

## Resilience Within the Family Networks of Lesbians and Gay Men: Intentionality and Redefinition

*This article reviews the literature on gay and lesbian family networks as a way to identify the resilience processes that enable members to create and strengthen their family networks. Two processes, intentionality and redefinition, were identified. Intentionality refers to behavioral strategies that legitimize and support relationships. Redefinition refers to meaning making strategies that create linguistic and symbolic structures to affirm one's network. Brief comparisons are made to the literature on resilience in ethnic minority families, and careful study of the similarities and differences between gay and lesbian family networks, and other marginalized families, is urged.*

Family resilience research focuses on the relational processes that facilitate family survival, and even growth, under adverse conditions (McCubbin, Thompson, Thompson, & Futrell, 1999). Though family resilience includes attention to how family processes shape individual outcomes, the unit of analysis is more focused on family relationships than individuals (McCubbin, Futrell, Thompson, & Thompson, 1995). The resilience approach attends to both behavioral strategies and the ongoing construction of meaning within families (Thompson, 1999). Further, this approach locates families as actively engaged within their cul-

tures and communities, and examines the ways in which active engagement facilitates social support (e.g., McCubbin, Thompson, Thompson, & Futrell, 1995).

The family networks of gay and lesbian people are negotiated under varying degrees of adversity. Gay and lesbian individuals may fear and experience profound rejection, even violence, from loved ones when their sexuality is disclosed (e.g., D'Augelli, Hershberger, & Pickington, 1998); the same may be true for heterosexual people who disclose that they have a gay or lesbian loved one (e.g., Herdt & Koff, 2000). Commitment between same sex partners is not recognized by law, with the exception of Vermont's civil union statute, and may be ignored or dismissed by loved ones (e.g., Oswald, 2000a). In addition to the social consequences of nonrecognition, the lack of legal support for same-sex partner relationships means that these relationships are not afforded the many benefits that are automatically conferred upon heterosexual marriage (Partner's Task Force for Gay and Lesbian Couples, 2000). Relationships between nonbiological gay and lesbian parents and their children may be legally and socially ignored, and the parental rights of gay and lesbian biological parents can be challenged in the courts (Patterson, 1992). Relationships with friends that are considered to be family by gay and lesbian network members may also be minimized with negative effects (Carrington, 1999). In addition to these conditions the family networks of gay and lesbian people may be further complicated by racism (e.g., Mays, Chatters, Cochran, & Mackness,

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1998), economic inequality (e.g., Cantu', 2001), illness (e.g., Thompson, 1999), and other adversities.

Despite these difficulties, gay and lesbian family networks exist, endure, and even thrive. However, the family resilience approach has not typically been used in the gay and lesbian family literature (Allen, 1999; Herdt & Koff, 2000; and Thompson, 1999, are exceptions). The purpose of this article is to identify the relationship processes that promote the survival and growth of gay and lesbian family networks. Towards this end, the existing qualitative and quantitative research is reviewed.

Interpretive methods are especially useful for the study of resilience because of their ability to capture complex processes and the construction of meaning (McCubbin et al., 1999; Walsh, 1996). Therefore, in addition to including survey and observational assessment studies, special attention is paid to research utilizing participant observation, in depth interviews, or analyses of text generated by family network members. Each study was read for behavioral and meaning-making processes that contributed to the existence and growth of families. Identified strengths were grouped into two categories: intentionality and redefinition. Intentionality includes conscious actions that gay and lesbian people and their heterosexual loved ones use to validate themselves as family members and strengthen their ties to supportive others. Redefinition includes the ongoing development of a belief system that affirms gay and lesbian people. The multiple and recursive processes included within these two categories promote the existence and success of gay and lesbian family networks.

#### INTENTIONALITY

Intentionality refers to the strategies used by gay and lesbian people and their heterosexual loved ones to create and sustain a sense of family within a societal context that stigmatizes homosexuality and fails to provide social or legal recognition for a variety of family network relationships. Intentionality includes choosing kin, managing disclosure, building community, ritualizing, and legalizing.

##### *Choosing Kin*

*Friends as family.* Gay and lesbian networks contain family of origin members as well as children born into a variety of family circumstances. In

addition lesbian and gay people create families out of friendships. Kath Weston's (1991) path breaking ethnography provided an extensive analysis of the creative ways in which 80 racially and ethnically diverse urban gay and lesbian people organized their families of choice. The chosen kin in her study shared meals, money, and other resources, cared for each other in illness, spent holidays together, raised children together, and were often able to maintain a sense of kinship even after the end of a romantic relationship. She linked the practice of choosing kin to the exclusion of gay and lesbian people from cultural definitions of family, as well as actual rejection from biolegal kin. In addition, Weston's ethnic minority participants linked their making family out of friendships to their own ethnic minority fictive kin practices.

Weston's ethnography is bolstered by studies of social support that utilize predominately Anglo participants. For example, gay and lesbian adults receive more social support from their gay friends than from their families of origin (Crosbie-Burnett & Helmbrecht, 1993; Kurdek, 1988; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1987). Also, lesbian mothers-to-be may actively canvass their social networks to find suitable other-sex role models for their children who can become chosen family members (Gartrell et al., 1996). Further, ex-partners may serve as surrogate grandparents to the children of lesbian co-mothers (Patterson, Hurt, & Mason, 1998). In addition, Cantu' (2001) found that Mexican gay men immigrating to the USA use their relationships with other Latino gays to create a chain of migration resources based more upon chosen kin than biological relatives.

Heterosexual members of gay and lesbian family networks may also create family relationships out of friendships, especially those formed in support group settings such as Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) (Allen, 1999; Herdt & Koff, 2000; Thompson, 1999). These relationships legitimize the existence of gay and lesbian people as family members and increase available social support. They are most likely to be formed by those who have unlearned the belief that families are for heterosexual people only and become socially and politically active as the loved one of a gay or lesbian person (Herdt & Koff, 2000). Unlearning this myth is associated with being able to apply previous experience with human differences to one's relationship with a gay or lesbian loved one (Allen; Herdt & Koff).

*Choosing children.* In addition to making family out of friendships, choosing kin also refers to gay and lesbian people becoming parents through heterosexual intercourse, alternative insemination, surrogacy, fosterage, adoption, and other creative arrangements (Weston, 1991). Because homosexual sex is nonprocreative, and because there are few social supports outside of the gay community promoting gay and lesbian parenthood, becoming a parent can be fraught with challenges (Reimann, 1997). For example, gay men who want to be fathers and decide to negotiate the adoption or foster care system may have to present themselves as single even when in a committed relationship (Ricketts & Achtenberg, 1989). Lesbians who want to bear children must decide whether to use a known or unknown donor and, once decided, must negotiate insemination with the donors themselves or highly controlled, and sometimes hostile, medical institutions (Murphy, 2001).

Choosing children promotes resilience by enabling gay and lesbian people who become parents after coming out to at least partially access the social benefits of parenthood. For example, gay and lesbian biological parents are recognized as parents. This recognition may help reconcile previously difficult relationships with loved ones because the gay or lesbian parent is now perceived as being more similar to heterosexual people and may themselves feel that they have more in common with heterosexual society (Lewin, 1994). Further, to the extent that gay and lesbian parents use the benefits of parenthood to pursue even greater recognition of, and support for, gay and lesbian family network relationships (e.g., Gartrell et al., 1999), then choosing children promotes resilience by leading to the creation of an even more complex system of social support for family networks.

*Gay and straight integration.* Finally, the process of choosing kin may lead to an integration of both gay and straight people within the family network. Integration is used here to mean that gay, lesbian, and heterosexual members of the family network are involved in each other's lives rather than kept apart. Oswald's (2000b) study of social networks found that family and friendship boundaries were reconfigured to bring closeness among those affirming of homosexuality while creating distance from those members who were rejecting. Though not always possible, integration of gay and straight is pursued and highly valued (Carrington, 1999; Oswald, Gebbie, & Culton, 2000; Shallen-

berger, 1996), and may promote resilience by increasing the support resources available to all members of the network (Gartrell et al., 1999; Mays et al., 1998). For example, Crosbie-Burnett and Helmbrecht's (1993) study of gay male stepfamilies found that family and couple happiness was highest when the stepfather was openly included. The most resilient families of origin in Herdt and Koff (2000) were those whose parents recognized and included chosen kin of their gay and lesbian children. According to Patterson, Hurt, and Mason's (1998) study, the children of lesbian mothers had, on average, at least monthly contact with six adults who do not reside with them. This group typically included a biological grandmother, a biological grandfather, an unrelated male, and a female ex-partner of one of their mothers. These relationships widened the circle of support available to children from people with diverse sexualities. Finally, Fredricksen's (1999) study of care giving responsibilities found that approximately one third of gay men and lesbians were providing care to children, aging parents, or a seriously ill friend or partner. The majority of those providing care were simultaneously receiving support from at least some members of their families of origin.

*Comparison to other minority families.* No one has carefully studied the extent to which the gay and lesbian practice of making family out of friendships is comparable to fictive kinship practices within ethnic minority families. One complication is that research on gay and lesbian family networks is too often based upon largely White samples, and research on ethnic minority kinship too often ignores the existence of ethnic minority gay and lesbian people (Bennett & Battle, 2001). Despite this limitation of our knowledge, the existing literature does suggest that members of gay and lesbian family networks have a flexible understanding of family membership that enables them to build complex families that increase the social and material resources available to members. This appears to be quite similar to fictive kinship within African American (e.g., Chatters, Taylor, & Jayakody, 1994) and Latino (e.g., Lopez, 1999) communities. However, whereas fictive kin within ethnic minority communities typically integrates fictive kin into a larger biolegal family network, it is not unusual for the gay and heterosexual members of gay and lesbian family networks to be totally separate from each other. The role of sexual orientation in the development of

fictive kin in both ethnic minority and dominant Anglo family networks deserves much more careful attention.

### *Managing Disclosure*

This process refers to the ways that gay and lesbian people regulate the disclosure of information about their identities and relationships, as well as the parallel processes of disclosure undergone by their heterosexual loved ones (Healy, 1999). Like choosing kin, managing disclosure is a boundary process that can promote resilience by bringing people that are gay-affirming closer together while creating distance from those who are more hostile (Oswald, 2000b). Given the stigmatization of homosexuality in our society, managing disclosure is discussed in virtually every study of gay and lesbian individuals and family relationships and is often the primary focus of inquiry. This section will focus on the management of disclosure as it relates to family network resilience.

The management of disclosure should be understood as an ongoing process, rather than a one-time event, because the degree to which gay or lesbian people are visible within a family network, or to outsiders, will vary over time and across different contexts. For example, Oswald (in press) studied urban gay and lesbian people who were raised in rural communities and returned to them for family weddings. All participants had previously come out as gay or lesbian to their families of origin. At family weddings, however, they most often felt invisible and this was linked to feeling uncomfortable with, disconnected from, and not belonging to their families and communities of origin. The few times that they felt visible, this sense of being openly acknowledged as gay was linked to a sense of comfort, connection, and belonging. Whereas the participants in Oswald found themselves limiting their disclosure within an intimidating context, the lesbian co-mothers in Reimann (1997) were very conscious of using strategies in public to convey their motherhood status to outsiders, for example by holding their children more often than if they were at home.

Network members of all ages and sexual orientations are more open about homosexuality both inside and outside of the network when doing so will not compromise social support (Caron & Ulin, 1997; Oswald, 2000b), or is believed to promote social change (Allen, 1999). Also, members are likely to be more open when doing so is not anticipated to jeopardize their physical, financial,

or emotional safety (Carrington, 1999; D'Augelli et al., 1998; Sullivan, 2001), or their ethnic, religious, or family membership (Jackson & Brown, 1996; Newman & Muzzonigro, 1993).

For example, gay and lesbian people in both African American and Anglo families of origin have been found to tell mothers and sisters before fathers and brothers that they are gay. This is because heterosexual females are assumed more supportive than heterosexual males (D'Augelli et al., 1998), and if the family of origin is matricentric, and women are in fact supportive, then telling mothers and sisters is a powerful strategy for garnering support from other relatives (Mays et al., 1998). With regard to managing disclosure to those outside the family network, the lesbian mothers surveyed by Lott-Whitehead and Tully (1999) made conscious decisions about when to be out and when to not be out (e.g., co-mothers avoided school events if their attendance would cause problems for their child). Further, the children of lesbian mothers were most positive about their families when they felt a sense of control over who knew about their mother(s) being lesbian (Tasker & Golombok, 1997).

Managing disclosure may also involve indirect communications that are as supportive as open discussions or overt statements (Healy, 1999). Indirect communication may be especially important when networks are organized by collectivism rather more than by individuality. For example, in a case study of his life, Teles, a gay Dine' (Navajo) man felt that overt disclosure to his family and tribe would be disrespectful and immature; it is proper Dine' conduct to maintain group harmony and minimize one's differences from the group (Waller & McAllen-Walker, 2001). At the same time, his parents have nicknamed him BeeZee after his deceased gay uncle (nicknames are a way to imbue a loved one with the spirit of another), and his family emphasizes the importance of fulfilling his uncle roles to both maternal and paternal nieces and nephews, rather than pressuring him to become a father and husband.

Whether intended to maintain harmony, access benefits, request affirmation, garner social support, or prevent disaster, disclosure decision making and implementation demonstrates that network members assess their environment and make careful choices about when and what to tell or not tell. The extent to which network members have this control is the extent to which they are able to continuously construct levels of visibility that are most useful within their immediate environment.

This statement is not intended to excuse the homophobia that makes disclosure management necessary. Rather, it is intended to acknowledge a basic component of the cultural competence required to thrive in a context that often denies the existence or worth of gay and lesbian family networks.

Disclosure management is relevant to any family dealing with social stigma, for example infertile couples (Daly, 1992). Unfortunately, few studies have systematically compared the disclosure of homosexuality to other stigmatized family issues.

### *Building Community*

In addition to managing the disclosure of homosexuality within their family, the members of gay and lesbian family networks actively build and participate in supportive community resources (Gartrell et al., 1996; Gartrell et al., 1999; Jackson & Brown, 1996; Oswald, 2000b; Reimann, 1997), and may define these resources as a kind of extended family network (Ainslie & Feltey, 1991; Allen, 1999; Butler & Hope, 1999; Oswald & Culton, in review; Thompson, 1999; Weston, 1991). Again, the extent to which gay and lesbian family network members build community mirrors that of other families remains to be studied. However, we can say that a unique aspect of building community for gay and lesbian family networks is that it enables network members of all sexual orientations to access information and support specific to homosexuality that may not be internally available (Gerstel, Feraios, & Herdt, 1989).

Community resources may be created to meet needs as they arise. For example, a vast network of organizations has been created to address the needs of families where someone is HIV positive or has an AIDS diagnosis (Schneider, 1997). Communities may also be built by redefining existing resources, for example by working to make one's lifelong place of worship openly affirming of gay and lesbian people (Kirkman, 1998; Oswald, 2000b; Shallenberger, 1996).

Resources may be informal, such as the inaccessible-to-outsiders social networks formed within rural contexts (Oswald & Culton, in review). They may be highly organized and well funded, such as the international organization of PFLAG that sponsors local chapters, produces an annual convention and lobby day, and publishes self-help literature regarding homosexuality and family relationships (Allen, 1999; Herdt & Koff, 2000).

Resources may be located within the gay community, or they may be part of a particular ethnic or religious community. For example, gay American Indian men play important community roles as AIDS activists and service providers on reservations and within urban American Indian communities (Jacobs & Brown, 1997). African American lesbians may make a special effort to participate in national meetings where they can meet other Black lesbians (Jackson & Brown, 1996). More than half of the couples interviewed by Yip (1996) belonged to a gay Protestant or Catholic group that provided moral support, identity reinforcement, and some social or political activities.

The increasingly active gay social and political organizations, the growing body of self-help literature, and the rising visibility of gay and lesbian people in the national media all suggest that building community provides important social and material supports for gay and lesbian family networks and therefore promotes resilience of the entire group.

### *Ritualizing*

Rituals are symbolic performances that link the ritual actors to an entity larger than themselves (Rappaport, 1979/1996). Families can use rituals to maintain a sense of group cohesion and identity (Wolin & Bennett, 1984). Gay and lesbian people who use ritual draw upon culturally normative symbols while also subverting their meaning to be inclusive of homosexuality, and while also introducing new symbolism (Lewin, 2001).

Members of gay and lesbian family networks use ritual creatively to solidify relationships and affirm identities in the absence of social or legal validation. For example, lesbian co-mothers use bedtime routines as a way to strengthen the bonds between young children and nonbiological mothers (Reimann, 1997). Gay and lesbian youth may undergo coming out rituals within support groups (Herdt & Boxer, 1993). Same-sex couples have commitment ceremonies (Hare 1994; Lewin, 1996, 1998, 2001; Oswald, Gebbie, & Culton, 2000; Stiers, 1999). Survivors of those who have died of AIDS may create a panel for the NAMES Project AIDS quilt that commemorates their loved one, or may attend a showing of the quilt (Lewis & Fraser, 1996; Sturken, 1992). Mothers who are caregiving an adult child with AIDS may use religious ritual to garner strength and understanding for their task (Thompson, 1999). By promoting

commitment between people who love each other, as well as family and community recognition of that love and commitment, these rituals provide a kind of symbolic scaffolding to strengthen relationships.

Ritual may also be used to reconcile aspects of identity and membership that are not necessarily integrated within daily life. For example, gay men who were raised in, and rejected by, southern Christian fundamentalist families experienced an integration of homosexuality and Christianity by attending a weekly gospel hour held in an Atlanta gay bar (Gray & Thumma, 1997). Roscoe (1998) found that American Indians used Gay Pride as a time to celebrate being both gay and Indian by marching in tribal dress, drumming, and creating floats and banners that articulated a pan-tribal identity. In addition to strategies that reconcile sexuality and ethnicity, Herrell (1992) argued that Pride Day celebrations have increasingly invoked discourses of family legitimacy as a strategy to promote the acceptance of gay and lesbian people within mainstream society.

Families of origin for whom ritual is important may be more resilient when they are able to positively integrate their gay and lesbian members. For example, attending family of origin rituals was linked to having a supportive family, and a sense of belonging during these family rituals was predicted by family of origin support outside of ritual, and by the presence of one's partner at the ritual (Oswald, *in press*). These findings build upon Oswald's (2000a, 2001, *in press*) qualitative work that found weddings to be rituals of exclusion by addressing the question of what does and does not predict inclusion. Together, these studies suggest that the ability to integrate gay and lesbian loved ones into family of origin rituals is key to sustaining the resilience of biolegal relationships.

### *Legalizing*

There currently exists partial legal recognition for some gay and lesbian family relationships (Dolan & Stum, 2001). For example, same-sex couples can register in the state of Vermont for civil union status. Also, several states allow children to have two parents of the same sex. Further, an increasing number of employers offer domestic partner benefits. These legal gains are tenuous, however, as civil union status does not equal marriage and does not carry over state lines, second parent adoptions can be overturned, and domestic partner benefits are rarely equal to those enjoyed by het-

erosexual people. Existing laws do very little to systematically support and strengthen the family networks of gay and lesbian people.

Given this situation, gay and lesbian people and their heterosexual loved ones use creative strategies to legalize relationships. For example, same-sex couples may file power of attorney documents and mingle their finances to establish legal interdependence (Dolan & Stum, 2001). Oswald et al. (2000) found that just over half of their respondents with a same sex partner reported taking steps to legalize their relationship, such as through the purchase of joint property. Legalization may promote a sense of security for those who fear unwanted familial or court intervention were they to die or become disabled (Dolan & Stum).

Gay and lesbian parents make legal arrangements to provide their children with tangible rights, social legitimacy, and protection against homophobic legal intervention (Dolan & Stum, 2001). For example, gay and lesbian parents who live in states that allow it can use second parent adoptions and unknown donors to legally strengthen the relationship between children and co-parents, and to increase the legitimacy of the co-parent's status in the eyes of their families of origin (Gartrell, et. al, 1999; Reimann, 1997). By disclosing their family status at work, co-parents may be eligible for formal or informal family leave and other benefits (Reimann, 2001).

Legalization promotes resilience by bolstering relationships with economic supports. Also, to the extent that legalization enables network members and outsiders to recognize relationships are legitimate is the extent to which legalization promotes social supports as well (Hequemborg & Farrell, 2001).

### REDEFINITION

Resilience has a symbolic or meaning-making component that coexists with the behavioral strategies (Walsh, 1996). Literature suggests that, in addition to intentionality strategies to create and sustain family ties in the absence of much societal support, members of gay and lesbian family networks engage in four different redefinition processes by which they affirm the existence of gay and lesbian people and their relationships. These processes are politicizing, naming, integrating gayness, and envisioning family.

*Politicizing*

Members of gay and lesbian family networks may actively consider how living within a heterosexual social context shapes their relationships. For example, the nonmetropolitan respondents in Oswald and Culton (in review) described their lives to be shaped by economic and legal discrimination, anti-gay religious messages, and education and human service agendas that fail to address gay concerns. Heterosexual members of gay and lesbian family networks may also develop understandings of heterosexism, and this may motivate them to become activists for the rights of sexual minorities (Allen, 1999; Gartrell et al., 1999; Herdt & Koff, 2000; Hom, 1994; Lewis & Fraser, 1996; Oswald, 2000; Thompson, 1999; Sturken, 1992). As with any other marginalized group, politicization is a kind of resilience because it enables network members to make sense out of what is happening in their private lives by linking it to a larger societal context (e.g., Dilworth-Andersen, Burton, & Boulin-Johnson, 1993).

Politicizing may be a developmental socialization process within gay and lesbian family networks similar to racial socialization (e.g., Thornton, 1995). For example, gay and lesbian parents may use creative parenting strategies to teach their children how to cope with stigma (e.g., Gartrell et al., 1996; Hare, 1994), and these children may, later on in life, express as sense of pride in their family and engage in political discussions about the status of gay and lesbian families in society (e.g., Tasker & Golombok, 1995). Likewise, the heterosexual members of family networks may develop understandings of heterosexism and homophobia after someone they love comes out (Allen, 1999; Oswald, 2000b; Herdt & Koff, 2000; Thompson, 1999).

*Naming*

Naming practices may promote family network resilience by attaching familial meanings to otherwise unmarked identities, events, and relationships, which acknowledges and legitimates their existence. For example, network members must figure out what to call co-mothers and co-fathers, as well as chosen kin (Ainslie & Feltey, 1991). Co-parents may change surnames so that all parents and children have the same name, which reduces confusion when interacting with institutions such as schools and doctors (Reimann, 1997). Alternately, children may be given the last name of

the nonbirthparent to strengthen the relationship between child and co-mother (Reimann). Further, same-sex couples who refer to their commitment ceremonies as weddings are using language to claim legitimacy in the eyes of their loved ones as well as society (Steirs, 1999). Calling a friend "brother" or "sister" (Nardi, 1999) or referring to member's of one's support group as "real family" (Thompson, 1999) are additional ways that gay and lesbian family network members use language to promote relationship strength.

*Integrating Gayness*

Integrating gayness refers to the melding of homosexuality with other aspects of identity, especially ethnicity and religion because they may contain strongly heteronormative proscriptions. For example, ethnic minority parents of gay and lesbian children may come to tolerate or affirm their children after remembering that gay or lesbian people existed in their home communities when they were growing up (Hom, 1994; Tremble, Schneider, & Appathurai, 1989). Lesbian Christians in Kirkman (1998) redefined betrayal and rejection meted out by their families and churches as coming from a different world and this allowed them to maintain contact. They also redefined themselves as defecting-in-place and reinterpreted doctrine regarding gender and marriage to emphasize commitment rather than heterosexuality, and found support from feminists within their churches. Similarly, lesbian Jews (Alpert, 1997) and gay Catholics (Yip, 1997) actively rework teachings and ritual to be affirming of homosexuality. Roscoe (1998) argued that the ability to locate homosexuality within one's own cultural history and norms facilitates resilience because it builds upon existing strengths and resources rather than banishing gay and lesbian people from what they have been raised to believe, value, and depend upon for support.

*Envisioning Family*

Envisioning family refers to the process of redefining family to be an ongoing construction that affirms human differences, rather than an inevitable set of biolegal relationships that punishes those who resist or subvert social norms (Allen, 1999; Herdt & Koff, 2000; Hom, 1994; Naples, 2001; Thompson, 1999; Tremble et al., 1989; Weston, 1991). It is related to politicization but

different in that it refers to family membership itself more than linking family to politics.

The ability and willingness to re-imagine family promotes resilience by creating symbolism that is consistent with the facts of one's family network and that promotes the integration of all network relationships into one whole rather than separate constellations. The positive inclusion of more members means that there are more sources of social, emotional, and material support for all involved.

That envisioning family is a kind of resilience is perhaps best illustrated by a converse example: Patterson et al.'s (1998) study of contact between children and grandparents or other adults found that the children of lesbian couples had less contact with their nonbiological mothers' family of origin. They explained this as the co-mothers' families being unable to accept nonbiological grandchildren as legitimate members. These grandparents are presumably unwilling to envision family as anything but legally and socially normative relationships. Their unwillingness results in a separation between different network constellations and inhibits rather than promotes the reciprocal flow of social support that is part of resilience.

#### CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article was to identify the strengths within family networks of gay and lesbian people as a first step toward understanding resilience within these relationships. Two processes, intentionality and redefinition, were identified. Intentionality includes behavioral strategies that legitimize and support relationships and includes the conscious creation, ritualization, and legalization of relationships considered family, as well as the creation of external supports and the managed visibility of homosexuality both inside and outside of the network. Redefinition includes paradigmatic or meaning making strategies that create linguistic and symbolic structures to affirm one's network. These strategies include the development of a politicized and inclusive view of family, integration of gayness with other important life dimensions, and the creative use of familial names and categories to strengthen ties between loved ones. These processes may be unique to gay and lesbian family networks. Alternatively, they may be similar to practices found in other marginalized families. We need comparative research on the ways in which gay and lesbian family net-

works are similar to or different from other families.

Though all families are ongoing social accomplishments (Gubrium & Holstein, 1990), gay and lesbian family networks are in the difficult position of having to not only succeed in the face of social adversity but also to continuously establish their mere existence in a world that does not institutionally privilege their forms. Because the resilience approach attends to family strengths within specific contexts, it offers an important lens for the study of gay and lesbian family networks that can move us beyond our present focus on the negative ways that heterosexism impacts families. Through the lens of resilience we can put hardship in context by also studying the resourcefulness that facilitates successful relationships between people of diverse sexual orientations. The review presented here marks a beginning effort to integrate our current knowledge of sexual orientation and family strengths and may be used to inform future research.

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