2009

Negotiating Multiple Identities: the Experiences of African-Ancestral Lesbians

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NEGOTIATING MULTIPLE IDENTITIES: THE EXPERIENCES OF
AFRICAN-ANCESTRAL LESBIANS

BY

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy Degree
Seton Hall University

2009
ABSTRACT

Negotiating Multiple Identities: The experiences of African-ancestral Lesbians

In this study, we explored the behavioral and psychological strategies used by African-ancestral lesbians to negotiate relationships within their families of origin, while simultaneously developing and maintaining an affirmative lesbian identity. Twelve African-ancestral lesbians participated in this qualitative study; the data were analyzed using Consensual Qualitative Research. Themes relating to conceptualizations of multiple identities, the coming-out experiences, identity management strategies used within families of origin, familial patterns of support and rejection, and therapeutic experiences were examined from the women’s responses. Participants typically reported that they negotiated multiple identities of race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, and gender, to name a few. In their negotiations, participants reported several identity management strategies, including ways to manage conflicting loyalties between the LGB community and African-ancestral communities without any loss of significant relationships and cultural ties.

Keywords: African-ancestral; African-Americans; Lesbians; Identity management; Family of origin
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the following people for their unwavering support throughout this process.

To my advisor, Lewis Z. Schlosser, Ph.D., thank you for your guidance, intellectual energy, and inspiration. You are an outstanding mentor. Your warmth and genuine interest in my development as a scholar and clinician does not go unnoted. I appreciate your ability to simultaneously support and challenge me in ways that allows me to produce my best work. I am grateful for your insight, meticulousness, and enthusiasm throughout data analysis and the editorial process. Thank you for being available whenever I needed a question answered or just needed to talk through an idea for clarity. You must know that your presence in my life as a mentor, advisor, and ally has left lasting impacts on my professional and interpersonal development.

To members of my committee, Pamela F. Foley, Ph.D., Ben K. Beitin, Ph.D, Wesley Tak Matsui, Ph. D., and Cheryl Thompson-Sard, Ph.D., thank you for the time you invested. I am grateful for all of your useful comments and excellent suggestions which improved my study immensely. This process has been an exciting and challenging journey with all of you on board. Like my mentor, you have also inspired much intellectual and personal growth.

I want to express as well my gratitude to Jane Dewey, M.A. and Alan Burkard, Ph. D. Thank you for all your hard work, unfaltering enthusiasm and support throughout the data analysis process. It’s made a world of difference.

To my amazing wife, Julie A. Klein, M.A., who provided me with much needed emotional support throughout the writing process, and helped me to keep going whenever my spirits or energy were flagging. Your faith in me has kept me strong over the years and I am
tremendously grateful. Thank you for your patience on those many evenings when I needed to write for long hours though I would have much rather spent time with you. I hope that my unending love for you offers some consolation for all those difficult evenings.

I would also like to thank the following people for their support and inspiration through this process: Laura Palmer, Ph.D., Ruth Fasinger, Ph.D., Antoinette Regan, Andrea Campbell, Alton Gibson, Kesi Gibson, Ayoola Gibson, Imani Gibson, Shekeni Gibson, Helmar Cirillo, Beverly Greene, Ph.D., Ben Adams, M.Phil., Peter Economou, M.A., Karlene Ferron, Hermon Getachew, Raymond Brock-Murray, M.A., Natasha Manning, M.A., Kathy Klein, Jody Reiss, Lisa Klein, and Blake Sparrow.

Finally, my appreciation goes out to the fascinating women who participated in this study. This research would not be possible without their stories.
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Chapter I
INTRODUCTION

Gay and lesbian sexual orientations are believed to be evidence of unnatural masculinity and femininity, sinful character, and disturbed psychological development (e.g., Atkinson & Hackett, 1988; Clarke, 1983; Greene, 1994a, 1994b; Magee & Miller, 1992) in our society. In addition, gay and lesbian relationships are both sexualized and perceived as threats to heterosexual marriage and family values (Ross, 2002). The psychoanalytic construction of a developmentally arrested, perverse, gender-disoriented homosexual (e.g., Atkinson & Hackett, 1988; Gonsiorek, 1982; Magee & Miller, 1992), as well as religious condemnation of and legal sanctions against same-sex behavior, have generated many biases against lesbian and gay people. In fact, of the 8,804 hate crime offenses reported in 2005, 13.8% were based on sexual orientation bias (FBI, 2006). Further, the civil rights of gay and lesbian people in the US are slow to be realized both at the state and federal level. Indeed, there are no federal statutes that protect lesbian women and gay men from housing, employment, child-custody, and marriage discrimination (Civil Rights 101: Gays and Lesbians, 2008; Fassinger, 1991; Ross, 2002).

Given these statistics, as well as societal disadvantages and challenges that compromise the optimal functioning of LGBT individuals, continued research examining their experiences, quality of life, mental health, and coping strategies is essential. Furthermore, research in this area can help to balance the discourse on sexual identity; at present, heterosexual identities are
privileged, while LGBT identities are pathologized and stigmatized (Bowleg, Craig, & Burkholder, 2004; Douce, 1998; Greene, 2000a; Johnson, 2005). As members of society begin to challenge the assumed normality of heterosexuality, changes within institutional policies and legal statutes regarding LGBT people become possible. Such changes may then have far reaching implications for the optimal development of these individuals. Like all human groups, the LGBT population is diverse and possesses considerable within-group variability and ethnic and racial diversity. Hence, the proposed study seeks to focus on African ancestral lesbians, a sub-group within the LGBT community that is often overlooked and rarely studied.

Background of Proposed Study

African ancestral lesbians possess multiple identities and must face the complexities of their oppressions around race, sexual orientation, and gender (Bowleg, Huang, Brooks, Black, & Burkholder, 2003; Bowleg et al., 2004; Gomez, 1999; Graziano, 2004; Greene, 1994a, 2000a; Hall & Greene, 2002; Parks, Hughes, & Matthews, 2004). However, possessing multiple identities does not render them powerless and inept (Greene, 1994a, 2000a), but rather these women bring previously learned strategies to the table. African ancestral peoples had to learn skills to cope with denigrated racial and ethnic identities. As a result, many of these women bring their minority status to the task of managing a lesbian identity, an identity that is also disparaged within U.S. society. Mental health difficulties arise when these women internalize or try to act against or disprove the stereotypes of Black sexuality and lesbian orientation. In fact, some women expend much psychological and emotional energy trying to dispel the stereotypes or to appear "normal" within a society that pathologizes lesbian identities (Greene, 2000a; West,
1993). There are women who bring effective adaptive strategies to managing their multiple identities (Gibson, Schlosser, & Brock-Murray, 2007); however, it has also been noted that African ancestral lesbians have a greater likelihood of experiencing loneliness, social isolation, and tension, yet are less likely to seek professional help (Mays & Cochran, 1988). This finding is quite disconcerting (Greene, 1994a, 2000a), since it suggests that African ancestral lesbians may be more vulnerable to the effects of chronic stressors and may experience an elevated rate of negative psychological outcomes by the time professional help is finally sought. One major reason for the increased stressors among African ancestral lesbians is the presence of heterosexism and homophobia in their own families and communities.

African ancestral lesbians are often caught between a rock and a hard place: pejorative myths and stereotypes about Black sexuality within society and within the mental health profession, as well as homophobia and heterosexism among African ancestral peoples (Greene, 2000a). In many communities of African ancestry, it is believed that homosexuality is breaking up the Black family. However, Smith (as cited in Weston, 1991a), a Black lesbian writer, activist, and speaker at the 1987 Gay and Lesbian March on Washington, rebutted “homosexuality is not what is breaking up the Black family, homophobia is. My Black gay brothers and my Black lesbian sisters are members of Black families, both the ones we were born into and the ones we create” (p. 27).

Because of the homophobia and heterosexism often present in their families and community, African ancestral lesbians often face the challenging task of developing and maintaining positive lesbian identities while simultaneously coping with potential homonegativity from loved ones (Gibson et al., 2007). On this account, West (1999, p.293) asserted that the “closeted sexuality” that exists in African American communities “should be
seriously interrogated” because it contributes significantly to internalized homophobia within lesbian and gay persons. It is important to note that this “closeted sexuality” exists in most African ancestral communities.

There are multiple sources of homonegativity among people of African ancestry. Some see an LGBT identity as antithetical to being authentically Black (Greene, 2000a). In fact, African ancestral lesbians often report their families and churches as heterosexist (Bowleg et al. 2003, 2004; Clarke, 1983; Graziano, 2004; Greene, 1994b). Homonegativity is also rooted in several other sources as follows: (a) religious condemnation and selective interpretations of biblical scriptures (Claybourne, 1978; Gomes, 1996; Greene, 2000a; Icard, 1986; Weatherford & Weatherford, 1999), (b) sexism within African ancestral communities (Greene, 1994a, 2000a; Monroe, 1998), and (c) racist stereotypes of Black sexuality within the dominant culture, and the subsequent internalization of such stereotypes by African ancestral peoples (Clarke, 1983; Douglas, 1999; Greene, 2000a; Johnson, 2005). Some stereotypes include highly sexualized, wild, insatiable, and promiscuous depictions of Black sexuality. Because of the need to appear “normal” within a dominant culture that pathologizes Black sexuality, African ancestral lesbians are often experienced as embarrassments and sources of shame to their families and communities. Given this backdrop, coming out within families of origin can be a loaded and challenging process for many African ancestral lesbians.

According to Whitman, Comier, and Boyd (2000), disclosure of one’s lesbian identity helps to bridge the gap between private and public lives. Thus, coming out may facilitate the development of a cohesive identity. However, disclosing a lesbian identity may not always be safe. Some of the consequences of disclosing a lesbian identity include fear of jeopardizing relationships (Moses 1978; Nemeyer, 1980; Raphael, 1974; Spaulding, 1982), loss of economic

The coming out process may be quite difficult for African ancestral lesbians since they would be going against cultural taboos by bringing sexuality and sexual orientation out of the closet. Indeed, coming out to family of origin has been known to be an experience filled with much anxiety and challenges (Greene, 1994a, 2000a). Coming out stories range from complete family acceptance to outright family rejection (Gibson et al., 2007; Weston, 1991b). Furthermore, disclosing a lesbian identity can be viewed as an act of treason against the culture and the family. As a result of the closeted sexuality, familial and cultural homophobia and heterosexism, and the real fears of jeopardizing familial relationships (which are important and essential for continued survival), a climate of silence exists around African ancestral lesbians.

Silence plays an oppressive and protective role in the lives of African ancestral lesbians. Silence is protective in that it offers a haven from the constant bombardment of discriminatory inquiries and analysis of one’s sexual orientation (e.g., Bieschke, Croteau, Lark, & Vandiver, 2005). It is especially protective for African ancestral lesbians who live in multiple cultural contexts simultaneously and must find ways to manage conflicting loyalties between the lesbian and gay community and their African ancestral communities (Greene, 1994a). While silence offers safety for some, it can be quite costly for others in terms of psychological and emotional energies associated with hiding (e.g. Kitzinger, 1996). Silence also maintains heterosexism and the status quo, making it an oppressive force in the lives of African ancestral lesbians. Essentially, these women are relegated to the margins of a society that privileges White, male, and heterosexual identities (Fukuyama, Miville, & Funderburk, 2005).
Hence, African ancestral lesbians are faced with the dual task of negotiating familial and cultural homonegativity while simultaneously finding ways to create positive lesbians identities that are well integrated into their ethnic identities. In tackling this complex task, many lesbians have resorted to remaining closeted, hiding, and/or passing in order to manage their lesbian identity and negative family attitudes. However, several authors (Gomez, 1999; Kitzinger, 1996; West, 1999) have documented the psychological costs of having to silence one’s sexual identity. Despite the psychological costs, many continue to manage their lesbian identity within their families of origin in the aforementioned ways (e.g., passing) suggesting a need for more effective identity management strategies for negotiating family relationships. As such it is important for African Ancestral lesbians to tell their stories as they seek to transform an epidemic of invisibility, secrecy, and shame into a culture of self-love, support, and healing.

Statement of the Problem and Significance of the Study

The American Psychiatric Association declassified homosexuality as a mental illness in 1973. The American Psychological Association followed shortly after and adopted an official policy in 1975, which stated that homosexuality implied no psychological impairment. While this is progress, LGBT issues remain marginalized against the dominant heterosexual discourse (Douce, 1998, 2005). Though their issues are often depicted as inconsequential, lesbians and gay men make up an integral part of our society, both in numbers and contributions (Cowan, 1996; GLSEN [Gay, Lesbian, & Straight Education Network], 2001; Greene, 2000a).

Gonsiorek and Weinrich (1991) reported that a range of 4-17 % of the general population identifies as lesbian and gay. The Kinsey reports (1948/1998, 1953/1998) have also confirmed these figures, which appear to be stable throughout history and across cultures. Within this range,
10 percent is generally accepted as a satisfactory estimate (Greene, 2000a). Of further interest is the US Census 2000, which reported that there are 18 million Black/African American women living in the US. According to the U.S. Census (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000), the term “Black or African American” refers to people having origins in any of the Black race groups of Africa. It includes people who reported “Black, African American, or Negro” or wrote in entries such as African American, Afro American, Nigerian, or Haitian. Thus, based on the conservative estimate of 10%, it can be assumed that there are about 1.8 million African ancestral women who identify as lesbians. This figure is conservative because it does not include the many African ancestral lesbians who do not disclose their lesbian identities for a variety of reasons.

Despite the significant number of African ancestral lesbians, the LGBT empirical research continues to focus primarily on White, middle class gay men and lesbians (Bowleg et al. 2004; Chan, 1989, 1992; Croteau, Lark, & Lance, 2005; Garnets & Kimmel, 1991; Greene, 1996, 2000a; Mays & Cochran, 1988; Morales, 1992). However, the experiences of White, middle class lesbian and gay people do not necessarily represent those of lesbian and gay people of color. To that end, Greene (2000b) warned against the silencing of lesbians and gay men of color and suggested that “the very act of defining the experiences of all lesbians and gay men by the characteristics of the most privileged and powerful members of that group is an oppressive act” (p. 39). Further, Greene (2000a) observed that the unique experiences and psychotherapy issues of African ancestral lesbians are often absent from the LGB psychotherapy literature as well as the multicultural counseling field. Similarly, Gallor (2005) observed that the underrepresentation of ethnic minority lesbian women seems to parallel the general underrepresentation of women and ethnic/racial minorities in the literature.
In their qualitative study, Whitman et al. (2000) examined lesbian identity management at various stages of the coming out process for 21 White women, 3 African-Americans, and 1 Asian-American. That there were only three African-American lesbians in this study limits the degree to which their stories were captured; hence the need for research that examines the experiences of African ancestral lesbians. The study’s overwhelming majority of White participants is also symbolic of the predominantly White/Eurocentric focus of the current lesbian, gay, and bisexual literature (Chan, 1989, 1992; Garnets & Kimmel, 1991; Greene, 1994a, 1996, 2000a; Mays & Cochran, 1988; Morales, 1992).

Similarly, research with ethnic minority groups rarely acknowledges or explores sexual orientation differences within group members (Greene, 1994a, 2000a). For example, research with African ancestral peoples has often celebrated the merits of families, church, and support systems for Black populations (e.g., Sanders, 2002; Taylor, Chatters, Hardison, & Riley, 2001); however, empirically we know little about the extent to which these factors help or hinder effective functioning among Black lesbians. African ancestral lesbians are often reared by heterosexual parents and are therefore seldom provided with the support needed to affirm their lesbian identity. This forms an additional source of oppression in their lives (Atkinson & Hackett, 1988; Brown, 1989; Greene, 1994a, 2000a). Therefore, research is needed to investigate the role of familial social support with regard to the mental health of African ancestral lesbians, particularly in light of evidence of increased psychiatric morbidity among Black lesbians (Cochran & Mays, 1988, 1994). Similarly, Parks, Hughes, and Matthews (2004) revealed that African ancestral lesbians possess adaptive strategies that aid in their development and functioning. However, more research is needed to further illuminate the essential skills and
competencies used by African ancestral lesbians who successfully negotiate and manage the
tasks associated with lesbian identity development in their families of origin.

Much of the extant literature on African ancestral lesbians is theoretical and conceptual in
nature (Gomez, 1999; Greene, 1994a, 1994b, 1996, 2000a, 2000b; Hall & Greene, 2002),
suggesting a need for more empirical research in this area. I therefore hope to increase the
knowledge base of African ancestral lesbians through qualitative analysis of their identity
management strategies within their families of origin. This study begins to fill a gap in the
literature by giving voice to the experiences of African ancestral lesbians, their joys and
struggles, their survival strategies, their mental health, and their humanity. This study also
informs practice by providing resources, knowledge, and skills to mental health professionals
working with this population.

Research Questions

1. What are the coming out experiences of African ancestral lesbians within their families
of origin?

2. How do African ancestral lesbians manage or regulate information about their lesbian
identities within their families of origin?

3. What are the specific identity management strategies (e.g., psychological, behavioral)
used by African ancestral lesbians?

4. What factors influence the type of management strategies used?

5. What enables or hinders self-esteem regarding one’s lesbian identity?
6. What roles do silence and heterosexism play in managing a lesbian identity within family?

7. How can mental health professionals best support African ancestral lesbians as they navigate the complexities of developing a lesbian identity within their families of origin?

Conclusion

In sum, the main goal of this study is to explore the psychological and behavioral strategies used by African ancestral lesbians to negotiate relationships within their families of origin, while simultaneously developing and maintaining a lesbian identity. The knowledge and insights gained from this study will be helpful for African ancestral lesbians, mental health professionals, and graduate training programs. It is critical to hear the voices of these women because it is only when people speak their minds that education has a chance to develop (Palmer, 1998). Moreover, without voice, dialogue, and agency, there is no empowerment (Ritz, 1997), and individuals are not able to name their experiences so that they may be able to make changes (Freire, 1970). The voices of these participants will hopefully help to improve treatment interventions as well socio-political policies that shape the mental health profession.

Definitions

*African Ancestral Lesbians:* Refers to lesbians of African descent/heritage who reside in the United States, regardless of ethnicity. This includes lesbians who identify as African, African-
American, Black, Black American, Caribbean, Caribbean-American, Afro-Caribbean, and West Indian (Gibson et al., 2007).

Coming Out: The process wherein a lesbian, gay, or bisexual individual acknowledges a same-sex orientation, develops an identity based on it, and discloses their lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity to others. Coming out is a shortened form of coming out of the closet. Thus, being in the closet or closeted refers to passing as heterosexual. Because of cultural heterosexism, people are generally presumed to be heterosexual. Coming out, therefore, is an ongoing process, and different lesbian and gay people are out of the closet to varying degrees (Fassinger, 1991; Weston, 1991b).

Heterosexism: An ideological system that denies, denigrates, and stigmatizes any non-heterosexual form of behavior, identity, relationships or community (Fassinger, 1991; Greene, 2000a).

Homophobia: The term used to describe the fear and hatred that characterizes reactions to lesbian and gay people by family, friends, and society (Fassinger, 1991).

Homonegativity: A term used to describe strong negative attitudes and actions to which lesbian and gay people are subjected to by family, friends, and society. Some homonegative actions and attitudes are as follows: (a) homophobic jokes, epithets, and name-calling; (b) the questioning of professional competence due to minority sexual orientation; (c) homophobic stereotyping; (d) ridicule or criticism of LGB affirmative notions; (e) anti-LGB violence and vandalism; (f) labeling LGB people as sinful and deviant; (g) reaction of social discomfort or ostracism toward LGB individuals or issues; (h) advice to appear less LGB-like; and (i) exclusion from job-related tasks and/or employment (Bieschke et al., 2005).
**Hiding and Passing:** Refers to the process of using various mechanisms to either actively or passively conceal one’s sexual orientation from others. Passing is a form of hiding and may be done passively or actively. Passive hiding may include avoiding the topic of LGBT issues in conversation, remaining silent when the topic is raised, not offering personal information about oneself. Active hiding may include hiding lesbian literature, jewelry, or other paraphernalia indicating a lesbian orientation, changing pronouns so that sex of one’s partner is not revealed, denying a lesbian orientation, or omitting information that would reveal a lesbian identity (Whitman et al., 2000).

**Internalized Homophobia:** Refers to the various forms of pernicious self-attack, self-loathing, or self-hatred that lesbian and gay individuals experience through interaction and identification with a culture which generally promotes an anti-homosexual attitude. In other words, lesbians and gay men grow up learning the same negative attitudes toward same-sex feelings and behaviors that heterosexual men and women do. Internalized homophobia is therefore a major obstacle for lesbian and gay individuals, further complicating an already complex process of self-definition (Greene, 2000a).

**Identity Management Strategies:** Refer to decisions around when, to whom, and how a person chooses to be open about her lesbian identity. The concept also refers to the development of behavioral and psychological strategies to maintain a lesbian identity while simultaneously remaining connected to families in which this identity is typically denigrated. In addition, the concept addresses how these strategies impact self-esteem and positive psychological outcomes in spite of the negative social identity of a lesbian orientation within our society (Gibson et al., 2007; Goffman, 1963; Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

**LGBT:** Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender
*Sexual Orientation*: Refers to a complex web of behaviors, emotions, fantasies, attitudes, self-identification, and sexual and life-style preferences regarding one's choice of intimate partners. Some dimensions of sexual orientation include homosexual, bisexual, and heterosexual identities (Fassinger, 1991).
Chapter II

LITERATURE REVIEW

There remains a dearth of empirical research that focuses on the experiences of African-ancestral lesbians (Greene, 1994a, 2000a, 2000b). This paucity speaks to the nature of the discourse about sexual orientation. In our society, as well as in the counseling professions, dialogues about sexual orientation include ideas and assumptions that establish heterosexuality as dominant (i.e., normative and superior) and exclude and devalue LGB orientations (Bieschke et al., 2005). In light of the need for empirical research with this population, the following literature review will focus on several pertinent issues as follows: the experience of having multiple marginalized identities among African ancestral lesbians; sources of homophobia and heterosexism in these families and communities; coming out experiences within families of origin; protective and oppressive roles of silence in the lives of African ancestral lesbians; identity management strategies; and implications for positive mental health and well-being within this population.
African Ancestral Lesbians: Triple Jeopardy and Multiple Identities

The pervasive and injurious effects of racism on the lives of Black people (e.g. Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999; Williams, 1999), heterosexism on the lives of predominantly White LGBT populations (e.g., Brooks, 1981; Chan, 1989, 1992; DiPlacido, 1998; Gock, 1985; Meyer, 1995), and sexism in the lives of a multiethnic sample of women (e.g., Klonoff & Landrine, 1995) have been well documented in the literature. However, there is limited theory and research on multiple oppressions and multiple marginalized identities (Allison, 1998; Bowleg et al., 2003, 2004; Greene, 2000a, 2000b; Landrine, Klonoff, Alcaraz, Scott, & Wilkins, 1995; Parks et al., 2004). African ancestral lesbians who face multiple oppressions by virtue of their gender, ethnicity/race, and sexual orientation/identity – a concept known as triple jeopardy (Greene, 1994b) are therefore an ideal population through which to explore the experiences of managing multiple marginalized identities. From the limited existing literature on multiple oppressions and Black lesbians (Bowleg et al., 2003; Bowleg et al., 2004; Consolacion, Russell, & Sue, 2004; Gibson et al., 2007; Graziano, 2004; Greene, 1994a, 2000a, Parks et al., 2004) it can be concluded that African ancestral lesbians face a wealth of challenges to their optimal development. They also bring effective adaptive coping strategies learned from one or more of their stigmatized identities. These works will be reviewed throughout this chapter.

Research studies of Bowleg et al. (2003), Bowleg et al. (2004), and Gibson et al. (2007) all focused exclusively on lesbians of African ancestry. In their 2003 qualitative study, Bowleg et al. explored resilience among Black lesbians as it relates to their triple jeopardy status. They found that some participants were resilient despite their triple jeopardy status and some were not
able to cope well with the multiple stressors. To further explore this finding, Bowleg et al. (2004) examined active coping among a sample of 92 Black lesbians in a quantitative study, which tested a conceptual model of active coping. The authors examined the extent to which internal factors (e.g., self-esteem, race identification, lesbian identification) and external factors (e.g., social support, perceived availability of LGBT resources) predict active coping. They found that internal psychological factors were more predictive of active coping than external factors. They also found that lesbian identification, an internal factor, was positively associated with social support.

This finding has implications for lesbians of African ancestry as they navigate their familial relationships, since family is a major source of social support for African ancestral women in general. The extant literature on Black LGBT individuals often laments the lack of social support shown by Black families and communities due to homophobia and heterosexism (Clarke, 1983; Greene, 1994a, 2000a). This study seeks to go beyond this lamenting to understanding how African ancestral lesbians manage their familial relationships and lesbian identity effectively and successfully in spite of homonegativity. Specifically, the extent to which there exists familial social support or a lack thereof influences the quality of life and mental health of African ancestral lesbians. Gibson et al. (2007) conducted a pilot study to begin exploring management strategies of African ancestral lesbians in their families of origin. The authors found that participants typically reported positive attitudes and feelings about their lesbian identities, a finding that may be related to the sample selection. In addition, these individuals consistently endorsed the importance of effectively navigating familial relationships as a means of more successfully managing their lesbian identities. While the study added to our knowledge base, it did not examine the specific behavioral and psychological aspects of identity...
management among African ancestral lesbians. It also did not examine the role of counseling and psychotherapy in the lives of African ancestral lesbians. Uncovering the essential behavioral and psychological identity management strategies employed by lesbians of African ancestry is critical and is the focus of this study.

In their 2004 study, Consolacion et al. explored the relationship between adolescents’ multiple minority factors and their mental health. While the current study focuses on adults, the study of LGB ethnic minority adolescents has important implications for the nature of multiple identities. Consolacion et al. examined the association between multiple minority factors and mental health outcomes as measured by reports of suicidal thoughts, depression, and self-esteem among LGB adolescents. Of the total sample of 13,205 (6,413 male and 6,792 female) adolescents, 55% were White, 21% African American, 17% Hispanic and 7% Asian/Pacific Islander. Eighty-five percent identified a same-sex attraction, nine percent identified a bisexual attraction, and six percent did not identify any attraction. Consolacion et al. found that the pattern of mental health risk for female adolescents was fairly consistent for all racial/ethnic backgrounds. In fact, their study was consistent with the 1999 study of Dubé and Savin-Williams, who found that their sample of ethnic sexual minority youth did not show increased levels of internalized homophobia. Both of these studies yielded contrary findings to several other studies and theoretical ideas (e.g., Alquijay, 1997; Greene, 1994a; Walters, 1998), which showed that ethnic minority LGB individuals are at risk for higher levels of compromised mental health. In accounting for this discrepancy, Consolacion et al. suggested that sexual minority status, in addition to other marginalized statuses, does not necessarily predict compromised mental health functioning. They further suggest that perhaps individuals who showed an increase in mental health risk did not have and/or were not able to use adaptive identities, while those
who had positive mental health outcomes had the inner resources (e.g., resiliency) and abilities to be adaptive with their identities. Also, perhaps age played a significant role here since adolescents and adults would vary in terms of the types of coping strategies used as well as adaptive and flexibility skills.

In support of identity adaptiveness, the 1999 study of Pittinsky, Shih and Ambady revealed that participants with multiple identities were able to reorient themselves to identities that were more adaptive to a situation, without disidentifying with the identity that was not adaptive. Thus, they were able to hold on to both the adaptive identity and the disparaged identity in their lived experiences. In another study, Parks et al. (2004), examined the intersection of race/ethnicity and sexual orientation among 450 adult lesbians including African Americans, Latinas, and Whites. One of the most interesting and relevant findings of this study focuses on generational differences between women of color and White women. Older women of color were more likely than younger women of color to be out to their families, whereas older White women were substantially less likely than their younger White counterparts to be out to their family members. The authors provided possible explanations for this finding. Younger White women may be more likely to be out to family members because of greater public visibility of LGBT individuals (often White) and more open public discourse about sexual orientation. However, while the sociopolitical climate around LGBT individuals have been gaining more media attention in the US, the cultural expectations of silence about sexual orientation within communities of color may have changed very little. As a result, younger women of color may be more reluctant than their younger White peers to disclose a lesbian identity to their families in order to avoid conflicts with the cultural expectations of their families and communities; younger White women may be less affected by such expectations. On the other hand, lesbians of color
may also be less affected, in general, by shifts in the public discourse within the majority culture since they have learned to manage societal racism through reliance on family and community supports.

Furthermore, older women of color may be more comfortable with both their lesbian identity and racial/ethnic identity and may therefore bring the experience and skills learned from coping with racism to managing an additional stigmatized identity, their sexual orientation. However, older White women may have fewer skills available to manage a stigmatized identity having been socialized within a majority culture. According to Greene (1997), women of color tend to bring their experiences of minority rather than majority membership to this process. In other words, what is or has been a source of oppression may become a source of strength. Having developed the competencies necessary to negotiate the challenges of racism, lesbians of color may more readily recognize an additional minority status and may be better equipped to meet the challenges associated with managing a lesbian identity that has been pathologized and condemned.

The experiences of African ancestral lesbians within the domain of family and community are often complex due to heterosexism and homophobia within their cultures, families, and communities. Further, Greene (2000a) observed that any analysis of lesbians of color must include an exploration of the roots of homophobia and heterosexism in African ancestral families and communities. Thus, the following section will explore the nature and multiple sources of homonegativity within African ancestral families and communities.
Homophobia and Heterosexism in African Ancestral Families and Communities

Greene (1994a, 1994b, 1995, 1996, 2000a, 2000b) has written prolifically about the multiple factors that result in homophobia and heterosexism in African Ancestral families and communities. She asserts that some of the root causes include (a) perceived importance of continued propagation of the race, (b) distortions of lesbian identity, (c) selective biblical interpretations used to reinforce homophobic attitudes, (d) sexism, and (e) racism including pejorative sexual myths and stereotypes about African ancestral men and women and internalized racist stereotypes of sexuality. Each of these will be discussed in greater detail.

Race Propagation

Oppressed groups, such as Native Americans and African Ancestral peoples have historically granted reproductive sexuality great importance due to racist and genocidal practices that encourage their demise (Clarke, 1983; Greene, 1994a, 1996). Many view reproductive sexuality as the only way of ensuring their continued existence in society. Thus, non-reproductive sexual practices such as gay and lesbian sexual orientations are experienced as yet another threat to the presence and survival of African ancestral peoples (Kanuha, 1990; Monroe, 1998). Within this context, a woman’s primary role is to reproduce and women who reject this role are viewed as traitors to the race (Cohen, 1999; Monroe, 1998). According to Kanuha (1990), these beliefs are described as “fears of extinction” (p. 176). However, Greene (2000a) aptly points out that “although fears of genocidal practices against African-Americans as a group are warranted, this view scapegoats lesbian and gay members of the community rather than
holding the proponents of racist and other discriminatory practices more accountable” (p. 100). Moreover, possessing a lesbian sexual orientation does not prevent one from having children, particularly among African ancestral lesbians. Several studies (Bass-Hass, 1968; Bell & Weinberg 1978; Mays & Cochran, 1988) have found that African ancestral lesbians were more likely to have children than White lesbians. Notwithstanding this reality, many African ancestral lesbians struggle to reconcile their lesbian sexual orientations and their desires to have children, primarily because of the internalization of the myth around the incompatibility of motherhood and a lesbian orientation (Cohen, 1999; Greene, 1994a; 1996; Monroe, 1998).

Lesbian Identity Distortions

One primary distortion of lesbian identity, and source of homophobia, is the belief that it is a “chosen lifestyle.” Many African ancestral peoples, like members of the dominant culture, believe that a lesbian sexual orientation is a poorly chosen lifestyle rather than a natural, compelling way of experiencing one’s sexuality; a sexuality that is as natural as heterosexuality (Greene, 2000a). Interestingly, since a lesbian orientation is believed to be “chosen,” it is assumed that a heterosexual orientation is the only “natural” and normal expression of sexuality, because it is the only form that leads to procreation. Furthermore, since a lesbian orientation is viewed as a chosen lifestyle, any discrimination on account of one’s sexual orientation is seen as an inconvenience and quite dissimilar from discrimination based on one’s Blackness, an entity of self not chosen (Gates, 1993). The belief that a lesbian sexual orientation is chosen and race is not is a source of great controversy and heated debates within African ancestral communities,
especially when attempts are made to draw parallels between racial oppression and homonegativity.

Greene (2000a) has offered some theoretical arguments that may shed light on this controversy. She suggested that “the relative visibility of race/ethnicity among African ancestral peoples and the invisibility of lesbian sexual orientation plays a significant role in the belief that lesbian sexual orientation is chosen” (p. 101). Believing that it is a chosen lifestyle leads to the assumption and belief that if lesbians would only hide and be quiet, they would not be discriminated against and there would be no need for civil rights and their legal protection. This suggests that lesbians who are “out” invite any discrimination they receive and therefore deserve it. The message this sends is that lesbian sexual orientation, unlike racial/ethnic identity is something that can and should be hidden, which makes homophobia appear more controllable than racism. Of course, the assumption here is that the problem is being known and there is no cost in hiding or remaining silent. Herein lays the pinnacle of heterosexual privilege and homophobia – if one would simply remain silent about her lesbian identity, then we would not have any problems. Greene further pointed out that asking a lesbian to pass for heterosexual is in direct contradiction to what we know about passing for White among African Americans. These assumptions require what West (1993) describes as a “serious interrogation” within African ancestral communities (p. 293).

Religion

Religion plays an integral role in the lives of African ancestral peoples by offering a significant amount of support, guidance, and wisdom (Boyd-Franklin, 1989; Dyson, 1996; West,
1993). It also provides rituals through which people can organize and make meaning of their lives. It is in the meaning making that selective interpretations of biblical scripture are used to reinforce homophobic attitudes (Claybourne, 1978; Greene, 2000a; Icard, 1986). According to Greene (1994a, 2000a), objections to one’s lesbian identity based on religious doctrines is one of the most frequent sources of internalized homophobia among African-American lesbians, as well as a constant source of conflict between them and other family members. This is also an incessant source of anguish for lesbians of African ancestry. Silvera (1991), a Caribbean lesbian, wrote that when her grandmother discovered that she was a lesbian, she took out her Bible and explained: “This was a ‘ting only people of mixed blood was involved in” (p.16). Similarly, Shaka-Zulu (1996), an African-American lesbian growing up in a Black fundamentalist church, reflected that there was a “Don’t ask, don’t tell” policy of denial within her church community, where compulsory heterosexuality was strictly enforced.

These objections and enforced silence around them based on religious grounds reflects cultural and societal homonegativity via Christian privilege (Schlosser, 2003). Christian privilege contributes to how views and behaviors of gay and lesbian individuals are seen as antithetical to “true Christian values.” As a result, family members who possess anti-LGBT attitudes may feel righteous about their positions since these beliefs are sanctioned by their religion and protected by Christian privilege. Several participants of Gibson et al.’s (2007) study also reported on this sanctioned homonegativity in that their lesbian identity was seen as immoral and sinful within their families of origin. In addition, Greene (2000a) found that family members reported that supporting a lesbian family member is experienced as a betrayal or negation of their faith since they believe that lesbian relationships violate teachings of the scripture; God’s law; or intent.
Several scholars have found that there are a great variety of opinions, teachings, and official policies on homosexuality among various religions within African ancestral communities, including Christianity (Gomes, 1996; Weatherford & Weatherford, 1999), Islam (Kilgerman, 2007; Minwalla, Rosser, Feldman, & Varga, 2005), and Judaism (Alpert, 1997, Schlosser, 2006). These authors have certainly broadened the controversial dialogue around the intersection of religion and sexuality. Within Christianity, for example, Roman Catholic, Southern Baptist, and Pentecostal denominations maintain the most conservative, rejecting positions on homosexuality, whereas the United Church of Christ is quite welcoming to LGBT members, and other denominations fit in between (Weatherford & Weatherford, 1999). Conservative Islam is also often experienced as condemning by sexual minorities. In an ethnographic study of six gay Muslims in North America, one participant indicated that coming out led to threats to his life, stating, “You have to make sure that being true to yourself doesn’t mean getting killed” (Minwalla, Rosser, Feldman, & Varga, p. 121). With regard to Judaism, Schlosser (2006) noted that acceptance of LGBT individuals varies within Jewish communities. For example, Orthodox and Hasidic Jewish communities typically condemn homosexuality based on literal interpretations of Biblical passages, while Reconstructionist and Reform Jewish communities are more accepting and welcoming of Jewish LGBT people.

In essence, conservative religious families are likely to be more homonegative regardless of their religious group membership. Given the conservative-liberal continuum of religious teachings, Greene (2000a) cautioned mental health professionals to be aware that there is no uniformity or absoluteness among theologians of their interpretations of these issues. This variation in meanings and interpretations certainly gives more room for working with clients who are trying to reconcile their lesbian and religious identities.
Sexism

Male superiority and dominance both in the dominant culture and among African ancestral peoples is another major source of homonegativity (Greene, 1994a) since it supports the preservation of traditional gender roles and the accompanying hierarchies (Cohen, 1999; Dyson, 1996; Greene, 1996a; Monroe, 1998). Within traditional gender roles, men are expected to be attracted to women only, and women to men only. Accordingly, a normal woman is defined as being attracted to a man; similarly, a man who is sexually attracted to other men is viewed as defective (Greene, 1994a).

Sexism often coexists with racism to maintain the patriarchal status quo in African ancestral communities. According to Monroe (1998), Black men are believed to be the most endangered members of the Black community (as a result of racism — e.g., high incarceration rates and rampant police brutality of Black men). They must therefore be protected by and at the expense of African American women. Consequently, LGBT members are scapegoated for race-related problems affecting African ancestral communities. Furthermore, female subordination to men is not rightly viewed as a social construction within society, but rather is seen by some as what has been referred to as “natural,” and “God’s will” (Monroe, 1998). As such, African ancestral lesbians are seen as betraying their natural roles in the community and “acting in defiance of the rule that establishes sexual pleasure as a male domain, a domain that maintains the status quo of dominance and submission between Black men and women, and eroticizes female submission to men” (Greene, 2000a; p. 107).
Finally, racism is another cause of homonegativity within African ancestral families and communities. Racism encompasses racial distortions and misconceptions, pejorative sexual myths and stereotypes about African ancestral men and women, and internalized racist stereotypes of sexuality. The sexuality of Black men and women has been maliciously attacked throughout American history as well as histories of colonized Africa and the Caribbean. For example, African ancestral men and women have been regarded as highly sexual, wild beings (Jordan, 1995). According to Johnson (2005), attacking Black people’s sexuality calls into question their very humanity, since sexuality involves a person’s self-image; the way a person defines her or his femininity or masculinity. Douglass (1999) suggests that a major reason for targeting Black sexuality is that Black people are essential to the economic power of the US, initially as free labor and later as cheap labor. As a result, it was and remains necessary to dehumanize African ancestral peoples, to cast them as inferior beings in order to maintain social control over “supposed” scarce resources and enforce White, heterosexual superiority. In the US, the White middle-class family organized around a heterosexual couple is depicted as the norm. Thus anyone outside of this limiting perspective is labeled “abnormal” and rendered a threat. The problem with this norm is that it requires the continued stigmatization of African ancestral peoples, their cultures, families, and sexualities (Douglass, 1999).

According to Lipsky (1987), internalized racism is exemplified in the constricted, limited views of Black culture and what it means to be authentically Black. It is also manifested as anger about anything that differs too much from the mythical ideal of the dominant’s culture middle class members. As such, many African ancestral heterosexual family members will reject
African ancestral lesbians because they do not fit into ideas of “normalcy.” Further, in an effort to defend against racist stereotyped views, many African ancestral people are invested in demonstrating what has been referred to as “normal behavior” in our society (Clarke, 1983; deMonteflores, 1986; Gomez, 1983; Greene, 1986; 1994a, 1994b, 1996; Wyatt, Strayer, & Lobitz, 1976). Essentially, sexual behavior outside of dominant societal norms can be experienced by heterosexual family and community members (who have internalized the negative stereotypes of their sexuality) as a negative reflection on all African ancestral people (Greene, 2000a, 2000b). For example, an African-American, heterosexual male identified how the long legacy of racist stigma surrounding Black sexuality has been a major reason why he and other African-Americans are rendered voiceless on matters related to sexuality, including sexual orientation (Johnson, 2005). Furthermore, within many African ancestral communities and churches, sexuality has been swept under the rug, condemned in contrast to an idealized need for sexual purity (Douglass, 1999; Dyson, 1996; Higginbotham, 1993; Lipsky, 1987; Monroe, 1998; Weatherford & Weatherford, 1999). This serves primarily as a defensive response to attacks on Black sexuality. These attacks, coupled with the entrenched condemnation of sexuality and sexual orientation by some African ancestral peoples have also been a major reason for the silencing of African ancestral lesbians and their allies. It has also fostered feelings of shame and embarrassment in African ancestral family and community members, especially people of African ancestry who strongly identify with the dominant culture or who wish to represent African cultures and African descendancy as devoid of LGBT individuals (Cohen, 1999; Greene, 1994a; Poussaint, 1990; West, 1993). Indeed, some of the only names for lesbians in African ancestral communities (e.g., “battygirl,” “bulldagger,” “sodomite,” “manroyals” and “funny women”) are all derogatory (Gibson et al., 2007).
Disclosing a sexual identity, given the complex and powerful factors that result in homonegativity in African ancestral families and communities, is likely to present many challenges. In spite of these challenges, an increasing number of African ancestral lesbians are telling their stories, living authentic lives, and coming out to their families of origin though there is the strong possibility that their disclosure may be met with silence, ambivalence, denial, and outright rejection (Greene 1994a, 1994b, 1996, 2000a, 2000b; Gibson et al., 2007).

Coming Out to Family of Origin

Coming out allows a lesbian to connect her private and public lives (Whitman et al., 2000). Many other authors are also in agreement, suggesting that disclosing one's sexual orientation fosters the development of a cohesive self-identity, improves self-esteem, and enhances overall psychological adjustment (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1981; Dank, 1971; Gonsiorek, 1982; Greene, 1994b, 2000a; Hencken & O’Dowd, 1977; Moses, 1978; Ponse, 1978; West, 1999). While coming out fosters integration in identity development, the process is also filled with many unfortunate consequences. In addition, coming out has serious implications for lesbians’ experiences with colleagues at work, employers, adoption agencies, schools, insurance companies, clients, religious leaders, roommates, neighbors, and others with whom they have social and occupational relations (Fassinger, 1991). Given that this population faces many challenges as they integrate a lesbian identity within their social, professional, and familial lives, it is important to look at their experiences within these three domains. Many studies have explored the professional domain, and have focused on the coming out experiences, management strategies, and vocation fit of lesbians within the work setting (Baker, Strub, & Henning, 1995;
However, the familial domain, an extremely important aspect of African ancestral peoples, has received little attention in the literature. For research that does give some attention to this domain in the lives of lesbians of color (Bowleg et al., 2003; Graziano, 2004; Greene, 1994a, 1994b, 1996, 2000a, 2000b; Sanders, 2002; Taylor et al., 2001), the authors often stop at lamenting the difficulties of coming out to families, instead of focusing on coping with societal heterosexism, the interrelatedness of race, gender, and sexual orientation, as well as affirmative and inclusive psychotherapies. The current study therefore seeks to build on the extant literature by examining the complexities of navigating familial heterosexism and homophobia and developing a positive lesbian identity within one’s family of origin.

In a 2005 narrative study of coming out experiences of counseling professionals, Fukuyama et al. shared powerful stories. The words of one of their female participants are as follows:

I told somebody not long ago that the worst prejudice, if you will, that I have encountered has been from my own family. I believe that it has colored my perception of the world. I am reticent to share my personal side because if my own family cannot accept me, how can others? It really isn’t that simple, I know, and yet it is. So goes the greatest struggle of my life. (p. 145)

This account highlights the basic theme of this study: the struggles and challenges of coming out to one’s family of origin. For many women, claiming a lesbian identity within the presence of one’s family of origin often involves great anxiety as the individual struggles to bring speech about sexual identity and sex (which is often taboo) into the cultural domain of the family.
According to Weston, coming out to family of origin may result in acceptance with explicit affirmations of love and kinship. On the other hand, rejection may ensue which could entail severance of family ties previously held to be inalienable. Other attitudes may include denial, dismissal, and superficial acceptance. Many persons who form their beliefs primarily from a religious perspective may also adhere to the principle of “love the sinner, hate the sin,” which captures their love for the person but rejection of her sexual orientation/identity.

Typically, in African ancestral families, the kinship bonds are so strong that a tolerance at the price of silence is often preferred to outright rejection of a family member (Bohan, 1996; Morales, 1990). According to a number of authors (e.g., Greene, 1997; Morris, Waldo, & Rothblum, 2001), the cost of disclosing a lesbian identity tends to be greater for African ancestral lesbians than for White lesbians because of the combined effects of racism in lesbian and gay communities and homophobia in racial/ethnic communities. It is this combination of racism and homophobia that tend to limit the internalization and disclosure of sexual identity among lesbians of color. Furthermore, a disruption in or loss of family of origin can mean a loss in community and social protection, which are integral aspects of survival (Greene, 1997).

Among African ancestral peoples, intricate networks of reciprocal obligation and support encompass nuclear and extended family members and form the basis of strong family ties, which are essential to the survival of this population (Boyd-Franklin, 1989; Greene, 1986, 1994a, 1997; Icard, 1986). The African American family, for example, “is an important socializing tool in a hostile environment and a refuge to protect group members from the racism of the dominant culture. The family also offers positive cultural mirroring to mitigate against internalizing negative images” (Greene, 2000a; p. 88). Similarly, the African proverb “I am because we are, and because we are, therefore I am” speaks to the importance of community and connection.
among African-ancestral peoples. Because of the strong family ties, African ancestral lesbians may not necessarily be rejected from their families, but instead, may experience subtle and overt oppressive attitudes and behaviors such as silence and denial of her sexual orientation (Greene, 1994a, 1994b). Villarosa (as cited in Brownworth, 1993) observed that instead of disowning or throwing someone out of the family, they “keep you around to talk you out of it” (p.18). Greene (2000a) cautions mental health clinicians that this apparent “tolerance” should not be viewed as support, because this tolerance is usually contingent on a lesbian’s silence about her sexual orientation. “Once a lesbian family member openly discloses, labels herself, or discusses being a lesbian, serious family conflicts may occur within the family or between family members” (p. 89).

Despite the inherent struggles in coming out to family members, Murphy (1989) found that lesbian women who disclosed their sexual orientation to their parents reported that they were happy that they had done so, even if their parents disapproved of their lesbian identity. In fact, the adverse consequences of parental disapproval were overshadowed by the benefits the women attributed to their decision to affirm their lesbian identity. This multifaceted web of challenges and joys in affirming a lesbian identity often leave African ancestral lesbians with a mixture of positive and negative feelings about coming out to members of their families (Gibson et al., 2007).

The 2004 study of Parks and colleagues, addressed earlier in this chapter, revealed that lesbians of color bring adaptive strategies to the table as they journey through the multifaceted web of joys and challenges. However, in our society and families, silence makes it extremely difficult for individuals to share their skills and competencies. In fact, silence has been used for centuries as a way of maintaining the status quo and keeping people from telling their stories, an
important ingredient in uncovering the essential skills and strategies of positive lesbian identity development among African ancestral lesbians.

Silence: A Source of Protection and Oppression

An interesting two-pronged aspect of silence is that it creates invisibility which maintains heterosexism, yet it is also a source of protection for some. Several authors (Bohan, 1996; Cox & Gallois, 1996; Eliason, 1996; Fukuyama & Ferguson, 2000; Rust, 1996) warned against the assumption that public acknowledgment or disclosure of a lesbian identity indicates developmental maturity and psychological health. Instead, they suggest that such perspectives fail to acknowledge the effects of multiple, changing socio-cultural contexts that lesbians of color experience as they move through the identity development process.

Most theoretical perspectives and models describe sexual identity formation and "coming out" as a linear sequential developmental process that begins with awareness of same-sex attraction, progresses through stages of testing or exploration, and culminates in personal acceptance and public acknowledgment of a lesbian identity (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Cox & Gallois, 1996; Troiden, 1989). However, the stage-based models have been validated with predominantly White, middle-class, gay male populations and have been found to be inadequate at capturing and understanding the experiences of lesbians of color (Fukuyama & Ferguson, 2000; Reynolds & Hanjorgiris, 2000). In challenging previous stage-models, several authors (Fassinger & Miller, 1996; Fukuyama & Ferguson, 2000; Gonsiorek & Rudolph, 1991; Reynolds & Hanjorgiris, 2000) have put forth contemporary perspectives asserting that sexual identity development is a continuous and evolving process that is substantially influenced by the cultural
and historical context in which it occurs. Thus, silence may be a source of protection for lesbians of color who experience multiple oppressions and must live in several cultural contexts simultaneously. In fact, Bieschke et al. (2005) suggested that silence provides lesbians with a safe space from the hostile anti-LGBT climate, where they can rejuvenate their mental and emotional selves.

While silence can be a haven for some, it can be quite costly and plays a major role in maintaining and perpetuating heterosexism. The negative psychological effects of remaining silent about one’s lesbian identity have been well documented in the LGB, cultural, and psychological literatures on people of color (Gomez, 1999; Greene, 2000a; Kitzinger, 1996; West, 1999). According to Greene (2000a), silence represents a form of societal oppression that fuels the development of internalized homophobia. Bieschke et al. (2005) further pointed out that silence renders LGB individuals invisible and devalued, as it keeps the heterosexist dominant discourse firmly in place. The prevailing dialogue pathologizes and condemns LGB individuals, maintaining a power structure where heterosexual identities and relationships are portrayed as culturally and morally superior to LGB identities and relationships.

Indeed, disclosing one’s lesbian identity can be a complex issue, especially when considering multiple oppressions and cultural context. On one hand, silence can be a refuge from the hostile, heterosexist climate. On the other hand, silence can also play an integral role in the continued oppression of the LGB population as dominant beliefs and assumptions go unchallenged. Fukuyama et al. (2005) offered a very useful classroom example of this dilemma where silence as a source of oppression and a source of protection worked together to make it almost impossible to interrupt the repressive cycle. Silence filled the room when a group member came out in group (silence as a form of oppression). The group leader then wanted to address the
groups’ silence and not give them a chance to avoid the topic. She however, felt obligated to respect the wishes of the group member who had come out to the group and did not want any additional attention (silence as a form of protection). The group leader was left feeling stuck and angry as a result of the combined effects of silence as an oppressive force and silence as a protective force, and thus the heterosexist dominant discourse was left unchallenged.

In his 2004 study in post-apartheid South Africa, Graziano examined the unheard voices of seven Black lesbians and gay men through a form of participatory action research that uses documentary photography and storytelling. Participatory Action Research (PAR; Maguire 1987) is a method of social investigation of problems involving participation of oppressed and ordinary people in problem posing and solving. Through PAR, knowledge is constructed through a process where participants reflect on their own experiences, use their own language, and hear their own voices in understanding what is happening to them, and around them. From his study, Graziano revealed the impact of silence in the lives of his participants and its role in maintaining the heterosexual status quo in South Africa, where it is safer for Black gay men and lesbians to remain silent and conform to heterosexual norms than to disclose their sexual identities. He further asserted the importance of engaging in research with the Black LGBT population as a way to ensure that their voices are heard in the multicultural literature and society at large. In doing so, the LGBT population will see themselves as respected and worthy individuals.

Stereotypes are other means through which silence is enforced as an oppressive force. Stereotypes such as the assumption that lesbians want to be men, are defective, unattractive, and sexually promiscuous women serve to prevent women from stepping out of the patriarchal line (Greene, 1995). According to Carby (1987), stereotypes such as the aforementioned do not accurately reflect reality. Instead, they serve to disguise a societal reality that would be
unacceptable or would contradict the ego ideal of heterosexuals as a group. Stereotypes of lesbians are a reflection of a larger scheme used to justify their discriminatory treatment to the benefit of their idealized and privileged heterosexual counterparts. These stereotypes are also intended to convince lesbians that their lot in life is part of the natural, normal order of things, rather than unfair social practices deliberately designed to keep institutional power in the hands of the already powerful and privileged.

Given the mental and behavioral health implications of issues raised above, it is essential that African ancestral lesbians develop effective and adaptive identity management strategies to build up and maintain positive lesbian identities, navigate potential homonegative attitudes and behaviors within their families of origin, and create changes that can contribute to improved quality of life.

Identity Management Strategies

A major goal of this study was to gain insight into how African ancestral lesbians may respond to their socially underprivileged positions. Social identity theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) offers an invaluable perspective on identity management. A negative social identity results when one’s group holds an inferior or disadvantaged position in society. Consequently, group members are motivated to find various identity management strategies to improve their status position. SIT holds that one’s perception of the sociostructural characteristics of intergroup relations influences the strength of in-group identification and one’s preference for different management strategies (e.g., Ellemers, 1993; Ellemers, Wilke, & van Knippenberg, 1993). Thus, identification with one’s group acts as a mediating variable for management strategies. The
sociostructural characteristics included in SIT are stability or instability of status inferiority, legitimacy or illegitimacy of status inferiority, and permeability or impermeability of group boundaries (see Mummendey, Kessler, Klink, & Mielke, 1999 for detailed descriptions of these characteristics). According to SIT then, the strategies used by African ancestral lesbians will be in part related to their in-group identification with other African ancestral lesbians as well as their perceptions of sociostructural characteristics. Therefore, their identity management strategies may vary according to their perceptions of their status inferiority as being (a) stable or unstable (e.g., “I think the current strained relationship between LGBT and heterosexual individuals will not change easily”); (b) legitimate or illegitimate (e.g., “Heterosexual individuals are entitled to be better off than lesbians since their relationship is sanctioned by the Bible”); and (c) the boundaries between lesbians and heterosexual individuals/family members as being permeable or impermeable (e.g., “It is quite easy to consider both heterosexual and lesbian orientations as human inclinations that are natural and compelling ways of loving”).

Goffman (1963) offers another equally relevant perspective. Membership in a stigmatized group, such as LGB identities, is not immediately apparent. As a result, individuals must decide whether to “display or not to display; to tell or not to tell; to let on or not to let on; to lie or not to lie; and in each case, to whom, how, when, and where” (Goffman, p. 42). Thus, many challenges abound for African ancestral lesbians who must develop effective and adaptive identity management strategies within their families of origin, so as to protect against poor mental health and well-being. Many African ancestral lesbians feel compelled to hide their lesbian identity or pass as heterosexuals due to heterosexism (Goffman, 1963) and an attempt to integrate their multiple identities without loss of significant relationships or cultural ties (Fukuyama et al., 2005). However, hiding one’s sexual orientation causes discrepancies between public and private
identities, which are often painful experiences. This discrepancy also intensifies the social vigilance among lesbians, lest others figure out their “true” identity (D’Augelli, 1994).

Several authors (Gomez, 1999; Greene, 2000; Kitzinger, 1996; Martin, 1982; West, 1999) have observed that passing, hiding, or remaining closeted as long-standing strategies of coping exact its costs in terms of psychological well-being. Furthermore, passing is likely to disrupt longstanding family relationships and friendships as lesbians create distance from others in order to avoid revealing their sexual orientation. When contact cannot be avoided, relationships may be kept at the superficial level as a self-protective strategy. Passing also puts a strain on the lesbian couple, which adds to the problems and stresses common to lesbian relationships, relationships which exist without the social supports typically provided to heterosexual couples (Goffman, 1963; Greene, 2000; Jones et al., 1984). Several others have explored coping strategies among lesbians and gay men in various settings.

In a 1993 study, Woods identified avoidance, passing as heterosexual, and being out as three ways that gay men manage their sexual identities at work. In their qualitative study, Whitman et al. (2000) examined lesbian identity management at various stages of the coming out process using Cass’s (1979) linear six-stage model. The authors found that participants differed among the six stages in regard to both frequency and type of disclosure strategies used. Prior to stage three, participants came out via direct active methods such as telling others directly that they are lesbian, attracted to women, or confused about their sexual orientation. Participants in stages four through six used more indirect active disclosures such as associating with a lesbian organization as a means to disclose, displaying symbols and dropping clues by mentioning lesbian or gay literature, music, people, and bars. While a linear stage model does not capture the dynamic experiences of being a lesbian with multiple oppressions (Greene, 1994a, 2000a), it will
be interesting to see if older African ancestral lesbians utilize more indirect active disclosures and younger lesbians engage in more direct active disclosure in the proposed study.

Another interesting finding from this study, revealed that lesbians at later stages of lesbian development made decisions not to come out. Rather than pathologize non-disclosures, Whitman et al. (2000) were in agreement with Healy (1993), who cautioned mental health professionals not to “pathologize secrecy and to consider the contradictory demands faced by lesbians and gay men in society” (p. 262). Similarly, Fukuyama et al. (2005) suggested that there are many reasons and contexts that mediate the coming out process. Understanding these mediating factors rather than pushing for disclosure is more empowering and far more beneficial to a positive lesbian identity and self-esteem (Fukuyama et al., 2005; Healy, 1993; Whitman et al., 2000).

Some researchers (Bowleg et al., 2003; Bowleg et al., 2004; Gibson et al., 2007; Graziano, 2004; Parks et al., 2004) have begun to explore factors that help African ancestral lesbians survive and thrive, and develop a positive lesbian identity. These studies were all reviewed earlier in this chapter. Four of the five studies focused more on coping within a societal heterosexist, racist, and sexist context, while Gibson et al.’s study began to explore coping within the familial domain. In an effort to build on the extant literature and broaden the scope of research, this study seeks to undertake a more in depth examination of management strategies among African ancestral lesbians within their families of origin.

Given the important issues involved in the experiences of African ancestral lesbians, exploring the mental health implications for claiming, rejecting, or remaining silent about a lesbian identity amidst a climate of familial homonegativity becomes essential. This next section
is especially important as we move toward improving mental health and quality of life for African ancestral lesbians.

**Toward Positive Mental Health and Well-Being**

African ancestral lesbians face unique challenges with regard to developing and maintaining a positive sexual identity. African ancestral lesbians are likely to have their families’ and communities’ support for dealing with racism and developing adaptive coping strategies. However, this support may not necessarily carry over to their sexual orientation. According to Greene (1994a), many African ancestral lesbians find themselves without support from family and community when it comes to developing positive lesbian identities. As a result, it is difficult to navigate the homophobic and heterosexist climate of the United States as a lesbian of color; doing so without the support of one’s family and/or community can make the task even more challenging. Perhaps as equally daunting is African ancestral lesbians’ experience of homophobia and heterosexism within their own families. Research studies by Mays and Cochran (1988) and Mays, Cochran, and Rhue (1993), and Cochran and Mays (1994) have all pointed out the psychological pain, inner turmoil, and increased vulnerabilities experienced by many African ancestral lesbians on account of their multiple identities.

Similar to the fact that sexual orientation oppression produces greater stressors for lesbians when compared to heterosexual women, the combination of sexism, racism, and heterosexism create powerful challenges for African ancestral lesbians (Greene 1994a, 1994b, 2000a). The anxiety and stress around coming out may be quite intense for African ancestral lesbians due to their multiple oppressions; multiple identities that need to be carefully managed
so as to ensure their continued support from family and community. Gonsiorek (1982) has done work exploring diagnostics, homosexuality, and psychotherapy with gay and lesbians populations. In his work, he discussed the intense anxiety experienced by gay and lesbian individuals around coming out and the likelihood that such anxiety levels may lean toward expression of feelings and behaviors that could possibly resemble symptoms of severe psychopathology. However, he warned against misinterpreting these symptoms and argued that they may be indicators of the extreme stress associated with the coming out process rather than symptoms of underlying psychiatric disorders.

This same line of reasoning is also applicable to African ancestral lesbians; expressions of feelings and behaviors that resemble symptoms of severe psychopathology may in fact just be a result of the challenges involved in managing multiple oppressed identities. Indeed, Greene (1994a) spoke of African ancestral lesbians as bringing resources of management to their lesbian identity that they have used with their racial/ethnic identities. Because African ancestral lesbians are forced to learn useful coping strategies against racism, they may bring these coping mechanisms to their lesbian identity, another stigmatized and devalued part of self. While acknowledging the resources that lesbians of color bring to the table, Greene also cautions that problems may arise when previously learned self-destructive or maladaptive strategies used to manage racism are also used to manage heterosexism. This may have serious mental health implications for lesbians of color who fit into this category. For example, substance abuse may be used to mask or manage the pain and challenges associated with racism and heterosexism. Similarly, blaming oneself as a means of managing racism and all the stereotypes that come with it may carry over to the management of a lesbian identity. The individual may also blame herself for others’ homonegative attitudes and behaviors or actively try to pass as heterosexual. In the
latter example, the individual’s strategy fails to identify racism and heterosexism as pertinent issues and instead, her African ancestry and lesbian orientation/identity are experienced as the problems.

Another situation that seriously affects the quality of life and has mental health implications for this population is the superficial tolerance of their sexual orientation within families of origin. This tolerance is usually achieved at the price of silence and denial, leaving many African ancestral lesbians between a rock and a hard place. In other words, many are forced to choose between their families and important aspects of themselves. Some risk the charge of “racial disloyalty,” not being “Black enough” (Greene, 2000a, p. 112), and their lesbian identity being a “disease acquired from Whites” (Greene, 1994a, p. 249). Others risk being called “a traitor to her race” and “confused” (Greene, 2000a, p. 113). African ancestral lesbians may experience these accusations as serious injuries to their ethnic/racial and sexual identities, identities around which many organize their lives. In addition to being left on the margins of their families and communities, lesbians of color commonly report being marginalized in predominantly White LGBT communities including bars, clubs, and other social gatherings (Chan, 1992; Dyne, 1980; Garnets & Kimmel, 1991; Greene, 1996, 2000a, 2000b; Mays & Cochran, 1988; Morales, 1992). Being on the margins of both their ethnic/racial community and the LGBT community, African ancestral lesbians are often left with a sense of conflicting loyalties, and many resort to concealing important aspects of their identities to survive in each community. This intense conflict often leaves many African ancestral lesbians vulnerable to many psychological problems, increased risk for isolation, and feelings of estrangement (Greene, 1994a).
Conclusion

In sum, though there has been increasing research with LGBT populations, there has been a lack of focus on African-ancestral lesbians in particular. Considering the multiple intersecting identities of these women, it is essential that empirical research begin to capture their experiences so that their voices too may be reflected in the literature. A review of the literature revealed that there is very little empirical research with African ancestral lesbians (Bowleg et al., 2003; Bowleg et al., 2004; Gibson et al., 2007; Graziano, 2004; Parks et al., 2004). Of the scarce research, only one study began to address the complexity and challenges faced by these women in managing their lesbian identity within their families of origin. According to Sanders (2002) and Taylor et al. (2001), church, family, and support systems for Black populations have always been extolled in extant research with African Americans. Empirically however, little is known about the extent to which these factors facilitate or hamper effective functioning among African ancestral lesbians. Furthermore, Parks et al. (2004) suggested that more research is needed to uncover the essential skills and competencies used by African ancestral women as they manage and negotiate the tasks related to their lesbian identity development. Thus, this study examines the identity management strategies used by African ancestral lesbians within their families of origin. It is hoped that the results of this study will provide useful information for mental health professionals working with African-ancestral lesbians as well as enhance the general well-being of these women.
Chapter III

METHOD AND PROCEDURES

In light of the limited empirical research on African ancestral lesbians, a qualitative approach was used to provide an effective method for examining the experiences and identity management strategies of these women without constraining their responses. In fact, many scholars of qualitative approaches have noted that such methodologies are well suited to the investigation of unexplored phenomenon (Hill, Knox, Thompson, Williams, Hess, & Ladany, 2005; Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997; Ponterotto, 2005). Further, a qualitative approach, which uses words as data, lends itself to rich narratives that cannot be obtained through quantitative methodologies. Thus, the present study sought to deepen our understanding about the lives of African ancestral lesbians through the use of consensual qualitative research (CQR). The lived experience of being an individual of African ancestry, a woman, and a lesbian in a society, community, and family where all or some of these identities are marginalized creates challenges for African ancestral lesbians. It is therefore the purpose of this research to inform mental health professionals’ work with these women as we move toward positive mental health and well-being for this population. This chapter will provide a detailed description of consensual qualitative research and the rationale for its use in the present study. In addition, material concerning procedures for ensuring the reliability and validity of the findings will be provided.
Overview of Consensual Qualitative Research

Consensual qualitative research (CQR) was introduced to the field in 1997 by Hill et al. (1997), and recently updated (Hill et al., 2005). According to the developers, they “wanted to conduct qualitative research but were frustrated because the descriptions seemed vague, difficult to comprehend, and equally difficult to implement” (Hill et al., 2005, p. 196). The impetus for this development lies in the investigation of the inner experiences of clients’ psychotherapy process, a very complex phenomenon in counseling psychology, that could not be captured through quantitative means well or the vaguely described qualitative methods available at the time. Thus, the authors sought to integrate the best features from existing qualitative methods and also have their method be rigorous and easy to learn. CQR is predominantly constructivist in that the authors recognize that people construct their reality and that there are multiple, equally valid, socially constructed versions of “the truth.” CQR incorporates elements from phenomenology (Giorgi, 1985), grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), and comprehensive process analysis (Elliot, 1989).

According to Hill et al. (2005), the essential components of CQR are the use of (a) open-ended questions in semi-structured data collection techniques (typically interviews), which allow for the collection of consistent data across individuals as well as a more in-depth examination of individual experiences; (b) several judges throughout the data analysis process to foster multiple perspectives; (c) consensus to arrive at judgments about the meaning of the data; (d) at least one auditor to check the work of the primary team of judges and minimize the effects of groupthink in the primary team; and (e) domains, core ideas, and cross-analyses in the data analysis. In addition to the essential components, the three main steps involved in conducting CQR include
developing and coding domains, constructing core ideas, and developing categories to describe consistencies across cases. CQR, like quantitative methodologies, is a scientific method of data collection and analysis. The following sections describe how CQR principles were applied in the present study.

Preserving Scientific Integrity

According to Devers and Robinson (2002), qualitative research maintains its scientific rigor through the following components: credibility, applicability, consistency, and confirmability.

**Credibility.** Credibility is akin to internal validity, which can be assessed through “member checking” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) where participants are asked review the accuracy of the transcription as well as the researchers’ interpretation of their responses. In order to establish credibility in the present study, participants \( n = 12 \) were e-mailed a copy of their transcripts as well as a list of the emergent themes. Participants were encouraged to make comments and provide feedback to the researcher. In particular, participants were asked to comment on the accuracy of the transcriptions and the extent to which the emergent themes captured their experiences. Participants were also asked to confirm that their confidentiality had been maintained. Only two participants responded, and both noted that they were satisfied with how the team coded their stories. This response rate is typical of CQR given the lengthy data analysis process, and resulting time-span between data collection and presentation of transcripts and results to participants. One of the two participants also conveyed her delight that the study was conducted, noting a need for this kind of exploration with African-ancestral lesbians.
Applicability. Applicability is comparable to external validity and can be defined as the level of fit between the findings of the study and the data from which they are derived (Sandelowski, 1986, cited in Devers & Robinson, 2002). In the CQR method, applicability can be assessed through auditing. According to Hill et al. (1997), an auditor’s role is to provide detailed feedback at each stage of the analysis process (e.g., creating domains, constructing core ideas, creating the cross-analysis). Essentially, the auditor checks whether the raw data are in the correct domain, that all the important data are well represented in the core ideas, that the essence of the raw narratives are concisely captured in the wording of the core ideas, and that the findings of the cross analysis truly represent the raw data from which it was born. In the current study, an associate professor from another institution, who has conducted a number of CQR studies himself, served as the auditor.

Consistency. Consistency is quite important to the integrity of qualitative research and is most analogous to reliability. In CQR, consistency is demonstrated, at least in part, through the use of semi-structured interviews. All participants responded to the same core set of questions (although the interviewer was free to explore unique areas further depending upon the individual participants' responses), which ensured that there was consistent base of information across participants.

Confirmability. And finally, confirmability parallels objectivity. It is hard for the qualitative researcher to assume neutrality or objectivity since she/he is immersed in the data collection and analysis process (Devers & Robinson, 2002). While objectivity cannot be guaranteed, scientific integrity is maintained through awareness and documentation of researchers’ biases as well as the consensual process. Hill and colleagues (1997, 2005) described the consensus process as central to the CQR method. Consensus is based on the assumption that
complex issues involve multiple perspectives and levels of awareness. According to Marshall and Rossman (1989), multiple perspectives increase our approximation of the “truth” and are more likely to be free from researcher bias, which is one of the strengths of the consensus process. Analyzing human communication is difficult since there are many ambiguities and complexities in their narratives. Therefore, having the space to think and talk about these ambiguities, as well as the team’s diverse viewpoints and experiences allows for accurate conceptualizations. In terms of researcher bias, Hill et al. (1997, 2005) suggested that researchers report their biases so that readers can evaluate the findings with this knowledge in mind. According to the authors, biases are personal issues that make it difficult for researchers to respond objectively to the data. Biases can be reflected in values and reactions to the topic under study as well as via demographic characteristics such as ethnicity/race, gender, sexual orientation, and theoretical orientations.

In addition to familiarity with the literature, the personal experiences and biases of the researcher must be kept in mind throughout the proposed study. For example, the researcher’s coming out experiences, level of support, and identity management strategies may be different and similar to other African-ancestral lesbians. I have several African ancestral friends and colleagues who identify as lesbians. I also identify as an African ancestral lesbian who became interested in the topic after experiencing and listening to stories reflecting the complex and arduous task of coming out to families of origin, as well as recognizing that the voices of these women were not well represented in the literature. As a result, I was inspired to provide a space where the voices of these women could be heard. Essentially, the primary goal of this study is to increase our understanding of the experiences of this population, with the hope of beginning to
fill a gap in the literature regarding the psychological and behavioral identity management strategies of African ancestral lesbians within their families of origin.

**Participants**

The participants in this study were 12 adult lesbians of African ancestry living in or near a large city on the West coast, Midwest, and North coast; all of the participants were out to at least some members of their family of origin. Participants ranged in age from 21 to 71 years (M = 38, SD = 14.69). Eight (67%) of the participants identified their race/ethnicity as Black, 3 (25%) identified as African American and 1 (8%) identified as Biracial – Black and White. Among the 12 participants, nationality was reported as follows: 9 (75%) Americans, 2 (17%) Jamaicans, and 1 (8%) Grenadian. Participants represented many levels of educational achievement: 2 had earned High School Diplomas, 1 had earned an Associate’s degree, 2 were college seniors, 2 had Bachelors degrees, 3 had Masters degrees, and 2 had doctoral degrees. Participants reported a variety of careers, including health, education, contracting, social services, administration, divinity, and art. Finally, participants’ relationship status was as follows: 7 were involved in serious committed relationships (i.e., includes some level of commitment such as domestic partnership or shared living expenses), 2 were romantically involved but not seriously committed (i.e., they reported being in steady relationships without symbols or actions of commitment), 1 was casually dating, and 2 were not actively dating.
Participant Inclusion Criteria and Recruitment

In order to engage in the study, participants had to self-identify as an African ancestral lesbian, regardless of their degree of outness. Participants were nationally recruited through purposeful sampling and the snowball technique via personal contacts and from a LGBT drop-in community center in a large city in the northeastern United States. The study was announced (see Appendix B) during a meeting at the LGBT drop-in center. Interested individuals were provided with an informed consent with a description of the study (see Appendix C), a demographic sheet (see Appendix D), and a copy of the interview protocol (see Appendix E) on site. Contact information was exchanged on site for a possible telephone interview. Members of the primary team also asked colleagues to forward an e-mail recruitment letter (see Appendix A) to adult African ancestral lesbians. Interested individuals were asked to provide telephone numbers and mailing addresses via e-mail. Potential participants were sent a packet of the study materials. The packet included an informed consent with a description of the study (see Appendix C), a demographic sheet (see Appendix D), and a copy of the interview protocol (see Appendix E). A self-addressed, stamped envelope was also included so that participants may return the signed informed consent and the completed demographic sheet to the researcher.

Protection of Participants

Hill and colleagues (1997, 2005) highlighted the fact that researchers need to be respectful and aware of participant’s emotional responses. Participants of this study were reminded that they had a right to withdraw from the study at any time, without penalty, for any
reason. They were also invited to share their concerns with the researcher. Furthermore, contact numbers for mental health professional services were provided in the informed consent, should participants have needed this kind of support. While anonymity was not guaranteed for this study, participants' completed demographic sheet and informed consent were kept strictly confidential in locked file cabinets. To further maintain confidentiality, participants' names were not attached to their demographic sheets or interviews. Instead, code numbers were assigned to each demographic sheet and tape, which were also kept in the locked cabinets. Every effort was made to ensure that participant's names were not mentioned on the tape by the researcher. Participants' names and any identifying information were deleted from the transcript, and the tapes were destroyed upon completion of data analysis.

Data Collection

Data collection within CQR consists mainly of interviews, a rich means of capturing lived experiences. There are four main types of data collection strategies: telephone interviews, face-to-face interviews, paper and pencil survey format, and e-mail format. The telephone format was employed in the present study. This format allows for more privacy and confidentiality than face-to-face interviews and protects interviewees who may potentially feel vulnerable or embarrassed. Given the deeply personal nature of this study, it is likely that African ancestral lesbians, often a hidden community, were more willing to participate and felt less threatened and vulnerable via a phone interview (e.g., Hill et al., 1997). Further, research has shown that participants were less likely to give socially desirable responses in telephone interviews when compared with face-to-face interviews (Hill et al., 2005; Wiseman, 1972). However, one
disadvantage of telephone interviews is that they have the potential to distance the researcher from the participant. The face-to-face interviews, on the other hand, allow for the physical presence of the researcher and subsequent increased possibilities for developing better rapport with participants. Another limitation of telephone interviews is that only verbal cues are available, while both verbal and non-verbal cues are available in face-to-face interviews (Gatewood & Field, 2001; Polkinghorne, 1994). With regard to the potential distancing effect in telephone interviews, Hill et al., (1997, 2005) have asserted that researcher’s interviewing experience as well as her/his rapport building skills can give telephone interviews just as much authenticity as face-to-face interviews. Logistically, since I solicited participants nationally, it was more affordable and feasible to conduct telephone interviews rather than in-person interviews that would require traveling within and between several states within the country. Finally, telephone interviews have been used successfully in several published CQR studies (e.g., Gray, Ladany, & Walker, 2001; Hill et al., 2005; Schlosser, Knox, Moskovitz, & Hill, 2003).

Procedures for Interviews

Once participants’ signed informed consent and demographic sheets were received, they were called to set up a time and date for the phone interview. On the demographic sheet, participants provided some basic information such as: age, race, nationality, level of education, current occupation, and relationship status. Interviews took approximately 60 minutes and consisted of questions that explored participants’ coming out process within their families of origin as well as their behavioral and psychological identity management strategies (see Appendix E). Interviews were recorded by audiotape with the participant’s permission.
Interview Protocol

Interviews followed a semi-structured format (see Appendix E) and I conducted all the interviews. I conducted a pilot telephone interview, which lasted 50 minutes, with a 27 year-old Ethiopian lesbian. The interview protocol was then revised based on feedback from the pilot participant. The following research questions were explored in the current study:

1. What are the coming out experiences of African ancestral lesbians within their families of origin?

2. How do African ancestral lesbians manage or regulate information about their lesbian identities within their families of origin?

3. What are the specific identity management strategies (e.g., psychological, behavioral) used by African ancestral lesbians?

4. What factors influence the type of management strategies used?

5. What enables or hinders self-esteem regarding one’s lesbian identity?

6. What roles do silence and heterosexism play in managing a lesbian identity within family?

7. How can mental health professionals best support African ancestral lesbians as they navigate the complexities of developing a lesbian identity within their families of origin?

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using the Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) approach (Hill et al., 1997). In CQR, a small number of cases are examined intensively to gain in-depth
understanding of the phenomenon, data analysis occurred via a consensual group process, and findings emerge inductively from the data. Throughout the data analysis process, an auditor checked the emerging consensus judgments to ensure that they were based on the data and are as free of researcher bias as possible. The consensual process is the most critical aspect of CQR. In this process, team members are encouraged to speak their minds and share their individual understanding of the data. After thorough discussions of the material, team members then agree upon a final, mutually satisfying interpretation of the data.

Team Members, Hill et al. (2005) suggest that there be at least three members on the primary team to provide a variety of perspectives and one or two auditors. The primary team members were involved in the consensual process, creating domains and core ideas for all of the cases. Team members were therefore intimately familiar with all the cases and hence were able to contribute to the understanding of the data as a whole. In addition, all team members served as judges throughout data analysis. Finally, team members represented varying demographic variables including age, gender, sexual orientation, and ethnicity/race. Team members included an assistant professor (a 35 year-old European-American heterosexual Jewish man), a second year doctoral student in counseling psychology (a 26 year-old European-American heterosexual Christian woman), and myself (a 27 year-old African Ancestral lesbian of Jamaican nationality who does not identify with the beliefs and rituals of any religion but instead identifies spiritually with a belief in a higher power. I was raised in a household of varying religious denominations including Rastafarianism, Seventh-day Adventist, and Pentecostal). A 49 year-old European-American heterosexual agnostic male associate professor served as the independent auditor. He has considerable expertise in CQR and much familiarity with the LGBT and multicultural
competence literature. He also has clinical experience with the LGBT community, particularly working with multiple oppressions.

**Bracketing Biases.** Prior to conducting the interviews, members of the research team examined their expectations of the data by discussing how they anticipated the participants would respond. According to the CQR method, discussing biases is critical to minimizing their impact on the data-coding process (Hill et al., 1997). After a thorough discussion regarding their expectations, team members should endeavor to approach the data as objectively as possible. The diversity of the research team was deliberately designed to reduce potential biases and to facilitate with the identification of blind spots. The values, expectations, and biases of the research team are as follows: (a) lesbian orientation is a human inclination that is as natural and compelling as a heterosexual orientation; (b) many African ancestral families hold homonegative attitudes and beliefs for several reasons including religious views, societal homophobia, distortions of lesbian identity, and sexism, but these attitudes and beliefs are not likely to be any more or less prevalent in the family based on the family’s African ancestral heritage; (c) it is important for African ancestral lesbians to find effective and adaptive strategies that work for them so that they may hold a positive lesbian identity; (d) positive lesbian identity includes feelings and attitudes of comfort and security with one’s lesbian identity; this may also include feelings of pride, but is not necessary, since there are lesbians who may be comfortable and secure with their lesbian identities but may use silence as a management strategy; (e) it may be difficult for lesbians who are members of conservative, fundamentalist, or orthodox religious communities to hold a positive lesbian identity since most of these religious communities hold homonegative views and doctrines on LGBT orientations. In fact these women will have challenging journeys as they try to reconcile their religious identity and their lesbian identity; (f)
the family-of-origin experiences of African ancestral lesbians will influence their identity management strategies, for example, a positive, affirming lesbian identity will likely be associated with less conservative perspectives, particularly those families who hold more egalitarian gender role beliefs and religious beliefs, while individuals from families with more conservative and sexist value systems will likely experience more conflicts in their family if they are out as lesbian; (g) African ancestral lesbians will use different management strategies for different family members; (h) Participants’ intimate relationships will be healthier and stronger if participants’ families are affirming. Our values, biases, and expectations were thoroughly discussed before the interviews and prior to data analysis. One interesting aspect of our discussions focused on the fact that heterosexist values and assumptions are pervasive in our society and are therefore internalized by all team members to some extent. Given this context, it was important that the primary researcher, though lesbian identified, be aware of these assumptions throughout the interview process. For example, during the interviews I made certain to explore participants’ family make-up rather than assume that they were all raised by heterosexual parents and/or relatives. Indeed one woman felt comfortable to share her mother’s struggle with her lesbian identity and its implication for her (participant) own lesbian identity development. In addition to increased awareness during the data collection process, it was also important that team members, auditor included, be cognizant of our heterosexist assumptions throughout data analysis. These discussions minimized their impact on the data collection and data analysis, and ensured that interviews and data analysis were approached as objectively as possible. In addition, the team members engaged in a constant process of checking with one another regarding the presence of potential biases or blind-spots. As noted previously, the diversity of perspectives helped in this regard.
Coding of domains. A “start list” (Miles & Huberman, 1994) of domains (i.e., general topic areas) was first developed by the primary team. The start list was organized according to the research questions. Throughout the data analysis process, the initial domains were changed to reflect the emerging data. The judges independently assigned participants’ responses into one or more domains based on their meaning units. Meaning units are complete thoughts, varying from short phrases to several sentences. They represent a system of summarizing the main themes from participants’ responses. The judges then discussed the placement of meaning units into domains until consensus about how the data should be broken into domains was reached.

Coding of core ideas. Next, the judges developed core ideas (i.e., succinct accounts of the content) for every domain in each case. The judges then discussed each core idea until they arrived at consensus about both wording and content. The core ideas along with domains labels were compiled to form a consensus version of the transcript. The consensus version was then sent to the external auditor, who examined and evaluated the accuracy of both the coding of domains and the coding of core ideas. Next, the judges discussed the auditor’s feedback until consensus was reached regarding how it should be incorporated into the analysis. Feedback included comments about placement of participants’ responses, domain labels, and wording of core ideas.

Cross-analysis. In this stage the judges examined the core ideas across participants to identify categories under each domain. The team then came to consensus about the titles of categories and core ideas that were placed in each category. The consensus version of all cases was then re-examined by the judges to ensure that they were exhaustive. Likewise, categories and domains were continually modified until the judges agreed that the data were well represented. Once this process was completed, the cross-analysis was then sent to the auditor for
review. As in previous stages, the auditor’s feedback was discussed by the primary judges until consensus was achieved.

Finally, categories were classified as general, typical, or variant as outlined by CQR guidelines (Hill et al., 2005). These classifications describe the frequency of a category’s occurrence. Categories were described as General if all or all but one of the cases were represented. They were described as Typical if more than half of the cases (up to the cutoff for general) were represented and Variant if at least two cases (up to the cutoff for typical) were represented. Since there were 12 participants in this study, General included 11-12 cases, while Typical consisted of 7 – 10 cases, and Variant comprised 2-6 cases.

In sum, the strengths of CQR make for a good fit with the goals of the current study. The method is highly suitable for conducting in-depth studies of rich, inner experiences of individuals, as well as to get at marginalized experiences and phenomena that have not been studied previously, or for which no measures have been created. African ancestral lesbians are marginalized within our society, a population about whom little is currently known. CQR is also a rigorous scientific method that allows several researchers to examine data and come to consensus about their meaning, thus reducing the biases inherent with just one person analyzing the data. On an intellectual level, this method also allows researchers to exercise their analytical and creative skills.
Chapter IV

RESULTS

The data reflected participants' experiences negotiating a lesbian identity within their families of origin. Data analysis yielded 11 domains: conceptualization of lesbian identity; conceptualization of multiple identities; coming out experiences; identity management activities; self-talk regarding lesbian identity; challenges regarding lesbian identity; role of silence in maintaining lesbian identity; influence of heterosexism on lesbian identity; influence of family on lesbian identity; experiences with counseling and therapy; and advice for mental health professionals. See Table 1 for categories, subcategories, and frequencies for each domain. Pseudonyms have been used to identify all participants.

Conceptualization of Lesbian Identity

In the conceptualization of their sexual/relationship orientation, participants generally shared their feelings with regard to various aspects of their lesbian identity. Typically, participants had positive feelings about their lesbian identity. For instance, Karen, a 41-year-old Black American, indicated:

I feel liberated and free [about my lesbian identity] and I feel like I realize my true self. The self that doesn’t cater to the other expectations. It [lesbian] means...I can pretty much come up with three words that come to mind. Strength, originality, and free thinking.
Table 1
Summary of Domains and Categories From the Cross-Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain/Category</th>
<th>Frequency/# of Cases</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Conceptualization of lesbian identity</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>A. Feelings about lesbian identity</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>i. Positive feelings</td>
<td>General/11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii. Shifted from rejection to acceptance of lesbian identity</td>
<td>Typical/8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iii. Mixed/conflicted feelings about lesbian identity</td>
<td>Variant/6</td>
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<tr>
<td>B. Felt entrapped by “lesbian” label</td>
<td>Variant/3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Conceptualization of multiple identities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Drawing protection and strength from multiple identities</td>
<td>Variant/3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Negotiate multiple identities</td>
<td>Typical/10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Feelings about multiple identities</td>
<td>Typical/8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i. Positive feelings</td>
<td>Typical/7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii. Shifted from rejection to acceptance of multiple identities</td>
<td>Variant/3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Salience of identities varies contextually</td>
<td>Variant/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Coming out experiences</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>A. Coming out experience on-going</td>
<td>General/12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i. Came out directly</td>
<td>Typical/7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii. Came out indirectly</td>
<td>Variant/5</td>
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<tr>
<td>iii. Outed by others</td>
<td>Typical/8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Reaction of others to participant’s coming out</td>
<td>General/12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experienced affirmation</td>
<td>Variant/6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experienced Mixed Reactions</td>
<td>Variant/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experienced Rejection</td>
<td>Typical/7</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Identity management activities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Cultivate LGB community and support systems</td>
<td>Typical/9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Educate others about lesbian identity/challenge heterosexism</td>
<td>Variant/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Maintain visibility/be out no matter what</td>
<td>Typical/9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Use literary arts for affirmation and support</td>
<td>Variant/3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. Engage in self-protective strategies in response to heterosexist demands</td>
<td>Typical/7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F. Engage in LGB activism</td>
<td>Variant/3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G. Use psychotherapy for support</td>
<td>Variant/2</td>
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5. Self-talk regarding lesbian identity
   A. Positive/Affirming
   B. Negative/Self-injurious
   C. Avoids self-talk/No self-talk

6. Challenges regarding lesbian identity
   A. Lack of acceptance from family
   B. Managing safety
      i. Physical and psychological assaults
      ii. Having to continually come out or manage heterosexist assumptions
   C. Other Life Circumstances (e.g., sexual abuse & disability)

7. Role of silence in managing lesbian identity
   A. Maintains status quo/stability in family
   B. Not a factor because participant was out

8. Influence of heterosexism on lesbian identity
   A. No influence of heterosexism
   B. Negative emotional effect
      General negative emotional effect
      Pressured to be “straight” via religious teachings
      Pressured to be “straight” via stereotypes

9. Influence of family on lesbian identity
   A. Ambivalent family attitudes have shaped participant’s lesbian identity
   B. Felt supported
   C. Rejecting of Participant

10. Experiences with counseling and therapy
    A. Felt positive
    B. Felt negative or harmful
    C. Has not sought out therapy
    D. LGB concerns not central focus of therapy
### Domain/Category

11. Advice for mental health professionals

   A. Be knowledgeable about complexity of multiple identities for African-ancestral lesbians
   
   B. Appreciate cultural differences/Don’t make assumptions
   
   C. Increase availability of mental health professionals who are Black or African-ancestral lesbians
   
   D. Understand importance of family
   
   E. Reach out and be more direct regarding the lesbian-straight and Black-White divides

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<thead>
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<td>Variant/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African-ancestral lesbians</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>D. Understand importance of family</td>
<td>Variant/2</td>
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<tr>
<td>E. Reach out and be more direct regarding the lesbian-straight and Black-White</td>
<td>Variant/5</td>
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**Note.** General = 11-12 cases; Typical = 7-10 cases; Variant = 2-6 cases.

Another example comes from Marcia, a 36-year-old Black Grenadian, who noted “Um, I think that where I am in my life right now, I feel truly blessed that the Lord saw a fit to make me a lesbian. I’m happy. I’m happy to be a gay woman. I’m happy with who I am.”

Two variant subcategories also emerged from this category. Some participants noted that their feelings shifted from rejection to acceptance, while others expressed mixed/conflictual feelings about their lesbian identity. Natalie, a 25-year old Black Jamaican, shared her journey from rejection to acceptance:

Growing up, I believed it [being a lesbian] was wrong. At first it felt really odd knowing that I was attracted to women and that felt unnatural and so I had a big problem with it. [I was raised] very religious, ya know, going to church hearing how homosexuality is a sin...the idea is for a man to be with a woman, not for two women to be together. So, yea, at first being a lesbian was a huge conflict, but, the more I matured and came to the US for college and saw that well, you know...yea, so being away from my family gave me a chance to explore my feelings more and I definitely realized that, wow, it feels so good to be me and not pretend anymore...Yea, so basically that is what happened and now I'm just a proud lesbian.

In terms of mixed/conflictual feelings, Beverley, a 71-year-old African-American, noted “I feel wonderful about being a lesbian. I feel it’s a calling of sorts because it has taken
me out of a narrow world into a world of challenge where I can see things differently and
I feel differently...it [being a lesbian] means struggles and pain, but it also means joy.”

Participants also typically reported feeling entrapped by “lesbian” label. For instance,
Lisa, a 33-year-old African-American indicated:

I think I identify mostly as being queer and yet, I find myself calling myself
lesbian in conversations, so I think that, how do I see it? I see it as- I see the name
[lesbian] as a name that is easy to use. People in the states know what it means
and I use it just for casual conversations, but I really kind of think of myself more
as a kind of woman centered, woman loving woman. I don’t like the sound of
lesbian. Too many harsh vowels there, but yea I definitely think language is
powerful. Language is power...it’s our first understanding of power and of
control and certain words I do think hold a lot of history and can do a lot of
damage...and I think that there are a lot of people who think that lesbian is
something that belongs to a particular set of people, to White women.

Another example comes from Stacey-Ann, a 33-year-old Black Jamaican who echoed
similar sentiments:

I have a problem saying to people, “I’m a lesbian.” I think growing up I always
had a sense within me that there was this attraction there for other women. But it
was never something that I was. It was something that I did or something that was
a part of me not something that defined me. I guess I have a problem thinking that
there is this word out there now that says because I love this way, because I love
other women romantically, sexually, in all the ways, that I am this thing versus
that I live this way. I think I have to say what I am though, or what I do, even
without that word [lesbian]. Like that’s the challenge I think and talking to you
has got me thinking about how that is. Like how do you talk about how you’re
feeling? How do you talk about how you’re loving? And how do you talk about
how you are in the world without saying over and over again, ‘lesbian lesbian
lesbian?’...I think if I use the word “lesbian” with my mom, the weight of the
word may take away what I’m saying to her.
Conceptualization of Multiple Identities

Typically, most all participants noted that they negotiate multiple identities. For instance, Adwoa, a 27-year-old Black American noted:

I find it difficult at times- I worry that I’m going to be judged by other Black lesbians or just Black people in general because my partner is White. Because I’m not somebody that’s really been in an interracial relationship and I know I talk a lot of shit [about people in interracial relationships]... So, I struggle with that and the only time I find myself desiring to be closeted in the sense of being in the closet with being with a White woman is in those moments. That’s like the one thing I’m holding onto in terms of what people think of me and I’m not usually somebody who worries about what people think of me, but I’m definitely somebody who deeply cares about Black people and my relationship to other Black people. And I think for Black lesbians, we just feel like we have a lot more identities to balance-being Black, being a woman, and then within being Black, being African or Jamaican or Haitian, or whatever culture that you’re directly connected to that plays into your definition of self and class.

Natalie also stated:

For one, I had to be the good daughter, because I’m the first child. To my mom I was the overachiever, the person who you can tell about your family problems...the worst thing happened when I came out as a lesbian...my mom actually told me that, oh well, after all that you have achieved, this is what you do to the family. It seemed as if every positive thing I’d ever done was negated by just me being an out lesbian.

Stacey-Ann further shared:

I do think about myself as multiple and also whole at the same time for the most part, even though I think I have a habit of compartmentalizing my life...I’m a woman, I’m a teacher, I’m a daughter, I’m a student, I’m Jamaican, I’m Black, ya know there are all these things. I’m o.k. with being all of these things I’m o.k. with the multipleness of me, but I’m careful about how the multipleness of me meshes or comes together in my living.

Participants typically shared their feelings with regard to various aspects of their multiple identities. Two subcategories emerged from this category. In fact, participants typically endorsed
positive feelings while others occasionally expressed a shift from rejection to acceptance of their multiple identities. Susan, a 55-year-old African-American stated, “So I felt about things very passionately and that’s pretty much how I’ve lived my life, so being a lesbian, being African American, being a woman, ya know, all of that has just come together for me to stand up for.” Beverly shared similar sentiments “I just feel like I’m always kind of on the soap box, whatever I do, whatever I’m in to, I have to address it as a lesbian, as an old person, as a woman of color...I feel very glad that I’m living in this time and I do feel blessed that I’m able to have the experience that I’m having, that I’m able to speak, so I’m in a constant state of appreciation and gratitude.” Lisa aptly noted her shift from rejection to acceptance:

Yea, overlapping identities...yea, ya know, I came into a lot of awareness really late in life. I’m really rather free spirited and I don’t often think in terms of categories and so when I lived on the [West Coast] a few years ago, I began to see myself as a Black person in the world and I think at that time, I began to be all of the other identities that I was a part of, that I participated in without actually being bold enough or conscious enough to just step inside of those categories and live in them first, before rejecting them outright...so I do see myself as a Black person in the world, I see myself as a woman in the world, I see myself as a queer person in the world, I see myself as an artist in the world. And I try to see those things as a blend of things, ya know...I don’t see one identity speaking on top of the other or sitting next to the other, but just all of it complementing each other.

Participants variantly reported that the salience of their identities varied by social context.

For example, Adwoa indicated:

I guess my multiple identities change a lot. For a long time, my racial identity was of utmost importance and lately because I’m getting married in a year [to a woman], my gayness has been a huge...sort of at the top of my identity list. I think that probably at a different time, being a woman is on the top of my identity list, so I think they change and they change in response to things in my environment, things that are going on in my life. And so, I think that my identity...I mean there are certain aspects of my identity that don’t change...I’m always going to be a woman, I’m always going to be a lesbian, I’m always going to be Black,
I'm always going to be a writer... but, the importance that they play in my life, definitely shifts.

Participants also variably indicated that they draw protection and strength from their multiple identities. For example, Roxanne, a 24-year-old African-American/Irish, revealed “I do believe that I have multiple identities that kind of help me adapt to the world in different ways and different situations.” Similarly, Lisa noted “Thanks to the queerness, it seems like that energy [positive, prideful thoughts of self via queerness] spilled over into the Black...I try to like pull some of that queer energy into the Black energy and to the woman energy [Lisa described negative feelings and experiences with regard to her Black and woman identities]...So, yea, my self esteem definitely shot up with the Blackness and the femaleness.”

Coming Out Experiences

Participants generally described their coming out experience as on-going. Three subcategories emerged from this category. Typically, participants came out directly. Dayna, a 51-year-old Black American, Karen, Beverly, Roxanne, Marcia, Lisa, and Stacey-Ann all disclosed, in-person, their lesbian identity to some family members including mother, father, sister, aunt, father. However, coming out to certain family members required a different strategy, and participants variably came out indirectly. For instance, Adwoa noted “I kind of did it [came out to dad] in a very underhanded way. We had dinner and I brought my partner and then he just figured it out and was pissed.” Stacey-Ann has also been trying to come out to her mother for years and emphasizes her frustration with the on-going nature of the coming-out process:

Like, the coming out seems to be something that always has to be done with her [mom]. Like, it’s never done. It’s been years of me trying to make it clear. I would do things like shave my head or dress a certain
way. I would never wear women’s clothing. I would wear them to church, but then outside of that, outside or wearing my uniform and wearing my church clothes, I was always in men’s jeans and sports bras and mens shirts...but she [mom] would never talk about it.

Coming out was not always in these women’s control. In fact, participants were typically being outed by others. Candice, a 21-year-old African-American expressed “My parents are separated and my mom lost a court date...she brought my dad to court when I was 17 and she lost, so she just looked him in the face and goes, ‘That’s why your daughter’s gay.’ So, she kind of told him for me, which really pissed me off...I cried...but what could I do about it. And he told the other side of my family.” Several participants were confronted by their parents and had to come out before they were ready. Natalie’s story provides a poignant example:

One night I was on the phone and I was really crying talking to my girlfriend, kind of like pleading, like I want this relationship to work...and apparently, my mom I think overheard the conversation...she came in and she was like, ‘Is that a woman on the phone?’ and I was like ‘yes!’ I didn’t know what else to say because she knows who my girlfriend is. I had introduced the girlfriend as just a friend of mine, ya know, so um she was like, ‘Is that the one that’s on the phone?’ and I was like, ‘Yea’ and she’s like, ‘Two women do not argue like that. Like, that is so unnatural, two women do not argue like that. Natalie, what is going on?’ I left it alone. I wasn’t ready to come out yet...then she said, ‘What’s going on? Are you gay?’ She always suspected that I was gay...she’d always ask questions alluding to the fact that I’m gay, ya know and I was always denying it. But this time when she saw the whole conversation thing, she really came out asking me if I was gay...everything came crashing...it took a few more probings for her to get it out of me. So, I finally said yes and there was this one big long silence and she’s like, ‘You disappoint me’...so that’s how it came out...and next thing I knew, my father found out...and my grandmother overheard the conversation [between my mom and I] and she found out.

Generally, participants experienced various reactions from others with regard to their coming-out. Participants occasionally experienced affirmation and mixed reactions. Karen’s father was quite affirming and after she told him in-person he said “No matter how you bring it,
baby, I love you anyway.” Adwoa’s sister has been and remains very supportive and is “so happy” that her sister is marrying a woman. Marcia’s grandmothers were also very supportive and affirming:

When I spoke with my paternal grandmother, she was like ‘It’s fine...I still love you...as long as you’re happy, that’s all that matters.’ [When I came out to my maternal grandmother] she said, ‘I don’t care...you could be whoever you want to be.’ She’s like, ‘I lived too long to think that I can tell people what to do with their life...at my age, you realize people just have to do what’s good for them.’ And so her response was just very positive and she said, ‘Well is there anybody you’re seeing right now. Am I going to meet her?’ So, my grandparents actually turned out to be the people who dealt with it [my coming-out] the best.

In terms of the mixed reactions, family members were supportive at times and dismissive and hurtful at other times. For example, Lisa had a hard time with her parents’ mixed messages:

[I came out to my parents] in conversation...they were really quite cool about it...and that kind of helped me to feel a little bit more strong and more positive about taking on this name [lesbian/queer]. My mom was like, ‘Don’t call yourself anything right now because you don’t know...just play around, experiment, do whatever and once you know for sure, then you put a name to it.’ [When] I started dating someone I was very serious about and wanted to bring her home my dad was just like, ‘Look, this is the real deal with your mother. She tried to drown herself that night [night Lisa came out]. So, she’s going to make you think that she’s o.k. with it. She’s going to send you beautiful sheets to put on your bed, so that you and your lover, ya know, can have a nice night’s sleep together. She’s going to send you sexy lingerie, because that’s what she does, but deep, deep down inside, it is killing her.’ And that was painful. It was painful for me, not because my mother was hurting or that she saw it this way, but painful because she’s been lying to me.

Unfortunately, participants typically experienced family rejection. Stacey-Ann shared “We had [an] argument where she just told me, if I ever told her I was a, and ya know, she didn’t say the word ‘lesbian’ or ‘dyke’ or anything like that, she [just] said that it would kill her and I
just said, 'fine!' and I left it there and that was the end of the argument. I never pushed her on it...and I was shattered.” Marcia’s father disowned her for 9.5 years:

I called him [father] up...and I said, ‘I’m gay.’ And we didn’t have much of a conversation. I asked him if he heard me. He said, ‘Yes’ after which he basically let me know that I shouldn’t call him anymore and of course I was still his child, but he doesn’t want anything to do with me. His way of putting it...he said that he would not sit at a table with someone who was gay and just act like it was o.k. just for the sake of making somebody else comfortable. And since he wouldn’t associate with gay people and I was gay, he would not associate with me. So, ya know, right after that happened, it was really hard. It was very difficult. It was kind of a shock to my system. Like, I expected a lot of reactions, but I really didn’t anticipate that that was going to happen and he just like...he truly just like cut himself out of my life for nine and a half years. If I ever called, he’d just hang up...he made it very clear that he wanted nothing to do with me.

Dayna also shared her painful story:

My parents thought that I was tomboyish. So, when my mom approached me about it, it was from a negative part. It was like, ‘You funny! You like girls? You tell me right now. You funny!’ I was like, ‘What?!’ And then all of a sudden she didn’t want me around my youngest sister...I was 18 when I finally answered the question honestly, because she asked me at 12...I was able to tell my mother [at age 18], ‘Yea, I like her. Yea, I am [a lesbian].’ And my mother was just mad. My whole family fell apart. They didn’t want to see me no more. I moved out. My mom said, ‘I don’t want to see you and when you come to my house, let me know you on your way so I can leave and I don’t have to be here.’ So, my decision was not to come home. I didn’t come home for about 6 months.

Identity Management Activities

Participants endorsed several identity management strategies. The women typically reported that they cultivate LGB community and support systems. For example, Lisa stated “I was always upfront about it [my lesbian identity]. I started joining queer organizations really
early in life...and when I say really early, 14, 15, not just the organizations, but being around any person who looked gay to me. I was hanging out with them. And I got to college and if I saw that there were queer organizations or people trying to start queer organizations, I was there.” Adwoa further shared:

I put myself in spaces with lesbians. I have a friend- a [lesbian] couple- who have been together for a very long time. They’re very good friends of mine and now very good friends of my partner. We see them all the time. My best friend in the world is a gay man and he and I talk about being Black and gay all the time...the African ancestry group where we met...I love to have relationships with older Black lesbians... meeting and cultivating relationships with Black lesbians...that’s something that I definitely am actively seeking out.

Finally, Karen noted “Going to (AALUSC – [lesbian support group at a gay and lesbian center in the city])...I wanted to connect with other lesbians and hear their story and learn from that and I have. I learned a lot about myself just by listening to them about their lives. So that’s been the main one is really connecting that way and ultimately becoming a part of the group- to me more involved in the community at the end of it.”

Typically, participants felt it important to maintain visibility and be out no matter what. Lisa is adamant about maintaining her visibility:

I insist on holding my lovers hand in public. I insist on being intimate with my lover in public, because I think I just embrace that Audre Lorde concept [not being afraid to be out, not allowing fear to stifle/silence one], ya know...I’m always just out all of the time...and I try to never push myself in a closet...I have to always make sure that I’m never doing anything to become invisible and that if there is some danger involved...I’d rather put myself in dangers way for being a person who love...yea, I don’t understand the choice to live in fear of people finding out that I’m queer. I just...I’d rather have all of my cards on the table and if someone stigmatizes me, ya know what? I pity them. I really do because they don’t know me.
Beverly talks openly about her lesbian identity and feels called to speak up if someone says something inappropriate about lesbians, even if it embarrasses her daughter. Susan also insists on being out:

I wear rainbow stuff out in public...whenever I meet someone, initially, if it appears that it's going to be a friendship, I immediately tell them I'm a lesbian. I don't want no surprises. If you're gonna be my friend, you're gonna be my friend for who I am or I don't need you. You cannot compromise yourself in your personal relationship. And I have grown to learn that even in your work relationships, you have to [tell the truth about your lesbian identity]...I went through that, 'Oh, my friend, they...' I call it the 'they-isms', where you don’t use an identifying term to refer to your intimate relationship. I did that one time. I don’t do that no more.

Typically, the women would engage in self-protective strategies in response to heterosexist demands of family and society. For instance Felicia noted that though she usually spoke up when people speak negatively about gay people, “sometimes I chose to keep my mouth shut for various reasons.” Dayna reported that “When my parents had company ...I never would try to make my family members uncomfortable with who I am, so I wouldn’t wear a tie and a suit around with my family, sisters, and friends...but I didn’t change so much. I was never flamboyant with it...but I never changed who I was [either]...I was able to find a comfortable medium.” Dayna further noted “For 4 years in high school, I had a boyfriend...I did that for my parents and sisters. I learned how to manipulate every situation I was in. My parents thought we were getting married, his family thought we were getting married. I couldn’t stand it that I compromised who I was in my family...everybody thought that it was ok, that I had changed, but I knew I didn’t. I had girlfriends on the side that I was hiding.” Stacey-Ann also shared that she compartmentalizes her identities until she is sure that they can be integrated and not become a problem for her to negotiate. For example, she does pre-introductions whenever she has to
introduce her partner to friends and family so that both parties know a little about each other before they meet for the first time.

Occasionally, they would educate others about lesbian identity and challenge heterosexism. For instance, Felicia, a 38-year-old Black American shared "When people are talking about gay people in a negative way, I usually make a point to say something. I like people to know, you need to know what you're saying and who you're around and so I feel better about that when I do things like that." In that same vein, Marcia confronts people's ignorance about homosexuality:

Well, it's kind of like, ok, someone walks up to me and says, 'Ya know, what you're doing is wrong.' My natural reaction is, 'who told you what I was doing was wrong.' And really people don't expect questions. 'Really, tell me what about me is wrong. Where did you hear that? And what's it based on.' And for most people, it's a religious thing and really I'm very skilled with the Bible, so I can like, say to them, 'Well maybe you need to read your Bible and maybe get a study Bible...a concordance, so that you can look up what was going on at this time and that time and what the message of that story was.' And most times people don't want to look foolish and appear like, 'Oh, I'm a total idiot. I have no idea. I'm telling this person that the Bible says it's wrong and they know more about the scriptures that I do.'

The use of literary arts for affirmation and support was occasionally endorsed by participants. For example, Felicia noted "I have found for me that reading Black gay and lesbian writers have really been a tremendous support for me. Professionally as an artist and spiritually, just having that kinship with these people...I've read James Baldwin's and Audre Lorde's biography and I just like broke down. I was just like wow! It was really impactful for me."

Stacey-Ann also explained:

I write a lot...it is my way of not killing myself. The words would be on the page and it would make sense and I wouldn't feel so insane and lost, and so that has been really important in me being able to be ok in this family and in this world...I've written my mom letters and explained to her exactly what my life is with [participant's partner] and even before
[participant’s partner], I was writing her these letters, but I never mailed them and that often helped me to just, every now and then, get it out. And then I think somehow by writing it, I’ve materialized it...writing to me is putting sense to what I can’t say and when I’ve said it on the page...I’ve sometimes found that it’s made it possible for me to say it in the world.

Finally, participants variantly engaged in LGB activism and used psychotherapy for support. For example, Beverly reported:

I am the past co-director of an organization called Old Lesbians Organizing for Change and I also am the emeritus of that organization, ya know, I am an advisor and one thing that I initiated when I was more active in that organization was a memorial program for lesbians who died to recognize them, ya know, an annual or biannual gathering. I recognized them with letters to their families, plaques with their names on it, with stories, a newsletter about them, so that’s what I do most of the time.

Beverly was also at the forefront of supporting gay and lesbian positions as a minister in the 1970s and 1980s. In terms of psychotherapy use, both Natalie and Marcia found it helpful to seek out therapeutic support.

Self-talk Regarding Lesbian Identity

Generally, participants engaged in positive/affirming self-talk regarding their lesbian identity. For example, Natalie expressed “I keep on saying to myself, it’s between me and God and no one else has the right to judge me and that’s what keeps me going. People have to accept me for who I am...I don’t find that hiding my sexuality is going to be beneficial for my mental health.” Beverly, Felicia, and Marcia expressed similar sentiments. According to Marcia:

I feel truly blessed that the Lord saw it fit to make me a lesbian...as an individual, if you’re given an opportunity to be different; it’s a blessing, not a curse. It means that God felt that you had the strength and the love and the capacity to be different. So, I think for me, it’s like realizing
who you are is vital and there aren’t mistakes in life...and anything
that’s based in love and really peaceful and not harmful to anyone else
there can’t be anything wrong with it. God made me exactly how I am
for a reason and I need not fight that.

Candice and Stacey-Ann both recognized that they have no control over the reactions of others
and incorporate this knowledge into their self-talk. Candice shared “Realizing that I’m separate
from them [family members]...realizing that they say a lot of things that are bullshit...realizing
that in this world at the end of the day, I can try to make everybody happy, but I can only make
myself happy.” In that same vein, Stacey-Ann noted “It’s not like this [lesbian
identity/relationship] is killing me...this relationship nurtures me. I’ve learned to step back and
say, I don’t have to be the maestro of all of the interactions in my life. I just have to be the one to
look after how I am with people. I have no control over how people want to react.”

Occasionally, some participants engaged in negative/self-injurious self-talk while others
avoided self-talk/did no self-talk. While Natalie and Stacey-Ann mostly engaged in positive self-
talk, they also struggled with negative/self-injurious self-talk. Stacey-Ann noted “I think I always
have this voice in my head and I think it’s always my mom’s voice, which is like, ‘You’re
fucked up! You’re a problem. Why you got to be so much trouble? You’re nothing but trouble.’
I just think, that for me is just hard to live with because I always feel as if I’m just a walking
problem that will never go away and that affects my self-esteem a lot of the time.” Except to
remind herself of her inability to make everyone happy and her future financial independence,
Candice expressed her avoidance of self-talk. Unlike the eleven participants who reported some
engagement in self-talk, Adwoa asserted that she does not do self-talk.
Challenges Regarding Lesbian Identity

Typically, participants found it challenging to manage safety with regard to their lesbian identity. One typical and one variant subcategory emerged from this category. Typically, participants faced physical and psychological assaults. Roxanne aptly pointed out her concerns:

Hate or distrust from other people [is a challenge]...Like walking down the street and holding hands with my girlfriend and being like yelled at, being called names just because you’re walking down the street and holding hands. Like, that kind of thing, like any attack, any attack on anybody, whether it be verbal or physical or mental. Any attack like that, that is enough to like jar you...like bump you out of your own comfortability. Kind of pull you into another world where you’re not safe and you’re not the norm and you’re not positive, you’re not beautiful, like anything like that...and that has been done to me...there have been people who have screamed at me...there are people that have like thrown things out of a car window and those are the things that shake me out of myself and my safety.

These concerns were confirmed across several other participants. In fact, Stacey-Ann thinks twice before holding her partner’s hand or kissing her partner in public because of a fear of physical danger and being judged by the public. Felicia is also uncomfortable with public displays of affection because of threats to her and her partner’s physical safety. Marcia was also scared that telling her father about her lesbian identity in-person might put her physical danger.

Participants also variantly noted that they encountered challenges in having to continually come out or manage heterosexist assumptions. Susan noted “Societal attitudes [make] meeting people [challenging], because I mean you don’t know who is [lesbian] and who isn’t. I mean just people having stupid ideas about who lesbians are [remains a challenge].” Felicia shared similar sentiments “Other people’s intolerance [is difficult]. It makes it challenging in terms of meeting other people, because, ya know, if you have a connection with another woman, you might not be sure if they’re gay or not, whereas people always assume one is a typical heterosexual.” Finally,
Beverly reported “I know that sometimes it’s uncomfortable and challenging when I have to go to an agency or healthcare worker. Every single day, I have to come out as a lesbian... every single day... and I guess we can’t get away from that, because people have to know, who the next of kin is all the time and if you’re not married... you have to constantly say, well, this is my partner and a lot of people don’t understand.

Lack of acceptance from family variantly presented challenges for participants. Candice’s story provides a poignant example of the struggles of these women with regard to family acceptance:

The one thing that holds me back is me being with somebody who treats me better than any man has treated me, is having my mother say nasty shit, or having my grandmother say nasty shit... not even my whole family, but my mother and my grandmother are cruel. That’s the only thing that holds me back... like will I ever have to choose my sexuality over my family? It’s such a crazy, like mind-blowing question. I mean I teeter totter between do I make myself happy or do I make my family happy? Like, who am I without my family? So, to sit there and like choose someone else, you’re like, well, will I still be myself with my family? Will I survive without them? What if we break up and I’ve chosen this person? Will I like be on the streets?

Other life circumstances also variantly presented challenges for these women. These life circumstances including sexual abuse, religious teachings, disability, socio-economic status, and race, often complicated the lesbian identity development process for some of the participants. Felicia shared “There have been, within my family, issues of sexual abuse as it relates to a woman and so I have personally had difficulties being intimate sometimes with women because I’ve had that history.” Susan noted “I prefer to meet women in environments that I [definitely] know there are lesbians but physically [it’s challenging because] I can’t negotiate most of those spaces and I need to have somebody with me to help me get up sometimes. I use a scooter, and I’m getting ready to ask my doctor to write me a prescription for Medicare to get a wheelchair.”
Adwoa struggles with an interracial lesbian relationship and is concerned about being judged by other Black lesbians because her partner is White. Candice's financial dependence on her parents makes living an openly gay life very difficult. In the beginning of her self-discovery, Marcia went to church to exorcise the lesbian out of herself because of competing beliefs between church teachings on homosexuality and living her truth.

Role of Silence in Maintaining Lesbian Identity

Typically, participants noted that silence maintains the status quo in their families of origin. Several participants found that silence kept the peace within their families. For example, Stacey-Ann noted:

Silence plays a big role in how I maintain my identity with my family. The whole situation with my mom...it's kind of like, to keep the peace, literally to keep the peace, the peace and quiet I should say. I will not push my mom if she insists on saying something like, 'I know she's your special friend.' I want to say something like, 'My lover, my partner, love of my life!' And I won't. [My mom] says to me, 'Ya know it would kill me if you told me you were...,' and then, blank, and then I go, 'Ok' and I don't say it...I won't say it...I'm not here to kill anybody. But I'm not going to change either, so for me right now, I'm silent in what I say, but not so much in what I do. I'll keep certain silences. I won't say that she's my lover, but I have said that I love her and I have said that we're together and that's about as close as it's gotten to me not being so silent about relationships and my sexuality.

Natalie shared similar sentiments "It [silence] plays a really good, beneficial role because even though they [parents/family members] know about my sexuality, we don't talk about it and I find that really helpful that we don't talk about it because I know that if we did, I'd be upset most of the time. So I'd rather be silent than have them [parents/family members] come up with questions and ask who I'm dating and why and these sort of things. So, silence is definitely on
my side.” Dayna also agreed “There are sometimes, it’s better to be silent. It will bring more
peace [in family]. Unfortunately, I mean you don’t want to [be silent]...you want to stand up and
be counted at all times and sometimes in your family, it’s just better left unsaid a lot of days,
especially early on in the coming out process...ya know what I mean...it will bring you
acceptance.”

Participants also occasionally reported that silence was not a factor because they were
out. For instance, Lisa verbalized “Oh no, no, no [silence does not play a role]...I think I’m ok
with my family being a little discomforted if they need to be and since my mother kind of outing
me to everybody in the family anyway...I think I just embrace that Audre Lorde concept, ya
know...I’m not going to live in silence, I’m not going to live afraid and that’s that.” Marcia
expressed similar feelings “I don’t think that [silence] really is me at all...[silence] doesn’t
apply to me... I’ve always been honest with my family [about my lesbian identity].

Influence of Heterosexism on Lesbian Identity

The majority of the women generally reported negative emotional effects. Three sub-
categories emerged from this category. Typically, participants experienced a general negative
emotional effect. Lisa shared her difficulty thinking of marriage because of the heterosexual
implications and her family’s expectations:

I do ask myself if I were kind of butch and my girlfriend were femme,
would that change any kind of dynamic in terms of my parents having
panics attacks on occasion and I don’t know...I think we would just
make more sense maybe, because neither one of us looks butch, so
maybe to them it would make sense because one of us would be the
aggressor- visibly the aggressor and my mom used to ask me that all of
the time, like ‘which one of you is the femme or which one is the butch,
because I was watching Ellen and I think that she’s the kind of man in
the relationship.' And so ya know, it's a little difficult to explain that stuff...I'm not really interested in that kind of heterosexual looking relationship. And I mean my lover and I were asking ourselves the other day what happens if we just go and get married and be each other's spouse?...and then I don't know... I have a difficult time thinking about those things because of my family's expectations, my parents in particular...everything comes with a cost right...If I played any kind of heterosexual gay, there would be something added to it.

Candice also noted "I find myself like trying to go out on dates with guys just to make my mother and my grandmother happy. I kind of act like I have no sexual desire and act like a 12 year old sometimes in order to please them...I act like I have no emotional feelings, no physical feelings, [I] act like I'm totally desensitized."

Participants variantly reported that they felt pressured to be "straight" via church/religious teachings. All of the 5 participants who endorsed this category noted the strong religious condemnation of their lesbian identities from family members. Family members responded by praying for their daughters to become straight. In fact, Stacey-Ann's born again sister told her that she was praying for her soul. Likewise, Dayna received the following messages from her family "you need help, maybe it's a phase, we'll pray for you, we want to take you to church." These sentiments were reflected in the stories of the five women in this category.

Participants were also variantly pressured to be "straight" via stereotypes. For example, Stacey-Ann noted pressures with regard to hair and make-up:

Every time I cut my hair off, my mom and my dad lament [the] loss of my crown and glory...my dad laments that I'm not more girly or something. Of course my mom, who was a very glamorous woman when she was younger, often talks [to me] about her days of a glamour, walking to work and having people [men] stop their cars and pull over their buses just to wave at her...and then there's my sister, who has all this makeup and always trying to style me up and has like this crazy,
Another stereotype centered on finding ‘Mr. Right.’ Felicia shared “My grandmother seems to think that I haven’t found the right man.” Natalie, Marica, and Roxanne were also stereotyped by family members as needing to find the “right man.”

On the other hand some participants occasionally reported that heterosexism had no influence on their lesbian identity within their families of origin. Roxanne’s statements highlighted the general sentiment among the four women who endorsed this category. She stated “It [heterosexism] doesn’t really play a conscious role for me. It’s not something that I think about when it comes to my family.”

Influence of Family on Lesbian Identity

Typically, participants felt supported by family members with regard to their lesbian identity. Lisa shared a wonderful experience of her supportive father:

Yea, I mean my dad is really philosophical. My dad calls me up and says ya know, ‘Hey I was watching the animal channel and it got me really interested in animals and I saw these female lions hugging each other and they said that they think these female lions might be lovers, that they love each other. If you see this in the animal world, then I know that it must exist in the human world. Well, I saw that in the African society, women marry women and yea, this relationship existed in early Africa [but] they didn’t call it this [lesbian]. Why do we call it this? Where does the term come from?’ [This] was really wonderful for me, because I feel that he’s struggling and he’s struggling for me and he’s struggling beyond me. He wants me to know that this is part of the human landscape, that what I’m doing is not a sin, it’s not a deprivation. It’s something that has been made into a sin. So that’s been great for me. He’s reached out to gay people like it’s his job. And I feel like he’s doing something marvelous. Ya know, this person who was highly religious, very male and Black...to have that person who was also for a number of years, a devout Muslim, feel the need to call me up and tell
me that he’s doing [this] research...I was impressed. I was really just moved.

Beverley and Roxanne had very supportive cousins who helped significantly in their development of a positive lesbian identity. Susan and Dayna recounted moments when their mothers were supportive. According to Dayna:

When I was playing drums and my parents came to see me and everything she [my mother] sat at this bar and heard these women talking about me [saying negative things about me being a lesbian]...my mother finally came up to me and she hugged me and brought me over, she said, 'This is my daughter and she not hurtin’ anybody.' She finally claimed me in front of people to say, 'Yea she’s gay, but she’s not hurtin’ you. Let her be who she is. She’s not hurtin you.' My mother defended me for the first time...my joys are absolutely coming from my family acceptance. It would be hard to feel the joy that I’m feeling without that. I’m sure that I could accomplish it, but there’s nothing like this [family support and acceptance].

Participants variably reported on the influence of family rejection. Natalie noted that her family’s lack of acceptance negatively impacted her self-esteem. In an effort to regain their support, Natalie went to conversion therapy to try to become straight to please her mother.

Beverly also shared that family pushed her to lead a straight life though they knew she was a lesbian:

I was married three times...all to men. I always knew that I was a lesbian but my family were Black Orthodox Jews...so I just couldn’t even imagine coming out to them and this was in the 50s...so, I just lived- I tried to be straight. It was miserable...I was ready to kill myself all the time. My family tried to get someone for me to marry because they believed in settin’ up marriages, so I also lived a double life from the beginning and then I even had a child. That’s when I got married the first time, just trying to be straight. That’s the only reason; I really wasn’t in love with anyone. I wanted to be straight and I wanted my family to be proud of me and so I got married to my first husband. It didn’t work...we never even stayed together. He went in the army and it dissolved.

Participants also occasionally reported ambivalent family attitudes that have impacted their lesbian identity. Adwoa’s story reflected the experiences of a few of the other participants.
I definitely don't get feelings of pride about being a lesbian from my parents...my culture, my legacy, and my parents help maintain my self-esteem about every aspect of who I am...so they haven't taught me to be proud to be gay, but they've taught me to be proud of who I am. My mother is a very complicated—some might say crazy person...she voted against gay marriage and recently I asked, 'Ya know, even though you voted against gay marriage, I still feel like you support me. You don't support me marching or anything like that,' but she'll ask about my partner. I definitely feel like she's proud of the fact that I am living my life in a way that makes me happy, because she didn't live her life in that way.

Experiences with Counseling and Therapy

Typically, participants' experiences with counseling and therapy were positive. Marcia spoke of highly of therapy and her experiences:

I was in therapy for years, but more for my abuse and what not and really dealing with more of loving me more than I love anybody else. Therapy helped me with being me...like it really helped me being comfortable with myself [all aspects of self including lesbian identity]. I definitely think it [therapy] is a very useful tool and I would recommend to people in my life. I think as Black people, there's a stereotype...ya know...and there's a bit of shame and stuff associated with therapy, but really everybody deserves an opportunity to be able to love themselves, so there can't be anything wrong with therapy.

Like Marcia, Felicia's 6-year therapeutic treatment did not focus on her lesbian identity. Though the focus was not on Felicia's lesbian identity, she reported feeling comfortable bringing up issues related to her romantic relationship with women. She also noted that she would consider using therapy to support her lesbian identity if the need arose. Adwoa also shared a positive therapy experience:

I have [had experience with counseling/therapy] and in fact I have an appointment today. I went to a Black therapist, very far and so I couldn't continue sessions with her because she's like 2 ½ hours on train, but I'm trying somebody in my neighborhood. I'm very open to dialoguing and getting help...particularly [in] dealing with my father...also conflict in
transition in terms of getting married, coming out, switching my job, a lot of things. Specifically, I think it [therapy] helped shedding some of the heterosexism I’ve internalized in terms of my silence... when it’s helpful to my father and when it’s helpful to me and when it’s hurtful to my father and when it’s hurtful to me...ya know...battles that I should be confronting and battles that I should be letting go.

Additionally, three variant categories emerged from this domain as follows: LGB concerns were not the central focus of therapy, Negative/harmful experience, and therapy not sought by participants. Several cases illustrate these variant categories. Some participants felt that lesbian/gay/bisexual concerns were not the central focus of therapy. For instance, Susan reported “It [my therapy] really didn’t have so much do to with being a lesbian. It had more to do with my relationship with my mother. I went into therapy when I was 33 with two goals: to work on my personal maturation and my relationship with my mother.” Similarly, Karen noted that her therapy “wasn’t primarily [about] being a lesbian. It was about dealing with issues in the past that have never been dealt with. But I did choose a therapist who was gay. I felt that that was critical because I knew at some point I’d be talking about who I am [lesbian identity].

In terms of the negative/harmful experience, Natalie recounted: I didn’t want to burden my friends or anything, so I went to a therapist. She was more asking me about my sexuality, more than the problem I came to her with...like for example, if I’m having problems at work, or things like that...and every time I’d say something about my sexuality, in terms of me being gay...she’ll say, ‘well, why do you think you like women?’ And she gave me a list of things, like ‘embracing men’ more. I think that was a judgment call, because, first of all, I didn’t even come to her with questions about why I’m gay, so I kind of found that odd that she came to that. That really messed me up.

Roxanne, Dayna, and Candice had not sought therapy. Roxanne noted that she would go to family members first before considering therapy. Both Dayna and Candice felt that therapy meant one was not strong. According to Candice considering therapy can be a struggle:

All through my life, people have been trying to put me in therapy, but I have never gone. I mean you know...the whole Black woman thing...we
don’t need therapy. That’s White people shit...like therapy has always been for White people. It hasn’t been for me. Every time I’ve gone a couple of times, but only for the first introduction kind of thing. By the time I’m done [with intake session], I’m in such a funk that I just can’t get up the next morning. So, I just deal with it myself...it’s just like for me, for what I want to do, I just can’t dwell on it [my problems/concerns]. I’m sure that therapy with time would have worked, however, that first fucking day [intake session], that’s enough to basically undo me. I think that’s a problem with being a Black woman...being a Black gay woman, like I feel like we’re asked to have the weight of the world on our shoulders and when somebody bends down and asks us, ‘How does it feel?’ It all comes flowing out and it’s like we don’t know how to be weak and when we’re weak, it all kind of undoes us. It’s like one of those things that I feel like a Black woman doesn’t have the luxury of saying, ‘Wow, my life really sucks.’ It’s just like, you know what? Keep trucking, keep trucking...so, for me, it’s [therapy] just always been something that’s been the antithesis of me being strong.

Advice for Mental Health Professionals

Typically, participants wanted mental health professionals to be knowledgeable about the complexity of multiple identities for African-ancestral lesbians. For example, Felicia shared:

“Mental health professionals [need] to realize that they’re dealing with a minority within a minority and to keep that in mind. I think sometimes for me, some of my issues with being a lesbian in the past have been very or directly or similar to many of the issues that I have had with being a Black woman and so there might be some correlations if a client has issues with being a lesbian that surround them, it might be useful for the practitioner to see what that client’s issues are about being Black as well, because you’re talking about being a minority.” Adwoa shared similar sentiments:

I can’t speak to what other people go through, but I think it might be a lot easier for a White lesbian to sort of see her lesbianism and woman [identity] as being the big pieces. And I think for Black lesbians, we just
feel like we have a lot more identities to balance – being Black, being a woman, and then within being Black, being African or Jamaican or Haitian, or whatever culture you’re directly connected to that plays into your definition of self and class. I think there are a lot of psychologists that say, we specialize in LGBT issues, but what does that mean? I mean LGBT issues for a Black person can be about money, about class, about education, about race... ya know... about so many things that it [lesbian identity] is one of the many pieces that make up who African, African American, Black women, lesbians are. So, they [mental health professionals] need to understand this complexity.

Stacey-Ann also noted “I would like them [mental health professionals] to know the life. If they could understand the life, like the gay life, as well as what it means to be in a Caribbean family or what it means to be an immigrant or what it means to be Black or any of those things.”

Participants variantly endorsed the following advice for mental health professionals:

Appreciate cultural differences/Don’t make assumptions, increase availability of mental health professionals who are Black or African-ancestral lesbians, reach out and be more direct regarding the lesbian-straight and Black-White divides, and finally, understand the importance of family. The following cases illustrate these guidelines. Susan would like mental health professionals to appreciate cultural differences and “stop grouping all Africans in one box because there are so many countries and so many different cultures... therapists have a tendency to look at you and see you’re Black and that’s it but they need to be aware that African Americans, Africans, and Caribbeans do not fit into the same box.” Natalie also shared that mental health professions should meet African-ancestral lesbians where they are and not make assumptions and jump to conclusions.

In terms of the availability of Black/lesbian mental health professionals, Adwoa shared “I think that because the field of therapy and psychology is really White dominated, I think it would be important to cultivate more Black psychologists first of all. And I think the best way to do that is to have more Black lesbian psychologists and more Black psychologists who are trained to
really work with the LGBT community.” Similarly, Candice passionately noted “I believe that the people that see African people as the furthest marginalized should be the damn psychiatrists, that’s what I think! Black, gay women should be psychiatrists.”

In another vein, several participants would like mental health professionals to reach out and be more direct regarding the “lesbian-straight” and “Black-White” divides. Natalie shared:

Next time when I go to seek therapy, I am looking for someone who identifies as a lesbian. [That would be important to me] mainly because what happens is that I find that they’re more real…straight therapists tend to be more cautious in what they say and I don’t like that pretentious feeling. So if I come to them [straight therapists] with certain things, I want them to be more direct in how they address it…if I’m talking to my therapist, I want to feel like I’m talking to somebody off the street and they understand what I’m saying.

Lisa also noted her concerns of the therapist in the Black-White dyad being willing and able to talk about the impact of racial issues on her lesbian identity development process “I think that it would definitely have helped me, even if I were in a room with a White woman [White MHP] to just feel comfortable enough to say, “In Black cultures a lot of the time, people think that gayness is a White disease and that we’ve been unduly influenced by you.”

Finally, both Dayna and Lisa shared that mental health professionals need to understand the importance of family in the developmental process of African-ancestral lesbians. Dayna verbalized “I don’t think I would want to do it [therapy] by myself without my family being there to understand what I’m going through. I never thought they understood what I was feeling and how lonely I felt and there’s a lot of things I’d want them to know… and [so] there would have to be a counseling session with both sides.” Lisa also shared:

[MHP should help African-ancestral lesbians] figure out ways to help those of us whose parents are our primary haters and who we want to be our primary supporters. [We need help] just to figure out ways for us to give them the material that they need…ya know…to just be able to undo all of the negative images, thoughts and views [our parents have] of
queerness...to just kind of give them the tools to undo that, and for me I always feel that that would be really helpful because at some point, beyond the pain there is frustration talking to my parents and listening to my parents’ struggle [with accepting my lesbian identity]...to just be able to figure out a way to talk with them, to help them understand that their biases are really not founded, that it doesn’t belong to them...I think for me that would be very helpful to just figure out/have the language to talk to our parents.
Chapter V
DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the psychological and behavioral strategies used by African-ancestral lesbians to negotiate relationships within their families of origin, while simultaneously developing and maintaining a lesbian identity. The pervasive and injurious effects of racism (e.g., Williams, 1999), heterosexism (e.g., Meyer, 1995), and sexism (e.g., Klonoff & Landrine, 1995) have frequently been studied as singular entities. However, this singularity or monolithic perspective does not capture the experiences of African-ancestral lesbians; these women are in a unique position because they occupy multiple stigmatized identities by virtue of their gender, ethnicity/race, and sexual orientation/identity – a concept known as triple jeopardy (Greene, 1994b). For example, African-ancestral lesbians are likely to have their families’ support in managing racism and developing adaptive ethnoracial identities. However, similar familial support may not be assumed as they negotiate heterosexism. In fact, heterosexist and homonegative attitudes may even be present in their own families. This cultural context certainly creates complexities around the management and integration of multiple identities for these women. In this chapter, I will begin with a discussion of specific findings from my study. I will then offer a general summary of the findings. The limitations section will follow, and the chapter will end with implications for research and practice.
In general, the findings revealed that the participants employed a variety of identity management strategies as they negotiated relationships with various family members. These strategies will be described later in the discussion. Most of the participants reported positive feelings about their lesbian identities, which may indicate their resistance to internalizing negative societal and/or familial messages. On the other hand, a few participants expressed negative and ambivalent feelings, which reflected the general homophobia with our society and families. Participants generally described their coming out experiences in their families as ongoing, whether they came out directly, indirectly, or were outed by others. For example, all of the women spoke of their frustrations and anger around having to always come out because of pervasive heterosexual assumptions and expectations both within their families, ethnoracial communities, and society in general. This finding is consistent with the literature (Brown, 1995; Coleman, 1981; Gallor, 2005; Gonsiorek & Weinrich, 1991), in which it is suggested that the process of coming out is an ongoing stressor for the LGB individuals due to insidious heterosexual assumptions and the marginalization of the LGB population.

Given the denial that exists in many African-ancestral families regarding issues of sexuality and LGB identities (Bohan, 1996; Gibson et al., 2007; West, 1999; Weston, 1991b), it was surprising that several participants were outed and/or confronted by their parents before they had a chance to decide how and when to come out. For these parents, their manner of outing their adult children was verbally aggressive and abusive. It is possible that parents may have felt the need to embarrass or shame their daughters into “fixing” their sexual orientation. Further, participants’ statements indicated that the challenges of the coming process were not exclusive to the lesbian-identified family member but were experienced by the whole family. According to Boxer, Cook, and Herdt (1991), parents can experience an immediate sense of doom associated
with their daughter’s sexual identity because of the homophobic messages that they have internalized over the course of their lifetimes. Boxer et al. further suggest that the socially constructed negative elements of a lesbian identity as abnormal keep parents from connecting to their daughters. Parents are therefore often caught between their heterosexist beliefs and positive qualities of their daughters. This situation caused much pain and sadness for several of the participants because they felt parents chose their heterosexist beliefs over the positive qualities and accomplishments of their children. For example, Natalie noted that when she came out to her parents, “it seemed as if every positive thing I’d ever done was negated by just me being an out lesbian.” This speaks to the power and pervasiveness of homonegative messages from many cultures and societies.

In addition to the difficulties of the coming-out process, the lack of acceptance from certain family members, parents in particular, was experienced as another challenge by a few participants. These women felt torn at having to choose between their families and the expression of their sexuality, both of which participants felt were essential to their development. This finding is consistent with Greene (1994a), who found that ethnic minority lesbians and gay men frequently report feeling a pressure to choose between the LGB community and their families of origin/ethnic communities, and subsequently determine which aspect of their identity is primary.

Given the importance of family in the lives of African-ancestral lesbians, familial reactions influenced the expression and development of the participants’ lesbian identity. A few participants noted that family rejection negatively impacted their self-esteem. Natalie spoke of her attempt to use conversion therapy to become straight in order to regain her mother’s approval and acceptance. Beverly reported frequent suicidal thoughts as she lived through three
heterosexual marriages so that her parents would be proud of her. A few other participants noted that in spite of their families’ ambivalence, they internalized the supportive part of their responses. For example, Adwoa noted that though her mother voted against gay marriage knowing that her daughter is a lesbian, she feels like her mother is proud of her for living her life in a way that makes her happy. Perhaps these women were aware of, and interpreted the ambivalence as a manifestation of their families’ struggle with being lesbian-membered families. Interestingly, most of the women noted that they felt supported by their families, which they felt helped in their lesbian identity development. Of particular note is that no one family as a whole was completely rejecting, accepting, or ambivalent. Rather, different family members within each family reacted differently, creating a variety of responses to the disclosure of a lesbian identified family member. This has implications for mental health professionals, which will be discussed later in the chapter.

The range of familial reactions that these participants received speaks to the insidious nature and influence of heterosexism. All except one of the women reported negative emotional effects of familial reactions on their lesbian identity development process. These reactions included pressures from family members to be straight via religious teachings and heterosexist stereotypes of lesbians. This finding is consistent with past research and theory which suggests that African-ancestral lesbians are not likely to expel LGB family members because of strong family ties but instead keep that lesbian family member around to talk them out of it (Greene, 1994a, 1994b, 2000b). Perhaps the hope of family members is to break down the morale and sense of lesbian self so that their daughters, sisters, nieces, and granddaughters will reject their lesbian identity for a straight identity, for which they will be positively reinforced.
Given the complexity of the coming-out process and the challenges of familial and societal heterosexism, participants spoke about how silence was on their side and how they kept the peace within their families by maintaining the status quo. For instance, several of the women did not speak about their sexuality or same-sex romantic relationships within their families. While some experienced silence as beneficial others experienced it as stifling and therefore refused to maintain silences about their lesbian identities in their families of origin. This finding is consistent with past research which suggests that silence can be a double-edged sword, wherein it creates invisibility which maintains heterosexism, yet it is also a source of protection and refuge (Bohan, 1996; Eliason, 1996; Fukuyama & Ferguson, 2000; Rust, 1996). The two-pronged aspect of silence is not a popular notion in the field (Fukuyama & Ferguson, 2000). Instead, most theoretical perspectives and models describe sexual identity development as a linear and sequential process which culminates in personal acceptance and public acknowledgement of a lesbian identity (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Cox & Gallois, 1996; Troiden, 1989).

While silence does come with a cost, models that dismiss its protective role altogether fail to capture the experiences of African-ancestral lesbians. Silence is a source of protection for African-ancestral lesbians who experience multiple oppressions and must live in several cultural contexts simultaneously. In fact, Bieschke et al. (2005) suggested that silence creates a safe space where lesbians of color can rejuvenate their mental and emotional selves amidst a pervasive hostile heterosexist climate. Perhaps the stories of these women could serve to move the discussion along; it would be worthwhile to explore the mental health implications of maintaining silences as a short- and/or long-term strategy.
Speaking of cultural contexts, most all participants negotiated and noted positive feelings about their multiple identities. Interestingly, some of the participants indicated that they drew strength and protection from their multiple stigmatized identities in that, adaptive skills, feelings of pride, and life lessons learned from negotiating one identity spills over into the others. In their negotiations, participants also noted that the salience of their identities varied contextually around issues of race, sexuality, gender, social class, religious affiliation, and disability.

Depending on their developmental juncture and life events, one or more of these identities may take precedence over the others. In addition to the salience factor, several participants struggled with their fit in the socially constructed “lesbian” category. In fact, an interesting theme emerged where several participants felt entrapped by the “lesbian” label. For example, participants noted that the word “lesbian” holds a lot of weight and can get in the way when used with family members in that the word takes away from participants’ intricacies and reduces them to negative images and stereotypes. More specifically, Stacey-Ann noted that the weight of the word “lesbian” further complicated an already challenging coming-out experience with her mother. Lisa also shared that she prefers woman centered, woman loving woman to “lesbian” because the word “lesbian” holds a lot of history in that it is a term that belongs to White women.

Essentially, these feelings of entrapment seem to be rooted in the stigma attached to the word. Indeed, some of the women spoke of wanting to change the word and call themselves something different; however, changing the word does not change the behavior – women having sex with women – since the behavior is what people find objectionable, not the word “lesbian.” Trying to avoid the word seems like an attempt by these women to avoid being stigmatized. According to Greene (1994a), this stigma is related to patriarchal society where who people are attracted to and have sex with becomes part of the definition of being a normal female or male.
The perception that the word "lesbian" applies to White women who have sex with women and not African-ancestral women who have sex with women is supported by a number of phenomenon: (a) the visible lesbian and gay community in the US is largely White; (b) the visible lesbian and gay activists are usually White; (c) when psychological research and media focus on lesbians and gay men, the groups they tend to focus on are largely White; (d) communities of color perceive lesbian and gay sexual orientation as a disease of White people, and tend to be rejecting of their lesbian and gay members; and (e) African-ancestral lesbians tend to be fairly invisible within African-ancestral communities because of the silences around sexuality, and LGB orientations in particular, which further supports the perception that African-ancestral lesbians are rare and do not exist (Bowleg et al., 2003, 2004; Chan, 1989, 1992; Croteau et al., 2005; Greene, 1994a, 1996, 2000a; Morales, 1992).

The extent to which an individual is able to manage the inherent stress and prejudice of a minority social identity determines her positive development (Meyer, 2003). As such, managing minority stress becomes a critical buffer against compromised mental health for African-ancestral lesbians. From the few existing literature on multiple oppressions and Black lesbians (Bowleg et al., 2003; Bowleg et al., 2004; Consolacion, Russell, & Sue, 2004; Gibson et al., 2007; Graziano, 2004; Greene, 1994a, 2000a, Parks et al., 2004) it can be concluded that African ancestral lesbians face a wealth of challenges to their optimal development. They also bring effective adaptive coping strategies learned from one or more of their stigmatized identities. Indeed, the women from this study revealed several adaptive identity management strategies, both behavioral and psychological in nature, as they rose above the challenges that come with occupying a lesbian identity within their families of origin.
Social identity theory holds that individuals occupying a socially disadvantaged and underprivileged position in society are motivated to find various identity management strategies to improve their status position (Taifel & Turner, 1986). In fact, the theory maintains that identification with one’s group acts as a mediating variable for management strategies. Most all of these women reported that they cultivated LGB communities and support systems as a primary strategy. This finding is also consistent with research that suggests building LGB community and participating in LGB sponsored organizations and events as key sources of empowerment and support for the LGB population (Dube & Savin-Williams, 1999; Fassinger, 1991; Fassinger & Miller, 1996; GLSEN, 2001).

Affiliations with social support groups can also be an effective source of managing familial victimization. For example, if family members’ reactions are particularly rejecting, particular members from these groups can serve as one’s chosen family, as well as access to helpful resources. Furthermore, Broderick (1998) noted that females tend to be relational and therefore, most often deal with problems through nurturing strategies and the use of social environments. This was evident in most all participants’ use of their social support networks (e.g., LGB organizations and sponsored events, as well as supportive family members and friends) to enhance the utilization of their unique coping strategies. Participants reported several other adaptive behavioral strategies as follows: Educate others about lesbian identity and challenge heterosexism, maintain visibility no matter what, use literary arts for affirmation and support, engage in self-protective strategies in response to heterosexist demands of family and society, engage in LGB activism, and use psychotherapy for support.

In terms of psychological strategies, most all the participants engaged in affirming self-talk about their lesbian identities. Essentially, they were able to maintain a strong and positive
internal self despite heterosexist messages from their families and society in general, which suggests that the women are resilient. Consistent with social identity theory, participants' may have rejected the notion of lesbian identity as unnatural and inauthentic. These women may also have been more optimistic about the strained relationship between LGB and heterosexual individuals, focusing on the similarities rather than differences between the two groups. Furthermore, the nature of participants' self-talk indicates that they may experience their locus of control as internal rather than external.

African-ancestral lesbians are in a unique position when it comes to identity management strategies since they occupy several stigmatized identities. Caplan (1964) found that struggling with difficult or stressful lives events appeared to increase an individual’s repertoire of coping skills. According to the author, when an individual is able to manage a difficult experience in a functional manner, such negotiations may lead to an enhanced self and self-efficacy in the individual and she/he tends to use these past experiences to help cope with future difficulties. Consistent with Caplan’s findings, Greene (1994a, 1994b, 1996, 2000a) and Bowleg et al. (2003, 2004) have also found that African-ancestral lesbians tend to bring their minority status to the process of managing the stress around their lesbian identity. Essentially, what is or has been a source of oppression may become a source of strength. Having developed the competencies necessary to negotiate the challenges of racism, African-ancestral lesbians may more readily recognize an additional minority status and may be better equipped to meet the challenges associated with managing a lesbian identity that has been pathologized and condemned. Indeed, some of the women reported bringing past coping strategies around race/ethnicity, gender, and disability to the task of managing their lesbian identity. As such, there may be advantages as well as challenges that come with occupying an African-ancestral lesbian identity. Perhaps many
women in this population may have developed bicultural competence because they have lots of practice navigating a devalued identity.

Summary and Conclusions

Gay marriage is legal in two states – Massachusetts and Connecticut – and same-sex desire is no longer a criminal act or sanctioned a mental illness by the American Psychiatric and Psychological Association. This cultural context is likely to influence the ways in which individuals self-label. Several of the participants in this study had strong feelings about the label “lesbian,” saying it was confining and did not capture all of their attributes. Several of the women preferred to go unlabeled or queer, which may reflect their desire for an identity unbounded by a particular narrative constructed largely for White middle class or a previous generation of women, given that the voices of African-ancestral lesbians has been on the margins of the LGB discourse (Bowleg et al. 2003, 2004; Greene, 1994b, 2000a). The narratives of these women highlight the importance of an African-ancestral lesbian finding the space to construct the personal narrative of her identity and the importance of Mental Health Professionals (MHP) working with individuals from their personal narrative rather than from a one-size-fits-all mode. In fact, participants noted that they would like MHP to appreciate cultural differences and not make assumptions about their lives and experiences.

Interestingly, issues around sexual identity were not the primary focus of therapy for participants who sought therapy. While it was not the focus, the women spoke of experiencing themselves as belonging to several cultural groups so that their lesbian identity may come up in them talking about their difficulty with a particular topic. In fact, one of the most popular
recommendations among participants is for MHP to be knowledgeable about the complexity of multiple identities for African-ancestral lesbians. Furthermore, the experiences of these women underscore the importance of being aware of filters. Although sexual orientation concerns may not always be among the particular presenting problem for African-ancestral lesbians, it is a filter through which these women experience themselves and through which the world sees them. Therefore, mental health professionals' familiarity with this filter and its overlap with other filters such as race, gender, social class, disability, and religion, may enhance their ability to provide service to African-ancestral lesbians. Rather than focusing on unidimensional multicultural identities such as sex, gender, ethnicity or sexual identity, African-ancestral lesbians demonstrate that the and that joins their social identities reflects the complexity of their experiences better than the presumptive unidimensional or.

In sum, disclosing a lesbian identity within one’s family of origin has a profound impact on the subsequent dynamics and relationships between family members. Given the primacy of families in most people’s lives (Laird, 1993), the social and cultural stigmatization and marginalization of lesbian individuals are likely to create challenges for all family members involved. African-ancestral families with lesbian members therefore face dual tasks. On one hand, these families must negotiate the challenge of becoming a lesbian-membered family in a society pervaded by heterosexism, racism, and sexism. On the other hand, African-ancestral lesbians must negotiate the challenges of managing a lesbian identity within their families of origin. These challenges are especially difficult for the lesbian family member in core aspects of human development (Laird, 1993) including the development of a personal identity, the integration of that identity into the family, and the creation of a psychological sense of community and support within one’s family. Managing a lesbian identity within one’s family of
origin was challenging for all the participants and required much perseverance, determination, and self-agency on their part. In an effort to positively narrate their lives as African-ancestral lesbians in a largely non-accepting world and family of origin, many women utilized unique adaptive strategies, which reflected their resilience. The results of the present study begin to fill a void in the literature and provide useful information which has implications for research and practice.

Limitations

This study used a qualitative methodology, CQR, and therefore carried with it the limitations shared with other qualitative methodologies. A qualitative study typically involves a relatively small number of participants (e.g., 8 to 12 for CQR) because of the in-depth nature of qualitative research. The use of 12 participants limits the extent to which the findings of this study can be generalized to the larger population of African-ancestral lesbians. However, CQR was an ideal methodological choice given the limited research in this area and the need to give voice to African-ancestral lesbians. These results may not be representative of those African-ancestral lesbians who chose not to participate because of the potential for self-selection bias. Perhaps those women who participated in the study were more adjusted in some ways and therefore more willing to participate. The results are not representative of African-ancestral lesbians who are not yet out and therefore at a different stage of identity development. Results of this study may also reflect in part the perspectives of the research team though the team explicitly discussed and attempted to set aside biases and expectations for the study’s findings. Replication and extensions of this study are important as more categories and domains could
emerge, resulting in a more comprehensive understanding of and appreciation for the variables of interest in this analysis.

Implications for Research and Practice

I hope that the findings from this study will act as a heuristic vehicle for more research in this area. In fact, future research can use the results of this study as a baseline for understanding the experiences of African-ancestral lesbians. One of the most interesting themes of the study was the strength and protection that some of the women drew from their multiple stigmatized identities. Perhaps future research could explore this emergent phenomenon: the strengths and advantages of occupying positions of disadvantage and stigma. Bestselling author Malcolm Gladwell and keynote speaker at APA 2008 Annual convention in Boston (Price, 2008) is in agreement. In his address, he urged the psychological community to study the notion that adversity can foster success and positive attitudes. Gladwell’s poignant assertion follows a line of work that have theorized about the resilience and strengths of African-ancestral lesbians in the face of multiple oppressions (Bowleg et al., 2003, 2004; Greene, 1994a, 1994b, 1997, 2000a). This kind of work exploring the adaptive role of adversity would be an interesting twist and nice complement to the more prevalent research, which focuses on the pathologies and struggles of people with stigmatized identities and less privileged circumstances. Given that we all occupy multiple identities, researchers and MHP will need to begin working with people within this framework. The current and predominant assumption that people exist in singular identities or mutual exclusivity of varying identities (e.g. Klonoff & Landrine, 1995; Meyer, 1995; Williams, 1999) fails to capture the experiences of African-ancestral lesbians.
Future inquiry could also examine the identity management strategies of African-ancestral gay men. This research may yield fruitful results and would be particularly salient given the “down low” or “DL” phenomenon among many Black men (Denizet-Lewis, 2003; Trebay, 2000) who have sex with men but do not label themselves as “gay” or “homosexual” (Mays, Cochran, & Zamudio, 2004; Woodyard, Peterson, & Stokes, 2000). Perhaps being on the “down low” is a management strategy for African-ancestral gay men. However, research has shown that HIV/AIDS is a serious consequence (for both the men and their wives/girlfriends) of those who employ this strategy. It would therefore be meaningful to explore and uncover more adaptive identity management strategies for this population. Furthermore, African-ancestral gay men experience the double minority status associated with race and sexual orientation (Kraft, Beeker, Stokes, & Peterson, 2000). They also experience cultural conflicts between cultural values regarding family expectations of the masculine gender roles and being gay as a pervasive challenge (Williams, Wyatt, Resell, Peterson, & Asuan-O’Brien, 2004). In fact conflicts between gay identity and ethnic identity for Black gay men have increased the likelihood of depressive symptoms (LaFramboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993). This negotiation of multiple identities seems to be a common thread between African-ancestral lesbians and gay men that is worth exploring.

Participants indicated the centrality of family support in their coming out and developmental process. In fact, two participants suggested that MHP need to understand the importance of family in the lesbian identity development process, indicating that they would like tools to help them connect to their parents across the sexuality divide. One of the two women would also want her family present in any kind of therapy session as she believes this would facilitate a better dynamic and understanding of the problem, heterosexism. Interestingly,
Saltzburg (2007) noted that the coming out of the child becomes the coming out of the parents. Perhaps future studies could explore the coming out process and identity management strategies for parents of African-ancestral lesbians. This kind of research would be worthwhile since we currently know very little about the families’ experience of becoming a lesbian-membered family. It would also serve to foster an understanding in both parties across the divide; an understanding that may lead to future reconciliation.

Of particular note, is that no one family in this study as a whole was completely rejecting, accepting, or ambivalent. Rather, different family members within one family reacted differently, creating a variety of responses to the disclosure of a lesbian-identified family member. MHP can play an invaluable role here by broadening the coming-out dialogue with clients. This dialogue could include the different reactions of different family members so that a father may be supportive, a mother rejecting, an aunt ambivalent, a grandmother became supportive over time. This sort of reframing may help African-ancestral lesbians reconceptualize their families’ responses from an all-or-nothing framework to the reality that there are varied responses within one family, which in turn may lessen the intensity of the coming-out process. Furthermore, having knowledge of varied reactions could also lessen the pervasive sense of negativity about an essential aspect of self.

Results of this study show that secrecy and avoidance via silence can be self-protective and effective at maintaining family harmony. However, silence also comes with a cost and was experienced by participants as miserable, stifling, and at times evoked suicidal thoughts. It is therefore crucial that researchers and MHP understand this complexity so that LGB individuals are not made to feel that their silence is necessarily indicative of shame or delayed lesbian identity development. In fact, it may be helpful for MHP to understand familial patterns of
support and victimization rather than encouraging individuals to be open with family members. It may also be useful to assess the degree of an individual’s emotional and financial independence from particular family members (i.e., parents), clients’ living situation, family’s knowledge of clients’ sexual orientation, the reactions of those who know, and the predicted reactions of those who do not know, as well as, histories of victimization and familial support. This detailed exploration may be valuable to clients as they engage in the decision making process with regard to coming out within their families of origin.

Finally, the stories of the women from this study highlight the importance of working with individuals from a framework that endorses their multiple identities. When MHP work with African-ancestral lesbians it may be useful to explore their feelings about and experience of their multiple identities. Doing so would help clients uncover and better understand their coping skills as well as the challenges and strengths inherent in occupying multiple identities. For example, MHP can help their clients from this population explore their backgrounds and identify their reference groups (e.g., race, gender, age, sexual orientation, religion, disability, and socioeconomic status) and its relationship to their coping strategies. This exploration may help clients foster insight and understanding of their existing repertoire of coping mechanisms and resources, which in turn may help them utilize things learned from one devalued identity to manage another. MHP may also want to conduct more outreach services for women who may need help but are unwilling to seek services for various reasons, including the general stigma attached to therapy, as well as the shame and humiliation that is experienced if one needs help and fails to live up to a pervasive cultural ideal of “the strong Black woman.” In fact, Candice, the 21-year-old African-American woman, reported knowing she needs help but cannot get past the intake session because she experiences therapy as “the antithesis of my being a strong Black
woman.” Outreach for women that may find themselves in Candice’s position may include, but is certainly not limited to conducting psychoeducational support groups and personal development workshops in mental health community clinics, LGB centers, and schools.


Saltzburg, S. (2007). Narrative therapy pathways for re-authoring with parents of adolescents coming-out as lesbian, gay, and bisexual. *Contemporary Family Therapy, 29,* 57-69


http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/DTTable?_bm=y&-geo_id=01000US&-ds_name=DEC_2000_SF1_U&-_lang=en&-mt_name=DEC_2000_SF1_U_P012B&-format=&-CONTEXT=dt


Appendix A

E-mail Recruitment Letter
Greetings,

My name is Damaliah Gibson. I am counseling psychology doctoral student at Seton Hall University. As a lesbian of African-ancestry and a researcher, I seek to capture the richness and often untold stories of our lives. Your perspective is a vital, yet often overlooked component in understanding the lives of lesbians of African-ancestry (African-ancestral lesbians include lesbians who identify as African, African-American, Black, Black American, Caribbean, Caribbean-American, West Indian, and Afro-Caribbean).

I am asking you to participate in a study of identity management strategies among African-ancestral lesbians within their families of origin. It is my hope that this research will uncover skills and strategies that we use to maintain our identities so that others who are struggling may benefit from some of the ideas that this study will generate. Additionally, this project can also help mental health professionals provide the best service possible to African ancestral lesbians.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you agree to participate, you will be contacted for an interview by telephone. The interview should take approximately one hour, and will consist of open-ended questions about the specific strategies you use to create and maintain a positive lesbian identity within your family of origin. The interview will be audio-taped and then transcribed. Once all the data are compiled and the paper written, you will receive a copy by mail to ensure that your thoughts and experiences were accurately represented.

Confidentiality will be assured by assigning code numbers to tapes, transcripts, and demographic sheets. In addition, your tape will be destroyed upon completion of the study. All data will be stored in a locked cabinet maintained at Seton Hall University. If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact me at gibsondb@shu.edu or (347) 677-4124 and provide me with your mailing address and a telephone number where I can reach you. I will then send you a package with the study materials including the interview questions.

I would like to thank you in advance for your interest in this study. I believe that thinking about the experiences between African-ancestral lesbians and their families of origin could be stimulating and rewarding. I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Damaliah Gibson, M.A.
Dept. of Professional Psychology and Family Therapy
Seton Hall University
gibsondb@shu.edu
Appendix B

Oral Script for On-Site Recruitment
Greetings everyone,

My name is Damaliah Gibson. I am counseling psychology doctoral student at Seton Hall University. As a lesbian of African-ancestry and a researcher, I seek to capture the richness and often untold stories of our lives. Your perspective is a vital, yet often overlooked component in understanding the lives of lesbians of African-ancestry (African-ancestral lesbians include lesbians who identify as African, African-American, Black, Black American, Caribbean, Caribbean-American, West Indian, and Afro-Caribbean).

I am asking you to participate in a study of identity management strategies among African-ancestral lesbians within their families of origin. It is my hope that this research will uncover skills and strategies that we use to maintain our identities so that others who are struggling may benefit from some of the ideas that this study will generate. Additionally, this project can also help mental health professionals provide the best service possible to African ancestral lesbians. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you agree to participate, you will be contacted for an interview by telephone. The interview should take approximately one hour, and will consist of open-ended questions about the specific strategies you use to create and maintain a positive lesbian identity within your family of origin. The interview will be audio-taped and then transcribed. Once all the data are compiled and the paper written, you will receive a copy by mail to ensure that your thoughts and experiences were accurately represented.

Confidentiality will be assured by assigning code numbers to tapes, transcripts, and demographic sheets. In addition, your tape will be destroyed upon completion of the study. All data will be stored in a locked cabinet maintained at Seton Hall University. If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact me at gibsondb@shu.edu or (347) 677-4124 and provide me with your mailing address and a telephone number where I can reach you. I will then send you a package with the study materials including the interview questions.

Do you have any questions for me about the research or procedures?

Before I end I would like to give you my e-mail and telephone number should you have more questions or concerns. I look forward to your responses.
Appendix C

Informed Consent to Participate in Research
1. Researchers' Affiliation

You are invited to participate in a research study examining the identity management strategies of African ancestral lesbians within our families of origin, which is being conducted by a doctoral student in the Department of Professional Psychology and Family Therapy at Seton Hall University.

2. Purpose and Duration of Study

The purpose of this research study is to uncover behavioral, psychological, and emotional strategies used by African ancestral lesbians to manage our identities so that others who are struggling may learn and incorporate some of the ideas that this study will generate. Additionally, this project can also help mental health professionals to provide the best service possible to African ancestral lesbians. The total time to complete this study, including the enclosed Demographic Sheet, Informed Consent, and an Audiotaped Interview, will take approximately 80 minutes.

3. Procedures

If you decide to participate in this study, please sign both copies of this informed consent and keep one for your records. Return the second signed Informed Consent and completed Demographic Sheet in the self-addressed stamped envelope provided. Once the researcher receives these forms and confirm your eligibility, you will be contacted by telephone to schedule the interview. Interviews will be audiotaped with your permission. The interview will take about one hour, and will consist of open-ended questions about your thoughts, feelings, and experiences around coming out in within your family of origin. The interview questions will focus on the specific strategies you use to manage and create a positive lesbian identity. Once all the data is compiled and the paper written, you will receive a copy by mail to ensure that your thoughts and experiences were accurately represented.

4. Voluntary Nature of Participation

Participation in the study is completely voluntary. If you decide not to participate after reviewing the study materials, you are under no obligation to continue. Further, if you begin the study and at any time you decide to discontinue your participation, you are free to do so, and please accept the researcher's gratitude for your interest.

5. Anonymity

Because of the need to contact you by phone, the researcher will be aware of your identity. However, this information will be held in strict confidence, as described below.

6. Confidentiality of Data

Confidentiality will be assured by assigning code numbers to the tapes and transcripts, as well as to the demographic sheet. Tapes will be destroyed upon completion of the study. Summaries of your interviews that may be cited in publications related to this research project will use a pseudonym. All data will be stored in a locked cabinet maintained at Seton Hall University by Dr. Lewis Schlosser, my graduate advisor.
7. Access to Research Records

The primary investigator, Damaliah Gibson, her faculty advisor, Dr. Lewis Schlosser, and a research team of two others will have access to this data. No one else will have access to the demographic information or the taped interviews. All records identifying participants by name or location will be destroyed at the completion of the study.

8. Anticipated Risks

It is not expected that participation in this study will involve significant risk or discomfort. However, some of the interview questions may be asking you to recall unpleasant situations. Should this exercise bring up difficult feelings that you wish to discuss further, you may wish to talk to a friend or to contact your health insurance provider for referrals to a counselor.

9. Anticipated Benefits

In terms of direct benefits, participation in this study will provide a safe space where you can share your experiences and wisdom, as well as discover new things about yourself and your relationships with your family members. This study will also benefit you indirectly by increasing the knowledge base of behavioral and psychological strategies used by African ancestral lesbians to manage our identities so that others who are struggling may learn and incorporate some of the ideas for an improved quality of life. Additionally, your participation will have a direct impact on the mental health profession by providing professionals with insights into the best possible treatment interventions for African ancestral lesbians.

10. Procedures to Follow in Case of Distress

As stated above, it is not expected that this study will involve significant risk or discomfort. However, if you do experience significant distress, you are encouraged to discuss these feelings with a counselor or other health professional. If you experience distress, you should contact your insurance provider to find a referral for a counselor near you. You can also contact the New York State Psychological Association Referral Service at 1-800-445-0899 or the New Jersey Psychological Association Referral Service at 1-800-281-6572.

11. Alternative Procedures

This study does not involve any clinical treatment; therefore, there are no relevant alternative procedures.

12. Whom to Contact for Additional Information

If you have any questions regarding the research process or would like to have a copy of the results, please contact Damaliah Gibson at 347-677-4124 or by email at gibsondb@shu.edu. You can also contact my graduate advisor, Dr. Lewis Schlosser, at 973-275-2503 or if you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Institutional Review Board of Seton Hall University at 973-313-6314.

13. Video- or Audiotaping

Interviews will be audiotaped with your permission. As stated above, audiotapes will be stored in a locked cabinet and will be destroyed upon completion of the study.
14. Your Right to a Copy of This Form

You are entitled to a copy of this Informed Consent Form. If you choose to sign it, please sign both copies, and keep one for your records.

15. Participant's Informed Consent

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I have read the material above and have had all questions answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this exercise and realize that I may withdraw at any time, without prejudice or penalty.

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Appendix D

Demographic Questionnaire
Demographic Information

1. Your Age: __________

2. Your Ethnicity/Race: ____________________________

3. Your Nationality: ______________________________

4. If you were not born in the U.S., please indicate your country of origin: ______________________ and length of time in the U.S.: _______

5. Your Occupation(s) (please specify): ____________________________

6. Your education level (please specify any degrees earned): ____________________________

7. Are you out to any family member(s)? ____________________________

8. If yes who? ____________________________

9. Your Living Situation:
   ____ With family of origin
   ____ With other relatives
   ____ With unrelated roommates
   ____ With partner
   ____ Live alone
   ____ Other (please specify) ____________________________

10. Your Romantic Relationship(s):
    ____ Involved in a serious committed relationship
    ____ Involved but not seriously committed
    ____ Casually dating
    ____ Not actively dating
    ____ Other (please specify) ____________________________
Appendix E

Interview Protocol
Identity Management Strategies Among Lesbians of African-Ancestry

1. How do you feel about being a lesbian? Please share freely.
   a. What does the term lesbian mean to you? [meaning making of lesbian identity (sexual, relationship, special, spiritual, etc.) and it's connection to strategies used]

2. Describe your multiple identities and your feelings about them.
   a. From where do your feelings (e.g. pride, anger, sadness) come with regard to these identities?
   b. How do these feelings about your various identities impact your self-esteem?

3. Talk to me about your coming out story within your family of origin.
   a. Probe for when, to whom, and how?
   b. How long have you been out?

4. What, if any, concrete strategies have you used to maintain a lesbian identity? (How, if at all, do you maintain loving the lesbian part of your self?)
   a. Once participant suggest strategies, inquire about how each strategy has specifically helped her?
   b. Inquire about what strategies have been tried and have not worked.

5. What, if anything, do you tell yourself about your lesbian identity? (self-talk/internal dialogue)
   a. To what degree does it help you protect your lesbian identity?
   b. To what degree does it hinder?

6. What things, if any, make it challenging/difficult to be comfortable and secure with your lesbian identity?

7. What role, if any, does silence play in how you maintain your lesbian identity within your family?

8. What role, if any, does heterosexism play in how you maintain your lesbian identity within your family?

9. What has your experiences been with counseling or therapy?
   a. If some experience, then follow up with: How do you use therapy/counseling, if at all, to manage your lesbian identity?
   b. If no experience, then follow up with: Would you consider using therapy/counseling? Why? Why not?

10. How could therapy be helpful for African ancestral lesbians?
    a. What would you want mental health professionals to know about working with African ancestral lesbians?
11. Is there anything else you would like to share about the maintenance of your lesbian identity within your family? Please share freely.

12. What enables you to have self-esteem about your lesbian identity in spite of it being so stigmatized within our society?

13. Any final thoughts or comments on anything related to what we’ve discussed or not discussed?