability (e.g., income) that shape individuals’ daily lives (Oswald et al., 2008). The majority of the sample being highly educated and thus, had a greater income potential and has clear implications for their niche. Moreover, much of the sample was also in the metropolitan range of the rural-urban continuum codes (ers.usda.gov). These ecological niche factors affect GLBT relationships and are compounded by societal structures, such as lack of institutional support. Because so much of the sample fell within the same ecological niche, the sample could be biased. Further research on a broader participant population is needed to fully understand the impacts of ecological niche on the current theory.

While nearly half of the sample had children, (42.8%), these children included biological children, adopted children and step children. In studies of child outcomes related to parental sexual orientation, it is important to distinguish between children conceived or adopted in a previous heterosexual relationship and those in which children were conceived or adopted after parents came out as gay or lesbian (Patterson, 1992). Families in which children were part of the dissolution of a heterosexual parental relationship have undergone reorganizations that children born into families that identified as gay or lesbian have not had to deal with. Although both families may have had to deal with judicial and legal issues related to their children, the
structure of each family may be drastically different, which speaks to the need for further research in this area.

Additionally, there is a possibility for a self-selection bias in this research. Couples in this study selected themselves into the group of strong GLBT relationships, meaning that there was no outside criterion or measure of their strength for their participation in the study, other than their own report that they were a strong couple. This could potentially confound the results as there was no objective measure of how healthy and loving each couple’s relationship actually was. Therefore, the results should be interpreted with caution and future research should address this concern, which will be discussed in the next section.

Finally, the current study relied in large part on in-depth interview data from each couple. As this was a dissertation project, only one person conducted the interviews and the sole researcher was a white, heterosexual, well-educated female. This could have had a potential effect of interviewer characteristics on participant responses and the self-selected/snowball nature of the study. Moreover, as the researcher is straight identified, all interview data is from an outsider perspective and all observations were made as a non-participant observer. As such, the researcher could not be immersed in the data and exposes the study to potential misinterpretation of the data (Creswell, 2007). Thus, the resulting theory should be considered with caution, and not be used as a sweeping conclusion for all GLBT couples.

**Future Directions**

The current study generated a theory of how GLBT families create and maintain a strong relationship. A logical future step would be to develop an assessment instrument based on
these findings. This assessment would be beneficial for use in a myriad of clinical and educational settings, particularly for use in couples or family counseling. While many assessment scales would be the same for GLBT couples as they are for heterosexual couples, certain items that focused on support, coming out processes, and attitudes regarding public disclosure could give clinicians a more complete picture of family dynamics within the context of the current times. Moreover, the assessments or measures created could help researchers ascertain how the identified strengths are related to various outcomes such as physical and mental health. By using an online approach, GLBT couples could complete the assessments anonymously, thus avoiding concerns of confidentiality.

The range of ages for individuals in this sample spanned from 26 years old to 70 years old. This is a considerable difference, particularly when the historical context of the Gay Rights Movement is taken into consideration. As the 70-year-old participant in the study described her youth and the beginnings of her relationships with other women, she stated: “We knew that there were lesbians and there were probably 12 of them, maybe in New York. [laughter].” When this idea of how few other gay people there were in the world is looked at through the eyes of a 26-year-old participant who legally married her same-sex partner, clear differences in perspective begin to emerge. Accordingly, continued exploration of the differences regarding GLBT couple strength and the potential differences that may occur generationally is an important expansion of the current theory.

As mentioned previously, there are quantitative data that serve to disentangle the various forms of commitment GLBT couples have in their relationship, but there are fewer qualitative works that present the lived experience of the individuals forming the commitment.
As this is the central phenomenon of the process of becoming a strong GLBT family, deeper exploration of meanings associated with moral, legal and structural commitment is warranted. Additionally, a qualitative exploration of the strengths of the entire GLBT family unit (i.e., GLBT couples with children present in the home), not just the couple dynamic is warranted. While literature has established that children raised by same-sex couples do just as well in life as children raised by heterosexual parents, the unique set of strengths and challenges they possess is an important focus for inquiry.

Moreover, an examination of the gender asymmetry of commitment and communication has deep implications for GLBT couples. As discussed previously, if levels of commitment or forms of communication are different for males versus females, same-sex couples may experience these qualities of strong couples another way than their heterosexual counterparts. An examination of the ways in which same-sex couples withdraw during conflict, deal with conflict surrounding money or children and many other aspects of commitment and communication is needed to not only help GLBT couples in distress, but also to help bolster positive qualities within the relationship.

As mentioned in the Limitations section, only two of the participants in the current sample identified as transgender. What is more, those two individuals were both female to male transgender individuals who had chosen to undergo surgery to reassign their gender. A family strengths study that focuses specifically on transgender families is a logical next step in this strengths-based research of queer families. While transgender families were a small part of the current study, the interviews with these two couples dealt with some interesting issues. An exploratory project that asks questions of relationship gender roles in transgender couples,
specifically dealing with how one or both partner’s transitions (hormone therapy, gender reassignment surgery, etc.) shape the gendered relations such as power and division of household labor within the couple and family context, is warranted. Additionally, little is known as to the best practices for how transgender families make gender transitions known to their families of origin and in their personal and professional life. This exploratory research would give gender scholars a unique perspective on how individuals and couples feel medical intervention and cultural expectation shape their lives, as well as the interactions between sexual minorities and heterosexual individuals in the context of the family, while at the same time, honoring the diversity of the GLBT community.

Conclusions

For GLBT couples trying to build a foundation of strength in their relationships, this study will hopefully serve as a source of encouragement and assistance in their journey. The knowledge that this process is the same progression that strong GLBT families embark upon will help all GLBT couples to shore up the areas where they need improvement and bolster the areas of strength they already have. An awareness that commitment, communication, and shared values along with an acknowledgement of fundamental differences between GLBT couples and heterosexual couples, and the inevitable need for a context of support is attainable for GLBT couples across the nation.

Essentially, this study provides support for the positive rhetoric surrounding GLBT family rights issues and may help to continue the process of undoing damage done by pseudoscience, legal rulings and hurtful messages of inequality. While GLBT families still deal with a marginalized status and a lack of government support, by gaining an understanding of the
qualities strong GLBT families possess they can become strong and in so doing, succeed and flourish.
References


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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Time of Interview: 
Date: 
Place: 
Interviewer: 
Interviewee: 
Length of Participants’ Relationship: 
Participant Ages: 
Participant Ethnicity: 
Participant Education: 

Project: The Process of Becoming a Strong Gay/Lesbian Family
Hello! Thank you for agreeing to speak with me today. As we have discussed, the purpose of this study is to uncover the process of becoming a strong gay/lesbian family and to ultimately build a theory of family strengths based on the findings. At this stage in the research family strengths will be generally defined as the key qualities that provide the supportive foundation strong couples and families need to succeed and flourish. Please feel free to elaborate on any questions and ask for clarification as needed. Again, you do not need to answer any questions that make you uncomfortable or that you do not want to answer.

Questions:

Ice breaker opening question – Tell me about your family.

Are you a strong couple? In what way?

Could you describe how you have become a strong couple? (getting at the process) or, if not a strong couple, how they might get to become a strong couple.

Probes: What stages have you gone through? What are the major events, or benchmarks in the process of becoming a strong family?
In this process, what is at the core – what is the most important aspect of the process? (getting at the central category)

Why is it such an important part of the process? (causal conditions)

What in the setting contributes to it? (context, intervening conditions)
  Probes: Each other? Children? Extended family members? Community?) What was their role/how did they participate? Who are the important participants in the process of becoming a strong family?

What strategies or actions might contribute to it? (strategies)
  Probe: What, if any, strategies do you use to strengthen your relationship?

What are the outcomes of participating in this process? (consequences)
  Probes: Has your relationship changed over time? If so, how? How do you help one another overcome the challenges you face as a gay or lesbian couple/family or an individual in a gay/lesbian relationship? What are the areas of potential growth in your relationship?

Is there anything else you think I should know? Who else might I contact to get more information?

(Thank you so much for your time today. As we already discussed, your response will be kept completely confidential. It is possible that I will contact you again for clarification on certain points, or to check back with you to make sure I’m accurately reporting what you have told me. Thank you very much.)
Appendix B

Observational Protocol

Time of Interview:
Date:
Place:
Interviewer:
Interviewee:

Project: The Process of Becoming a Strong Gay/Lesbian Family
Hello! Thank you for agreeing to speak with me today. As we have discussed, the purpose of this study is to uncover the process of becoming a strong gay/lesbian family and to ultimately build a theory of family strengths based on the findings. At this stage in the research family strengths will be generally defined as the key qualities that provide the supportive foundation strong couples and families need to succeed and flourish. Please feel free to elaborate on any questions and ask for clarification as needed. Again, you do not need to answer any questions that make you uncomfortable or that you do not want to answer.

Physical Setting

Participants’ location in relation to each other

Space for a visual sketch of the setting
Descriptive Notes

Reflective Notes

(Thank you so much for your time today. As we already discussed, your response will be kept completely confidential. It is possible that I will contact you again for clarification on certain points, or to check back with you to make sure I’m accurately reporting what you have told me. Thank you very much.)
Informed Consent Form

TITLE OF PROJECT:
The Process of Becoming a Strong Gay or Lesbian Family

You have been invited to participate in this study to share your experience as part of a GLBT couple. The purpose of this study is to better understand the unique set of strengths and challenges you face in your family. The resulting knowledge will contribute to the development of Family Science at UNL and across the country.

This interview will take about an hour and a half to 2 hours of your time. You and your partner will be asked questions regarding the unique strengths of your relationship. The interview will be audio taped, but your identity will be kept strictly confidential. The transcription of the audio tape will be handled by the researchers and kept in a locked file cabinet. No identifying information will be used from this interview.

Participating in this project involves minimal physical and emotional risk to you. You do not have to answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable. You may withdraw from the study at any time.

The information obtained in this research may be published in a scientific journal or presented at professional conferences, but your identity will be kept strictly confidential. All data will be kept in a locked cabinet in the investigators’ offices. Only the investigators will have access to the data. All data will be destroyed within five years after the project is completed.

Your rights as a research participant have been explained to you. Please call Maureen Todd at 402-742-0149 or Dr. Yan Ruth Xia at 402-472-4086 if you have questions before you decide to participate. Also, please call them if you have questions about the project at any time during the investigation. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant that have not been answered by Dr. Xia or Maureen Todd or want to report any concerns about the study, you may contact the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Institutional Review Board, telephone (402) 472-6965.

You are free to decide whether or not you would like to participate in this study. You may also end your participation at any time without negatively affecting you, or your relationship with
the investigator, or the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Your decision will not result in any loss of benefits to which you or are otherwise entitled.

**Documentation of informed consent**

*You are voluntarily making a decision whether your youth may participate in this research project. Your signature certifies that you have decided to allow your youth to participate having read and understood the information presented. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.*

Name (Print)

___________________________________________

________________

Signature Date

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