

“COMING OUT GAVE ME MY LIFE BACK:”  
INVESTIGATING THE COMING OUT PROCESS FOR PROFESSIONAL AFRICAN  
AMERICAN LESBIANS

by

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AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

School of Family Studies and Human Services  
College of Human Ecology

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY  
Manhattan, Kansas

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## **Abstract**

The overarching research question addressed by this qualitative dissertation is “What are the meanings, structures, and essences of the lived experiences of the coming out process for professional women who are African American lesbians (PAALs)?” The study was designed to 1) fill an existing gap in the literature by examining the coming out processes of PAALs, 2) gain an understanding of the challenges and stressors associated with the intersection of gender, race, and sexual orientation, and 3) explore the diversity of experiences that PAALs may have when coming out to family, friends, and colleagues. Purposeful sampling was used to recruit 10 women between the ages of 25 and 65. Each participant completed a face-to-face interview. Data analysis yielded 21 codes that were then aggregated into five themes and several subthemes that serve as the basis of a 5-level model for describing their coming out process: Confusion, Suppression, The Turning Point, Disclosure, and Proving Self. These levels are progressive but may overlap depending on where the individual is in the coming out process. The findings show that the experiences of PAALs demonstrated the influences of culture, race, and gender in the personal and professional lives of lesbians who have come out, or who are in the process of disclosing their sexual orientation. Additionally, some PAALs are motivated to disclose their sexual identity in order to inspire other young lesbians to come out and express their true sexual orientation.

**Keywords:** African Americans, homosexuality, lesbian, sexuality, stages of coming out, professional

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## **Dedication**

To my mother Josephine L. Johnson, who is no longer here in body but continues to be with me in spirit. I miss her dearly.

To Dr. Sue Carter Collins my best friend, who has guided me through some of the most challenging and rewarding moments of my life. Thank you for believing in me, and for sharing your vast knowledge of this process. Because of your attentiveness, and valuable insight into the process of graduate school with its many sleepless nights, hard work, and deadlines, I would not have made it to graduation. This dissertation would not have been a reality without you. Thank you for your continuous push for me to succeed regardless of my doubts and excuses. You started this venture with me long before anyone else, and was steadfast through the entire journey.

## CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

*“One’s identity as a Black lesbian is the meaningful whole; it is not a mere addition of ethnicity, sexual orientation, and sex gender.”*

Audre Lorde (2011)

To date very little research has been dedicated to investigating the lived experiences of African American lesbians in regards to the “coming out” process (Loiacano, 1989). This lack of attention may be due to an assumption that the coming out process for African American lesbians mirrors that of White lesbians or that their experiences are not research worthy (Gallor & Fassinger, 2010; Greene, 1994b); however, given the historical experiences of women of African descent in America such assumptions are likely erroneous (Gabbidon & Peterson, 2006; Greene, 1994a, Painter, 2006).

According to Greene (1994a), the lives of African American women vary greatly from their White female counterparts due to a variety of social factors and the unique characteristics of their heritage culture. Kendall (1998) also noted that, as the primary objects of the American slave trade, African women are distinct in that they are the only women of color who were forced to immigrate *en masse*. Once captured, they were subjected to inhumane physical and mental treatment and often sexually exploited. Unlike women from other countries that immigrated to America, the racial and social oppression that besieged African women did not end with the outlawing of slavery, but has continued for centuries (Fox-Genovese, 1988).

In spite of their common heritage, African American women have never been a homogeneous group. When African women were forcibly imported into the United States they were looked upon as a uniform group solely because they were not White (Comas-Diaz & Greene, 1994b). This externally imposed label of homogeneity fostered an inaccurate view of African American women that still exists today. Wekker (1993) stated that, before their voyage

from the African Coast as slaves, Africans, including African women, were actually quite heterogeneous as a group. The mixed pre-slavery ancestries of African women encompassed their affiliation in numerous tribes that spoke many different languages as well as having various systems of family values, family relations, and ancestral customs. The pre-slavery diversities and post-slavery realities also fostered an increase in individualism and the broad range of female sexuality among African women (Kendall, 1998). Despite this, unique differences among African American women based on status, sexual orientation, and other characteristics that alter the meaning of race and culture are typically overlooked (Fox-Genovese, 1998).

## **Context of the Study**

Challenges and the stressors associated with being a lesbian can make coming out a difficult and frightening experience (Griffith & Hebl, 2002; Herek, Chopp, & Strohl, 2007; Legate, Ryan, & Weinstein, 2012). While important national strides have been made on behalf of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning (LGBTQ) community, many LGBTQs continue to report that they are being discriminated against by family members, and colleagues because of their sexual orientation (Herek, 2009). Tactics that some lesbians have employed to lessen the likelihood of being victimized include aggressively shunning other lesbians who are out and suppressing their lesbian identities altogether (Herek et al., 2007). Further complicating matters is the fact that deciding to come out, or not, is not a one-time only occurrence. Instead, it is a decision that must be repeated throughout the woman's lifetime with each new acquaintance and each new social and professional experience.

The decision to come out impact all facets of the lives of lesbians including their relationships with families, friends, and colleagues (FFCs). While a few studies have provided a cursory examination of the coming-out process of White lesbians (i.e., Griffith & Hebl, 2002;

Legate et al., 2012), very few have explored the coming out process of African American lesbians (AALs). The following excerpts taken from the Human Rights Campaign Foundation's Resource Guide (2014) underscore the complexity of the challenges that African American lesbians often face and the need for research in this area.

**Dibri:** *Coming out to yourself, your friends and your family is a huge part of the journey toward being honest about your sexual orientation. But coming out is more than just telling those close to you. It is a challenging process that continues throughout your life and across all of its facets.... Many opportunities will arise where you will need to choose whether to come out as a lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender person — whether it's on the job, at a church picnic, while having a conversation on the bus or when filling out a form in your doctor's office. Almost daily, you will have to make decisions about when and where to come out. I'm glad I chose to come out sooner. [Fear of coming out] can be paralyzing and can often trap you in silence. It's the fear of going against our religious upbringing, of losing friends and families, and of shattering the dream that most parents have for us as children. But I have found that coming out has not only strengthened the bonds I have with the people in my closest circle, [it] has also made me feel whole and complete as a person. The day I chose to live without regret or shame is the day I chose to really live (p. 31).*

**Sean:** *Coming out to family is often one of the most difficult experiences for an LGBT person, and for African Americans, it may be particularly challenging. The black family unit is a very strong one. In a world where racism is still far too prevalent, the family is a haven, a stronghold of support. For many, there is no place in this fortress of strength for a 'weakness', as homosexuality is often viewed. Parents sometimes think that having an LGBT child is*

*detrimental and damaging to the black family and will negatively affect the whole African American community (p. 12).*

**Linda:** *One of the biggest risks you may face is coming out on the job. It's not always easy to come out on the job — even if you've already come out to your family and friends. When Linda Villarosa went to work at Essence magazine, she was afraid to come out to her boss and colleagues, even though she had come out in college a few years earlier. But, once again, she found she couldn't stand hiding any more, and she took the chance. "My boss and I were in her car coming back from a weekend editorial retreat, and she was saying something about fixing me up with her brother-in-law. And I just blurted out, 'I'm a lesbian.' She was embarrassed about the brother-in-law attempted hook-up but very kind. And that Monday, I came out to just about everybody else at work, and everyone was fine (p. 31).*

**Donna:** *Despite the challenges that coming out in the black family presents, many LGBT African Americans choose to share their orientation or identity with their relatives. My mom thought at first I could no longer be the torchbearer and political leader in the community that she expected me to be. But, as she came to accept and understand who I am, she was able to see that my role as torchbearer was still just as important (p. 12).*

No one knows exactly how many people are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (APA, 2014). The most reputable estimates are skewed by the fact that many people are afraid to identify as LGBT even when assured anonymity. Whatever the numbers, the fact remains that one's sexuality or sexual identity may not be by choice. The real choice is deciding how to live one's life. People are learning to appreciate themselves by coming out and allowing others to know the real person behind the name (Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2014).



## Statement of Problem

Greene (1994b) suggested that the coming out experiences of African American lesbians are very different from those of White lesbians who, as a result of their race and ethnicity, have enjoyed numerous privileges throughout their lives that are not available to their African American counterparts (Greene, 1994b). While Greene's assessment seems quite reasonable, one can only speculate as to its validity because research that explores the coming out process of African American lesbians (Greene, 1998a) in general is extremely limited, and research that investigates the coming out process of PAALs is non-existent. This discovery has led to the identification of three gaps in the literature. First, there is a lack of research discussing PAALs from an historical perspective. This finding is particularly important because the invisibility of PAALs in the professional and social literature is indicative of their invisibility in American culture as a whole. They are present but currently unseen; therefore their contributions to society are unknown. Second, there is no empirical research addressing the major challenges/stressors that impact PAALs' decision to come out. Although anecdotal stories about the challenges PAALs face when coming out to FFCs do exist, they have not been examined scientifically. Third, the available literature fails to identify an effective coming out process for PAALs who choose to disclose their sexual identity in a professional setting.

Furthermore, several researchers have studied lesbian career issues (Badgett, 1996; Bowleg, L., Burkholder, G., Teti, M., Melynda, & Craig, M., 2008; McDonald, 2006), and some have examined African American career issues (Bartsch, 2004); however, none have investigated career issues affecting PAALs regarding what might be the most effective way (or ways) for them to come out to their FFCs. The need for such research is especially important given that PAALs who come out to FFCs risk losing not only their personal and professional support

systems but also their jobs and careers. Herek (2009) studied heterosexual attitudes toward gay men and lesbians in the workplace and found that often in an attempt to maintain a White working class male solidarity, White men are more likely to commit verbal assaults towards homosexuals.

## **Purpose of Study**

This study begins to fill the gaps in the literature by; (1) providing an historical overview of PAALs that is intended to increase their visibility in the empirical literature, (2) identifying the challenges and stressors that PAALs face when coming out to their FFCs, and (3) identifying an effective coming out process for PAALs who want to disclose their sexual identity to FFCs.

## **Research Question**

This was a qualitative phenomenological study that sought to gain a better understanding of the coming out process for PAALs and how coming out has impact their lived experiences with FFCs. The overarching research question addressed in this dissertation is “What are the meanings, structures, and essences of the lived experiences of the coming out process for professional women who are African American lesbians (PAALs)?” Subsumed within this are two specific research questions that also guide this study:

1. What is the process involved in the coming-out process for professional African American women?
2. In what ways do PAALs perceive that coming out impacts their family, social dynamics, support systems, professional relationships, and expectations that they have of themselves and others?

## **Rationale for Study**

Same sex attraction is not a new phenomenon (Greene, 1994a). In the past, same sex attractions were considered a mental illness, defined as a sexual deviation involving pathological behavior (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV, 1994). At present, it has been removed from the list of mental illnesses (DSM V, 2013) and is regarded as being within the acceptable range of normal sexuality. In fact, Cochran (2001, cited in the American Medical Association, 2014) emphasized that the problems people have in dealing with their sexuality and coming out stems from society and its ill treatment of LGBT people, and not actually from being LGBT. Regardless of these facts, there are some who continue to view same sex attractions as being morally wrong, a sickness, or something unnatural (DSM IV, 1994; Greene, 1998a).

This dissertation seeks to shed light on professional African American women who live life as lesbians and the challenges that they face in coming out to FFCs. Such challenges may include social and workplace discrimination (such as non-advancement in careers), being overlooked during social events, being chastised by religious affiliates, and being ostracized by family members and excluded within family settings. This provides a context for understanding the importance of this study, which begins to fill a gap in the literature pertaining to the coming out process of Professional African American Lesbians (PAALs). Chapter 2 presents two theories—Symbolic Interactionism Theory (SIT) and Social Identity Theory (SI)—that may shed light on this matter. Chapter 3 contains a comprehensive literature review detailing the history of homosexuality in America and a discussion of relevant concepts (e.g., sexuality, sexual orientation, and gender identity) and several existing models that address the coming out process of non-African American gays and lesbians and that may be used to facilitate understanding the coming out process of PAALs. Chapter 4 includes an explanation of the methodology used to

guide this qualitative study and provides a detailed description of sampling techniques and data collection and analysis strategies. Chapter 5 contains a detailed description of the results. Chapter 6 returns to the research questions and includes an exploration of the meaning and implications of the findings. Every effort is made to situate the findings of this study within the broader context of the existing research. Where appropriate, tables and figures are included for illustration purposes.

## **Researcher's Voice**

When conducting qualitative research, the researcher is the measurement tool. Therefore, it is important to understand the researcher's investment in and relationship to the topic. The way we perceive ourselves and the world in which we live is influenced by our experiences and the groups to which we belong (Jung, 1993). Reflexivity is a way to be transparent to the reader. This section describes who I am and why I felt compelled to conduct this study as a way to give voice to PAALs who are seeking acceptance within a heterosexual society.

I am an African American female born in the South. My father was a Baptist preacher and building contractor. My mother was a Baptist missionary and surgical nurse. My parents had six children. I am the fifth child born, and the younger of two daughters. My siblings and I attended a Black Baptist school that emphasized education, religion, and living what was known as appropriate lifestyles. As outsiders to the LGBTQ community both of my parents were very dogmatic in their belief that homosexuality was morally wrong. Occasionally my father would speak against homosexuality and the lifestyles of those who identified as gay. My siblings and I knew there was no mistaking how our parents expected us to behave—being sexually different or acting differently from one's birth sex was neither tolerated nor understood.

Growing up I had a friend who loved playing with boy toys and always wanted to play with the boys and not the girls. Her parents constantly punished her for doing so and told her to “act like a girl” and play with dolls. In the community she was known as a “tomboy.” To this day she speaks of her younger self as feeling different, alone, and misunderstood and attributes it to this treatment. Since then she has pushed herself to achieve high goals in an attempt to gain respect from family, friends, and colleagues to no avail.

Three years ago my friend called to tell me she was thinking of coming out as a lesbian and wondered what my thoughts were. This came as no surprise to me because I have known her secret but chose not to speak of it to maintain her privacy. My friend has always supported me regardless of my actions or opinions therefore I could not see myself turning my back on her as I had done as a child. I rejoiced in her decision because I want her to be happy and to live her life the way she chooses. I cannot say enough in regards to how she has impacted my life. She encouraged me to continue my education and not allow others to discourage my decision. She has cried with me through all of the challenges I have had to face throughout my lifetime. As an outsider looking in, I have learned that it is not my place to judge anyone based on sexual orientation whether heterosexual, bi-sexual, or gay/lesbian. I have come to this understanding as an adult after realizing that as a child most of my beliefs were not my own but those of my parents. I have discarded their views of about what is right and what is wrong based on my own knowledge and experiences. I believe that every person has the right to decide what is most important in life and to voice her beliefs accordingly.

As a heterosexual African American female, my ethnicity, profession, and personal knowledge influence my position in this study and with the participants. My hope is that that this research will allow the voices of PAALs to be heard within families, communities, and

workplaces, and provide for a source of knowledge for understanding the life experiences of these women that have long been overlooked.

## **CHAPTER 2 - THEORETICAL APPROACH**

Two family theoretical approaches were used to examine the coming out process of PAALs. They were Symbolic Interactionism Theory (SI) and Social Identity Theory (SIT). This chapter provides an overview of the assumptions, concepts, and main propositions of these theoretical perspectives.

### **Symbolic Interactionism Theory (SI)**

Symbolic Interactionism is a sociological theoretical perspective which argues that humans rely on shared symbols and language to create their own realities, and that in order to understand behavior, researchers must be attuned to the reality of the actors.

SI originated in the early 1920s based on the ideas of Mead (1934), Cooley (1902), and other researchers. SI was developed out of the idea of practicality, which means that individuals use symbols to interact meaningfully with each other. It assumes that for each person meaning exists only at the individual level where it is created one symbol at a time, although the meanings given to particular symbols are negotiated at the cultural level through social interaction (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). Thus, SI was developed as a way to explain how people interact socially, and communicate with each other, emphasizing the symbols they use to do it (Blumer, 1969).

Although it was Mead (1934) who first noted that how humans communicate and use symbols is central to human social conventions and that humans work together to form meaning, it was Blumer (Mead's student) who coined the term social interactionism and popularized the concept in 1937 (Blumer, 1969). Specifically, Blumer detected a peculiar type of interaction that takes place between human beings when two or more people come into contact with each other. Instead of reacting to each other's actions and behaviors, humans first attempt to interpret or

define the behavior itself.

Therefore, the reactor's response is not based on the actor's objective behavior, but on the meaning that the reactor attaches to it. For example, as applied to professional African American lesbians (PAALs), this means that once they announce their sexual orientation to others, they are labeled as lesbians and treated in a manner consistent with the other person's (the reactor's) views on lesbianism. If the reactor believes that lesbianism is anti-Christian and bad, the reactor may respond to the PAAL as if she is anti-Christian and bad. On the other hand, if the reactor has a positive view of lesbianism and finds it is acceptable, the PAAL is more likely to be viewed in a positive light and accepted (Blumer, 1969).

### **Assumptions of Symbolic Interactionism**

SI has three primary assumptions: meaning, language, and thought (Blumer, 1969). These assumptions guide individuals to conclusions about the formation of self and socialization in a larger community (Forte, 2009).

*Meaning.* With regard to meaning, Sheldon (2014) noted that humans live in both a physical and symbolic world and use a complex set of symbols to interact with each other. Humans evaluate and interpret these symbols and attach different meanings to them. A thing has no meaning except the meaning that humans give to it. When the meaning and the symbol are joined, it helps us to navigate everyday life in terms of what and how we think, the development of language and how we use it, and how we live our lives (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). White and Klein (2008) have argued that meaning is the most important assumption of SI because human behavior can be understood only within the situational context of the meaning that the behavior has for the actor and the reactor. In other words, we act toward other humans (and things) in a manner consistent with the meanings that those humans (and things) have for us. This is



illustrated in the example about PAALs provided above.

*Language.* Language is the medium that humans use to convey meaning through verbal and written symbols. The existence of mutually agreed upon meanings for symbols facilitate the process and understanding of human interactions at the individual and societal level (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969; White & Klein, 2008; White, Klein & Martin, 2014). A lack of mutually agreed upon meanings results in misunderstandings and makes social interaction difficult. For instance, the term “queer” is commonly used to refer to homosexuals. It was initially used as a negative form of criticism. Over the years, many younger homosexuals have adopted this label and use it to refer to themselves with pride. However, some older PAALs would probably find the term offensive since they grew up in the age when being called queer was viewed as a negative stigma.

*Thought.* The third assumption of SI is that individuals have minds and the capacity for thought, which is shaped by social interaction with others. Thought is an internal mental conversation or dialogue involving each person’s interpretation of symbols. Humans also have the capacity to change symbols and adjust the meaning of symbols they use based upon their interpretation of acts or behavior in specific situations. This ability stems in part from the fact that individuals can reflectively interact with themselves, evaluate the possibility of taking different courses of action, and make decisions (Forte, 2009). For example, a PAAL thinking about coming out to her family may be on the verge of doing so until she hears a loved one make an offensive remark about gays. At that point she may reconsider her decision and choose not to come out because she fears rejection.

## Concepts of Symbolic Interactionism Theory

*Self* is one of the most important concepts in symbolic interactionism theory. White et al. (2014) described that in SI the self and mind are founded on symbols and consciousness where self is a symbolic representation of that which did an act and that which was acted upon. A majority of what we know and learn about ourselves is a direct result of our interactions with others (Cooley, 1964). In fact, one of the most distinguishing characteristics of humans is their ability to see themselves from the perspectives of others, mentally take on different roles based on those perspectives, and form a conception of self (i.e., a self-concept). Cooley (1964) described this as the looking-glass self and suggested that we often perceive and evaluate ourselves based on how we think significant others and generalized others see us and feel about us. This process, called reflected appraisal, is a major component of self-development (International Encyclopedia of Marriage and Family, 2003). For instance, if a PAAL believes that her family sees her or wants her to be seen as a heterosexual, she may deny her lesbian identity to conform to how they see her rather than cause a conflict.

*Significant others* are people whose opinions matter to us while *generalized others* are the community, group, or any other organized system of roles (such as social clubs, etc.) used as a referred point for viewing one's self. In the case of PAALs, significant others include immediate family, friends, and colleagues. Generalized others are those institutions (e.g., churches, groups, clubs, etc.) that make up the PAAL's community and to which a PAAL may belong.

*Socialization* is the process by which humans acquire the symbols, beliefs, and attitudes of their culture, learn to apply them, and form opinions about their roles in society (Frey & Sunwolf, 2004). White et al. (2014) explained that socialization is a social construct utilized by

people acting together in groups. Depending upon the makeup of one's socialization group, individuals may be exposed to and given opportunities to create multiple realities (White & Klein, 2008). Unlike other researchers, Mead (1934) did not see socialization as a social construct, but as the introduction of social symbols into thoughts that contribute to the development of the simplified other. He argued that the mind is merely the introduction of an exterior process into the conduct of a person in order to meet problems that could happen. In any case, socialization is a life-long process that is both active and selective and may result in unpredictable changes to self over time (Noto, Leonard, & Mitch, 2014). Thus, individuals are constantly being socialized into new groups and new cultures.

*Role* is one of the most difficult of the SI concepts. Because the term is overused, researchers assume its meaning is self-evident (White & Klein, 2008). Mead (1934) explained role taking as the ability to put one's self into the place of the actor, which includes conforming to the rules that the actor is expected to follow. Through the process of role making, individuals are able to see themselves in various ways (International Encyclopedia of Marriage and Family, 2003). When a role conflicts with a person's perception of a valued attribute, she is likely to disassociate from it to minimize role strain (International Encyclopedia of Marriage and Family, 2003). For instance, PAALs who perceive that lesbians are not valued as contributing members of society may believe that if they come out they will not be valued either, and may reject their sexual orientation in order to minimize or avoid role strain.

*Definition of the situation* is a concept that is best understood in the context of Thomas's (1931) assertion that people act in situations based on how the situations are defined. Situations that are perceived as real will have real consequences. For example, a PAAL who perceives that her life will be endangered if she comes out as lesbian will likely experience real consequences

in the form of extreme stress and other physical and/or psychological disease (Trepte, 2006). Even if she is not harmed, she may isolate herself and become subject to self-induced illnesses stemming from her own fears.

### **Main Propositions of Symbolic Interactionism Theory**

The main propositions underlying a particular theory explain the philosophical framework on which that theory is based. In the case of SI, the propositions that follow have been abstracted from the work of Burr, et al., (1979):

- 1) The clearer the role expectations, the higher the quality of role enactment.
- 2) The more individuals sense consensus in the expectations of others about a role they occupy, the less role strain they will experience.
- 3) The greater the perceived role strain that results from performing a role, the less ease a person experiences in transitioning into that role and the greater the ease she experiences in transitioning out of it.
- 4) The greater the diversification of a person's roles, the less consensus the person will perceive in expectations about those roles, whereas the more individuals perceive consensus in the expectations about a role they occupy, the less role strain they will experience.

SI also includes the emphasis that symbols are attached to acts and behaviors that are interpreted by humans at the individual level. Consistent with this, Blumer (1969) stated that meanings are central in human behavior. Further, Patton (2002) noted that SI addresses society by focusing on the personal meanings that individuals impose on behaviors, objects, and events. An act assumes meaning and importance only because of the meaning that individuals give it, not because of the act or behavior itself. For example, if a woman wears her hair in what an

individual perceives as a masculine style, the reactor may immediately identify the woman (actor) as a lesbian even though there is no empirical evidence to support that conclusion, which is based solely on external appearances.

SI theory is helpful in providing insight into the role that the individual's ego plays in the decision to come out. Burr et al. (1979) suggested that the ego not only affects the quality of one's role performance in a relationship, but it absolutely influences one's gratification with it. As it pertains to a PAAL coming out, it is reasonable to assume that the first act or behavior in this regard will be made by the PAAL to a significant other that is usually a family member, friend, or colleague. If that person responds in a manner that the PAAL interprets as being negative or disapproving, the PAALs' self-esteem may be adversely affected resulting in her refusal to make further disclosure. On the other hand, if the PAALs' disclosure receives positive support, her ego will be boosted and she may feel free to come out to others in her family, among her friends, and in her colleagues' network. Depending upon how this coming out process unfolds (i.e., whether she is supported or reviled), a PAAL may or may not out herself totally.

In summary, when applying the SI framework to the lesbian coming out process it is reasonable to assume that some PAALs may not be comfortable coming out because it will require them to take on a role that subjects them to negative stigmatization. Since lesbianism is often viewed by society as being socially unacceptable, the mere fact of being tagged as a lesbian may foster great role strain and reduced self-worth for PAALs in the coming out process. The more socially unacceptable they perceive that the lesbian role is, the more difficult it will be for them to come out and the greater the likelihood that they will experience greater role strain. Of course, the flip side of this is that many PAALs remain closeted because they know what is expected of them in their societally approved roles as "heterosexual women" (Greene, 1994b).

Although this is not their self-identified sexual orientation, having been socialized into this role they are often able to perform it with minimal role strain, which leads to feelings of acceptance and enhanced self-worth (Green, 1994b).

### **Social Identity Theory (SIT)**

SIT is rooted in social psychology and stems from research by Henri Tajfel and his colleagues on intergroup processes in the 1970's. It was developed to explain the findings of studies that investigated the marginal conditions that are necessary to create negativity towards out-groups. Tajfel asked, "What were the circumstances that would produce such group bias?" What he learned inspired him and Turner to develop Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, Billing, Bundy & Flament 1971).

SIT is a theory about how membership in groups helps to construct our social identities. It is a relational approach that defines who we are as a function of our similarities to and differences from others (Abrams & Hogg, 2004). SIT suggests that individuals are motivated to join groups due to a need for self-enhancement and reduction of uncertainty about other people's feelings, perceptions, and behavior toward them (Hogg & Terry, 2000). When a person's social identity is being developed, the groups they belong to (e.g., social class, family, churches, clubs, etc.) provide a valuable foundation for self-esteem and pride (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and establish a sense of belonging to a social world (Tajfel, 1972). For instance, women in the process of coming out often seek out the company of other lesbians and become active in LGBT groups so they can learn from the experiences of others and feel supported in their new role. This may be especially helpful if family and significant others are not supportive.

Membership in groups is also important because it provides a basis for the group as a collective, and the members as individuals, to develop a sense of importance and belonging by

discriminating and holding biased views against non-group members (Hogg, Abrams, Otten, & Hinkle 2004). When learning of this phenomenon, Tajfel (1972) concluded that the world is split into two groups, “them” and “us” based on a process of social categorization. “Them” are those we discriminate against and view as less than ourselves; “us” are those that we accept as being one of us. This is known as the in-group (us) and the out-group (them) classification (Simply Psychology, 2014). The “us-them” label can apply to power groups as well as to groups that, from a societal perspective, have limited power. For example, although heterosexuals are assumed to have the most power in traditional society because they embody traditional gender roles, it is not unusual for homosexuals to portray their group as being more powerful than heterosexuals because of their more liberal views on sexual freedom. Thus, each group classifies the other group as “them” in order to expand its own sense of worth and self-esteem.

### **Assumptions of Social Identity Theory**

Unlike most theories that begin with assumptions about individuals, SIT begins with assumptions about social groups (Trepte, 2006) and suggests that one part of our self-concept is derived from belonging to such groups (Hogg & Adams, 1988). Other assumptions of SIT are:

1. social identity is shared with others and provides a basis for shared social action,
2. the meanings associated with any social identity are products of our collective history and present, and,
3. social identity is something that links us to the social world and provides the pivot between the individual and society.

### **Concepts of Social Identity Theory**

The most important concepts of SIT are identity, social identity, social comparison, and social categorization (Ashford & Mael, 1989).

*Identity* has two components: a personal component consisting of characteristics such as personality traits, physical attributes, and intellectual capabilities; and a social component based on shared features associated with group membership. Social identity is based on a person's belief that who they are is directly related to group membership (Ashford & Mael, 1989). It is influenced by the categorization of individuals, the distinction and prestige of the group, and the relationship to out-groups.

*Social comparison* is the method people use to evaluate themselves in relation to members of other groups. Their goal is to view themselves as being superior on relevant characteristics or dimensions and be positively compared with other groups.

*Social categorization*, as described by Tajfel and Turner (1986), is a cognitive process used to separate "them" from "us" by segmenting, classifying and ordering the social environment, and allowing the individual to undertake a variety of forms of social action. The earlier example involving heterosexuals and homosexuals and the "us" versus "them" phenomenon provides a strong indication of how individuals may assume their social identity from the group, the process of social comparison, and the process of social categorization. By classifying members of other groups, such as PAALs, as "them," the individuals doing the classifying (members of society that possess traditional family values) put themselves in the position of being better than or having power over the people who are classified. This is done to increase a sense of self-importance for the classifier and decrease the value and worth of the classified.

### **Propositions of Social Identity Theory**

The following propositions are derived from the work of Tajfel (1978), and Tajfel and Turner (1986).



- 1) Identification with certain groups requires involvement in activities that support the collective identity in positive ways while simultaneously fostering stereotypical views and beliefs about self and others. This results in the development of in-groups and out-groups.
- 2) Using the mechanism of social comparisons, in-group members will attempt to gain and maintain superiority over out-group members in certain areas or dimensions.
- 3) Social categorization of individuals, whether voluntary or involuntary, is all that is required to subject a person to in-group favoritism or out-group stereotyping and discrimination.
- 4) Groups that are viewed as having high social status will accept and include people they think are like themselves while excluding and discriminating against those who are not.

To sum up the preceding propositions, according to SIT, an individual's identity is enhanced (or diminished) based on the perceived distinction of the groups to which he or she belongs; therefore, the individual will seek membership in groups that are perceived as having distinct and positive identities.

SIT serves as a viable theory for understanding the coming out process of PAALs because it takes into account various phenomena, such as peer pressure, decision-making, and intergroup hatred (Ferdman & Sagiv, 2012; Jackson & Smith, 1999). SIT may aid the researcher in identifying and understanding PAALs' perceptions of how their family, friends, and colleagues (FFCs) will react to the decision to come out as well as how PAALs respond to that perception.

Using SIT also can provide a foundation for understanding the FFCs' behavior from a group's perspective. For instance, if two PAALs from similar socioeconomic backgrounds

decide to come out and one is met with support and acceptance from her FFCs while the other one is met with rejection, what are the societal/group characteristics and dynamics that account for these differences?

SIT can be used to help with understanding why some PAALs seek membership in LBGT groups for support in the coming out process while others may avoid these groups because of what they view as the stigma attached to being associated with gays and lesbians. Finally, SIT can provide a basis for understanding certain group behavior such as why religious conservatives and hate groups may discriminate against lesbians and why some lesbians choose not to out themselves. Even if accepted by FFCs, some PAALs may have such an overwhelming fear for their safety that they won't openly acknowledge their love for another woman because it is perceived as a social taboo that goes against their religious and social upbringing (Ferdman & Sagiv, 2012).

The following chapter offers a historical overview of literature on lesbians and lesbianism leading up to gaps in the literature on the existence of professional African American lesbians and their coming out process.

## **CHAPTER 3 - LITERATURE REVIEW**

In order to fully comprehend the importance of investigating the coming out process professional African American women who self-identify as lesbians (PAALs) experience, it is necessary to provide an historical overview of homosexuality in America. This chapter lays the foundation for the forthcoming research by identifying relevant terms and chronicling important events in the evolution of gay and lesbian civil rights. Contemporary issues that LGBTs face in what still is a homophobic society are also identified. Together these terms and events provide a social context for understanding the existing challenges that PAALs experience as they contemplate the decision to come out.

### **Homosexuality in America: An Historical Overview**

Briefly stated, homosexuality refers to a sexual attraction or sexual relations between persons of the same sex (Harpers Collins English Dictionary, 2015; Comprehensive List, 2015; Greene, 2000). Lesbianism is a form of female homosexuality that refers to romantic love or sexual relations between women (Harpers-Collins English Dictionary, 2015; Comprehensive List, 2015; Greene, 2000). Prior to the 1900s, lesbianism was generally accepted as a way to prepare women for “real sex” with a man (Clunis, Fredriksen-Goldsen, Freeman & Nystrom, 2005, p. 4).

The term Boston Marriage was used during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century to refer to two single women residing together independent of men. This term was used to describe a long-term monogamous relationship between two otherwise unmarried women. Typically formed among educated and financially secure women of the upper and middle classes, the Boston marriage was viewed with respect because it kept the women from becoming financial burdens on their families (Cole, 1993). Examples of such marriages include the relationships of novelist Sarah

Orne Jewett and Annie Fields, Irish writer Edith Somerville and Violet Martin, and painter Rosa Bonheur and Natilie Micas (Clunis et al., 2005). Because of the negative stigma attached to homosexuality intimate facts about the sexual nature of the relationship/marriages were scarce (Clunis & Greene, 2005).

Some researchers have argued that participation in the Boston marriage was a choice made by educated women who generally lost their careers if they married. Thus, it allowed these women to have the careers they desired and remain independent while simultaneously serving as an historically important step for gender equality (Cole, 1993). Additionally, the existing cultural context was one in which women were much more likely to form strong emotional bonds with other women than with men (Cole, 1993). Faderman (1981) stated when men penned about female affections in literature they had a tendency to see the same sentimental images that were widespread in eighteenth-century literature:

“Two sweet females uplifting each other morally, but ultimately entirely dependent on men whether that dependence brought them joy or tragedy. What they did not see was how female relationships could sustain a woman intellectually and make her strong enough to engage in the battle for more of the world. But they also did not suspect any more than the women themselves did that such an emotional and even physical closeness “lesbian,” at least in a twentieth-century definition. They did not treat it as an abnormality because it was common enough to be a norm.” (p. 157).

Faderman further explained that whether the union between women in Boston Marriages were sometimes, or often included sex was never known, but what was known was these women spent their lives chiefly with other women and they developed strong emotional bonds.

## **Gay Life in the 1900s**

During the early 1900s, a strong middle class developed in the United States as a result of the nation's increasing economic prosperity. When researchers such as Sigmund Freud and Havelock Ellis began publishing studies about sexual deviance (such as sadomasochism, flagellation, and homosexuality), people took a growing interest in these acts. By 1910 lesbianism had become disfavored and was viewed as a medical abnormality and a threat to society's morals. One important factor contributing to this turn of events is that American culture in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century took a turn toward increased hetero-sociability and greater emphasis was placed on the importance of heterosexual interaction (Zschouche, 2015). In fact, the public was warned of "the 'dangers' of lesbianism to young women" (Clunis et al., 2005, p. 5) including the temptations and depravities associated with being a homosexual. Widespread newspaper coverage of police raids of bars and clubs that catered to homosexuals and lesbians promoted increased public awareness that such deviance would not be allowed. In a process that virtually sealed the fate of same-sex lovers, whether male or female, "homosexuality was linked to mental illness and the criminal world, [and] visibility, however limited, was no longer tolerated" (Clunis et al., 2005, p. 5; see also, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders of the American Psychiatric Association, 2014). In the U.S., the history of homosexual culture and politics is short. Homosexuals quickly became a target during and after World War I after soldiers returned from overseas back to the U.S.

World War I began in 1914. When the United States entered the War in 1918 there was a growing public awareness of same-sex love in other parts of the world. Gay soldiers who spent time in Paris were exposed to a new world where they frequented homosexual clubs and spent time with others who were like themselves. After experiencing Parisian society, which was

tolerant and accepting of homosexuality, both gays and straights returned from the war and migrated to larger towns and cities that were more tolerant of sexual diversity and where they could meet others like themselves. Among the principle locations that welcomed these individuals were Greenwich Village and Harlem in New York, the Southside of Chicago, and the Tenderloin in San Francisco (Seidman, Fischer & Meeks, 2006).

### **The Homosexual Witch Hunts**

Although “jazz, blues, bathtub gin, speakeasies, drag balls, sin, sex, masculine women, and effeminate men proliferated” (Clunis et al., 2005, p. 7), not everyone in America supported the homosexual and lesbian lifestyles that existed in the big cities. Reflective of this Clunis et al., (2005) noted,

many members of the conservative middle class thought they were deplorable and characterized them as evidence of societal decline, which they attributed to “allow[ing] homosexuals to serve in the military and to the corrupting influences of foreign lands” (2005, p. 7) A critical turning point in the history of homosexuality came in the form of the Newport Naval Station scandal of 1919. Supported by the business community and by moral reformers, the United States Navy undertook a homosexual witch-hunt in which it used decoys to criminally entrap effeminate sailors that “cruised the Cliff Walk and congregated at the local YMCA soliciting homosexual sex acts” (Clunis et al., 2005, p. 7).

Consistent with the anti-homosexual sentiments of the times, the masculine-appearing decoys were not criminally prosecuted for engaging in sex acts even though some said they enjoyed it. Rather, it was the effeminate sailors that were thought to have committed an act against nature

and faced the wrath of the Navy. The resulting message of sexual intolerance and persecution was not lost on lesbians who fled deeper under cover.

In 1932, Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) was elected president and the world experienced the Great Depression. In the United States, banks failed, unemployment was rampant, poverty was overwhelming, and soup kitchens proliferated. The existing climate was ripe for discrimination against anyone who was different. Led by Father Charles Coughlin, the American fascist movement denounced Jews and condemned homosexuals. Moral reformers and politicians quickly jumped on the bandwagon and supported the investigation and prosecution of all non-conforming groups including homosexuals and others that they deemed morally lax or corrupt. As Clunis and colleagues (2005) noted, “Vilification by the press and public guaranteed that homosexuals (male and female) were viewed as criminals unable to escape their own perversities” (p. 10).

The trend of persecuting homosexuals continued in the United States and elsewhere. By 1946, America’s Republican-dominated Congress was deeply involved in a fight to control the spread of communism. Growing ever suspicious of groups that were different, American society was increasingly less tolerant of homosexuals. Clunis et al. (2005) suggested the following: “Fueling this lack of tolerance were a myriad of magazine articles published by psychiatric and mental health professionals that praised the benefits of normalcy and condemned homosexuality, a medical abnormality that they alleged could be cured” (p. 11). This was despite the fact that many of the treatments that were promoted had horrible side effects (shock treatments and lobotomies) while others were simply expensive and ineffective. Nevertheless, the prevailing message voiced by the medical and criminal justice communities was that “homosexuals [would be] treated as criminal and social deviants, at risk of losing their jobs, credit, social standing,

[and] friends, and subject to blackmail and involuntary commitment” (p. 11). Needless to say, this pushed gays and lesbians even further into what is now referred to as the ‘closet’ where many remain today because of fear.

### **The Kinsey and McCarthy Era**

Between 1948 and 1953 Alfred Kinsey published several studies on the sexual behavior of men and women. Among his key findings were that 8% of men were homosexual and 28% of women were sexually attracted to women. Although these statistics were deemed shocking, they provided little enlightenment to the public as few people read the studies and the medical profession was unwilling to change its position that homosexuality was abnormal (Clunis et al., 2005, p. 12).

With the fear of communism running rampant in the United States and abroad conservative politicians in America joined forces with a biased media that linked communism with “homosexuality, blackmail, un-Americanism, and perversity” (Clunis et al., 2005, p. 12) thereby creating additional fears in the minds of the public. In response to these concerns, states formed numerous committees that were empowered “to investigate the nefarious activities of myriad communists, and by association homosexuals, in such places as government, Hollywood, universities, and the military” (p. 12). The paranoia associated with these investigations escalated in the early 1950s when Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy (Wisconsin) became chair of the Senate Committee on Government Operations. Joined by Roy Cohn (a closeted gay man), his chief counsel, McCarthy charged that the State Department was full of communists and homosexuals and quickly proceeded to search out, intimidate, and persecute a list of 205 people. To justify this onslaught gays and lesbians were labeled security risks and fired from teaching, civilian, and government service jobs. At the same time, the military engaged in massive efforts



to seek out homosexuals in the ranks and dishonorably discharge them. Although it has been reported that McCarthy died from alcohol-related cirrhosis of the liver in 1957, homophobia did not die with him (Clunis et al., 2005).

Several researchers published empirical studies during the McCarthy era that disproved that homosexuality was a mental illness (Miller, 1995); however, this was not enough to defeat the negative perceptions that society held of gays and lesbians (Clunis et al., 2005). Nor did these studies have a significant impact on the way many gays and lesbians lived, which appeared to be closely linked to their economic status. For example, the rich and famous, like film director Dorothy Arzner (1920s to 1940s) and actress Marlene Dietrich, lived amazingly open lives with their lesbian lovers. Similarly, the wealthy middle and upper classes frequented San Francisco and held private parties in the Village. Working class gays and lesbians lived simpler and more restricted lives with many relegating their social activities to private bars and speakeasies, which often operated under a police pay-off system that afforded customers a measure of protection (Clunis et al., 2005). Although these bars provided “an atmosphere of camaraderie, acceptance, and solidarity” (p. 13), not all gays and lesbians embraced them. Additionally, “denial, social pressure, and fear of discovery” (p. 13) led many homosexuals to seek or accept forced treatment at the hands of medical personnel who claimed to have the ability to cure them and make them heterosexual. Others simply got married as a way to avoid sexual examination.

### **The Fight for Gay Equality**

The onset of the 1960s saw the occurrence of a multitude of events including the Civil Rights Movement and the Women’s Rights Movement that turned American society upside down. Because it was illegal for bars to serve gays alcohol or for gays to dance with one another, the police conducted frequent raids to search out this behavior.

During a typical raid, the lights were turned on, the customers were lined up, and their identification checked. Those without identification or dressed in full drag were arrested. Women were required to wear three pieces of feminine clothing, and would be arrested if found not wearing them. Employees and management of the bars were also typically arrested (Crimes Against Lesbians. Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2014, p.12).

In 1967, a grassroots movement led by young people who were fed up with this treatment began to take a stand. When the owners of several gay bars in Seattle, Washington, testified about the police payoff system and related police corruption, it resulted in a police chief being forced to resign and several officers sentenced to jail time. This ended the harassment of gays in the Seattle area. In 1969, another powerful turning point occurred, the Stonewall Riots (Clunis et al., 2005).

The Stonewall Inn was a gay bar in Greenwich Village, New York. It is the legendary birthplace of the modern Gay Rights Movement. On June 28, 1969 at 1:20 AM the Stonewall Riots occurred with 200 people inside the bar and another 150 outside. When police raided the bar that evening the gay patrons refused to go quietly. Instead, “they threw pennies, chanted, sang, and set the bar on fire” (Clunis et al., 2005, p. 15). The following evening nearly one thousand protesters gathered and another explosion took place resulting in injuries and arrest. To this day, the LGBTQ community around the globe commemorates this historic time at the Stonewall Inn each year. Hailed as the beginning of the modern gay rights movement, these protesters changed the way in which society viewed gays. The ensuing riots provided a mechanism that empowered gays to make their voices heard. Often referred to as the “Rosa Parks moment” in Gay history, the Stonewall uprising paved the way for future members of the

LGBTQ community to reject being treated as second-class citizens and demand to be treated as equals (Clunis et al., 2005).

The following information was taken from Marc Stein's *Rethinking the Gay and Lesbian Movement* (2012, pp.143-162). As a result of Gay Rights movement in the 1980s numerous Gay and Lesbian organizations supporting gay and lesbian rights were formed in response to three socio-political factors: 1) ongoing resistance to sexual equality (i.e., in some states same-sex sex was legal and laws prohibited sexual orientation discrimination whereas in other states same-sex sex was illegal and there were no laws protecting gay individuals from discrimination); 2) decriminalization of sodomy by way of sexual policing; and, 3) local variability (i.e., states were free to regulate gay issues as they saw fit). While there was every reason to believe that state and local battles related to gay and lesbian rights would continue, there was little hope of claiming victory at the national level. These three factors served to galvanize and unite LGBTQ organizations in their fight for equality (Stein, 2012).

### **The Black Gay Rights Movement**

The following information was taken from Cole and Guy-Shefall's (2003) study. Although African Americans participated in the Gay Rights movement that primarily addressed the concerns of Whites, they faced issues that were unique to their history of racial and gender oppression. This gave rise to the Black gay and lesbian movement which began in the 1980s and was largely the result of gay and lesbian writer-activists such as Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, Joseph Beam, and Craig Harris, to name a few. Also playing an important role in this critical social movement was out gay and lesbian preacher-scholars like James S. Tinney, Renee L. Hill, and Irene Moore. Allies of the movement included civil rights leaders such as Reverend Jesse Jackson, Coretta Scott King, and Maya Angelou (Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2003).

Many activists began paying closer attention to the increasing politics of class, gender, race, and sexuality in the 1980's (Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2003, p.150). Several national groups such as the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force began to place more emphasis on grassroots community mobilization. The Human Rights Campaign Fund (HRCF) began to focus on federal officials and supporting electoral politics. Other organizations were influenced by the Gay Rights Movements as well, including but not limited to, Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders, Lambda Legal Defense, National Center for Lesbian Rights, the National Gay Rights Advocates, Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), ACLU Lesbian and Gay Rights Project, the Black Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays, Black Lesbian and Gay Leadership Forum, the Unity Fellowship Church Movement, etc.

In 1982 Wisconsin was the first state to ban discrimination based on sexual orientation. Following this the Lesbians of Color Conference was held in 1983 (Stein, 2012). Eaklor (2008) pointed out that in 1987 over 500,000 people participated in the National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay rights. Another political event that took place was the National Black Lesbian and Gay Leadership Forum. In that same year (1987) Washington celebrated the first National Coming Out Day (October 11<sup>th</sup>).

Widespread reports of the devastating effects that AIDS was having on the Gay community contributed to significant changes in race relations within the gay and lesbian movement (Stein, 2012). By the end of the 1980s over 200 groups was established to support African American gays and lesbians (Eaklor, 2008). In general, the United States had more organizations and programs representing gays and lesbians in general than ever before. Gays and lesbians also had an increased presence in corporate businesses, professional occupations, trade unions, academic disciplines, and sports.

## **Medical Reform: Homosexuality Is Not Mental Illness**

The negative stigma attached to being gay in America is deeply embedded in the country's medical traditions. Nevertheless, supported by proponents of the women's rights movement, in 1970, the National Organization of Women (NOW) passed a resolution recognizing that "double oppression of lesbians is a legitimate concern of feminism" (Clunis et al., 2005, p. 185). In 1973, the American Psychological Association (APA) voted to remove homosexuality from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* by a vote of 5,854 to 3,830 (Bayer, 1981). Their decision "was scarcely a cool, scientific decision. [Rather, it] was a response to a political campaign fueled by the belief that its original inclusion as a disorder was a reflection of an oppressive politico-medical definition of homosexuality as a problem" (Weeks, 1988, p. 213). In addition to removing the stigmatizing label, the APA adopted the following resolution: "Homosexuality per se implies no impairment in judgment, stability, reliability, or general social and vocational capabilities...[A]ll mental health professionals [are urged] to take the lead in removing the stigma of mental illness that has long been associated with homosexual orientations" (Week, 1988 p.214). The APA's decision is especially significant in light of the fact that when social and behavioral scientists began to study the phenomenon they found no evidence to support the perception that homosexuality is a form of mental illness and, instead, concluded that same-sex attraction is just one variation of human sexuality within a range of normal sexual behavior (Bayer, 1987).

Following the removal of homosexuality from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* many states changed the civil laws that allowed involuntary commitment for homosexual behavior; however, the APA's decision did not result in a corresponding change in the criminal laws. In an attempt to change this and promote gay rights, gay

activists held the first national march on Washington in 1979, with an estimated 125,000 people attending (Clunis et al., 2005, p. 186). Regardless of this show of political strength, criminal laws have been slow to change. Indicative of this, in 1986, the United States Supreme Court decided that the First Amendment does not protect homosexual acts that occur between consenting adults in the privacy of their own homes (Clunis et al., 2005, p. 187), which demonstrates an additional form of oppression experienced by the LGBTQ community. Although the Court since has ruled that same-sex marriage is protected by the Due Process and Equal Protection Clauses of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment, this ruling came only after a prolonged legal fight. (See below, *Obergefell v. Hodges*, Lenhardt, (2015).

### **More Social Oppression: Homophobia and Hate Crimes**

Although the 1990s brought increased visibility to LGBTQs and their issues, it came at a cost. Specifically, Clunis and colleagues (2005) noted that with increased visibility came more violent anti-gay and homophobic hate crimes and acts. Additionally, in a recent publication on *Crimes Against Lesbians*, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI, 2014) reported

that since the Stonewall Riots of 1969, LGBTQ individuals and communities have continued to ‘experience significant degrees of discrimination and violence, ranging from government-sanctioned discrimination to a wide range of crime victimization, including assault, harassment, stalking, sexual violence, and homicide.’ (FBI, 2014, p.1)

One of the biggest dangers faced by members of the LGBTQ community is hate crimes. Hate crimes, which are “rooted in cultural bias” (FBI, 2014, p.1), are committed by perpetrators who are “bias[ed] against the actual or perceived sexual orientation and/or gender identity of the victim” (FBI, 2014, p.1). Although the attack is committed against an individual, its greater

effect is to

incite community-wide fear and panic as well as frustration and anger. Hate violence sends a clear message that a community and anyone associated with it is not safe, raising anxiety and fear for members of the community who may not even have known the victim. (FBI, 2014, p.1)

According to recent FBI statistics, “Hate violence against LGBTQ people is on the rise. The following statistical results were taken from the Stotzer (2012) article: Between 2006 and 2008, reports of anti-LGBTQ bias-motivated violence increased by 26% overall, with a 36% climb in crimes committed by strangers, a 48% increase in bias-related sexual assault, and an all-time high rate of hate violence resulting in murder” (p. 1). Furthermore, “approximately 20% of lesbians, gay men, and bisexual people experienced a crime against their person or property based on their sexual orientation and 50% experienced verbal harassment over their lifetime” (p. 1). Although race-based hate crimes, followed by religion-based hate crimes, are the most commonly reported each year, sexual orientation-motivated hate crimes are a close third. Significantly, LGBTQs only make up 3.5% of the population but “sexual orientation-based hate crimes make up roughly 30% of reported hate crimes each year” (p. 1). For the period 2001-2013, the FBI announced that 10 in 100,000 lesbians reported being victims of a hate-motivated crime against persons (Stotzer, 2012).

The picture painted by these statistics is very disturbing; however, it may not be totally accurate due to widespread underreporting of hate crimes by law enforcement agencies.

Although all law enforcement agencies are legally required to report hate crimes to the FBI, there is strong evidence that many fail to do so. There also is substantial research indicating that a sizeable amount of “anti-LGBTQ bias-related physical abuse [occurs] at the hands of law

enforcement personnel” (Stotzer, 2014, p. 1), which may explain some of the non-reporting. In any case, it is very clear that hate crimes not only have a negative effect on how the victims live their lives, they also have significant and long lasting psychological effects on members of the LGBTQ community because they strike at the heart of the victim’s and community’s core identities (FBI, 2014).

### **Contemporary Legal Issues in the Fight for Gay Equality**

Homosexuals also face other societal and legal challenges/oppressions that negatively impact their quality of life. For instance, although numerous gays have achieved individual career goals, they continue to be faced with the challenges of racism, sexism, and homophobia. As a group, gays and lesbians often are denied equal citizenship rights because of a lack of anti-discrimination laws that protect homosexuals in most parts of the United States. Indeed, many states still have laws on the books that criminalize same-sex sexual behavior. For example, the sodomy law, which defines homosexuality as a crime, is still in effect in 26 states with penalties as severe as life imprisonment (Kane, 2007).

In other areas, such as employment and family issues, the laws also have been slow to change. However, as more gays and lesbians have come out of the closet, they have been elected to political office in large numbers thereby allowing them to have a strong political voice. As a result, many gay activists have taken the fight for gay equality to the state houses, the courthouses, and the White House. For example, President William “Bill” Clinton was elected to office on a political platform that supported gay rights. After trying unsuccessfully to persuade Congress to remove the ban against homosexuals in the military, he instituted a “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy that allowed gays and lesbians to serve in the military as long as they did not openly announce their homosexuality and did not engage in homosexual acts. While this was not



the happy outcome that most gays hoped for many accepted it as better than nothing (Kane, 2007).

More recently, gay activists fought for the same right to get married that heterosexual couples have and to have marriage legally recognized for all purposes. Some states (such as Illinois, Hawaii, Minnesota, and New York) voluntarily enacted laws authorizing same-sex marriage while others strongly resisted. In 2013, gay activists scored a major victory when the Supreme Court ruled that the portion of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) that barred the federal government from honoring same sex marriages that are legal in other states is an unconstitutional violation of the 5<sup>th</sup> Amendment. DOMA, which was enacted by Congress under the Clinton administration in 1996, prohibited gay couples whose marriages were recognized by their home state from receiving the benefits available to heterosexual married couples under federal law. The Obama administration had initially defended DOMA but changed course early in 2011 after concluding that the law was unconstitutional (Lewis, 2013).

In 2013, the plaintiff, Edie Windsor, age 84, challenged the constitutionality of DOMA. Windsor sued the Internal Revenue Service claiming it had denied her refund request for federal estate taxes that she paid after her spouse, Thea Spyer, died in 2009. In the 5-4 landmark decision, the U. S. Supreme Court sided with Windsor and ruled that DOMA's "demonstrated purpose is to ensure that if any State decides to recognize same-sex marriages, those unions will be treated as second-class marriages for purposes of federal law." As such, it "humiliates tens of thousands of children now being raised by same-sex couples" and "makes it even more difficult for the children to understand the integrity and closeness of their own family and its concord with other families in their community and in their daily lives" (*United States v. Windsor*, 2013,

p. 43). After the Court's decision in *Windsor*, the number of same sex marriages surged nationally; however, the fight for gay marriage rights is far from being over.

The refusal of a homophobic society to extend full citizenship privileges to gays and lesbians impacts a myriad of other factors including same sex marriage, public recognition and support of intimate partner relationships, employment opportunities including job benefits such as family insurance coverage, and the right to procure housing. Also affected are the right to adopt children, the existence of positive relationships with family and friends, and personal safety (Consiorek & Weinrich, 1991). Although some states have enacted LGBTQ laws that range from full marriage rights to civil unions and more limited partner registries, others have adopted constitutional amendments that define marriage as a legal relationship between a man and a woman with the express intent to exclude gays (Killian, 2010). This exclusion serves as a severe form of oppression on gays and lesbians and can have devastating effects resulting in decreasing levels of self-esteem and self-destructive behaviors such as suicidal behavior, alcoholism, and substance abuse (Consiorek & Weinrich, 1991).

Although the Court in *Windsor* confirmed the validity of same-sex marriages in general, it left unanswered two critical questions: (1) Does the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment require a state to issue marriage licenses to same sex couples; and (2) Does the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment require states to recognize same sex marriages that are lawfully licensed and performed in other states. These questions were answered definitively in *Obergefell v. Hodges* (see Lenhardt, 2015) when the Court considered legal challenges to bans on same-sex marriage in four states: Ohio, Michigan, Kentucky and Tennessee. In a landmark opinion rendered on June 26, 2015, a divided Supreme Court ruled that same-sex couples can marry nationwide. The *Obergefell* decision established a new civil right and handed gay rights advocates an historic victory. Nearly 46 years to the day

after the Stonewall riots ushered in the modern gay rights movement, the Supreme Court settled one of the thorniest civil rights issues in American history. Although same-sex marriage was legal in 37 states and Washington D.C. before the *Obergefell* ruling, the Court's decision gave all gay people the same marital rights previously afforded only to heterosexual couples (Times.com, 2015).

Justice Anthony Kennedy wrote the majority opinion for the Court. Arguing persuasively that same-sex couples have a fundamental right to marry under the Due Process and Equal Protection Clauses of the Fourteenth Amendment, Kennedy reasoned:

No union is more profound than marriage, for it embodies the highest ideals of love, fidelity, devotion, sacrifice and family, and in forming a marital union, two people become something greater than they once were (p. 1)"....The Constitution promises liberty to all within its reach, a liberty that includes certain specific rights that allow persons, within a lawful realm, to define and express their identity. The petitioners in these cases seek to find that liberty by marrying someone of the same sex and having their marriages deemed lawful on the same terms and conditions as marriages between persons of the opposite sex. (p. 7)

The net legal effect of the *Obergefell* decision is that any state law that attempts to prohibit same-sex couples engaging in civil marriage on the same terms and conditions as heterosexual couples is *per se* invalid. Therefore, since "same-sex couples can exercise the fundamental right to marry in all states, it follows that there is no lawful basis for a state to refuse to recognize a lawful same-sex marriage performed in another state on the ground of its same-sex character." (p.1).

While it is not likely that the *Obergefell* decision will soon be reversed, one must nevertheless consider that possibility. The decision itself is a 5-4 ruling. Speaking on behalf of the losing minority justices, Chief Justice Roberts made it clear that he did not support the outcome. Characterizing “The majority's decision is an act of will, not legal judgment” (2015, p. 21), Roberts concluded

Our Constitution does not enact any one theory of marriage. The people of a State are free to expand marriage to include same-sex couples, or to retain the historic definition. The Court takes the extraordinary step of ordering every State to license and recognize same-sex marriage. Many people will rejoice at this decision, and I begrudge none their celebration. But, for those who believe in a government of laws, not of men, the majority's approach is deeply disheartening. (p. 21)

Despite Robert’s disagreement with the outcome, the Court’s ruling in the *Obergefell* decision makes the United States the 21st country in the world to legalize same-sex marriage. Married same-sex couples now have the same legal rights and benefits as married heterosexual couples and these rights will be reflected on official documents such as birth and death certificates.

### **The Prevalence of LGBTQs in America**

No one knows exactly how many people self-identify as LGBTQ. Although the United States Census Bureau recently began to capture information on the prevalence of LGBTQs in America, it is generally accepted that this information is subject to significant under-reporting as a large number of LGBTQs remain deeply closeted. Additionally, the Census Bureau does not collect information on LGBTQs by race and professional occupation therefore it is impossible to get an estimate of the number of African American women who self-identify as lesbians and as

professionals (PAALs). To make matters more difficult the published statistics that are available often conflict with each other depending upon the source of the information. Despite these shortcomings, in order to provide a rough estimate of the number of gays and lesbians in America, data from both the US Census Bureau and ProCon.org are being reported. These numbers may vary because of differences in the definitions of who is included in the LGBTQ population, differences in survey methods, and because of consistent questions asked in a particular survey over time. Also impacting the results is whether the researcher is measuring the behavior, identity, or desire (Pruitt, 2002).

In its 2013 estimate, the Census Bureau reported that America's population consists of more than 318 million people. Of these, 50.8% are female and 49.2% are males. Whites constitute 77.7%, Blacks constitute 13.2%, and others constitute 9.1% of the total population. It has been reported that approximately 3.5% (9 million Americans) self-identified as LGBTQ. Of these, 1.7% self-identified as gays and lesbians (i.e., 2,491,034 are gays and 1,359,801 are lesbians). Also included in this group are 2,648,033 bi-sexual women and 1,539,912 bisexual men (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013).

ProCon.org is a non-profit charitable organization whose main purpose is to gather and report research on controversial issues and serve as a non-biased resource for educating the public. The data reported by ProCon.org is different than that reported by the Census Bureau and is provided to aid understanding the overall size of the gay and lesbian community. In the latest figures published on homosexuality, ProCon.org estimated that approximately 4%, or 8.8 million Americans, self-identify as LGBTQ. Of these, 8.8 million people nearly half self-identify as bisexual. Furthermore, of the 4.4 million people who identify as gay or lesbian, only 1.6% reported that they are living with a same-sex partner (Gates, 2007). Additionally, by age 26

approximately 10.7% of men and 24.5% of women report being attracted to their own sex (Dickson, et al., 2003).

To sum up, what we know about the prevalence of LGBTs is that between 3.5 and 4.4 million Americans who comply with the Census and participate in various surveys have self-identified as LGBTs. What we do not know is how many of these people are professional women who happen to be both African American and lesbian because their stories have not yet been told.

### **Sexuality, Sexual Orientation, and Gender Identity**

Sexuality, sexual orientation, and gender identity are important concepts that must be understood as a prerequisite to developing a deeper understanding of lesbianism and homosexuality; however, the available literature contains varying and sometimes conflicting definitions in each area. This section defines these terms and provides a brief overview of the relevant research in these areas.

#### **Sexuality**

There is no universally accepted definition of sexuality. Indicative of this, Pangman and Seguire (2000) described sexuality as “one of the most natural and basic aspects of life that affects an individual’s identity as a human being” (p. 49). They suggested that sexuality “provides the opportunity to express affection, admiration, and affirmation of one’s body and its functioning” (p. 49). Bancroft (2008) saw “human sexuality as that aspect of the human condition which is manifested as sexual desire or appetite [and] associated physiological response patterns” (p. 55). He argued that such behavior often “leads to orgasm, or at least pleasurable arousal, often between two people, but not infrequently by an individual alone” (p. 55). On the other hand, Coyle (2011) described sexuality as the manifestation of the individual as

a human being and included the states of maleness or femaleness. He stated that sexuality, which begins at birth and ends at death, encompasses an individual's body appearance, gender identity, gender role, sexual orientation, eroticism, genitals, intimacy, relationships, and capacity for love and affection. Sexuality also incorporates an individual's values, attitudes, knowledge, and behaviors, and is greatly influenced by family, culture, society, religion, and personal beliefs (Coyle, 2011).

### **Sexual Orientation**

As is true of sexuality, there also is no universally accepted term or definition for the sexual attraction that an individual feels toward a member of his or her own gender (Clark, 2013). Kinsey was the first researcher to explore and document sexuality using the accepted methods of science. He produced two major bodies of work: *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948) and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953). As the basis for this work, Kinsey and his colleagues conducted 18,000 interviews. At the time he was conducting his research, sexual orientation was seen as dichotomous – heterosexual vs homosexual. However, Kinsey found more variation in his data; therefore, he created a seven-point scale that goes from zero to six with gradations that move from sexual behavior only with members of the opposite sex to sexual interaction only with members of the same sex. As a result of his research, Kinsey concluded that “We’re all bisexual, it’s just a matter of degree” (Robinson, 1976, p. 117). Kinsey’s research changed society’s understanding of both sex and sexuality (Diamond, 2008).

In contemporary discourse, numerous terms have been used to describe this phenomenon. For instance, Aron (1991) called same sex attraction sexual orientation and defined it as the affectionate or loving magnetism of one person to another person. She suggested that sexual orientation can be measured by examining behavior ranging from same-sex magnetism-only at

one end of the scale to opposite-sex attraction-only at the other end. Rust (1993) used the phrase sexual identity to describe the sexual desirability that one has for persons of the same sex (homosexual) or the opposite sex (heterosexual) (Jensen, 2013), whereas Jensen used the term gender identity to describe the “the gender I feel that I am” and gender orientation to refer to the concept of “sexual attraction” (p. 7).

In recent years, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD Media Reference Guide, 2015) have taken the lead to clarify the terminology used in this area. Noting that the preferred term is sexual orientation rather than sexual preference, which mistakenly implies that a person gets to choose the gender he or she is sexually attracted to, GLAAD defined sexual orientation as the direction of an individual’s sexual longings and/or fantasies and attractions toward a male/female partner, including asexual and demi-sexual attractions (i.e., the lack of or partial sexual attractions). Consistent with GLAAD’s definition, the American Psychological Association, American Psychiatric Association, and other researchers have concluded that one’s sexual orientation refers to the sex of those to whom one is sexually and passionately attracted (Greene, 2000; Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, & Gebhard, 1953; Klein, 1993; Klein, Sepekoff, & Wolff, 1985; Shiveley & DeCecco, 1977). Also worthy of note is the term Same Gender Loving (SGL). According to the online Comprehensive List of LGBTQ+ Term Definitions (Comprehensive List, 2015), SGL is a phrase coined by the African American/Black queer communities as an alternative for “gay” and “lesbian” by people who see these terms as products of the White queer community (Comprehensive List, 2015).

Stein (1999) attempted to shed more light on the issue of sexual orientation by suggesting that it is a social construct developed by humans to explain an inherent sexual yearning that exists internally. As such, sexual orientation is set at the onset of an individual’s life making him



or her either gay or straight. Unlike Stein, Kinsey (1953-1998) perceived humans as sexual organisms that are capable of participating in a range of sexual experiences. He argued that individuals are not born homosexual, bisexual, or heterosexual, but may enjoy a range of sexual expressions over the life course. In other words, sexual orientation may incorporate desirability of one's own sex (i.e., gay men or lesbians), desirability of the opposite sex (heterosexuals), or desirability of both sexes (bisexuals).

Although these broad groupings (homosexual, bisexual, or heterosexual) are widely used, some researchers have found that sexual orientation does not always manifest in categories that are clearly definable (Diamond, 2007). Rather, there is significant evidence that sexual orientation may change over time for some individuals. Available research indicates that this is more likely to be true for women than men (*see e.g.*, Baumeister, 2000; Diamond, 2000, 2003a; Golden, 1987; Plummer, 1999; Peplau & Garnets, 2000). For example, after conducting research in this area, Bailey, Dunne, and Martin (2000) concluded "female sexual orientation also appears to be multimodal in its distribution, meaning that there exists a wide spectrum of self-identification for women and the presence of many women who identify as bisexual" (p. 63).

To sum up, a person's sexual orientation can be heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, or questioning. Both the American Psychiatric Association (2013) and the American Psychological Association (2014) have concluded that these are all within the normal range of human sexuality. Significantly, an individual's sexuality and sexual orientation play an important part in forming the foundation of an individual's being by providing a level of cohesiveness and comfort in the world around them. Related to this, the surroundings, culture, and communal setting in which people find themselves greatly impact their perceptions, attitudes, and conduct of sexuality (Carlson & Heth, 2007). As previously indicated, numerous terms and definitions are often used

to refer to sexual attractions between members of the same sex; however, for the purposes of this study, I use the term sexual orientation when referring to the gender of one's sexual attractions.

## **Gender Identity**

Since the Kinsey studies were published in the late 1940s and early 1950s, numerous researchers have investigated human sexuality (*see e.g.*, Abramson & Pinkerton, 1995; Beach, 1976; Diamond, 1997; Reinisch et al., 1990) and identified several factors that are important for understanding sexual orientation. Key among these is gender identity (Tiefer, 1996). Gender identity refers to whether an individual sees him or herself as male or female in all aspects of life. It encompasses the intellectual, emotional, physical, and spiritual traits that make up one's individuality (Bailey & Benishay, 1993). It goes beyond physical genetic properties and incorporates many features of an individual's nature such as the inborn talents and abilities, the simple orientation toward the domain around us, our knowledge base styles, how we process and arrange information, and additional predisposed tendencies and traits (Greene, 2007).

Identity development research suggests that individuals follow different paths in finding their identities and that identity is a fluid state of being (Meyer-Bahlburg, 1979). In fact, Golden (1987) contended that it might be wrong to seek congruence between sexual feelings, activities, and identities. He argued that while labeling oneself or others as heterosexual, gay, or lesbian may be socially desired, it may not provide an accurate description of who an individual is since no one's sexual identity is completely stable, but can be fluid over time. Therefore, when conducting research on the development of a lesbian identity, researchers must examine sexual orientation in the context of both present and past social conditions.

## **Gender Development: Social Learning and Life Course**

Closely linked to the literature on gender identity is literature on gender development and sexual orientation causation. In addition to gender identity theory that was discussed previously, two theoretical perspectives facilitate our understanding of homosexuality and lesbianism: Social Learning Theory and Life Course Theory.

### **Social Learning Theory**

Social learning theory suggests that children develop the gender roles deemed suitable in society through reinforcement of gender-appropriate conduct. In other words, individuals copy the actions and behaviors of those they respect and hold as examples (McConaghy, 1987). In the early developmental stages there are few variations between women who identify as lesbians and those that identify as heterosexual (Veniegas & Conley, 2000); however, as the person matures there are distinct variations in sexual orientation. For instance, although many people may view heterosexism as the norm, there is significant evidence that female sexual orientation covers a wide range with many women self-identifying as bisexual (Bailey, Dunne & Martin, 2000, p. 63).

In social learning theory, homosexuality is connected to the early qualitative learning and development of one's gender identity and gender role. In theory, gender identity and gender roles are acquired in two ways—by direct tuition and observational learning. A child learns first by direct tuition when he or she adopts the parental views that encourage gender-appropriate activities and discourage cross-gendered activities. For instance, an example of this type of learning occurs when parents reinforce gender stereotypes by allowing children to only play with certain types of toys. Secondly, observational learning occurs later in life when children adopt gender-typed attributes from the different same-sex models that they encounter in society

(Shaffer, 2008). Observational learning does not require reinforcement but does require a model (parent, sibling, aunt, neighbor, etc.). Proponents of observational learning suggest that a person's environment, cognition, and behavior all merge and ultimately determines how that person functions (Shaffer, 2008).

The social learning theory emphasizes the importance of the same-sex parent for a child's appropriate gender role and a strong adjustment. Social learning theory can be used to enhance our understanding of lesbianism by suggesting that a person can learn homosexual behavior through the same reward-punishment system that shapes other attitudes and behaviors (Shaffer, 2008).

### **Life Course Theory**

It has been suggested that, "Life course theory...offers a theoretical framework which moderates the polarizing meta-theoretical perspectives in sexual orientation research" (Hammack, 2005, p. 269). Aldous (1990) reported that at certain stages in the life course, a person begins to show signs of being attracted to certain behaviors that are often believed to be abnormal, such as homosexuality. Thereafter, and over the course of the life span, the person is subjected to biological influences and cultural events that may change her core identity, which makes her who she is (Aldous, 1990). For example, at a very young age a female child may begin to play with boys' toys because of a certain attraction they have for her. As she develops into puberty, certain biological attractions (that are not considered the norm) may develop such as being physically and emotionally attracted to other girls. Thus, life course theory "alert[s] us to [the] real world...[and] tells us how lives are socially organized in biological and historical time, and how the resulting social pattern affects the way we think, feel and act" (Elder, 1998, p. 9).

In what reasonably may be considered the final word to date on what causes homosexuality, both the American Psychiatric Association and the American Psychological Association have published policy statements. In a May 2000 article titled *Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Fact Sheet* that was published on its official website (Psych.org), the American Psychiatric Association stated the following:

[No] one knows what causes heterosexuality, homosexuality, or bisexuality. Homosexuality was once thought to be the result of troubled family dynamics or faulty psychological development. Those assumptions are now understood to have been based on misinformation, and prejudice. Currently there is renewed interest in searching for biological etiologies for homosexuality. However, to date there are not replicated scientific studies supporting any specific biological etiology for homosexuality. Similarly, no specific psychosocial or family dynamic cause for homosexuality has been identified. (2014, p. 2)

Similarly, the American Psychological Association posted the following policy statement on its official website at APA.org:

There are numerous theories about the origins of a person's sexual orientation; most scientists today agree that sexual orientation is most likely the result of a complex interaction of the environmental, cognitive, and biological factors. In most people, sexual orientation is shaped at an early age. There is also considerable recent evidence to suggest that biology, including genetic or inborn hormonal factors, play a significant role in a person's sexuality. In summary, it is important to recognize that there are probably

many reasons for a person's sexual orientation and the reasons may be different for different people (Fox, 1988, p. 508).

Although Fox (1988) asserted that all theoretical explanations are equally valid, there is evidence that there are differences based on the group of people to which the theory is being applied (Cooney & Dykstra, 2013). Having a context for theory application is central to determining the validity of theoretical explanations.

### **Lesbianism**

Most of what we know about lesbianism and the coming out process was written post-1980 and is primarily based on the experiences of White and Black homosexual males and White lesbians (Greene, 1994). As popularly defined, a lesbian is "a woman who is sexually and emotionally attracted to other women" (Stevens & Hall 1991, p.1). Research confirms that a woman's lesbian identity is primarily a self-ascribed assessment that is reached over time and across situations that involve "sexual, affectionate, and relational ties to other women" (Brown, 1995, p. 4).

As previously noted, no one knows exactly how many women self-identify as lesbians or what causes homosexuality (*see supra*, "Sexuality, Sexual Orientation, and Gender Identity", pps. 15-20, and "Gender Development Research: Life Course and Social Learning," (pps. 20-22). Most contemporary researchers and members of the medical community agree that homosexuality (including lesbianism) "is most likely the result of a complex interaction of the environmental, cognitive and biological factors" (Fox, 1988, p. 508). Contrary to this perspective, there exists another body of literature that must be considered, which suggests that lesbianism is a matter of choice. One of the leading proponents of this position is Hoagland (1988), who described lesbians as women who hate men; heterosexual women going through a

period of sexual experimentation; women who cannot get a man; and men in women's bodies. She suggested that lesbianism is abnormal and contended that the idea of a woman loving another woman is implausible within a typical society. For Hoagland, the idea that a woman could love another woman and achieve a reasonable or higher standard of living without relying on a man was unrealistic. Rounding out her argument, Hoagland (1988) described lesbianism as an assumption of power rather than a genetic predisposition. Similar to Hoagland, Swigonski (1995) argued that lesbianism endangers the social order of human beings by indirectly contradicting a man's ability to establish a relationship with females and thus reducing the flow of benefits (e.g., female caregiving) to men. As previously noted, although the assumptions (i.e., misinformation and prejudice) on which this research is based have been discounted, this information has been included to address the misconceptions of lesbianism and homosexuality that still exists.

### **Social Challenges Faced by Lesbians**

In addition to being subjected to hate crimes and denied equal rights because of the stigma associated with homosexuality (Bieschke, Perez, & DeBord, 2007), gays and lesbians face a diversity of challenges that impact the decision to come out. For example, several researchers have concluded that gays and lesbians experience more problems forming a positive identity due to the stigma of being homosexuals (Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2003; Chesney-Lind & Jones, 2010). Researchers also have documented a number of contextual factors that affect the lives and experiences of gays and lesbians including race and ethnicity, immigrant status, religion, and the geographical location where they live (Browning, 1996). Also impacted are socioeconomic status (Albelda, Badgett, Schneebaum, & Gates, 2009), age (Russell & Bohan, 2005), and disability (Abbott & Burns, 2007). Prevalent social stressors that affect gays and

lesbians and that impact their decision to come out include potential ostracism and isolation from family and friends, verbal and physical abuse, and rejection by the church and other religious institutions in their communities. For many, these minimizing conditions can have long-term negative effects culminating in prostitution, substance abuse, and suicide (D'Augelli, Pilkington, & Hershberger, 2002; Espelage, Aragon, Birkett, & Koenig, 2008). These social stressors may potentially impact the lives of all lesbians including PAALs.

### **Professional African American Lesbians (PAALS)**

To date, no research has been conducted on the coming out process of professional African-American women that self-identify as lesbians (PAALs). Although Greene (1994b; 2002) noted that several empirical studies have included a significant number of African American lesbians, the term “significant” is ambiguous since there is no way to determine how many women self-identify as lesbians or how many lesbians self-identify as PAALs. Notably, the Census Bureau does not collect data on lesbians by racial and professional status. Rather, most of what is known about the coming out process for lesbians is derived from research on White females. For instance, although Clunis et al. (2005) examined the coming out process of elder lesbians, and Jensen (2008) investigated the coming out process of lesbians who came out later in life after marriage, the women in both studies were White. To date, no body of research exists that has investigated the coming out process of PAALs.

### **Is the Coming Out Experience Different for African American Lesbians?**

There are many reasons to believe that African American lesbians' coming out experiences differ than those of White lesbians. Greene (1994a) investigated the overlap of racism, sexism, and heterosexism in the lives of African American women and determined that the best way to understand the experiences of African American women is to carefully examine



the intersectionality of race, gender, and sexual orientation, which influences their behavior and poses a *triple threat* to their being. She reported that the dominant culture presents significant challenges for African American women including racism, sexism, and negative stereotypes about Black sexuality that do not exist for White lesbians who enjoy numerous privileges because of their race and ethnicity (Greene, 1994b; 2000a). Additionally, African American lesbians often experience homophobia and heterosexism within their own ethnic communities, making some Black lesbians less likely than White lesbians to disclose their sexual orientation to the public (Plummer, 1999; Patterson, 1995). According to Greene, “The cumulative effects [of these *-isms*] may put lesbian, gay, and bisexual racial/ethnic minorities at special risk for stress” (2000a, p. 245).

Racism is based on the notion that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities, and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race (Webster, 2014). Conceptually, racism is the mistreatment and oppression of members of a particular group based on their birthright, race, color, origin, or descent. When a person is subjected to racism over an extended period of time, its effects are internalized. Greene (2000a) characterized internalized oppression as “the sinister processes by which a person’s experiences as a member of an undervalued minority group are adopted and become associated with their self-esteem” (p. 246). Szymanski (2009) noted that “Internalized oppression often takes the form of negative attitudes, beliefs, and feelings about oneself as a minority group member and about one’s minority group” (p. 111). Accordingly, when African American lesbians incorporate negative stereotypical ideas about race, gender, and sexuality into their personal identity, it can result in lower psychological functioning and inferior self-esteem (Szymanski, 2009).

It is generally accepted that homophobia within the dominant culture is linked to

internalized oppression and racism within African American lesbians (Szymanski, 2009). Black (2003) conducted a study in which participants reported difficulties in forming a lesbian identity due “to the racism, sexism, heterosexist oppression, and institutionalized oppression” (p. 89). The participants reported that racism was the most stressful aspect they experience, followed by sexism and heterosexism.

Black’s (2003) findings are consistent with the conclusion reached by Hoggs, Turner, and Davidson (1990) that ethnic minorities face numerous types of internalized oppressions stemming from their minority status as it interacts with gender and with sexual orientation (*see also* Holcomb-McCoy, Moore & Thomas, 2001). Because internalization of the negative minority status often occurs at an early age, it is more difficult for many African American women to come out. This likely is exacerbated by the fact that African American lesbians across the United States are assumed to be a small group and lack significant support in the Black community.

Sexism and heterosexism are important factors that also impact how society views African American lesbians and how they perceive themselves. Collins (1990) noted the existence of an assumption that African American women are always strong and domineering when, in fact, women should be weak and fragile. By choosing to cross the restricted area of gender roles and the expectations of each gender, African American lesbians are often looked upon as flawed women who want to be men and who are lesser than heterosexual women (Greene, 2000).

### **The Coming Out Process**

Gagne, McGaughey, and Tewksbury (1997) defined the term “coming out” as denoting the processes whereby gay men, lesbians, or bisexuals disclose to others their sexual orientation. Appleby and Anastas (1998) noted that the term originated in gay and lesbian culture and

“implic[s] some level of public declaration of one’s homosexuality” (p. 66). In what is perhaps the most comprehensive definition, the American Psychological Association stated:

The phrase "coming out" is used to refer to several aspects of lesbian, gay, and bisexual persons' experiences: self-awareness of same-sex attractions; the telling of one or a few people about these attractions; widespread disclosure of same-sex attractions; and identification with the lesbian, gay and bisexual community.

Many people hesitate to come out because of the risks of meeting prejudice and discrimination (APA, 2014, p. 1).

Contemporary research suggests that the integration of one’s core identity and sexual orientation is a necessary precondition to fostering a positive self-concept, stable mental health, and state of personal well-being (Chung, 1995; Croteau & Bieschke, 1996). Like heterosexuals, gays and lesbians experience a sense of freedom and enhanced self-worth that comes from being able to disclose important details of their lives without fear of censure, and receiving support from family, friends, and colleagues. However, coming out is not a uniform, across-the-board process. According to McDonald, McIntyre, and Anderson (2003), lesbians can be “out” in one aspect of their lives but not in others. Individuals who are denied the right to come out for whatever reason may live in constant unhappiness evidenced by personal isolation and rejection by family, friends, and colleagues. Not surprisingly, these persons may report more frequent mental health concerns than lesbians and gays that are out of the closet and may experience more physical health problems as well (McDonald et al., 2003).

The existence of homophobic environments makes the coming out process exceedingly difficult for many LGBT individuals, especially African American lesbians, who may be subjected to discrimination or violence, and receive limited support from family, friends, and

colleagues (Turner, 1997). Behaviors that occur outside the stereotypical norm of male or female behaviors, or actions that display same-sex desirability, may be met with strong resistance. Even when physical violence does not occur, the fear that it is imminent can have real and paralyzing consequences in the lives of gay and lesbian individuals.

### **Theoretical Models of the Coming Out Process**

There is a divergence of opinion as to what the gay and lesbian coming out process entails. Cass (1979) was the first researcher to develop a model. She viewed coming out as a developmental process by which individuals recognize their sexual preference for those of the same sex. Cass's model consisted of six stages: 1) the identity confusion stage in which the individual questioned his or her sexual identity; 2) the identity comparison stage in which the person reacts in a positive manner to being different but hides this from others; 3) the identity tolerance stage in which the individual begins to tolerate the identity; 4) the identity acceptance stage in which relationships within the family may become difficult; 5) the identity pride stage in which the individual is pleased with him or herself; and 6) the identity synthesis stage in which sexual orientation is no longer the main focus.

Building on Cass's research, Coleman (1982) constructed a coming out model that consisted of five stages: 1) the pre-coming out stage where an individual may feel different or estranged from his or her peers; 2) the coming out stage when an individual recognizes homosexual feelings that he or she possesses toward members of the same sex (This stage typically occurs when a person is between the ages of 13 to 18.); 3) the exploration stage when an individual begins to experiment with her new sexual identity (This may be the time when she experiences intimate sexual behavior with other lesbians.); 4) the yearning stage when the individual longs for a stable first union in which she will learn to function in a same-sex

relationship; and 5) the identity integration stage in which the individual blends her private and public self into one image.

Troiden (1989) conducted research in this area and reported that the coming out process is age specific and there are only four-stages: 1) the sensitization stage which occurs before puberty and is not seen in a sexual context; 2) the identity confusion stage in which the individual begins reflecting on the idea of his or her differentness; 3) the identity assumption stage in which homosexuality becomes a self-identity and a presented identity; and 4) the commitment stage in which an individual adopts homosexuality as a way of life.

### **Challenges Affecting PAALs Coming Out**

In order to understand the coming out process of PAALs, it is necessary to examine relationships with FFCs (family, friends, and colleagues) and how those relationships might influence their decision.

#### **Family and Friends**

Despite the existence of pockets of enlightenment and support, African American lesbians must deal with widespread institutionalized racism, sexism, and heterosexism within the Black family and the Black community (Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2003; Greene, 2000a). From rappers on the street to Black preachers in the pulpit, there is often strong condemnation of homosexuality as being abnormal, sick, and anti-Christian. Within Black communities, homosexuals are often viewed “as outsiders... poor relations [and] the proverbial black sheep, without a history, a literature, a religion, or a community” (Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2003, p. 174); however, “paradoxically, there is “acceptance” of sexual difference as long as it remains invisible” (p. 173).

When Black homosexuals come out they often face severe homophobic reactions including outright rejection by their families and friends. Those who choose to remain closeted live in constant fear that their deepest secret will be revealed. An example of this can be found in *Gender Talk* by Johnnetta Betsch Cole and Beverly Guy-Sheftall (2003) who describe the life of Pauli Murray, one of the co-founders of the National Organization for Women (NOW). A distinguished poet, lawyer, and African American Studies professor, Murray remained closeted throughout her life and even in her autobiographies did not disclose her sexuality. Though she was an active member in the women's movement and a key voice in gender politics in the Black community, according to her biographer, Murray "spent seventeen years (1937-1954) trying to cure her pathological disorder (sexual attraction to women) by appealing to psychiatrists and doctors and even committing herself to a mental institution...during her thirties" (Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2003, p. 175).

### **The Black Church**

The Black church plays a key role in fostering hate and intolerance of lesbians and gays (Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2003). Long recognized as a respected institution that instills Christian values, educates its members on how to behave, and serves as a force of resistance against racism, the Black church also is a powerful source of gender ideology educating Black women on what their proper roles are, which are to be submissive to the male head of the household and be "a virtuous woman" (Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2003, p. 106). But being a lesbian is not viewed as not being a virtuous woman. Rather, as noted by Delroy Constantine-Simms, homosexuality is "the greatest taboo in Black communities" (Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2003, p. 119). Lesbian theologian Reverend Dr. Irene Moore supports that characterization saying, "black churches, both denominational and storefront, are fertile soils for planting and cultivating homo hatred"

(Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2003, p. 119). Further, although there is not a clear prohibition against homosexuality or homoeroticism in the Bible, numerous Christians have declared homosexuality a perversion and Black churches have used the Bible to justify the oppression of homosexuals as sinners and undesirables (Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2003). Among the scriptural verses often used to support this view are the Leviticus Holiness Codes (Lev. 18:22; 20:13), the story of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19:1-90), and Paul's Epistle to the Romans (1:26-27) (Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2003, p. 120). Despite the fact that most biblical scholars have concluded that "Jesus was virtually indifferent about matters of sexuality," (Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2003, p. 120) many Black preachers continue to spew anti-gay hatred from the pulpit.

### **The Black Community**

On considering the history of Africans in America, Greene (2002) noted, "all black women in the diaspora have the horrific legacies of the slave trade in common" (p. 1); however, prior to leaving Africa and becoming slaves in America, African women were not a homogeneous group. The pre-slavery lineages of African women included membership in many different tribes, speaking hundreds of distinct languages, with different tribal customs and systems of family values and relations including lesbianism. Further, the wide range of slavery practices in the different countries to which slaves were taken, as well as the presence of cross-ethnic relationships and marriages, created even greater diversity among women of African descent. The result has been a wide range of expressions of female sexuality, including same-sex relationships, among Black women in the diaspora. Nevertheless, despite this rich history, the diversity of gender roles that African women brought with them to America have not always been welcome in their own communities (Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2003).

This lack of acceptance is not lost on African American lesbians, many of whom view it

as extremely homophobic (Croom, 1993; Mays & Cochran, 1988). They rationalize that the Black community has internalized negative stereotypes promoted by the dominant culture, particularly those of a sexual nature, and considers any sexual performance outside of dominant cultural norms as reflecting negatively on African Americans as a group and endangering their chances for acceptance (Cohen, 1999; Greene, 2000b; Poussaint, 1990). Because acceptance of lesbian sexual orientation maybe seen as immoral according to the oppressing culture's principles, African American lesbians may be seen as an embarrassment by Blacks who identify with the dominant culture (Cohen, 1999; Poussaint, 1990; West, 1999). Another reason that is often given to explain the existence for homophobia in the African American community is that being gay goes against accepted cultural ideals of marriage, childbearing, and family life (Greene, 1994c).

### **Professional Colleagues**

Slavery institutionalized racism and resulted in a lack of employment opportunities that made it difficult for African American men to assume the role as the family provider (APA, 1991). As a result, African American women were forced to work outside of the home to ensure economic survival. Despite the importance of this role, African American women are often castigated by African American men and pathologized by American mental health professionals for their success at work (Collins, 1990). Often they are blamed for problems in African American families and for the failure of African American men to gain equality with White men (Collins, 1990; Giddings, 1993).

Being able to value one's self and to acknowledge one's sexual orientation without fear of adverse consequences in the workplace is extremely important and necessary to the well-being of most persons (Chung, 1995; Croteau & Bieschke, 1996). When an individual is denied this



right because of sexual orientation, it is mentally unhealthy and can be psychologically damaging (Chung, 1995; Croteau & Bieschke, 1996). When discrimination on the basis of race is added to the mix of *-isms* that lesbians must contend with, it presents a *triple threat* to their existence—racism, sexism, and sexual orientation. This internalized oppression can have debilitating consequences. Although many professional African American lesbians remain closeted, in recent years there have been an increasing number of highly visible PAALs who have disclosed their sexuality to family, friends, and colleagues as well as the American public. Among the PAALs who have successfully navigated the coming out process are Carolyn Mobley, the first woman to co-chair the African-American Lesbian/Gay Alliance; Lorraine Hansberry, playwright and best-selling author (*A Raisin in the Sun*); Barbara Jordan, the first African-American to deliver the keynote address at the 1976 Democratic National Convention; Sheryl Swoopes, the three time WBNA all-star champion who later married a man; and, Robin Roberts, the current co-anchor of Good Morning America. These amazing women all have something important in common: each is African American, each is/was a public figure in a professional job, and each chose to come out of the closet at a time when doing so was not the most popular stance to take. Their willingness to take and overcome the risks associated with disclosure of their sexual identity has made them heroines within the African American lesbian community.

### **Conclusion**

The coming out process for PAALs has not yet been investigated. Existing research suggests that coming out may be harder and more complex for African American lesbians than for others with a same-sex orientation because it is intrinsically connected with both race and gender (Jensen, Arnett, & McKenzie, 2011). When an African American lesbian is developing a lesbian identity, she is also developing a gender identity and a racial identity (Comas-Diaz &

Greene, 1994). Black, woman, and lesbian—no part of her identity is mutually exclusive of the other and each part is necessary to facilitate growth of a healthy identity and self-esteem (Holcomb-McCoy & Moore-Thomas, 2001). Potentially, these three variables make the coming out process of PAALs different from their White female peers on which most of the current empirical research is based.

According to Fingerhut, Peplau, & Ghavami (2005), most lesbians have bonds to two communal worlds: the majority, or heterosexual society, into which they were born, and the minority subculture of lesbianism. They navigate these worlds as a part of their everyday life with varying amounts of ease. Many have a difficult time navigating them simultaneously and successfully (Fingerhut, Peplau, & Ghavami, 2005). It has been alleged that African American lesbians that are confronted with this dilemma have developed two main strategies to cope with social oppression and this lack of ease in the homosexual and heterosexual communities: problem-focused strategies that involve actively changing an unacceptable situation, and emotion-focused strategies that involve changing how one feels about an unacceptable situation (Richie, 1992). It remains unknown whether these strategies hold true and/or how they manifest in the lives of PAALs. This study seeks to uncover details of the coming out processes for PAALs, the challenges they face, and the strategies they have found to be more or less successful.

## CHAPTER 4 - METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents the methodology used to explore the experiences of 10 professional African American lesbians. Using Patton's (2002) phenomenological question as a premise<sup>1</sup>, this researcher used the following overarching research question to guide this study: "What are the meaning, structures, and essence of the lived experiences of the coming out process for professional women who are African American lesbians (PAALs)?" A qualitative methodology was needed to fully investigate the population due primarily to the fact that studies of PAALs are scarce in professional literature, and it often is difficult to access and identify PAALs because they are largely invisible in society. This chapter commences with a list of specific concepts and operational definitions that were used. A discussion of the utility of qualitative methods follows. Finally, the chapter includes a description of the sampling strategy as well as procedures used for data collection and analysis.

### Conceptual Definitions

Solid definitions of concepts are needed and expected when conducting empirical research that is rare and lacking in documentation (Patton, 2002). Since research on the coming out process of PAALs is rare, the following concepts facilitated conducting the study and explaining the results. Some definitions are working terms defined by this researcher.

1. *Professional* refers to a person who holds a position in or is a member of a profession that ascribes specific standards of education and training and that requires its members to possess the knowledge and skills necessary to perform the roles of that profession

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<sup>1</sup> This inquiry is derived from Patton's (2002) foundation question, which is "What is the meaning, structure and essence of the lived experiences of this phenomenon for this person or group of people?" (p. 104).

(Merriam-Webster, 2012).

2. *African American* is an American of African descent or a person exhibiting racial characteristics associated with African descent (Bailey, 2001).
3. *Lesbian* is a term used to describe women who are sexually attracted to other women (Bailey, 2001).
4. *Decision to come out* is defined as an internal conclusion reached by a lesbian who accepts her same-sex sexual orientation and is willing to disclose it (Jenkins, 2014).
5. *Overall Happiness* is defined as a state of complete contentment in an individual's life stemming from sometimes feeling of discontentment that has been lifted (Jenkins, 2014).
6. *Positive (acceptance) Family, Friends, and Colleague (FFC) Relationships and Support* is defined as relationships that PAALs have with FFCs that are characterized by acceptance of the PAALs' sexual orientation without judgment and that foster self-confidence and provide a safe and supportive environment for PAALs (Jenkins, 2014).
7. *Negative (non-acceptance) FFC Relationship and Support* refers to relationships that PAALs have with FFCs who do not accept the PAALs sexual orientation, are not willing to provide personal or social support, and will not provide a safe and supportive environment for PAALs (Jenkins, 2014).
8. *Willingness to Disclose* means that a person is willing to reveal some important personal information about self that is not known to others (Jenkins, 2014).
9. *Confidence* is defined as an emotion or perception involving self that contributes to one's ability to deal with situations implicating self-identity (Merriam-Webster, 2014).
10. *Oppression* is the excessive abuse or use of power by one group towards another

group and the feeling of being heavily burdened, mentally or physically, by troubles, adverse conditions, anxiety, etc., (Dictionary.com, 2014).

11. *Homophobia* refers to an irrational and distorted negative view of persons with a same-sex orientation (Hart, Olsen, Robinson, & Mandelco, 1997).
12. *Stressor* refers to something that makes persons nervous or concerned and has the potential to make them physically or mentally ill; a source of distress, which interferes with ones' happiness (Merriam-Webster, 2014).
13. *Safe Zone* refers to a workplace, school, or other civic or social organization that is openly supportive of LBGTQ individuals (Gay Alliance, 2015).

### **Qualitative Methodology**

A qualitative approach is the most effective methodology for collecting and analyzing data on the day-to-day truths and the lived experiences of PAALs (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002). This approach is consistent with that used by other researchers to conduct studies in this area (Green, 1994a). Creswell (2013) defined qualitative research as “research that begins with assumptions and the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 44). Creswell noted that when studying a problem

qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes. The final written report or presentation includes the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researchers, a complex description and interpretation of the problem and its contribution to the literature or a call for change. (p. 44)

In this definition, Creswell incorporated several elements from the interpretive and naturalistic approaches used by Denzin and Lincoln (2001) to “study things in their natural settings, attempt[...] to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (p. 3). However, it was Patton (2002) who emphasized that a qualitative method of research would assist in capturing the spirit of the lived experiences of individuals through personal interviews and focus group dialogue. As a result, researchers are better able to effectively identify factors that are otherwise incapable of being realized or defined. For instance, of importance in this study, social norms, socioeconomic status, gender roles, ethnicity, religion, and race all play a role in current society but are not readily understood in the context of the coming out process for lesbians.

Other researchers who have utilized qualitative methodologies have also recognized their value. For instance, the few studies that have been conducted on African American lesbians have all used qualitative methodology (Green, 1994). Additionally, Subich (1996) noted that qualitative research methods usually serve well the needs of a diverse group of people because they enable researchers the opportunity to examine phenomena about subjects where little information is known (Patton, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Patton (2002) concurred stating that when personal meanings and lived experiences are at the center of inquiry, the use of qualitative methods is necessary.

Another important reason for using a qualitative methodology in a study of this nature is to allow the researcher the flexibility to go where the research leads. Regarding this, Patton (2002) observed that qualitative research provides flexibility to adjust the format of the study in order to include new evidence and clarifications of participants’ experiences. This means that as interviews or focus groups progress, unanticipated questions may arise that can be used to probe

deeper for additional information. This allows the researcher to obtain a better understanding of a phenomenon especially when personal meanings and lived experiences are the focus of the investigation (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002). In sum, for the reasons noted a qualitative methodological approach is the best strategy for investigating this phenomenon.

### **Phenomenological Research Approach**

The phenomenology approach was used in this study of PAALs because the inquiry focused on the lived experiences, meaning, and context of experiences before and after their disclosure to family, friends, and colleagues. I relied heavily on Creswell's (2009) philosophy that the intent of phenomenological research is to convey the voices, and occurrences of those whose voices have been suppressed.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Edmond H. Husserl (1965) developed a philosophical approach to studying the structures of experience and consciousness known as the study of phenomenology. Together with some of his students he continued to expand his philosophy throughout his lifetime. Husserl was driven by his desire to understand the meaning of experiences associated with certain acts of subjective realities. To date, other researchers such as Ahmed, Creswell, Green, and Patton, to name a few, have contributed to this body of knowledge and utilized phenomenology in their research. For instance, Creswell (2007) observed that the approach of phenomenology could assist in "describing the essence of a phenomenon that is shared by all of the participants, focusing on experiences, meanings and context" (p. 13). Ahmed (2006) shared this view and suggested that phenomenology seeks the actual nature of a phenomenon that which makes something what it is. van Manen (1990) also noted that the essence of phenomenology is a logical attempt to disclose the internal meaning of lived experiences. Its claims are scientific because it is a precise, self-analytical, and inter-subjective study of a lived

experience. Therefore choosing to use a phenomenological approach sets the stage for findings that have yet been determined, verified, or documented.

### **Unit of Analysis**

When conducting a phenomenological study the researcher must first identify the unit of analysis. According to Babbie (2013), a unit of analysis refers to the “what or whom being studied” (p. 97). Because there is a noted scarcity of research on the experiences of the coming out process of PAALs, the analysis unit will be individuals who consider themselves lesbians, who are experts in their field, willing to share their lived experiences, and who are African Americans between the ages of 25 - 85. The importance of choosing individuals as my unit of analysis is because information relating to their decision to disclose their sexuality to FFCs, and to their experiences before and after the disclosure is by nature individualistic. It is also important to document how PAALs define themselves, as well as whether and how they distinguish themselves in society.

Patton (2002) suggested that what highlights a researcher’s decision is what we really want to say something about at the end of the study. Therefore, what is important to me is to give each individual a chance to express her personal perspectives and feelings associated with disclosure, which in turn may produce a healthy contribution to current literature (i.e., social, medical, and family sciences). Not only will this give credence to the individuals who are barely visible in today’s society, it might also reveal other unknown issues relating to disclosure that can be explored in future studies.

### **Data Collection**

The process of performing a qualitative study includes recognizing, acknowledging, and complying with all of the university’s guidelines as it applies to the study of human subjects.



After obtaining Institutional Review Board approval, the participant selection process began. Patton (2002) noted that data collection is the process of gathering information on a topic of interest. It must be done using a specific format that will enable participants to provide information that will allow the researcher to answer research questions. The description of the data collection process begins with participant recruitment.

### **Participant Recruitment**

I chose to use criterion sampling, which includes a valuable qualitative component, because participants are chosen based on their prior knowledge of the phenomenon in question along according to qualifying criteria (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002). The recruitment process began by distributing a flyer that provided the details regarding the study, a telephone number, and an email address for those interested in the study (see Appendix A). The flyers were distributed to selective safe zones and local organizations (i.e., churches, social organizations, retail divisions, etc.) in an attempt to gather participants. A safe zone is a workplace, school, or other civic or social organization that is openly supportive of LBGQT individuals (Gay Alliance, 2015).

After the initial contact and completion of prescreening, an assessment to determine eligibility was conducted. Only those participants who met the prescreening criteria were included in the study (See Appendix B). There were often times when the women thought the study would be a good match for some of their friends. Therefore, snowball sampling was also used. Walters and Simoni (1993) put emphasis on recruitment through snowball sampling in qualitative research. Snowball sampling does not involve random sampling. It is used to recruit a useful sample and is recommended when the group under investigation is invisible, where group membership is not obvious, and where access to the group is limited (Sommer & Sommer,

1991).

### **Demographic Profile of PAALs**

This study is rich with information about the lived experiences of professional African-American lesbians; however, prior to reporting the results it is necessary to provide a demographic profile of the participants. Initial recruitment efforts resulted in obtaining 12 participants that met the study requirements. Two of these individuals subsequently were removed from the study because one changed her mind about participating and the other failed to return her consent form in a timely manner. Therefore, the present study consists of 10 participants. Of these individuals, 60% are from a city in the South and 40% are from a city in the Midwest. The ages of four participants (40%) ranged from 51 to 64 while the ages of six (60%) participants ranged from 29 to 49. The average age of the participants was 44.5 years old. The modal age was between 51 and 54. All of the participants except one (90%) had completed a master's degree in their respective field of expertise; one (10%) participant had earned a doctorate degree. The participants were employed in respected positions of responsibility in law enforcement, education, finance, retail, information technology, and graphic design. Table 1 presents a summary of the participants' demographic profile.

**Table 1***Demographic Profile of Professional African American Lesbians (PAALs)*

Participant Code	Region	Age	Career Status	Level of Education
Jill	Midwest	37	Law Enforcement	Master's
Debb	Midwest	54	Merchandise Manager	Master's
Jewels	Midwest	29	Teacher	Master's
Al	South	63	Assistant Principal	Doctorate
Ava	South	56	Human Resources	Master's
Beth	South	42	Teacher	Master's
Tosha	South	29	IT Supervisor	Master's
Chandra	South	35	Graphic Designer	Master's
Brin	South	49	Finance Manager	Master's
April	Midwest	51	Education Therapist	Master's

**Emergent Codes**

The data in this study were collected using face-to-face interviews with all 10 PAALs. The questions used were designed to explore the lived experiences of PAALs including the day-to-day challenges that they face, the process of coming out to family, friends, and colleagues, and the perceived impact that coming out has on them and their professional standing in the community. A complete copy of interview questions can be found in Appendix D (See p. 155). An analysis of participant interviews resulted in the identification 21 Emergent Codes (see Table 2 below).

**Table 2***Emergent Codes*

Code Name	Number of sources	Number of references
Definition of homosexuality	10	10
Meaning associated with professional AA lesbian	10	11
Meanings associated with professional AA women	10	11
Effects of coming out	10	11
Association of social meaning	6	6
Avoidance	6	7
Challenging psychological factors	6	7
Discrimination experiences	9	9
Family values hinder self-identity	7	9
Value self-identity than social expectations	7	11
Perception of homosexuality	7	8
Self-understanding	7	7
Process of coming out	6	19
Recommendations with FFC	6	9
Support system	5	10
Stage of confusion	5	6
Anxiety	4	5
Reactions of the family	4	5
Mindful of self than others	4	5
Employers understanding of AA lesbians	2	2
Maintaining good relationship	2	3

**Geographic Locations and Sample Size**

Because professional African American lesbians are a largely invisible group two different geographical locations were used to conduct interviews: one in the Midwest and one in the South. Both regions are considered culturally traditional areas. In other words, these regions are not particularly well established as “LGBTQ friendly.” At times, this presented data collection challenges, such as increased difficulty in conducting interviews; however, dual locations were necessary in order to successfully recruit a sufficient sample.

Patton (2002) stated that an in-depth qualitative study should contain a small sample rather than a large sample as in quantitative research. Doing so allows the researcher to focus on the predetermined issues in-depth, thereby attending to all details of the interview. Ultimately 10 participants were identified that met the following criteria: 1) self-identified as African American, 2) were members of a recognized profession (e.g., police officer, nurse, professor, teacher, doctor, office administrator, *etc.*), 3) were between 25 and 85 years of age, 4) have come out fully, were in the process of coming out, or were considering coming out to FFCs, and 5) were willing to share their personal experiences. Participants were recruited from two different regions, Midwest and South. These regions are known for their traditional heterosexual life style values.

### **Interview Approach**

Prior to beginning the interview process each participant received an informed consent form (see Appendix C) that explained their rights, the purpose of the study, and provided additional details regarding the study and the interview process. Participants were given an opportunity to read the form and were asked if they understood it. Following this participants were asked to sign the form agreeing to participate. The researcher reiterated that individuals had the right to refuse to participate and to withdraw their consent at any time. Next, each participant was asked to grant the researcher permission to record the interview using a digital audio recording device. After completing the interview, participants were given a debriefing statement that provided them with emotional aftercare or contact information for other LGBTQ organizations within the community.

Patton (2002) identified the three most common methods used in qualitative research to begin the data collection process: 1) participant observation; 2) in-depth interviews; and 3) a

focus group to explore the phenomenon (Patton, 2002). The overall objective in interviewing individuals or groups is to discover what they are thinking, how they feel about something, and to find out something that we cannot directly observe (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012). Further, Patton (2002) stated that interviews could be done using several approaches. Therefore, I chose to use the standardized open-ended interview approach and the interview guide approach.

Fraenkel, Wallen and Hyun (2012) stated that when using a standardized interview approach, “The questions should have the exact wording, and the sequence of questions are determined in advance. All participants are asked the same basic questions in the same order [and] the questions [are] worded in a completely open-ended format” (p. 452). Patton (2002) observed that this makes for a faster interview because it diminishes bias and the data will be easier to analyze and compare; however, the drawbacks to using a standardized approach alone include limitations on flexibility when relating the interview to the individuals and conditions, and the normal phrasing of questions may restrict the importance of the questions asked and answers given.

By adding a semi-structured interview guide approach to the data collection strategy, the “topics and issues to be covered are specified in advance, in outline form; [the] interviewer decides the sequence and wording of questions in the course of the interview” (Fraenkel et al., 2012, p. 452). In the present study, this guide served as a checklist to direct participants’ general expression of information concerning the coming out process; the importance of self-identification associated with race, gender, and sexual orientation; and their past and present relationships with FFCs after coming out (See Appendix D). Also, it created a format for inquiry while allowing for the freedom to explore other topics that may emerge during the interview process. According to Patton (2002), this approach intensifies the understanding of the data, the

interviews remain situational, and the process is time efficient (2002, p. 453). By electing to use a combination of these approaches the researcher engenders a situation where one approach picks up where the other falls short.

### **Managing Data**

Patton (2002) referred to managing data as “identifying, coding, categorizing, and labeling primary patterns in data” (p. 463). To do this, I used audio recordings (i.e., face-to-face, telephone, and Skype), and note-taking while interviewing participants to ensure that everything was documented accurately. For the purpose of confidentiality, I stored all interview recordings on an external hard drive. Following the interview, I went over the debriefing form (see Appendix E) with each participant. The interview was deemed complete when the debriefing ended. Transcription of data followed (see Appendix F).

Transcribing and reviewing of field notes was critical for the purposes of reflexivity. After completing the interviews I uploaded each in order to transcribe the data. Transcription was done verbatim to search for themes. As I listened to each interview I compared the audio to my journal notes and documented my reflexive thoughts. I placed the content into a textual form to facilitate further analysis. Upon request, each participant was allowed to review her transcript for accuracy to help ensure trustworthiness of the data. This also was done to ensure that data properly reflected the participants’ voices. Subsequently, the recordings and journal were placed in a locked file cabinet at my home. I also stored the data on an external hard drive and placed it in a locked safe. Finally, pseudonyms were assigned to each participant to further protect their identity.

I used the software NVivo to aid with data management. NVivo is a qualitative data analysis (QDA) computer software, designed for qualitative researchers working with rich text-

based and/or multimedia information. NVivo enabled me to smoothly organize and categorize my data by nodes. A node is a collection of references about a specific theme, place, person, or other area of interest. These references were gathered by sources such as interviews or focus groups. Specifically, NVivo enabled me to collect the following information: 1) a project summary where the project status and terms were contained, 2) a source summary, which is a list of the sources in the project (this contained information about paragraph and word length), 3) a node summary, which is a list of the nodes in the project and the number of sources coded at each node (this helped me see which themes or ideas were occurring more than others), and, finally, 4) a relationship summary, which is a list of relationships that are organized by relationship types. Relationships are nodes that define the connection between two project items. This gave me an indication of how much coding was done for each relationship type in my data.

### **Data Analysis**

Analysis of data began with considering every statement relevant to the topic as having equal value (Patton, 2002). The meaning units were listed and clustered into common themes. These were used to develop a textural description of the experience. From this, I constructed textures and structures into the meanings and essences of the phenomenon (p. 45). My data analysis was based on inductive techniques, which refers to the process of discovering and generating patterns, themes, and categories from raw data (Patton, 2002). As Patton (2002) noted, qualitative data analysis refers to any “qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings” (p. 453).

### **Coding**

According to Patton (2002), developing a coding scheme should be a researcher’s first



step to begin identifying patterns and/or categories for content analysis. Codes are known as labels that are used to assign meaning to large pieces of data. My coding process was two-fold. First, NVivo generated a series of codes (called nodes in the software) after all 10 transcripts were uploaded. With my research questions as guide, the program identified relevant words, patterns, and concepts and grouped them into nodes. This analytical tool helped to ensure that only the most meaningful nodes/codes were set apart. Further, this organization of nodes/codes were listed in a code folder in the software.

In addition to the NVivo analysis, I manually coded each transcript in order to increase the validity of the findings. Specifically, I read each line of text and assigned a code to describe or identify what was occurring in the data, again using my research questions as a guide (line-by-line). Afterward, related codes were linked to each other. Finally, in order to refine and retain the most meaningful concepts, central codes were filtered again using my research questions (selective coding). I asked two of my peers to assist with the coding process. One of my peers participated in the manual coding process by reviewing the initial codes, and by giving feedback for verification; the other coder reviewed the NVivo results (i.e., sourcing summary, node summary, relationship summary, and project summary) to see if the manual coding and computer software were compatible and to see if we had incorporated some of the same codes. Additionally, a faculty member participated with the manual coding by negotiating and verifying the selection of all codes. During this process, there was consensus among reviewers that the codes with the NVivo as well as the manual coding was appropriate for this study.

### **Credibility and Substantive Significance**

Substantive significance was the last phase of data analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This phase consisted of drawing conclusions based on cross-case data assessment and then

submitting those conclusions to be verified (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Miles and Huberman (1994) recommended that research results be scrutinized according to three important questions: (1) Do the conclusions make sense? (2) Do the conclusions adequately describe research participants' perspectives?, and (3) Do the conclusions authentically represent the phenomena under study? Accordingly, several efforts were made to ensure credibility and substantive significance. First, credibility was achieved with the use of member-checking and peer examination. Member-checking involved the participants reviewing summaries of the transcripts for accuracy. According to Creswell (2007), if accuracy and completeness are affirmed, then the study is said to have credibility. Additionally, I consulted two doctoral colleagues to serve as peer examiners. Specifically, they provided assistance during the entire coding process. This process enabled comparison of codes for dissimilarities and inconsistencies. Further, my major professor, Dr. Karen Myers-Bowman, was essential for providing advisement on all aspects of data analysis and interpretation.

### **Summary**

This study sought to explore the lived experiences of professional African American lesbians who experienced a range of challenges related to their gender, race, and sexual orientation. A qualitative methodology was chosen to secure as much information as possible given that research in this area is relatively scarce. Merely skimming the surface would not give PAALs the attention that is well deserved in the research literature. Rather, by employing phenomenology as a viewing lens, in addition to the two-fold analytical technique used, credibility and substantive significance were increased. The qualitative approach described in this chapter permitted attention to detail and careful consideration of the coming out process of PAALs. The results, discussed in the next chapter, will provide a rich account of PAALs' first-

hand experiences in coming out to FFCs and the unique ways in which disclosing their sexual orientation impacted them.

## CHAPTER 5 - RESULTS

This chapter presents the findings from face-to-face, Skype, and telephone interviews conducted with 10 professional African American lesbians in order to gain a better understanding of their coming-out process, and to investigate how coming out impacts their lived experiences with family, friends, and colleagues. The study was designed using a qualitative phenomenological methodology to explore the following overarching research question: “What are the meanings, structures, and essences of the lived experiences of the coming out process for professional women who are African-American lesbians (PAALs)?” Related to this are two additional research questions that also guided this study:

2. What is the process involved in the coming-out process for professional African American women?
3. In what ways do PAALs perceive that coming out impacts their family, social dynamics, support systems, professional relationships, and expectations that they have of themselves and others?

The current chapter presents relevant findings that depict the latitude and complexities of PAALs coming out experiences, the challenges they face in everyday life, and their perceptions of the impact that disclosing their sexual identity had on their relationships with family, friends, and colleagues.

### **Themes and Sub-themes**

Along with manual coding the software NVivo uses repetitive words and phrases then groups into codes. Once the data had been examined, the codes provided information needed to establish the new levels that were created. Based on the shared recall of the participants’ sharing

of their lived experiences of coming out, also known as indigenous concepts, the following levels were established; see Table 3.

**Level 1: Confusion.** Level 1 represents a period of confusion and was experienced by all PAALs. During this period the participants were unclear about their gender roles and individual sexuality, and were not sure how they fit in with the larger society. Each participant in the study grappled with this dilemma as she searched for her sexual identity. For the most part, the participants were raised in traditional African American families that placed great emphasis on abiding by the rules and social values of the dominant culture relating to sexuality. As children the PAALs were taught to behave in ways that were consistent with a conservative Christian interpretation of the Bible that did not embrace homosexuality. For instance, Ava shared: *“I was also taught by my church that homosexuality is a sin before God and Christianity, and is not allowed or accepted in our culture. If you were associated with it you would go to hell.”* This was a common refrain among all of the PAALs that were interviewed.

The confusion that PAALs experienced may have been exacerbated by the negative views of homosexuality that were expressed at the societal level. For example, when asked to define homosexuality Ava stated:

*Well, at one point in time homosexuality was regarded as a mental illness but today a lot of changes have been made and that's no longer true. I think the term is more about gay rights rather than a sexual attraction to the same sex. I remember when I was in high school the term homosexual was meant as an insult, and it was never a term that was used with a positive overtone.*

Although Ava explained that her feelings about homosexuality have changed: *Today I think of homosexuality as an intimate desire or an act toward a person of the same sex. I don't see it as a*

*negative or unclean attraction at all.* Clearly, that was not always the case.

The data also reflect that all PAALs experienced significant confusion at an early age when they began to realize that their sexual interests and behaviors were not socially acceptable and did not fit the cultural ideals. For instance, Al shared this experience when she said, *“I was not sure of anything, and I was confused about whether or not I was a lesbian or what. I knew I was not bisexual because I had never been with a man... I would occasionally question my identity.”* Al said that this confusion even made her think that these thoughts were *“unclean and sinful.”*

Chandra described a similar experience but said she thought that her behavior was just a product of her imagination. She said, *“I often wondered, since I’m an only child, [am] I just making this up in my head?”* Chandra even thought that limited exposure to boys had influenced her behavior. She explained, *“I never lived near any boy cousins or played much with boys, so I thought just maybe that might be the reason. I just didn’t know enough about them. It was much later that I realized that it’s not that at all. I am attracted to women.”*

The level of confusion, which may last for a long time, is also a period when some of the women considered altering critical aspects of their being in order to conform to cultural expectations and be socially acceptable for their gender. For instance, Debb recalled, *“It took me about three years to realize that I really liked girls rather than guys.”* Beth shared, *“I wondered if I needed to change my personality, values, or my behaviors before coming out.”* She said, *“I wasn’t sure for a long time if I was really gay until I met my partner. After meeting her, I knew I was a lesbian.”*

***Cultural expectations.*** A significant subtheme that emerged in the confusion stage pertains to cultural expectations. All 10 participants expressed that being Black came with cultural expectations stemming from historical experiences of racial discrimination and bias against persons of African descent in America. Having to deal with the burdensome problems of race at the same time as they struggled to understand their sexual identity added to the confusion about their sexual orientation. In other words, the PAALs explained that within the African American culture there is an expectation that individuals are not supposed to be homosexual or to engage in homosexual acts. It was believed that to do so would only denigrate the Black race, which already was struggling to survive in a hostile White society. For instance, Al explained that *“in the 50s, Blacks were dealing with a lot of racism and going about the business of staying afloat in order to survive, so our parents had lots of rules.”* Ava shared: *“I was taught by my parents to be proud of my race, to embrace everything that goes with being Black.”* Tosha concurred and stated that Black Americans embraced cultural practices that helped them *“overcome harsh struggles like discrimination...like oppression.”* Although the participants supported the African American fight for equality, April seemed to sum up their feelings best when she said these cultural expectations add to the burden of being a PAAL and require *“extra hard work.”*

Other factors that contributed to PAALs confusion in Level 1 include the traditional expectations placed on women related to marriage, family, and church. Several PAALs explained that as Black women they were expected to go to church, get married, and have babies. For instance, Debb grew up in a home where Black girls were taught to obey the teachings of the Bible. She proffered,

*There was no sex before marriage, and certainly [not] with someone from the same gender. There was no mingling with gays, no friendships with Jehovah's Witnesses, no cursing, no close dancing with boys, no talking back to adults, and we had to attend church every Sunday.*

To further accentuate this point, Debb added:

*I think I was told the same thing most Black girls are told...grow up, finish school, find a husband, make sure you have a job, a house, and have babies. Don't get into trouble with the wrong crowd of girls and boys, don't hang out with gays, and don't become friends with kids who don't attend church.*

The interconnectedness of religion, race, and homophobia within the Black American culture was also reflected in the experiences of several participants who described that, at the same time as they were endeavoring to develop their own sexual identity, they were often were bombarded with religious doctrine and threats of damnation if they assumed anything other than a traditional gender role. For example, Al described a sentiment of her mother that perpetuated homosexual typecasts:

*If she saw a gay man in the neighborhood she would say, "That's a man gone wrong and he has to meet his maker, and do some explaining. Those people are sinning before God. It's not a holy way to be, it's unnatural, so promise me you will marry a good man and have a family."*

Ava said, *"I was taught by my parents to be proud of my race, to embrace everything that goes with being Black, [but] I was also taught by my church that homosexuality is a sin before God and Christianity, and is not allowed or accepted in our culture. If you were associated with it you would go to hell."*



Tosha provided an equally telling example when she described her father's negative reaction to finding out that her uncle is gay. She said:

*My parents were not forthcoming with their explanation about homosexuality and their respect for him. Although my dad loves his brother, he told us that we should respect my uncle, but my uncle's relationship with his friend was not normal, because men are meant to be with women.*

***Roles of Black women in society.*** Another sub-theme that emerged in the confusion stage pertained to gender role expectations for Black women. Children are socialized into gender roles at an early age. In this study the PAALs noted that they were not given an option to explore gender roles that were more in keeping with their emerging sexual identities. As a result, they experienced confusion and a sense of social disconnectedness.

Several participants vividly described the traditional role expectations that women in the African American community face. For instance, April shared:

*I was always being told that girls must act ladylike and soft-spoken. Marriage and having kids was always my parents' idea of being a perfect woman. I think once my dad made a statement about a gay guy in our community, something in the effect like, "If I had a son who acted like that, I would disown him." ... Black women have always had to face a lot of challenges when it comes to life that includes working outside of the home. But when you are female, Black, and your sexual orientation is not what society expects, the meanings you attach to yourself [are] heightened.*

April insisted that Black women have a "*double consciousness...and [are] always [in] a juggling act, because we understand our reality of society past and present. History informs us how we have been discriminated against by society because we go against the rules that man has*

*established.*” Despite this, Black women are expected to be deferential to male partners so as not to contribute to the ongoing emasculation of Black men that many African Americans believe that the White society perpetrates.

Only one participant in the study reported that she was not subjected to homophobic teachings by her family. Jewel felt very lucky to have a grandmother who believed in God but also respected the sexual orientation of her granddaughter. Unlike the other PAALs who were admonished *“to stay a virgin, and get married so a man could take care of them,”* Jewel stated I was told: *“I should always let my heart lead me when it comes to love. We never talk about sexual taboos.”* Jewel stated this helped to minimize the gender role confusion that she experienced in other aspects of her life.

**Level 2: Suppression.** After coming to grips with the reality of their sexual orientation and self-identifying as lesbians, every participant in this study described a period during which they hid their sexual orientation from others. The PAALs stressed that this was associated with feelings of shame and anxiety. Debb expressed that *“Black churches condemned homosexuality as sin”* and *“Rejection was on the top of my list. I never wanted to feel rejected or alone. I thought if I didn’t talk about it or act upon it those feeling would simply go away.”* Although she initially believed that suppression of this reality would make it *“simply go away”*, she found that, *“it didn’t! Not at all. I became apprehensive of disclosing my sexual orientation because I felt I still needed my family. They were great buffers against the racism during that time...During my day, we needed each other for support and protection from discrimination because of the color of our skin.”* A similar view was adapted by Al before disclosing her true sexuality. She shared, *“I didn’t allow myself to love anyone for a long time...I wanted those feelings I had to go away so I could be happier.”*

Ava also shared that when she was younger, she wanted to be accepted and to conform to social expectations. She said, *“I didn’t want to be different.”* Ava said, *“As a teen I would never sit through a love story with a group because I thought I was too different from them, my attention would be on the women.”* She tried to watch movies with her friends but ended up falling more in love *“with the female stars than the guys.”*

Beth’s experience of suppression was equally as agonizing. She stated, *“Before I came out I would act like a heterosexual whenever possible. It was not comfortable but it worked in order to keep my real identity safe.”*

***Intolerance of homosexuality.*** A sub-theme of the suppression level also emerged. All participants in the study described their social communities as largely homophobic. They named intolerance as one of the main reasons they suppressed their sexual identity. For example, Brin said, *“As a Black woman living in America I had to learn to find humor in heartache.”* Al shared that she *“stayed in the closet so long because of oppression of others and racism...It’s hard to think about coming out when you see the intolerance of others.”* In the same way, Chandra explained that she didn’t disclose because *“I worry about being rejected by my dad because of his homophobia...I also worry about how my partner and I might be treated as a couple. I worry whether people will discriminate harshly with words or even to the point of being physical.”*

**Level 3: The Turning Point.** PAALs described a point of no return in the coming out process. This describes a time when the women began to experience a compelling need to disclose their sexual orientation to others. Characterized as the pursuit of freedom from suppression, the Turning Point level reflects PAALs’ need to be authentic in all aspects of life despite the knowledge of possible negative reactions, rejection, or adverse social consequences.

Debb captured the essence of this level by asserting, *“I reached that meaning [i.e., decision] by laying all of my cards on the table and deciding what was important and what isn’t. Then I chose what was most valuable and went forward. There was no turning back.”* Ava shared that she needed something to change in her life, so *“it was my turning point.”* Brin stated that *“I had to take charge of me, so when I went to my parents that day, knew there was no turning back for me.”*

***Willingness and confidence to come out.*** The presence of this subtheme suggests that participants must have both willingness and a significant amount of confidence to bridge the gap between wanting to disclose and actually doing so. Desire alone is not enough. Only PAALs that are sufficiently committed to self and to becoming fully integrated members of society seem to make it. It is this psychological underpinning that seems to provide the confidence they need to embrace disclosure even if doing so adversely affects their relationships with loved ones.

All participants in the study stressed that commitment to disclosure and the desire to integrate fully into society resulted in a lifelong struggle for them. For most, the turning point was reached only when they perceived they had developed sufficient confidence. For example, Debb stated, *“I’m not sure about every homosexual, but for me, I needed willpower and especially confidence to psychologically move from point A to point B. Without the confidence I managed to build, I would not be here speaking with you today.”* Debb also shared that it took time to get to this point: *“It took a year, but my confidence had to be built. So in a way [my family] helped me to build my confidence. I’m pretty sure of that.”*

Tosha, on the other hand, claimed that hiding her identity gave her a feeling of invisibility. She said, *“I kept feeling invisible, so I had to become visible, you know, for me.”* Reflecting on internal quarrels she had with herself about being out in public, she recalled, *“If I*

*had stayed in the closet I would have been saying that I'm ashamed of who I am and that's not true. I'm proud of me."*

**Level 4: Disclosure.** This level is the period where the participants began to confide in their families and friends about their sexual orientation. The participants described how they talked to and engaged the people around them to accept the information. Some participants were anxious about disclosing due to fear of being rejected. However, in some cases, the disclosure was a positive experience. For example, Jill recalled:

*I mainly just walked up to my parents one day and said, "Can I talk to you?" They looked at me sort of crazy and said, "Sure." I think everyone was in the house because we were having Sunday dinner. So I said, "Well, I'm gay!" My cousin said, "No you're not, you're a lesbian." Everyone sort of stopped eating and turned to see what my parents' reactions were. My mother held her chest and my dad kept eating. Then my dad said, "And so, did you just come to this decision or have you been thinking about it for as long as we have?" There was a silence in the house that was (she paused) I'm not sure how to describe that silence. Then my dad said, "Can we please finish eating? Jill has finally admitted who she really is, and that's that. If anyone has anything to say that's not positive you can leave."*

Other times the disclosure was more difficult. In the case of April, she had conformed to social expectations and lived in a marriage that was a lie for 16 years. Eventually, she confessed her sexual orientation to her husband:

*I just couldn't continue living a lie, so I picked an evening when my boys were at the movies with friends to tell my ex. He got so upset; he started calling me all sort of names. He said that I had married him based on a lie and would be responsible for destroying*

*our family. His biggest concern was what he was going to tell his friends. It got pretty heavy for a while. He eventually calmed down, and left the house for a couple of days. Two months later, we decided to split up and remain respectful in the presence of the boys.*

Ava described the negative reaction she experienced when she came out to her sister. She described that her sister had a negative perception about homosexuality. *“I think the meaning she put to me coming out was, hummm well more like disgust, yeah disgust.”*

***Being true to self/Re-evaluation of priorities.*** A sub-theme that emerged from the disclosure level was the participants were able to reflect on how they felt about themselves after disclosing. Most felt a sense of relief and freedom and agreed that for far too long, society had denied them their freedom and the right to live according to their authentic identity and sexual orientation. They also resolved that a woman’s identity should not be contingent upon what society deemed to be socially acceptable.

Ava stated that while she initially had no intention of disclosing her sexual orientation to anyone, she came to believe that she was denying herself the right to be who she really was. She said, *“Hiding is not something I was willing to do.”* She also averred that while she remained in the closet, *“I couldn’t be the person I am today.”* For Jill, *“coming out gave me my life back...it made me understand myself, and I was better able to mingle with people and just be me.”* With her disclosure, she felt more confident and pleased with her life. Specifically, she noted,

*My thoughts on what is important in life elevated to a different level, you know, a more positive level and I internalize things better. It’s sort of funny because what I used to consider important or beneficial is now not that important or beneficial.*

When asked to provide a specific example, Jill shared, *“I don’t care what people think of me any longer, it use to worry me a lot but now it’s not important.”*

Debb shared similar circumstances. She claimed that the disclosure made her feel positive, because *“[I was] no longer looking over my shoulder or worrying about what others think about me.”* Disclosure allowed her to express herself more genuinely. She said, *“I go out dancing, to dinner, and to other social events with my partner.”* She further described that disclosing her sexual orientation *“freed me from those who were trying to cage me...and those who tried to stop me from experiencing real love for the first time.”* She finally said, *“I actually felt relieved after I came out, I felt free to be me. It was like a wave of calmness had possessed me.”*

The desire for personal authenticity was also associated with contempt for being dishonest with those who stereotype PAALs. Beth shared that disclosing her sexual orientation in public changed her life. She said she finally had the chance to free herself from lies. Jill stated, *“I couldn’t be happier...I’m living the life as the person I am.”* Beth indicated, *“I changed by telling myself that I would never tell another lie because I had lived a lifetime of lying about who I really was.”* She stressed that

*Coming out increased my sense of self-worth and it decreased my stress level. The biggest change was that I was able to openly develop myself in the ways I wanted to as a person. I was able to start dating girls, ultimately finding a partner. I really became more confident and more open about my sexuality.*

Ava expressed no regrets about her decision to disclose. She said:

*What I did back then has made me who I am today. I am stronger because of my decision to come out and to whom I first came out to. Life is too short to hold back, I think more people need to feel free to be themselves.*

**Level 5: Proving Self/Becoming an Advocate.** The last level of the process described by the participants occurs after coming out. It pertains to the ways in which PAALs feel that they must continuously prove their self-worth in society as a person and professional. For example, Tosha commented that while coming out “*has been a life-changing experience,*” she knew she was “*a strong woman who could accomplish the task.*” However, she often feels obligated to continually establish her worth:

*Well, sometimes when I walk into a room, my race and gender speaks before I have gotten a chance to open my mouth. Ugh! I pull my shoulders back and stand proud because I am not about to let this world eat me alive...I knew if I could deal with the little racism, prejudice, and the ill treatment of being a young Black woman, then one more thing wouldn't kill me. Black women have had to deal with that a long time. But being a lesbian, that takes a whole other level of strength and having to prove my worth.*

Beth, who believed that she possessed the ability to “*succeed in anything,*” also felt the nudge to constantly prove her worth. Consequently, she remarked about how her experiences led her to “*empower other young Black females.*” Specifically, Beth stated, “*Having to deal with what I've gone through, feeling the need to prove myself all the time, I just wanted things different for other women like me. That really serves as a broader mission of mine.*”

Chandra's bouts with having to prove herself provided inspiration in similar ways:



*“Once we have achieved the status of professional or expert in a profession, and knowing what we’ve gone through just to prove that we’re just as good, then we need to help our community, especially when they don’t think they can help themselves.”*

She further added:

*You know, because of our unique barriers as a race, and our gender, a lot of Black women are compelled to place a great deal of significance in becoming a professional. We look at it as striving for equality...It’s all about paying it back, or shall I say paying it forward.*

Essentially, Chandra explained that proving is a life-long process placed on professional African American lesbians. Consequently, she contended that this process necessitates commitment to their *“well-being, job satisfaction, and being a mentor to other Black females.”*

Brin also stated that the proving is a lifelong process for PAALs. Further, she claimed that with this process, *“I have had to learn to find humor in heartache.”* Brin shared how African American women in general kept their resilience and strength in the *“mistreatment, racism, and brutal hostilities of a predominantly White society.”* These experiences gave her the courage and vision to:

*support my family comfortably, be involved in organizations for equality, and I have secured a position where I have become a leader in my profession, but still I keep in mind that as an African American woman, we cannot count on being fully embraced by mainstream White America. We have to prove ourselves even more. As a Black woman, having the ability to be resilient and competent would be my meaning.*

Beth determined that *“I find myself more ambitious than I was before I finished college. I’m in a position now where I can empower other young Black females, that really serves a broader mission of mine.”*

**Self-values.** Self-values emerged as an important subtheme in the Proving Level. All ten participants shared that they cherished their real identity and the values they embraced. For example, Beth elaborated that *“love of family, hard work, kindness, freedom, and integrity are the most important values to me.”* These values guided her in becoming a leader in her field.

Another example was stressed by Jill who commented that her childhood taught her to *“value my real identity—the person I am today. I was taught to value the identity I was told I had.”* Jill also said that while she honors how African American girls should socially behave, she said: *“I always felt that my values were different. I value my self-identity.”* Further sharing:

*I value the freedom people should have to decide who they are for themselves. Who I am is important to me, I have never felt that I am a girl. I have a girl’s body but my mind says I’m not.*

Jewel also offered perspective in terms of the values that motivate PAALs. She shared, *“We were taught to love and support family, to believe in God, and to do no wrong to others. So I think self-worth and family love embodies my values.”* For Jewel, disclosing her true identity meant permitting herself the freedom to be genuinely respected and valued.

Ava offered insight concerning how her parents managed the teachings of the church and the social expectations of people living in a predominantly Black community. She described her parents as supportive:

*They disagreed with the church, but they never left the church. They are to this day members. My values have not changed because of my culture, I see people as people*

*without judging them based on their sexual orientation or preferences. My parents didn't have a problem with homosexuality, therefore, I didn't. They taught me to respect everyone, unlike our church when I attended there. It's a shame that they are still that way.*

***Self-actualization.*** The process of coming out significantly influences how lesbians actualize themselves in society. More specifically, African-American lesbians constantly strive to be successful professionals “despite the limited resources” and stereotypes they encounter in their environments. For many of these participants, success in their profession is associated with personal acceptance. In most cases, the more they struggled to be accepted, the higher their desire was to be successful. For example, Jill cited that she needed “*to possess a state of confidence to do whatever it took to succeed; but it's been important for me to be the best I can be professionally, especially to feel more confident about myself.*”

Similar to Jill's contention, Ava stated that lesbians aspire to achieve “*everyday working goals and self-acceptance.*” However, Ava placed greater emphasis on how she regarded herself as a Black professional woman by stating, “*I never think of myself as a professional lesbian, because I see myself as a professional Black woman. Being a lesbian does not define all of me, but being Black defines the most important part of me.*”

Like Ava, Tosha underscored the importance of seeing herself as a proud, professional Black woman. At the same time, however, she sees her various identities as linked and draws confidence from them:

*For me, it's nothing different, the same as being a Black woman I suppose, because I don't separate myself from being a Black woman and being a Black lesbian. It's who I am, you know? The meaning I attach to being a PAAL is striving to be powerful and*

*standing proud! Actually, this may sound odd, but being a lesbian increases my self-esteem and my confidence. It's sort of crazy but true.*

Beth also described her acceptance of multiple identities (i.e., professional woman, Black, lesbian) as empowering. More specifically, she noted that her disclosure impacted her professionally but it was especially *“inspiring, and made me feel limitless, like a leader, powerful, accountable, assertive, confident, and capable.”* Chandra, whose biracial identity compounds her experiences, supported this notion of self-actualization and empowerment by stating:

*My drive, determination, and my right to be equal as a leader in corporate America is the meaning that I attach to being a professional. It's because we are so underrepresented as a race and because of our sexual identity that the drive is so intense. Because I am biracial I feel as though I never really fit anywhere, so I overachieve. It is not easy being biracial, a woman, and a lesbian.*

Debb shared similar circumstances. She claimed that the disclosure made her feel positive, because she was *“no longer looking over my shoulder or worrying about what others think about me.”* Disclosure allowed her to express herself more genuinely. She said, *“I go out dancing, to dinner, and to other social events with my partner.”* She further exclaimed described that disclosing her sexual orientation *“freed me from those who were trying to cage me...and those who tried to stop me from experiencing real love for the first time.”* She finally said, *“I actually felt relieved after I came out, I felt free to be me. It was like a wave of calmness had possessed me.”*

In summary, analysis of the data in this section indicates that PAALs experience a range of complex emotions and life experiences that make the coming out process both frightening, and for some, absolutely necessary. Beginning with the period of confusion about their gender role and sexual identity PAALs typically transition through levels of suppression and fighting

back before reaching the point of actual disclosure. Once disclosure occurs PAALs may experience a sense of freedom and confidence that they are now in control of their own destinies. This typically occurs in the proving level when PAALs may feel inspired to achieve self-actualization. Although each participant has gone through each level, not all went in a linear direction, and each has stated that they find themselves going back to certain levels at different times in their lives.

This population of women is important because they have been all but forgotten in the LGBTQ literature. PAALs have a unique place in the conversation because of cultural factors but also because of the “expert status” that they uphold in their respective fields. Being members of the LGBTQ persons, PAALs may be seen as having a deficit in their personal lives, while simultaneously existing as an above average contributor to their profession. Society, as well as some people these women have encountered in their personal sphere of influence, view being a lesbian as a deviation from what is considered “normal” sexual practice. Although there are some parts of society that are becoming more accepting, PAALs still may find themselves to have dual roles in society; they are expected to be competent professionals with an expectation that this will transfer into their personal lives as well.

**Table 3**

*The Levels Involved in Coming-out for Professional African American Lesbians*

<p><b>Level 1: Period of Confusion</b>—Participants are unclear about their sex role and begin to question their sexual identity.</p> <p>Sub-theme A: Cultural Expectations—Participants attempt to align their sexual identity with what is expected by society. They do not want to be different.</p> <p>Sub-theme B: Roles of Black Women in Society—Participants learn acceptable gender roles and struggle to abide by them.</p> <p><b>Level 2: Suppression</b>—Participants suppress all outward signs and behaviors indicating they are attracted to the members of the same sex.</p> <p>Sub-theme A: Intolerance of homosexuality—Participants know that homosexuality is not looked upon favorably, worry about being rejected by FFCs, and may experience discrimination or other forms of intolerance.</p> <p><b>Level 3: Turning Point</b>—Participants describe this as the turning point in their pursuit of freedom. They take control of their self-identity. They feel compelled to disclose information about their sexuality despite potential negative consequences.</p> <p>Sub-theme A: Willingness and Confidence to Move—Participants struggle with the decision to disclose but are strongly committed to being fully integrated members of society. This gives them the confidence to embrace disclosure even if doing so adversely affects their relationships with loved ones.</p> <p><b>Level 4: Disclosure</b>—Participants come out to family, friends, and others.</p> <p>Sub-theme A: Being True to Self/Re-evaluation of priorities—Participants determined that their identity as women is not contingent of societal expectations. Rather, what is most important that they are true to self.</p> <p><b>Level 5: Proving Self/Becoming an Advocate</b>—Participants state that although the decision to come out is freeing they feel compelled to continually establish their personal and professional worth in the eyes of society.</p> <p>Sub-theme A: Self-values—Participants make a conscious decision to value self above others.</p> <p>Sub-theme-A: Self-actualization—Participants are inspired to live their lives to the fullest.</p>
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SRQ2: In what ways do PAALs perceive that coming out impacts them in their close relationships (i.e., family and friends), social settings, and professional contexts?

Data analysis revealed there is great diversity in the ways PAALs perceived their decision to come out affected their relationships with family, friends, and colleagues in social and professional settings. Specifically, (1) some relationships did not change, (2) some relationships changed initially but later normalized, (3) some relationships were permanently changed. Additionally, some PAALs reported they experienced discrimination in church and social gatherings while others described a life of constantly struggling to prove themselves in a professional context.

### **Some Relationships Did Not Change**

A few participants in this study described that coming out did not change their relationships with family and friends. For instance, Brin expressed the following: *“My family decided that whatever it took for me to really understand myself, and to love who I am, is acceptable with them. As long as I understood that society had a distorted lens when it comes to homosexuals.”* Brin’s relationships remained the same throughout her life. She explained, *“I see the same people, and my family, and I get along wonderfully.”* Jill felt that her relationships *“remained the same, whether good or bad....you know?”* *“My friends see me as Jill, loyal friend, hard worker, and a good friend.”*

Jill shared that as a professional she has never had any problems with her supervisors or colleagues. She continued by stating, *“being a lesbian has never interfered with my ability to be promoted or anything.”* Her relationship at work has remained the same. Strangely enough it was Jewel who stated that racism and ageism are two issues she faces at work that began when she started and continues to this day.

### **Some Relationships Changed Initially but Later Normalized**

Some participants reported that their coming out announcement was initially met with hostility and they faced rejection by family and/or friends. After a while they were able to work things out and today they enjoy normal relationships. For instance, some participants indicated that the relationships were damaged for the long-term, while others described that their relationships changed over time. For example, Ava stated that initially her sister would not speak to her for a year, *“but, that was over 30 years ago. Now, since it has been so many years, she sort of accepts it (laughing). I guess she didn’t have a choice. She’s even good friends with my partner.”* Debb explained that in her family *“they leave no room for forgiveness or acceptance when it comes to many subjects...It took them awhile, but they have come around a little more than before.”*

Beth commented that after being passed over for several positions at work she complained and was later transferred from into another department, and *“things are different in a good way, things are more normal now, and I’m not overlooked anymore.”*

### **Some Relationships Were Permanently Changed**

Eight of the participants shared that several of their family members and close friends refused to accept their decision to come out. Ava, for instance, described how her relationship with her sister and close friend broke after her confession. Ava shared:

*I got really angry with my sister after I came out, but I couldn’t stay upset with her. It required too much energy. I told her that it mattered to me that she understood, but if she didn’t, I couldn’t change who I am and I didn’t want to...There was a lot of hurt, but I survived.*



Beth had a good relationship with her brother before coming out. She was disappointed that it changed after disclosing her orientation. She said,

*The only relationship that changed was the one with my brother. Even though he doesn't approve, he is still my brother; and if I ever needed anything, I know he would help. He's still somewhat negative, but he keeps it in check.*

When describing how her family had reacted when she came out, Beth recalled,

*"I got a lot of phone calls that evening and the next day. Two days later my brother came over and proceeded to yell at me about embarrassing the family with what he thought was 'Bullshit.' He said that no one in our family was like that. It was ugly. I listened to him rave then asked if he wanted to know my feelings about his attitude and he said 'NO!' ...He's uncomfortable when I bring my partner over for dinner, even though he acts polite. But I see that as his problem, not mine."*

Tosha explained that her relationships with her family changed for the worse because of their beliefs on homosexuality. *"I think to this day they think I'm just going through a phase. Some of the older members of my family think I am sinning, and some say it's an illness in the family."* She further shared;

*"I have to distance myself from a few, and as for my dad, mom, and brothers I know they disapprove, and I respect that so I don't flaunt around them. I have never taken anyone home to meet my family." "My dad doesn't talk to me much. If I'm over there he always ask my mom to tell me something rather than him having to speak directly to me. It's annoying but I manage."*

Tosha stated that she has one friend who's a lesbian and they talk all the time; *"She's older and has given me great advice. She also sends me books to read about homosexuality and family issues."*

Jewel provided a vivid description of her family still has a low tolerance for homosexuality and stated, *It has not changed.* She described the night when she was outted.

*My parents woke me up screaming and swearing at me, they began dragging me from my bed. I still remember it like it was yesterday. I knew they would be upset, but I didn't think they would go postal on me. My parents received a phone call from a neighbor one night, and all hell broke loose. I was taken out of my bed around eleven o'clock, pushed around, dragged by my hair and thrown out of the house. I was 14 years old. My mom was yelling how could you embarrass us like this? I didn't have shoes on my feet, no coat, no money, nothing. I called my mom but she would only say, when you repent your sins we'll think about allowing you to return. My dad said I was filthy, and the devil had my soul. I have not spoken to my parents in 15 years.*

She also shared, *"I managed with God's divine help and the help of Mema. I got really close with my grandma. I stopped going by or calling my parents because that was always painful."*

Concluding on a positive note, Jewel stated that relationships with her friends remain strong.

Although Debb's relationship with her family and friends were okay before she came out, they became fragile after she disclosed. She was 17 when her relationship with FFCs changed for the worse.

*I think my mom told my grandmother I was asking a lot of questions about women loving each other and that I had a crush on another girl at school. Well, that following Sunday, my grandmother asked the church to pray for me because I had lost my way, and Satan*

*was trying to take my soul. I was so embarrassed that Sunday I could have died right then and there. My friends were asking me why was the church praying for me? I don't think the other kids knew, but all of the adults did. I was never nice to my grandmother after that day.*

Since she divorced her husband, April explained that their relationship has changed. *"It was intense for a long time, but now that he has remarried it is much better."* Her relationship with a few friends ended but she gained new ones that are extremely supportive. After thinking about it, Al explained, *"A few of my friends have slowly dropped away, but it was okay because they were not true friends."*

A major consequence that some PAALs faced as a result of their decision to come out was estrangement and withdrawal of familial support. Jewel's story (which is described above) provides a graphic example of this. Additionally, Ava shared that while her parents accepted her, *"My sister, on the other hand, was not really overjoyed about my decision because she was embarrassed."* Tosha explained that she received no support from her family.

Debb shared that *"It was rough growing up in my household as a lesbian."* Her family's form of support was *"not to say anything."* She recalled that her grandmother and cousins strongly opposed her decision to disclose her sexuality in public. Debb said:

*Traditionally an African American lesbian may have a lack of support in the community and social networks even though the African American community is known to be a safe haven for many oppressed groups. In my family it was no different. My family members are traditional homophobes, they believe in what the church preaches about homosexuality. Seriously they do, and everyone from my parents to my siblings and most*

*of my cousins were not supportive of my disclosure. They believe that they are obeying God's word.*

Jewel communicated that *"the support I got from my parents was and still is zero."* She further stated that

*Whether its money, love, affection, security, none of that. I'm almost sure I'm not their child. I just look like them. Mema has always been there for me, as my protector, my provider, my teacher. She is my everything! She accepts me unconditionally and encourages me to reach for the stars. She doesn't care who I'm with as long as that person is good to me and loves me as much as she does.... although, I think that's impossible. (smiling).*

As disconcerting as these statements may be, not all PAALs were adversely affected. For instance, Brin shared that her family members *"have stood by me 100% of the time."* Beth also shared she experienced some positive support and relationships. *"After I identified those who I thought would be supportive they were non-judgmental, tolerant of my viewpoints that they themselves don't hold, and they were willing to assist me in whatever I needed in my coming out process."*

Despite their adversities inherent in their situations all participants in this study seemed to value their relationship with their families. Indeed, most participants expressed that an important consideration in their decision to disclose their sexual orientation was the acceptance and support of their families. While eight of the participants shared that they had been reunited with their families, two participants remained estranged. Professionally, several participants spoke of either being held back in their current positions because of their sexual orientation or being overlooked.

Although there is no clear proof of this, they felt this is what is happening because they are more qualified than their colleagues.

### **Discrimination experiences in church and other social settings:**

Four of the participants were brought up in Christian, homophobic families that believed that lesbianism is sinful. Debb explained that she encountered discrimination within and outside her home. Debb described herself as an outcast of the church, which “*condemn[s] homosexuality and use[s] the Bible blindly to justify and promote discrimination and oppression to those who are different.*” Debb elaborated by adding, “*The majority of the Black churches preach that homosexuality goes against Black family values and that it’s unnatural and reflects the devil.*”

Jewel claimed that, even in 2015, she continues to face social discrimination. She shared the following story:

*Last summer I took Mema out to lunch for her 70<sup>th</sup> birthday along with a friend of mine (who happens to be a lesbian). We don’t hide who we are. It’s very obvious to everyone because of the way we dress socially. I wear men’s clothing and I love wearing them. Anywho!! The waiter took his sweet time coming to our table, and when he finally made his presence known after about 15 minutes after we had set down, he was impatient and started an argument with me. I’m not sure now what it was about, but it was stupid. Oh, Oh, OHHH, I remember. He started suggesting other (gay) places to eat, and ask if maybe we wanted to check them out. I put a tongue whipping to him and asked him to get the manager. The people next to us spoke up in our defense. I was looking around for cameras because I thought for a moment it was the “What would you do” show.*

April revealed what she described as a transparent form of discrimination when she was out to lunch in a mall with a friend and the following occurred:

*We went to a food court to get something to eat then set down. We started eating from the same plate and guy came up to us, and said, "You two ought to be ashamed of yourselves. You don't think men are good enough for you." I saw it as sheer ignorance and nothing more.*

### **Workplace and Professionalism Concerns:**

A unique aspect of this study is that the sample includes only African American women who are in professional careers. The emergence of this theme reflects that these women, because they were lesbians, felt as if they needed to constantly prove themselves professionally after disclosure. For example, Al remarked: *"In the community, but especially on the job, I have to prove myself. Homosexuality is just about my sexual preference, and it has nothing to do with my abilities to contribute on my job."* Jill added that because of the stigma and pressure to constantly prove their professional abilities, PAALs are motivated to continuously improve themselves. To expound, she shared:

*As a professional, it's about my psychological needs and my desire for self-improvement, because my sexuality is only a part of who I am. Most people only see the lesbian part of a professional woman when she chooses to come out. The meaning that I place on being a professional is much higher than my sexual orientation. So I'm always trying to find ways to improve my work skills so that speaks louder.*

Jill ended her statement by saying she believes that being a lesbian has not *"interfered with my ability to be promoted or anything."*

April added that although she feels compelled to prove herself, she uses it as motivation to exceed professional expectations in her organization. To highlight this point, she contended:

*See, being a professional Black woman, I see it as having more opportunities in corporate America than ever before, but also as having to face more discrimination and biases. Personally, the meaning I place on it is gratification and extra hard work to advance where I work.*

Al spoke briefly of an incident where she had come to the realization that regardless of her skills or credentials she was not going to be promoted because of her sexual orientation. *“I can tell you about the time I applied for a promotion, I was the only qualified candidate applying for the position (fully qualified), and didn’t get it.”*

Jewel expounded on racism and ageism in the workplace as a Black professional lesbian. She shared that she believes that she faces racism and ageism at work. Her classroom consists mostly of Black kids. *“I have spoken with the principal, but he says I’m reading more into it than necessary.”* As far ageism, she expressed *“I am the last to get anything new for my classroom. All of the other teachers who are older than I am are given the better supplies, and I get the leftovers.”*

Several participants shared that their relationships with their supervisors are positive when the supervisor respects and values their skills and knowledge. The key to having a good relationship with staff, as stated by Chandra, is to *“be more sensitive to the needs of others, and I do that because I know what it feels like to be an outsider.”* Whereas, April commented, *“I try to build trust and mutual respect with the people I work with. This gives me a little leverage when I’m trying to get things done.”*

Although some of the participants spoke of working well with their colleagues, there was still an air of concern regarding respect from co-workers and supervisors. They believed that there was a hidden sense of discrimination because of their sexual orientation.

## Summary

The findings of this study begin to contribute to a better understanding of some of the lived experiences of coming out for professional African American lesbians. As Black females they were taught to obey the church and its teachings, to marry and have children, and to follow the lead of the husband. They had to face multiple challenges (i.e., discrimination because of race, gender and age, cultural expectations, unrealistic family values, loss of support and respect from family and friends, discrimination on the job, etc.) as they moved through the coming-out process. Although these were difficult challenges, there were also benefits to their decision of disclosure. Each of the participants shared that coming out was one of the greatest achievements in their lives. Whether they chose to come out, or were outted by others, this act freed them to become who they are today. Coming out has enabled them to love who they want, to live how and where they want, and to set professional and personal goals without feeling invisible. It also allowed them to pave a path for others.

Results of this study establish that for professional African American lesbians, coming out is a very complex process with several critical levels: a period of confusion and the awareness of same-sex attractions, suppression on account of cultural intolerance, resisting typecasts and accepting their sexual identity, coming out and labeling themselves as lesbian or homosexual, and feeling the need to prove their worth on the job and in society. At the same time, results also indicate that the decision to disclose their sexual orientation often had a consequential impact on their close relationships (resulting in withdrawal of support for many), the ways in which religious groups and the Black community viewed them, and how they were treated as professionals.



## CHAPTER 6 - DISCUSSION

Greene (1994b) observed that the coming-out experiences of African American lesbians are very different from those of White lesbians because of race. She suggested that although White lesbians also are a minority group they have enjoyed numerous privileges throughout their lives that are not available to African American lesbians because of their race and ethnicity (Greene, 1994b). Greene's assessment has face value, but it was not grounded in empirical research. In fact, at the time Greene made this statement, research exploring the coming-out process of lesbians was extremely limited (Greene, 1998a). Additionally, research investigating the coming-out process of professional African American Lesbians (PAALs) was non-existent.

This dissertation research stems from my interest in Greene's assertion, which I found to be quite provocative. As a result, I identified three gaps in the literature. First, I found that there is a lack of research discussing PAALs from an historical perspective. Second, prior to this study there was no empirical research addressing the major challenges that impact PAALs' decision to come out to family, friends, and colleagues. Thirdly, no studies had been conducted that identified an effective process for PAALs to come out in social and professional settings. This study begins to fill these gaps in the literature. This is a qualitative phenomenological study that raised three questions. The overarching research question is "What are the meanings, structures, and essences of the lived experiences of the coming out process for professional women who are African American lesbians (PAALs)?" The specific questions that guide this study are:

1. What is the process involved in the coming-out process for professional African American women?
2. In what ways do PAALs perceive that coming out impacts their family, social

dynamics, support systems, professional relationships, and expectations that they have of themselves and others?

At its core, the overarching research question asks what it is like to live life as a professional Black woman who self-identifies as a lesbian. The sample consisted of 10 professional African American women that self-identified as lesbians. They ranged in age from 29 to 63 with the average age being approximately 45 and the modal age range between 51 and 54. Each woman held a Masters degree or higher. All were employed in professional positions including law enforcement, education, finance, retail, information technology, and graphic design.

The qualitative methodology called for each woman to complete a face-to-face interview. Data analysis yielded 21 codes that were then aggregated into five themes and several subthemes that serve as the basis of a 5-level model for understanding the coming-out process. This chapter presents a discussion of the study's results and provides recommendations for Family Life Educators seeking to affect appropriate changes.

## **What is the Process of coming-out for professional African American lesbians?**

The analyses led to the identification of several levels within the process of coming out for the participants. These levels are progressive, but are not always linear and may overlap.

### **Level: Confusion**

All participants experienced an initial period of confusion about their sexual identity. This level of indecisiveness might end relatively quickly or may last for years. In many cases, the confusion about sexual identity was exacerbated by family members, and/or friends and the Black church who rejected PAALs or tried to redirect their behaviors to more socially approved

sex roles.

### **Level: Suppression**

Many of the PAALs expressed that when they came to grips with the reality of their sexual identity they initially experienced great shame and anxiety because they feared being found out. Undergirding this fear was a concern that they might be rejected by their family and friends, and condemned by the church for being a sinner and homosexual.

### **Level: The Turning Point**

PAALs described the Turning Point as a period characterized by their pursuit of freedom. It was a time in which they refused to turn back or be controlled by others any longer. However, for several of the women, this new freedom did not come without a high cost. Most of the women had delayed coming out because they feared rejection, estranged relations, and adverse social consequences.

### **Level: Disclosure**

The Disclosure level marks the period in which the participants began to acknowledge their sexual identity to family, friends, and colleagues. A few PAALs described disclosure in positive terms while others described the experience quite negatively. In some cases the women faced rejection resulting in family relations that were permanently changed or destroyed. Overall, these women expressed no regrets about who they are.

### **Level: Proving Self**

Proving is a level that justifies the existence of the participants and recognizes their strength as women. It explains how they see themselves in the workplace. Each has achieved success within their careers where they are seen as leaders and women of importance. Although several, at one point or another in their career, had faced career discrimination, this rejection did

not force them to give up. They pushed harder for self-actualization and became advocates for others.

### **How does this process compare to other models of coming out?**

**Table 4**

*Comparative Theoretical Models/Levels of Coming Out*

Cass (1979)	Coleman (1982)	Troiden (1989)	Jenkins (2015)
Identity Confusion	Pre-Coming Out	Sensitization	Confusion
Identity Comparison	Recognizes Difference	Identity Confusion	Suppression
Identity Tolerance	Sexual Exploration	Identity Assumption	The Turning Point
Identity Acceptance	Yearning Stage	Commitment Stage	Commitment Stage
Identity Pride	Identity Pride		Proving Self
Identity Synthesis			

Several different models have been used to explain the coming-out process for gays and lesbians. The models, developed by Cass (1979), Coleman (1982) and Troiden (1989), each depict the coming out process as beginning with self-awareness and confusion and culminating in disclosure of a same-sex orientation to others. The findings of the current study identified similar characteristics. However, the participants described going through a process that was not linear in nature. They did not begin with step one and proceed in one direction to the end point of coming out. Instead, they described a back-and-forth process in which they moved from one level to another, but not always in the same pattern. In fact, they had to disclose over and over again. It was not a one-time event. For example, a change in their environment or context could move them back into the level of confusion. They may then move directly into disclosure again, without going through the suppression, turning point and commitment stages again. In addition,

they clearly saw themselves in different levels at the same time depending in which group they were. For example, one woman described being in the disclosure level with her family and friends, but was in earlier levels in her work environment.

Another difference between the model resulting from the data in this study and previous models is that the endpoint of the others is disclosure. The current model moves beyond this point. The women clearly described what happens after disclosure. Particularly, they discussed the importance of becoming advocates for other PAALs after they had come out themselves. They said that they felt it was important to be mentors for other women and colleagues as they navigated the coming out process. They also served as speakers and led sessions in workplaces and churches to educate individuals about discrimination and advocacy for sexual minorities.

This inclusion of advocacy may be a direct result of, not only following the process beyond disclosure, but also focusing on African American women in this study. This population of women has already dealt with racial and gender discrimination and oppression throughout their lives and many reported that they have benefitted from the mentoring and advocacy of others. These women were also successful in their careers and, therefore, saw themselves as being in positions of power that could benefit others.

**In what ways do PAALs perceive that coming out impacts their family, social dynamics, support systems, professional relationships, and expectations that they have of themselves and others?**

The participants in this study described a diversity of perceptions of the impact that their coming out had on the family, friends, and professional relations. They asserted that some of relationships remained the same (for better or worse) as they were before disclosure, some became worse initially but later normalized, and others were permanently destroyed.

Specifically, some PAALs reported that they remained close with family and friends while others became isolated or estranged. Some PAALs reported that they lost friends but thought it was for the best since they really weren't friends anyway. Other PAALs reported that such friends were not missed and added that they were quickly replaced. With few exceptions, most PAALs spoke of being raised in homophobic families and Black Communities, and discriminated against by homophobic churches and social groups. Most PAALs described their professional lives as characterized by a need to continuously enhance their credentials and constantly prove their capabilities within the workplace. At least one PAAL expressed the belief that she had been passed over for promotion because of her sexual preferences. Despite the adversities they have encountered all PAALs indicated that they are much happier now that they aren't hiding their sexuality. They feel strongly that they are in control of their own lives.

The women in this study have allowed us to have a glimpse of what it is they deal with as they interact with others in their work and social environments. There have been only a few studies that have helped us build understanding of the process PAALs experience as they choose to come out to family, friends and colleagues. The qualitative aspects of data collection used in this study assisted in the investigation of this phenomenon. By using the phenomenological perspective, I was able to capture the voices of PAALs to "normalize" the experiences of African American lesbians as professionals.

When the women described coming out to friends, most of them indicated that it had been a mostly positive experience. They said that their real friends supported them and that if they didn't, the individuals were not their friends any way. However, when they told stories about their families, the results were much more mixed. Every participant had at least one family member who rejected them because of their sexual identity.

How can SI help us understand this difference between friends and family members? I think it can be explained based on the meanings that we attach to friendship versus family ties. When friends do not meet our needs and expectations, we can discard those relationships. However, we do not feel the same freedom in letting go of our family relationships. Therefore, when we are rejected by our family members – those that are to care for us and accept us, no matter what – great damage can be done. This can be especially damaging in African American families, because of the racial discrimination faced by these individuals. Also, the religious and cultural buffers that are often used as coping strategies by African Americans end up harming those same relationships for PAALs. For example, a part of this would be due to the “don’t ask, don’t tell” mentality in the African American community. This current study gives voice to African American women who need to be given the freedom to share their experiences. The current study is just the beginning of that conversation.

### **Is the Coming Out Experience Different for African American Lesbians?**

An underlying premise of the current study is that African American coming out experience is different from that of White lesbians. This assumption stems from Greene’s (1994a) research which investigated the overlap of racism, sexism, and heterosexism in the lives of African American women and determined that the dominant culture poses significant challenges for African American lesbians including racism, sexism, and negative stereotypes about Black sexuality that do not exist for White lesbians who enjoy numerous privileges because of their race and ethnicity (Greene, 1994b; 2000a). Greene suggested that these “isms” (racism, sexism, and heterosexism) pose a *triple threat* to Black women's being. She (1994b; 2000a) also determined that African American lesbians often experience homophobia and heterosexism within their own ethnic communities, making some Black lesbians less likely than

White lesbians to disclose their sexual orientation to the public (Parks, Hughes, & Matthews, 2004; Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2004; Weinrich, 1972).

The results of the current study support Greene's (1994) conclusion that African American lesbians' coming out experiences differ than those of White lesbians. Further, although there is insufficient evidence in this study to even begin to determine whether Black lesbians are more likely to experience sexism, heterosexist oppression, and institutionalized oppression than White lesbians, there exists clear evidence that Black lesbians experience significant discrimination and oppression because of race as well as sexual identification. However, given the racial dynamics that currently exist in America, this conclusion is not unexpected.

Further, the results of this study indicate that Black lesbians are subjected to significant homophobia from family members and religious organizations including Black churches as indicated in other studies conducted by Greene (2000) and Bancroft (2009). To some extent this also is a cultural phenomenon resulting from the Black community's desire to conform to White world's standards in the pursuit for racial equality. Often, within Black families and Black communities, African American lesbians are viewed with disgust and as detractors from the Black family and Black community's reputations. This is not to say that White lesbians are not disparaged in their own families and communities for engaging in same-sex relations; however, White lesbians do not face the simultaneous racial discrimination. In the meantime, as it pertains to the different treatment that Black lesbians might receive, the results of the present study appear to find support in the work of Black (2003) who concluded that the participants in his study had difficulties forming a lesbian identity because of "the racism, sexism, heterosexist oppression, and institutionalized oppression" (p. 89). Further, the participants said racism was the most stressful aspect of their experience, followed by sexism and heterosexism.



## **Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

The focus of this qualitative phenomenological study was to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon of the coming out process for PAALs and how coming out impacts their lived experiences at home, socially, and work. The sampling methods provided the opportunity to learn more about the phenomenon for PAALs, an underrepresented population; however, it was not intended to be generalized beyond this specific group. Further research is needed to gain information about other racial groups and about women who are not in professional positions.

The results, which are best characterized as preliminary in nature, provide a sound foundation for the additional research that is needed in this area. Specifically, information should be obtained from family, friends, and colleagues about their views on the women's coming out process and same-sex issues. It will enhance the likelihood that the coming out process, and PAALs' experiences are better understood.

## **Implications for Practice**

According to Phellas (1999), understanding how the process of coming out works for individuals of varied backgrounds is of utmost importance when interacting with families. Therefore, the following recommendations are suggested for Family Life Educators (FLEs).

### **Family Demographic and Cultural Recommendation**

It is apparent that FLE should become knowledgeable of African American family demographic and culture including family values, religious beliefs, career concerns, child rearing practices, and socialization skills. Also important is having knowledge of economic and social issues that affect African American families including discrimination, oppression, and unfavorable social attitudes towards PAALs and their family units. When dealing with LGBTs on sensitive matters such as coming out, FLEs must be able to operate pursuant to an established

prevention and intervention protocol that is culturally sensitive. This is necessary because serious conflicts between family members may erupt when a family member openly discloses, labels herself, or discusses being a lesbian (Greene, 1994b).

### **Dedication of Resources Recommendation**

FLEs should have sufficient dedicated resources to educate and work effectively with PAALs, their families, and other LGBTs that also may require assistance during the coming out process. The American Psychological Association (2010) has recommended that professionals must strive to understand how a person's homosexuality or bisexual orientation might impact his/or her family relationships. This means that FLEs also must become knowledgeable of customs, cultural values, and beliefs affecting family roles and traditions of the groups they work with. Knowledge of this information can be used to teach families how to effectively negotiate and understand gay-related issues (i.e., same sex relationships, parental guidance, health issues, and tolerance) in a way that will allow them to cope more effectively with their conflict and difficulties.

### **Referral Resources Recommendation**

FLEs also should be willing to serve as an information and referral resource for LGBTs in crisis. For instance, in the present study least two participants indicated that they were kicked out of their homes at an early age when family members learned they were lesbians. At 14 years old one was forced out on the street in the middle of the night with no money, no resources, and nowhere to go. Assuming that events of this nature are probably not unusual, FLEs should develop information brochures or packets containing a list of emergency resources that LGBTQs can contact for shelter, food, and temporary financial assistance if needed. These packets should be made available to schools and all emergency service organizations, and placed in highly

visible locations such as medical facilities and grocery stores. Related to this, FLEs should develop a public school curriculum that addresses LGBT issues, informs individuals of their legal rights, and advocates gender role acceptance and tolerance.

### **Proactive Recommendation**

Adopting a more proactive stance, FLEs should develop public service bulletins and announcements that sensitize the public to LBGT issues including hate crimes and domestic violence. Speaker forums and PSAs that promote acceptance and tolerance of members of the LGBT community should be both presented and endorsed. The Black church and other religious institutions also should be encouraged to participate in these LGBT acceptance and tolerance campaigns given that many of them are often active participants in provoking intolerance.

### **Education of FFCs Recommendation**

Kinsey (1953) challenged many societal beliefs concerning sexuality, stating that sexual orientation falls on a continuum between exclusively heterosexual and exclusively homosexual with most “normal” people falling somewhere in between the two end points. The implication from Kinsey’s research is that “normal” is relative to where one falls on the sexuality continuum. If the FLE can convince FFCs to accept this fact, perhaps they will be more accepting of their lesbian family member. Therefore it is important to teach FCCs and others that diversity in gender roles and sexual orientation is normal and does not constitute a threat to the church, the family or the human race.

## **Conclusion**

In the introduction I spoke of a friend who for years has been unhappy because of her fear of coming out. She related that this is due to her Southern upbringing, her family values, and her career status. There are those in her family and community who have made assumptions

about her sexuality for years. Some have spoken negatively of her identity while others have adopted the “don’t ask don’t tell” attitude. Still others wonder why she hasn’t “just come out already!” But, why do they expect that she is going to make an announcement about her sexual identity at a social gathering or function? I believe the simple answer is, because of the way history has established our society implies that visibility matters to most. However, whether or not she chooses to come out is her decision and hers alone.

The experiences of the PAALs in this study demonstrated the influences of culture, race, and gender in the personal and professional lives of lesbians who have disclosed, or who are in the process of disclosing their sexual preferences. For most of the participants in this study, the decision to come out was one of the most challenging events in their lives, yet they indicated it was also one of the most satisfying. Some felt pressured to prioritize their different identities. With that in mind, further studies could help other African American lesbians see that they do not have to just pick one identity — they can be Black and gay and be successful members of society. They could embrace all the parts of themselves, because by embracing all, they are at their strongest.

Finally, this study validated the claims of several studies suggesting that LGBTQs encounter difficulties in coming out. A complicating factor, as stated by several of the participants in this current study, is that coming out requires commitment, and the decision to come out impacts all facets of the lives of PAALs, including their relationships with family members, friends, and colleagues (FFCs). Additionally, this study found that some PAALs are motivated to disclose their sexual identity in order to inspire other young lesbians to come out and express their true sexual orientation. Members of the LGBT community have an important role in inspiring and motivating young lesbians to search and commit to live the life they want to

have. More research is essential to build our understanding of the coming out process, and to educate family, friends, and colleagues about sexual orientation as a whole.

In the words of Jill, “Coming out gave me my life back...it made me understand myself, and I was better able to mingle with people and just be me.”

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## Appendix A - Invitation to Participate in Study

### Professional African American Lesbians: Coming Out to Family, Friends, and Colleagues

We are asking for your help with a research study concerning professional African American lesbians (PAALs) who are willing to share their lived experiences of coming out to family, friends and colleagues.

- ◆ *What is the topic of the research* This study will focus on the experiences of PAALs who have or who are considering coming out. I would like to provide women with an opportunity for their voices to be heard regarding the process in which they used to come out, whether it is negative or positive.
- ◆ *Who will be included?* This study includes African American females between 25 and 85 years of age, who are considered an expert within her field, who self-identify as a lesbian, who are willing to share any stories of their coming out to FFCs, specifically those who have experienced discrimination within the workplace.
- ◆ *What are participants asked to do?* You will be asked to discuss the process in which you used to come out, the after effects of coming out (to date) and your relationship with family, friends, and colleagues after your decision. The questions will focus on positive and/or negative aspects of the aftermath of coming out.
- ◆ *Why should you do this?* This study will allow your personal perspectives to be heard and will provide a wealth of insight and knowledge to professionals who work with the LGBT community, families of lesbians, as well as scholars who study lesbianism. The information based on your lived experience will provide researchers an opportunity to explore implications for future research. During the interview process you can help with identifying topics related to challenges and issues pertaining to sexism, sexual orientation and racism for future studies.
- ◆ *What will happen to the information?* Information we learn from this study will be recorded, documented and relayed to participants in the study, to other general audiences, and to professionals, i.e., therapists, counselors, medical personnel, politicians, and family members who are interested in the topic. No names or personal information that would identify you will be included in the reports.

Questions? Contact Bertha A. Jenkins, Researcher, School of Family Studies and Human Services, Kansas State University, (785) 341-8798, [bertha@ksu.edu](mailto:bertha@ksu.edu), or Dr. Karen Myers-Bowman, project director, School of Family Studies and Human Services, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS, (785) 532-1491, [karensm@k-state.edu](mailto:karensm@k-state.edu).

## Appendix B - Prescreening Form

Hi, My name is Bertha Jenkins may I ask you a few questions to see if you are eligible to participate in this interview? This is for pre-screening purposes only. I won't ask you your legal name, and all of your responses will be kept completely confidential.

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No

If yes, proceed to next question. If no, unfortunately, I am unable to determine your eligibility without asking more questions. Thank you for your time.

1. How old are you? \_\_\_\_\_

2. How would you describe your racial background? You can choose more than one category.

\_\_\_\_\_ Black/African American

\_\_\_\_\_ Other

\_\_\_\_\_ Decline to answer

Unfortunately, if you did not answer Black or African American I am unable to determine your eligibility at this time. Thank you for your time.

3. How would you best describe your sexual orientation?

\_\_\_\_\_ Lesbian

\_\_\_\_\_ Bi-sexual

\_\_\_\_\_ Transgendered

\_\_\_\_\_ Transge

If "Other" please describe:

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Interviewer: Is this person eligible to participate?

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes

\_\_\_\_\_ No

\_\_\_\_\_ Unable to determine due to missing information

*For INELIGIBLE (and unable to determine) participants, say:*

“Participants for this research project are selected based on the questions you were just asked. Based on your answers, it turns out you’re not eligible to participate in the interview. Thank you for taking the time to speak with me.”

*For ELIGIBLE participants, say:*

“Thank you very much for the information you provided. Based on your answers to these questions, you are eligible to participate in the interview. Are you interested in setting up a time to meet?”

If yes, set up an interview within the next two weeks. If no, “Thank you for your time. If you change your mind, please feel free to call back again.”

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone

#: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_ Date of interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Time of interview: \_\_\_\_\_ Interviewer: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix C - Consent Form**

### **Professional African American Lesbians: Coming Out to Family, Friends, and Colleagues**

Researcher: Bertha Jenkins, MS, and PhD Candidate

Project Director: Dr. Karen Myers-Bowman

You are being invited to participate in a research study within the College of Family Studies and Human Services. For you to be able to decide whether you want to participate in this project, you should understand what the project is about, as well as the possible risks and benefits in order to make an informed decision. This process is known as informed consent. This form describes the purpose, procedures, possible benefits, and risks. It also explains how your personal information will be used and protected. Once you have read this form and your questions about the study are answered, you will be asked to sign it. This will allow your participation in this study. You should receive a copy of this document to take with you.

#### **Explanation of Study**

This study is being done to identify mental and physical stressors that may impact the decision to come out, document the different processes of coming out as a PAAL, help end the persistent isolation of PAALs, and to promote an inclusion to the current scarcity of research. It is the desire of this researcher to gain a better understanding of the mental and physical stressors where gender, sexism, and racial are at the forefront in the social, home, and workplace, and explore the experiences associated in the coming out process. This study will provide African American lesbians an opportunity to have their voices heard regarding their rebirth into a White dominant heterosexual society.

If you agree to participate, you will talk to an interviewer about what you believe are your challenges whether positive or negative. The interview will be audio and video recorded. The interview will last about 30 to 40 minutes.

To participate in this study, you must:



- be an African American female between 25 and 85 years of age,
- identify as a lesbian,
- willing to share your lived experiences,
- must be considered a professional (expert in your profession), and
- has come out, or is considering coming out to FFCs.

### **Risks and Discomforts**

You might feel some discomfort with one or more topics brought up in this discussion. If this should happen you may refuse to answer any questions and are free to withdraw from the study at any time. A list of providers for additional follow-up care will be provided for future reference.

### **Benefits**

This study will allow me to understand your personal viewpoints on being a lesbian and will provide an abundance of insight and information to professionals who work with others in the LGBT community and their FFCs, as well as scholars who study Lesbianism. The information that is gained from your lived experiences as an African American lesbian provides a brilliant opportunity to examine other topics and challenges for future research. Individually, you may benefit by being able to speak freely about incidents that occurred to you before and after coming out.

### **Confidentiality and Records**

The information you provide for this study will be kept confidential. Audiotapes and videos of the discussion will be locked in a cabinet in the researcher's office. When the audiotapes are transcribed, no information that identifies you will be included in the transcripts. Pseudonyms (made-up names) will be used to identify individual participants in the transcripts. After the audiotapes are transcribed, the tapes will be destroyed.

### **Contact Information**

If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact Bertha Jenkins, researcher, Kansas State University, [bertha@ksu.edu](mailto:bertha@ksu.edu), (785) 341-8798, or Dr. Karen Myers-Bowman, project director, Kansas State University, [karensm@k-state.edu](mailto:karensm@k-state.edu), (785) 532-1491.

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact Dr. Rick Scheidt, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, Kansas State University, (785) 532-3224.

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By signing below, you are agreeing that:

- you have read this consent form (or it has been read to you) and have been given the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered,
- you have been informed of potential risks and they have been explained to your satisfaction,
- you are 25 years of age or older,
- your participation in this research is completely voluntary,
- you may leave the study at any time. If you decide to stop participating in the study, there will be no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix D - Interview Questions

### Meaning

1. Tell me what it means to you to be a professional African American woman?
2. Tell me what meaning do you attach to being a professional African American lesbian?
  - a. How did you reach that meaning?
  - b. What values (if any) have you placed on your meaning?
  - c. How does your values now differ from your cultural values and up-bringing?
2. What has coming out meant to you? How has it affected your life?
  - a. What meaning did your immediate family members place on your decision to come out?
  - b. What meaning did your close friends place on your decision to come out?
  - c. What meaning did your colleagues place on your decision to come out?

### Family/Friends/Colleagues

1. Before coming out, explain what your relationship was to those you are close to (i.e., FFCs)?
2. Now that you are out, has anything changed? If so, what and in what way?
3. If you have **not** come out, in what way do you feel your relationships with FFCs may change once you come out?
4. As a teen what were you told is expected of you as an African American woman in regards to sexual orientation and intimate relationships? Were you warned of any particular taboos, if so which taboos? What do you think now as an adult?

5. Explain the support you received from your FFCs once you came out.
6. Explain your personal feelings of those who are non-supportive of your decision?
7. Describe a situation or time where you felt victimized by someone who you believe to be homophobic? What is your relationship with that person now?
8. Often when a homosexual is discriminated against either psychologically, or physically, their broad sense of security is interrupted and replaced with fear. When deciding to come out, what characteristics are significant for that individual to possess in order to sustain a more confident attitude when coming out to FFCs?

### **Coming Out**

1. Tell me about your coming out process, how did you address it; video, personal letter, person-to-person, text message, YouTube, etc?
2. Describe your coming out experience? What did you expect would happen?
3. Who did you come out to first, and why did you choose that person? What was their reaction to your disclosure? How did you feel after that experience?
4. Where there any family-related dynamics that influenced your decision to come out, if so explain?
5. If you have **not** come out, what has prohibited you from doing so? Why?
6. What was the initial response of your colleagues? What about your direct supervisor, how did that go?
7. Describe your relationship with your colleagues now?
8. As an African American woman have you ever been discriminated against in the workplace or in a social setting (i.e., racism, sexism, ageism, etc.)? Describe that experience.

9. Have you ever been discriminated against as a lesbian? In what manner (i.e., racism, sexism, sexual orientation, other)? What was your reaction to that incident? How was it resolved?
10. What or who influenced your decision to come out, and at what age?
11. Were you “outed” by someone other than yourself, if so who? Describe the particulars of that incident. What was your emotional state during and after the incident.
12. What psychological factors did you find challenging and stressful before coming out? Now that you are out, do you believe you were psychologically prepared for the situation? Explain.

On a daily basis our paths eventually cross with someone new, by events such as, travel, relocation, changed of employment, membership to new organizations (just to name a few). At this point, does the challenges of the process of coming out repeat itself?

13. Describe a situation and your feeling where you have had to reintroduce yourself as a lesbian?
14. If you are out, explain how you feel about your decision today?
15. There are a number of organizations within the LGBTQ community striving to assist those in need (individual support, family support, group support, educational benefits, religious affiliations, etc.). If you sought support which agency did you contact, and what type of help did you receive? Was it helpful, if so please explain.

### **Speaking Out**

1. What advice do you have in support of professional African American lesbians right to self-identify?

2. What would you like others to know about your sexual orientation as an African American lesbian?
3. What specific information you would like employers to understand about PAALs?
4. What would you like to share with FFCs who are having a difficult time accepting the new lifestyle of their daughter, sister, mother, friend, or colleague?

## Appendix E - Debriefing Form

Thank you for your participation in this study. The research behind this dissertation qualitatively explores PAALs lived experiences, by gaining information from an overarching research question; “*What are the meaning, structures, and essence of lived experience of the coming out process for professional African American lesbians.*” It seeks to advocate the end of the persistent isolation of African American lesbians, to gain a better understanding of the mental and physical stressors associated with gender and racial discrimination in the workplace, explore the experiences associated in the coming out process to their family, friends, and colleagues (FFCs), and, finally to promote an inclusion of research in today’s literature.

All of the data collected today will be kept confidential, and there will be no way of identifying your responses in the archive. I am not only interested in your individual response but I am seeking to examine patterns and themes that emerge after all the data are analyzed.

If you have any questions about the study, or would like to receive a report of this research when it is completed, please feel free to contact Karen Myers-Bowman, PhD at (785) 532-1491 or Bertha Jenkins, at (785) 341-8798.

Thank you for your time and effort concerning this project. Your participation will help expand knowledge of the coming out process for professional African American lesbians and their lived experiences. If your participation in the study has caused you any emotional distress or if you would like to explore your experience further, you may contact Kansas State University LGBT Resource Center (785) 532-5352 or Pawnee Mental Health at (785) 587-4310.