WE ARE DIFFERENT, BUT WE WANT THE SAME RIGHTS: AN INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSIS OF BLACK LESBIANS WHO ARE PARENTING IN NORTH FLORIDA

By

CLARE WALSH

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To the women who told me their stories
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WE ARE DIFFERENT, BUT WE WANT THE SAME RIGHTS: AN INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSIS OF BLACK LESBIANS WHO ARE PARENTING IN NORTH FLORIDA

By
Clare Walsh

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Chair: Kendal Broad-Wright
Co-Chair: Milagros Peña
Major: Sociology

Almost 85,000 black lesbian and gay couples live in the United States, representing 14 percent of all same-sex couples. Little is specifically known about this group since most sexuality research focuses on white gay people and most race research focuses on black heterosexuals. Black same-sex couple’s experiences highlight the unique circumstance found at the intersection of sexuality and race. I conducted semi-structured interviews with twelve black lesbian who were parenting children alone and in couples asking them their perspectives on issues faced by their families as they negotiate a social world of intersecting oppressions. A symbolic interactionist theoretical frame was used with a constructivist grounded theory analysis to give increased voice to those black lesbians who are parenting.

My analysis shows that black lesbians who are parenting feel the same, yet different. They spoke in terms of sameness as they sought to be seen as legitimate families who should be treated equally with the equal right to marry or adopt children. They noted difference as they expressed feelings that their experiences provide
distinctive challenges for them as both black and lesbian. They especially highlight how they define their sexuality in racialized terms, negotiate it in racially-defined communities, and help their children learn the different strategies of resisting racism and homophobia. They also explicitly said that managing their racial identity and the associated racism were not part of their daily experience in the same way that sexuality and homophobia were. Participants reflected on ways they self-policing their lesbian identity in order to avoid conflict, to make others feel more comfortable, or to make themselves feel more comfortable depending on the situation or the social spaces they were in.

The black lesbians interviewed for this project bring attention to their unique experiences as black lesbians in the black community as they revealed how they regulate their behavior in a social world that marginalizes their lesbian identity through homophobia and racism. These stories of black same-sex families headed by lesbians help explore and expose the complexities and nuances found at the intersections of race and sexuality, especially as it relates to the family.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

There are almost 85,000 black lesbian and gay couples in the United States and this represents 14 percent of all same-sex couples living in the United States (Dang and Frazer 2004). This group is in a unique position given that their experiences are not the same as those of black heterosexual couples or those of couples composed of white lesbians or gay men. Little is specifically known about this group since today most sexuality research focuses on white lesbian and gay couples and most race research focuses on heterosexual couples. Black same-sex couple’s experiences highlight the unique circumstance that is found at the intersection of sexuality and race. For example, Dang and Frazer (2004) report that 53 percent of black lesbians and gay men interviewed in 2000, experienced racial discrimination and 42 percent experienced discrimination based on their sexual orientation. Furthermore, Biblarz and Savci (2010) in their review of the scholarship on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) families report that even though there has been significant progress in the research on these families “we know little about the unique family processes that may unfold when families are subjected to both the concomitants of racism and of homophobia” (p. 493).
Black lesbians and gay men must negotiate the social world while being challenged by the interlocking oppressions of racism and heteronormativity.

The racism experienced by black Americans is systemic and occurs in all aspects of everyday life—at the workplace, in schools, in housing, in stores, and in daily social interactions (Collins 2000; Feagin 2000). Bonilla-Silva (2010) notes blacks, when compared to whites, are more likely to be poor, earn less money, receive an inferior education, have less access to the housing market, receive impolite treatment in stores
and restaurants, pay more for goods, and are targets of racial profiling by the police. Dang and Frazer (2004) report these specifics as examples: “less than half of Black Americans own the home in which they live compared to 70 percent of White Americans; Black men earn 70 percent of the income of White men and Black women earn 83 percent of the income of White women” (p. 11). The racism experienced by black lesbians and gay men is significant, but must also be understood in relation to heterosexism and homophobia.

Regarding sexuality, black same-sex couples experience further challenges. Heterosexism creates a social system that “denies, denigrates, and stigmatizes any non-hierarchical form of behavior, identity, relationships, or community” (Herek 1995:321). Cross-sex couples are privileged over same-sex couples. Heterosexism can be blatant or more subtle and even unintentional. Like all LGBT individuals, black same-sex people face various negative impacts from heterosexism ranging from acts of violence, to being fired or passed over for promotion on the job, to social isolation and loneliness (Gomez and Smith 1990; Harper, Jernewall, and Zea 2004). As LGBT people of color, black same-sex individuals may feel a need to choose between their LGBT identity and being a member of their ethnic/racial group. Many times they experience nonacceptance and marginalization from both communities (Battle et al. 2002; Harper et al. 2004; Herek and Capitanio 1995). In the white LGBT community, LGBT people of color may be objectified and eroticized (Harper et al. 2004). Furthermore, black same-sex couples must contend with the mainstream American stereotype of the white, affluent gay person living in an urban area of the Northeast or on the West Coast since they earn less money than white same-sex couples and are
more likely to live in the South (Dang and Frazer 2004). Additionally, since over half of black same-sex households include children they confront the additional challenges that come from raising children.

Black same-sex households are hurt, both economically and legally, by family policies and initiatives like those limiting marriage to a man and a woman or those that limit adoption of children to heterosexuals (Dang and Frazer 2004). In a recent New York Times article, “Parenting by Gays More Common in the South, Census Shows,” it was reported that in addition to the legal and economic challenges faced by black lesbian and gay couples who live in the South there is also a struggle to find a church where they feel welcome. Many of these couples grew up in and felt a close affinity to the black church,\(^1\) which may not be welcoming because of homophobia. The homophobic messages of the black church created feelings of guilt and shame. Just as the racism faced by black same-sex families cannot be understood without an understanding of heterosexism and homophobia, the heterosexism and homophobia experienced by these families cannot be separated from experiences of racism.

Researchers know the demographics and the numbers of households headed by black lesbians and gay men from the information gathered by the U.S. Census, but researchers and scholars do not know the group. As Williams Institute\(^2\) demographer Gary Gates notes, “their story has not been told” (Tavernise 2011). In this dissertation I

\(^1\) The black church is “a cultural experience involving ethnicity (African American), region (having had some orientation to the South), socioeconomic status (working class), and sociopolitical ideology (conservative)” (Schulte and Battle 2004:130) and it has a great influence in the African American community since it is “not only a place of worship, but it is also involved in social organizations, financial and educational institutions, and political movements” (Schulte and Battle 2004:131).

\(^2\) The Charles R. Williams Institute on Sexual Orientation Law and Public Policy is a research center at the UCLA School of Law dedicated to the field of sexual orientation law and public policy. It advances law and public policy through rigorous independent research and scholarship (Gates et al. 2007).
help them begin telling their story by interviewing members of the black LGBT community in north Florida. Most of my interviews were with black lesbians from Jacksonville, Florida, a city with a large population of African American same-sex couples and the second largest population of gay parents in the country, about their perspectives on issues they face as they negotiate the social worlds of both sexuality and race (Tavernise 2011; The Williams Institute 2010). I use the family as a context since heterosexism and racism both have an impact on family life in the black community (Collins 2000; Feagin 2000; Moore 2011; Powell et al. 2010). These two systems of oppression (among others) shape the definition of family, explain who can form a family, determine who can marry, and who can adopt. As I investigate perspectives of family in households headed by black lesbians, I explore the intersection of sexuality and race (and to some degree gender and class) in an institution and in a community where it has been little studied.

My project adds qualitative data to the quantitative data already available and brings the voice of black same sex families to the conversation found at the intersection of race and sexuality as I answer the following question: How do those parenting in black same-sex households frame the key issues faced by their families today?

**Overview of dissertation.** This dissertation presents a look into the perspectives of African American lesbians who are parenting in the South, more generally, and North Central Florida, in particular. It adds to the limited research on

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3 For this project, I use “black” and “African American” interchangeably since according to recent Gallup polls there is no strong consensus in the community for either term (Associated Press, 2012) and since my participants also used these terms interchangeably and expressed no preference for either term.
families headed by black lesbians and the challenges they face as they negotiate their social world at the intersection of race and sexuality (and gender and class).

Chapter 2 begins with a summary of the demographics of households in Florida headed by lesbians and gay men. The challenges faced by black lesbians who parent are impacted by both heterosexism/homophobia and racism and I deal with each separately in my review of the literature. I provide an overview of the existing literature as it relates to the study of families headed by lesbians and gay men as they are impacted by heterosexism and homophobia and I provide an overview of the existing literature as it relates to racism in the study of families headed by African Americans. I also include a discussion of the existing research on homophobia as it specifically relates to the African American community. I close this chapter with an overview of the limited research that discusses the experiences of lesbian and gay Africa Americans.

Chapter 3 begins with a discussion of the concept of “family” to provide the reader with a sense of the challenges currently faced by scholars who look to define family. The theoretical approaches of intersectionality, symbolic interaction, and feminist theory and feminist standpoint theory are highlighted since these are the frames I used to explore the challenges faced by black lesbians who parent. This chapter also includes a discussion of my research design highlighting my recruitment and sampling strategies, methods for data collection, a profile of interview participants and analysis strategy.

Chapter 4 begins analysis of my research and details how participants talk about the “sameness” of their families when compared to other families and since their families are the same as any other family, participants discuss the importance of full and
equal family recognition. Chapter 5 explores how participants understand their unique experiences as black lesbians. The focus in this chapter is on the difference in experience black lesbians emphasize in how they describe their lives. Their perspective points to the impact of the homophobia found in the black community and in the black church. My analysis revealed a stud/femme gender construct that recognizes the importance of presenting both masculine and feminine gender ideals in the black lesbian community and in the process helps participants assert a unique expression of identity at the intersection of race, sexuality, and gender. I also provide a discussion on the ways they describe talking to their children about negotiating a social world impacted by racism and homophobia. Chapter 6 describes the ways in which participants explained how homophobia was different from racism but still intertwined with it. They highlight that as black lesbians they navigate their social world at the intersection of race and sexuality with its accompanying systems of oppression, racism and homophobia, not as black or lesbian, but as both black and lesbian. The final chapter provides a summary of the findings and discussion of their contributions to our understandings of black lesbian experience today and finally includes recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

The focus of this project is on households headed by black lesbians who are parenting. This literature review offers an overview of the scholarship regarding both sexuality and race in the family context. In this review, the sexuality and family scholarship focuses on the parental fitness of lesbians and gay men. While the race and family scholarship focuses on the attitudes of the African American community toward those with a gay identity and on the limited literature of families headed by black lesbians and gay men. It begins with a general discussion of households in Florida headed by lesbians and gay men.

Households in Florida Headed by Lesbians and Gay Men

Extrapolating from the 2000 census, there were an estimated 610,000 lesbian, gay, and bisexual people (representing 41,048 same-sex couples) living in Florida (Gates and Ost 2004). In fact, Florida was among four states (along with California, New York, and Texas) leading the country in the total number of same-sex unmarried partner households (Smith and Gates 2001).

The “Census Snapshot: Florida” conducted by the Williams Institute in 2007 found there were almost 55,000 same-sex couples in Florida living with children and 17 percent of them are raising children under the age of 18 (Romero et al. 2007). Ten percent of these couples have been racially/ethnically identified as black (Gates and Ost, 2004). Furthermore, when race is a consideration, black same-sex couples are

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1 I recognize that demographic information using the 2010 census is currently available. Here I present information from the 2000 census since it has been more thoroughly disaggregated. For comparison, current demographics available from the 2010 census report a slight decline in numbers with 48,496 same-sex couples in Florida with 13 percent of all same-sex couples raising their “own” children (Gates and Cooke 2011).
more likely to be parenting than white same-sex couples (Biblarz and Savci 2011; Cahill 2009; Dang and Frazer 2004; Gates and Ost 2004; Movement Advancement Project, Family Equality Council, and Center for American Progress 2011). Gates reports that 40 percent of all same-sex couples rearing children are African Americans (Marder 2011). These children include both biological and non-biological children and black same-sex households report the presence of non-biological children at higher rates than white same-sex households. Biological children generally are children being raised in a family where their biological parent had custody and their parent came out as lesbian or gay after previous heterosexual relationship. Non-biological children are defined as, “adopted children, foster children, and grandchildren, nephews and nieces (who are biologically related to the adult who is their grandparent, aunt or uncle but not technically biological children of that individual)” (Dang and Frazer 2004:23). When compared to white lesbian couples, black lesbian couples are twice as likely to be raising a non-biological child and when compared to white male same-sex couples, black same sex-couples are three times more likely to be raising a non-biological child. Because black same-sex couples are parenting at such high rates they are disproportionately more likely to be impacted by family recognition policies like those relating to marriage and adoption.

So, what does the research about homes headed by lesbian and gay men say? Most of it focuses on developmental outcomes for children in households headed by lesbians and gay men.

**Heterosexism in the Study of Families Headed by Lesbians and Gay Men**

Empirical research on families has viewed “the family” through the lens of heterosexual experience and assumes heterosexist experience is the norm (Brown
This norm is described by many and for the most part these definitions present the “normal family” as being white, middle class, North American, married, Christian, able-bodied and heterosexual (Brown 1989:447). Since “lesbian and gay families” differ from this nuclear, two-heterosexual-parent families they are generally considered deviant and inferior. This deviant status has an impact on the framing of research on LGBT families (and any other family that deviates from the norm). Thompson (1992) contends that “researchers who have a particular standard in mind tend to overlook or disparage those who diverge from the standard” (p. 7). Moreover, there is an emphasis on difference at the expense of similarities (Thompson 1992).

With this framing scholars are missing out on an opportunity. Biblarz and Savci (2010) advise that “scholarship on LGBT families will tell us not only much about these families but also much about heterosexual parent families and, at the same time, reveal continuity and change in the social, cultural, and political dimensions of our societies” (p. 494). Despite this search for difference in lesbian and gay families there has been “more than 30 years of rigorous social science research shows that children raised by LGBT parents are just as happy, healthy, and well-adjusted as children raised by heterosexual parents” (Movement Advancement Project, Family Equality Council, and Center for American Progress 2011). Biblarz and Savci (2010) would agree as they report researchers in the 1990’s were documenting that “sexual orientations and gender identities per se have almost nothing to do with fitness for family roles and relationships, including parenting” (p. 480). Some of this research is discussed in the following section.
**Parenting by lesbians and gay men.** Research has shown that lesbians and gay men are just as good at parenting as heterosexuals. In this section, I highlight empirical research on parenting outcomes for lesbians and gay men and developmental outcomes for children raised in a household headed by same-sex parents.

Many studies show lesbians and gay men are fit parents. These investigations can be divided into three main categories based on their findings: 1) developmentally, children of lesbians and gay men are not significantly different from their peers who are raised in a family with heterosexual parents (Allen and Burrell 1996; Anderssen, Amilie, and Ytterøy 2002; Chan, Raboy, and Patterson 1998; Flaks et al. 1995; Gartrell and Bos 2010; Pawelski et al. 2006; Stacey and Biblarz 2001; Tasker and Golombok 1995; Vanfraussen, Ponjaert-Kristoffersen, and Brewneys 2003; Wainright, Russell, and Patterson 2004); 2) children raised by lesbians and gay men are no more likely to be homosexual themselves when raised by gay parents (Allen and Burrell 1996; Anderssen et al. 2002; Huggins 1989; Pawelski et al. 2006; Stacey and Biblarz 2001; Tasker and Golombok 1995; Wainright et al. 2004); and 3) in some aspects, children raised by lesbians and gay men actually do better than their peers who are being raised by heterosexual parents (Chan et al. 1998; Gartrell and Bos 2010; Golombok et al. 2003; Stacey and Biblarz 2001; Vanfraussen et al. 2003; Wainright et al. 2004).

Allen and Burrell (1996) conducted a meta-analysis of studies comparing children with homosexual or heterosexual parents, to address the custody and visitation limits placed on same-sex parents. They found no differences between children of heterosexual or homosexual parents based on measures of a child’s sexual orientation,
satisfaction with life, and cognitive development, thus challenging decisions that deny custody or limit visitation for parents who are lesbian or gay men.

Anderssen, Amlie, and Ytterøy (2002) examined 23 empirical studies that were published between 1978 and 2000. They discovered seven outcomes to be the most studied: emotional functioning, sexual preference, stigmatization, gender role behavior, behavioral adjustment, gender identity, and cognitive functioning. The review concluded children of lesbians did not differ from other children when it comes to these developmental outcomes. These authors noted the limited number of studies on gay fathers made it difficult to make substantive conclusions on the developmental outcomes of children being raised by gay men.

Chan, Raboy, and Patterson (1998) examined the relationships between family structure, family process, and the psychological adjustment of children. They focused on lesbian families and heterosexual families who conceived children through artificial insemination using sperm from the same sperm bank. They found all the children were developing normally and qualities of relationships within families are more important than parental sexual orientation in predicting children’s outcomes. For example, families where parents were experiencing high levels of parenting stress, high levels of interparental conflict, and low levels of love for each other had children who had more behavioral problems.

Stacey and Biblarz (2001) examined findings of 21 psychological studies that compared gay or lesbian parents and children to a group of heterosexual parents and children noting all 21 studies found no differences in measures relating to parenting or child outcomes. They argue that these researchers stopped short and did not recognize
the impact heterosexism had in influencing their interpretation of the data. Stacey and Biblarz recognize gender, not sexual orientation, is more likely the source of more positive parenting. Positive parenting is defined as parenting with both parents being fully involved in child-rearing and with outcomes that produce children: 1) who have high levels self-esteem and well-being, and few mental health issues; 2) whose cognitive function falls in line with their level of development; 3) who have sexual and gender preferences and behaviors that conform to cultural norms. Furthermore, Stacey and Biblarz offered that gender and sexual orientation interact to create new family forms where children are more likely to express gender and sexual fluidity.

Wainright, Russell, and Patterson (2004) found similar results as Chan, Raboy, and Patterson (1998). They assessed personal, sexual, and social adjustment of children in families with same-sex parents and families with opposite-sex parents finding that “adolescent adjustment was not linked with family type but was strongly associated with the qualities of the adolescents’ relationships with their parents” (p.1896). They did note an unexpected finding that adolescents living with non-heterosexual parents felt more connected to school than those living with heterosexual parents.

Flaks et al. (1995) compared children from families headed by lesbian parents to those headed by heterosexual parents. Their research found boys and girls raised by lesbian mothers are just as well adjusted in cognitive and behavioral functioning as their peers who are raised in families with heterosexual parents. The difference they did find came when investigating parenting skills. Flaks et al. (1995) found lesbian couples were more aware of the skills necessary for effective parenting when compared to heterosexual parents, especially heterosexual fathers. Their ultimate conclusion is
“psychologically healthy children need not be raised by opposite-sex, heterosexual parents” (p.113).

Similarly, Vanfraussen et al. (2003) found a difference in families headed by lesbians when compared to heterosexual families. Lesbian social mothers\(^2\) were just as involved with their children’s activities as biological mothers, which was unlike fathers in heterosexual families who were less involved than the mother. The social mother in lesbian-parented families took equal responsibility for the children and was a symbol of authority just as the father was reported to be in families with heterosexual parents.

Tasker and Golombok (1995) used longitudinal data comparing outcomes for young adults raised in families with a lesbian mother or a single heterosexual mother. The development of the children in terms of psychological well-being showed no difference between the groups. They did find some anxiety for the children being raised by lesbian mothers. As these children moved through adolescence they experienced some concern about their peers finding out about their mother’s lesbian identity, but overall these young adults had no-long term effects from this anxiety and had positive feelings about the relationships with their mothers, fathers, and mother’s partners. These young adults were also more willing to consider a sexual relationship with a person of the same gender, but they were not more likely to identity as lesbian or gay.

Since so many samples of same-sex parents use convenience and volunteer samples, Golombok et al. (2003) used the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children. This study randomly sampled an area with a population of one million people.

\(^2\) The social mother is the lesbian co-parent who has no biological relationship to the children but is helping raise children with their biological mother in a household they all share.
Furthermore, this survey interviewed lesbian-mother families\(^3\), two-parent heterosexual families, and single heterosexual mothers so that a comparison could be made by family type. They found families headed by lesbians had positive mother-child relationships and children who were well-adjusted.

The National Longitudinal Lesbian Family Study, initiated in 1986, is “the largest, longest running, prospective, longitudinal study of same-sex-parented families” (Gartrell and Bos 2010:2) and is unique in that the children who are part of this study were conceived and born into a planned lesbian family rather than being conceived in the context of a heterosexual relationship. Gartrell and Bos (2010) found adolescents raised in families headed by lesbians are well adjusted and have fewer behavioral problems than their peers being raised in families with heterosexual parents.

Research design has focused on lesbian mothers comparing them with heterosexual single, married, or divorced mothers and even heterosexual fathers. As a result, there has been little research on parenting attitudes of gay men, and even less found reporting on the outcomes of children in families headed by gay men (Patterson 2000). Patterson (2000) does summarize several studies that found there were no significant differences between gay and heterosexual fathers and their motives for parenthood and gay fathers were found have greater responsiveness, more reasoning, and more limit setting when compared to heterosexual fathers.

Empirical studies overwhelmingly report a parent’s sexual orientation does not impact their children’s sexual preferences and behaviors (Allen and Burrell 1996; Anderssen et al. 2002; Golombok and Tasker 1996; Huggins 1989; Pawelski et al.\(^3\))

\(^3\) In the lesbian-mother families, about half of the sample interviewed came from families headed by single mothers and half from families headed by a lesbian couple.
2006; Stacey and Biblarz 2001; Tasker and Golombok 1995; Wainright et al. 2004). All these investigations found children of lesbians and gay men are no more likely to identity as gay than peers who have heterosexual parents. The investigation by Golombok and Tasker (1996) is representative of these studies. They compared children of lesbian mothers with children of single heterosexual mothers and found children of lesbians were more likely to be open and accepting of lesbian and gay relationships, but the children were still more likely to identify as heterosexual.

Several investigations have concluded there are some positive aspects for being raised in a lesbian- or gay-parented household. Chan, Raboy, and Patterson (1998) and Vanfraussen et al. (2003) found children in homes with lesbian mothers had both parents equally involved in their activities as compared to children in families with heterosexual parents where the mother was more involved with the children than the father. Golombok et al. (2003) found children in families with heterosexual parents were more likely to be hit, especially by their fathers, than children in families headed by lesbians. Gartrell and Bos (2010) found adolescents in families parented by lesbians were less likely to be aggressive and break rules than their peers in families with heterosexual parents. Pawelski et al. (2006) asserted children of lesbian or gay parents are more tolerant of diversity and more nurturing to younger children than their peers whose parents are heterosexual. Children in lesbian- and gay-parented families have also been found to have an expanded view of gender roles, a greater sense of being wanted, and an appreciation for an equitable division of labor between parents (Adams 1996). And as noted earlier, Wainright et al. (2004) found children whose mothers were
lesbian had greater parental involvement with school than their peers with heterosexual parents.

However, there is a limitation to be found in the research described in this section. The vast majority of these studies only mention sexuality of participants. Race, if mentioned at all, is not a main focus of investigation. Only Golombok and Tasker (1996), Kurdek (2004), Leung, Erich, and Kanenberg (2005), and Wainright et al. (2004) make note of the race of the individuals who participated in their investigations and in all of these studies race is mentioned only as a demographic characteristic and not as a point of analysis. This research focus is extremely limiting and reduces the complexity of the lives and families of lesbians and gay men. Just as in the general population, there are lesbians and gay men who come from many different racial, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds and to focus only on sexuality creates a picture of the community that ignores this diversity and ignores the impact these factors have on the life experiences of lesbians and gay men and the children they raise.

That being said, this extensive and rigorous empirical research does make clear that sexual orientation does not impact the ability to parent and has influenced many professional groups to come out with policy statements recognizing the parenting fitness of lesbians and gay men. All mainstream national children’s health and welfare organizations oppose restrictions on parenting by lesbians and gay men, including the Child Welfare League of America, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Psychological Association, the American Medical Association, the American Psychiatric Association, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, the American Psychoanalytic Association, the National Association of Social Workers, the North
American Council on Adoptable Children, the American Bar Association, the National Adoption Center, the Voices for Adoption, and the American Academy of Family Physicians (Cooper and Cates 2006; Gates et al. 2007; Howard and Freundlich 2008; Pawelski et al. 2006).

Only one professional organization has developed a policy statement directly opposing parenting by lesbians and gay men and that is the American College of Pediatricians (Cretella 2004). This small group broke away from the national professional group, the American Academy of Pediatricians, in 2002, when they created a policy statement noting lesbians and gay men are just as good at parenting as heterosexual parents (Howard and Freundlich 2008). The American College of Pediatricians argues that the two-parent, married mother/father family structure is best and it is “inappropriate, potentially hazardous to children and dangerously irresponsible to change the age-old prohibition on homosexual parenting, whether by adoption, foster care, or by reproductive manipulation” (Cretella, 2004).

In the next section, I provide a discussion of some research that investigates the influence of race and racism on the study of family as it specifically impacts African American families.

**Racism in the Study of Families Headed by African Americans**

Before examining the ways racism impacts the study of African American families a general discussion of race and racism is provided. Bonilla-Silva (2010) points out race is a socially constructed category meaning that “notions of racial differences are human creations rather than eternal, essential categories” (p. 8). Nagel (2003) explains “current notions of race are centered exclusively on visible (usually skin color) distinctions among populations” (p. 6, emphasis in original). Roberts (2011) further
contends “biologically, there is one human race. Race applied to human beings is a political division: it is a system of governing people that classifies them into a social hierarchy based on invented biological demarcations” (p. x, emphasis in original) and she further acknowledges that “race is the main characteristic most Americans use to classify each other” (Roberts 2011:3). This classification system based on race has produced a social system based in racism with oppression and mistreatment of black Americans by white Americans ranging from the subtle and hard to observe to the blatant and easily noticed (Feagin 2000). The effects of racism are encountered in “everyday situations in workplaces, stores, schools, housing, and daily social interaction” and this racial segregation remains a fundamental feature of the U.S. social landscape (Collins 2000:23) even influencing empirical research.

Several researchers have reported on the influence racism has had for the study of African American families (Chatters, Taylor, and Jayakody 1994; Dilworth-Anderson, Burton, and Johnson 1993; Staples 1971). Much of previous research in family studies has been criticized for using the white, middle-class family as the standard for comparison and in this comparison the African American family has been shown to be deviant and as a result has become pathologized. Staples (1971) asserts:

Black family research has been characterized by the reiteration of unfounded myths and stereotypes which produce in the public mind the image of black families as a pathological social unit—a system incapable of rearing individuals who can adjust to the demands of a civilized society. (P. 119)
He further noted this deviant status has been used to generate public policy that directly impacts the way African American families are treated. Ethnic minority families are different from white middle-class families, but that should not indicate a deviant status.

Chatters, Taylor, and Jayakody (1994) and Dilworth-Anderson, Burton, and Johnson (1993) point out one difference found in the family structure of many African American families is the network of fictive kin. Fictive kinship is a status extended to a friend that expands one’s social network. Fictive kin may help provide socioemotional assistance like companionship and counseling or they may be instrumental in providing support like child care, transportation, or financial assistance (Chatters et al. 1994). These networks help with a child’s educational achievement and serve as a buffer against a discriminating environment (Dilworth-Anderson et al. 1993).

Dilworth-Anderson, Burton, and Johnson (1993) advocate for a change in the way ethnic minority families are studied. They recognize four concepts are important to consider when studying ethnic minority families: 1) race is defined as a cultural construction of identity based on a set of descriptors used by a society; 2) ethnicity is where one develops a sense of peoplehood and a shared community with others who are members of the same group; 3) minority is defined as a low social position when compared to others and it indicates a place of oppression, suppression and discrimination experienced in almost all aspects of their life and society; 4) culture is an expression of self that includes racial and ethnic rituals, symbols, language, and general

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4 This pathologizing of African American families is part of the cultural legacy of the 1965 Moynihan study of black families, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. As Hill (2005) reports, Moynihan implied that “the lack of socioeconomic progress by blacks was linked to weak dysfunctional female-headed families” (p. 13). These black matriarchs were labeled as being unfit parents since they spent too much time working outside the home and not supervising their children; without supervision their children became social failures (Collins 2000).
ways of behaving (Dilworth-Anderson et al. 1993). Consideration of these concepts will help build an understanding of the ways minority families are unique in American life.

Dilworth-Anderson, Burton, and Johnson (1993) also caution family studies researchers who do not share the racial or ethnic identity of families being studied and this has been an important consideration in this project since my racial identity (white) does not match the African American families with whom I spoke. They suggest:

Production of knowledge about any group in a society is influenced by overriding societal norms, beliefs, and attitudes as well as the personal biography of the researcher. These societal and personal influences affect the way we see the world and perceive phenomena and people in it. (P. 635)

However, several researchers point out advantages may be present when the interviewer and interviewee are not ethnically matched (Carter 2004; Foster 1994; Shah 2004; Tinker and Armstrong 2008). For example, Tinker and Armstrong (2008) point out that:

By acknowledging their lack of cultural knowledge the researcher can: (a) elicit detailed responses, (b) minimize the respondents' fear of being judged, (c) ask some questions that a researcher from the same cultural group may not feel able to, and (d) maintain a critical distance from the data. (P. 55)

There are challenges to interviewing when the researcher does not match identities with those being researched, but these challenges are not insurmountable. A more thorough discussion of this outsider/insider debate is presented in the chapter on Theoretical Framework and Research Design—Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

Generally speaking the impact of racism on the empirical research on family studies can be seen in an informal search of the literature on the EBSCOhost internet 

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5 Ebscohost was chosen as an easily accessible and quick method to find representative research on black families. The search was conducted on March 13, 2012.
search engine. The *Journal of Marriage and Family*, the *Journal of Family Issues*, the *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, and the *Journal of African American Studies* were selected for this search since they are referenced frequently in the literature review for this project. In the *Journal of Marriage and Family*, from 1975-2012, there were 4399 total articles with 1927 of these articles (44 percent) having a focus on the subject keyword of “family” with 11 (0.6 percent) including a focus on “family” and “black” or “African American.” In the *Journal of Family Issues*, from 1980-2012, there were 1350 total articles with 733 (54 percent) of those articles focused on “family” with 79 (11 percent) including an additional focus on “family” and “black” or “African American.” In the *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, from 1985 to 2012, there were 1555 total articles with 699 (45 percent) of these articles focused on “family” with 61 (nine percent) including a focus on “family” and “black” or “African American.” In the *Journal of African American Studies*, from 1995 to 2012, there were 267 total articles with seven (three percent) of these articles focusing on “family” and, not surprisingly, all of them (100 percent) were also focused on “family” and “black” or “African American.” When adding the key word “LGBT” to these searches no articles were found in any of the journals discussing research specifically directed at investigating black same-sex families. Moreover, when comparing the 1980, 1990, and 2000 decade reviews of literature on families of color in the *Journal of Marriage and Family* there is no mention of any empirical research on sexuality and families of color (Burton et al. 2010; Demos 1990; Taylor et al. 1990). With this project I hope to fill this gap in the literature.

Race is an important consideration in the analysis of families. Yet, just as an investigation of African American households headed by lesbians and gay men must
include a discussion of race it must also include a discussion of race and its interaction with sexuality. For this project, I also argue that sexuality cannot be discussed without including a discussion of race. In the next section, I discuss some of the limited research about the intersection of race and sexuality.

**Race and Sexuality**

Nagel (2003) acknowledges “sex is raced and race is sexed” (p. 10). She further explains “race defines and constructs sexuality and sexuality defines and constructs race, ethnicity, and nationality” (p. 6). Appropriate sexual behaviors are essential to membership in specific ethnic groups (Nagel 2003) and the African American community is no exception. Sexuality plays an important role in determining what acceptable sexual behavior is for membership in this group and many times this excludes homosexuality. As such, further understanding of such attitudes and understandings are important grounding for my research on the issues faced in families headed by African American lesbian and gay men.

**African American Attitudes to Homosexuality**

Several researchers have investigated attitudes of African Americans toward lesbians and gay men (Battle and Lemelle 2002; Ernst et al. 1991; Greene 2009; Herek and Capitanio 1995; Jenkins, Lambert, and Baker 2009; Lewis 2003; Schulte and Battle 2004). Many of these studies indicate religiosity plays a role in the development of negative attitudes toward homosexuality (Greene 2009; Griffin 2000; Griffin 2006; Lemelle and Battle 2004; Lewis 2003; Schulte and Battle 2004).

Herek and Capitanio (1995) found African Americans negative attitudes toward lesbians and gay men were widespread with African American men having a more negative attitude toward gay men than toward lesbians because, as they found, African
American men had a greater tendency to see male homosexuality as unnatural. Herek and Capitanio (1995) found the single most important predictor to more positive attitudes was found to be if the respondent felt homosexuality was beyond an individual's control. They also found more favorable attitudes toward lesbians and gay men were also present if respondents had experienced personal contact with lesbians or gay men.

Ernst et al. (1991) found a gender specific component in attitudes towards homosexuality. Their analysis revealed that when gender, educational achievement, religious preference, and marital status were taken into account racial difference in negative attitudes to homosexuality were tied to the difference in attitudes between white and African American women. Ernst et al. (1991) suggest that while reasons for this gender-specific phenomenon cannot be derived from their data they do offer some reasons after interviewing “several” African American women. They claim:

Hostility to a homosexual life-style apparently stems from a recognition that this factor contributes to the decreasing pool of available black males already affected by integration (interracial marriages), disproportionate incarceration rates of black males, and high rates of premature death among black males from heart disease, cancer, AIDS, drug abuse, and violence. (P. 583)

This study had a very limited sample—state employees from Tennessee who were asked their attitudes to homosexuality within the context of an epidemiological investigation of AIDS-related attitudes—which may account for such a specific reason for the racial difference in attitudes to homosexuality among the women they surveyed.

Battle and Lemelle (2002) used the National Black Politics Study and also found a gendered difference in African American attitudes toward gay men. The National Black Politics Study (December 1993-February 1994) sampled over 6.5 million African
American households asking attitudes and opinions on issues of importance to the African American community. Their overall finding was that African American women have more positive attitudes toward gay men than do African American men. In fact, they found gender had more of an impact on attitudes toward gay men than age, education, household income, and even church attendance.

Lemelle and Battle (2004) again explored the information gained from the National Black Politics Study. They pointed out that for African American women age, income, education, and urban residence were variables that were important to explain attitudes toward gay men. Specifically they found older, more educated African American women who lived in big cities and have an increased level of income were more sympathetic to gay men. For African American men, religious attendance was the only significant variable, with more church attendance leading to less sympathetic attitudes to gay men. Lemelle and Battle (2004) suggest “among the larger African American male population, more age, more money, more education or living in a big city does not impact attitudes toward gay males” as much as church teachings that enhance black masculinist homophobic attitudes (p. 48).

Lewis (2003) used data from thirty-one national surveys to find if there are more definitive answers to attitudinal differences between African Americans and whites, specifically regarding their attitudes toward “homosexual relations, civil liberties for lesbians and gay men, and gay employment rights” (p.60). He found African Americans are significantly more likely than comparable whites to condemn homosexuality. Yet Lewis found, African Americans are more likely to favor gay civil liberties than
comparable whites and they are more likely to favor laws prohibiting antigay discrimination.

Greene (2009) points out many members of communities of color view LGBT people as “white, male, financially well off, well-educated and therefore privileged” (p. 702). She further posits religious beliefs and members of the clergy in African American communities have had an impact on the unequal treatment of LGBT people, especially those LGBT members of the African American community.

Schulte and Battle (2004) recognize the influence of the “Black church” on attitudes of African Americans to homosexuality. They specifically define the “Black church” as “a cultural experience involving ethnicity (African American), region (having had some orientation to the South), socioeconomic status (working class), and sociopolitical ideology (conservative)” (Schulte and Battle 2004:130). The “Black church” has a great influence in the African American community since it is “not only a place of worship, but it is also involved in social organizations, financial and educational institutions, and political movements” (Schulte and Battle 2004:131).

When Schulte and Battle (2004) analyzed the surveys they administered to college students they found women expressed the least negativity toward lesbians and gay men in general and African Americans generally had more negative attitudes toward lesbians and gay men. On the surface, it would seem ethnicity had an impact on attitudes, but since this research had a focus on the relationship between ethnicity and religious attendance when explaining attitudes toward lesbians and gay men these variables were included in analysis and no ethnic differences were found, but religious attitudes were always significant. This finding lead Schulte and Battle to conclude that
the “Black church” has an influence on African American attitudes to homosexuality that needs to be explored further.

Griffin (2000; 2006) discusses the influence of the Black church in *Their Own Receive Them Not* as he comments on the impact the church’s negative message regarding homosexuality has on African American lesbians and gay men. He points out many times lesbians and gay men marry the opposite sex trying to find acceptance in the community (Griffin 2000) and he further notes:

Gays pass in heterosexual marriage for a number of reasons: denying their homosexuality; the relative ease, comfort, and social respectability of a conventional life; pleasing parents; desire for children; and the more recent fear of AIDS. They live in marriage while carrying the burden of denying their erotic desire for intimacy and companionship with the same sex. (P. 148)

Lesbians and gay men find that they are tolerated in the church community if they stay in their “closeted place” (Griffin 2006:21) and “passing as heterosexual in black churches is not only common, *it is expected*’ (Griffin 2006:146, emphasis in original).

In a recent *New York Times* article, “Parenting by Gays More Common in the South, Census Shows,” it was reported that in addition to the legal and economic challenges faced by black lesbian and gay couples who live in the South, these couples are also challenged with finding a church where they feel welcome. Many of these couples grew up in and felt a close affinity to the black church but the homophobic messages of the black church created feelings of guilt and shame. As a result, when these lesbians and gay men came out they began searching for a more welcoming and inclusive church in which to raise their families.

Jenkins, Lambert, and Baker (2009) surveyed 551 Midwestern college students on their attitudes to lesbians and gay men. They were specifically looking for
differences in attitude based on race. Generally, they found no significant racial differences in attitudes toward, rights for, and willingness to socialize with lesbians and gay men. They did find gender was a significant predictor of attitudes. African American and white male students were more homophobic than female students. Furthermore, among African American men and African American women there was no significant difference in attitude which is inconsistent with other studies that have investigated African American attitudes toward lesbians and gay men. They also observed religion was a better predictor of white attitudes than African American attitudes toward lesbians and gay men, gay rights, and socialization with lesbians and gay men. This finding represents another inconsistency when compared with other studies that found religion to be a better predictor of African American attitudes. Jenkins et al. (2009) recognize that their findings may not apply to the African American community in general since college educated individuals have a different experience than those who do not attend college and since they tend to be younger in age. Jenkins et al. (2009) also recognize the importance increased media attention that focuses on LGBT issues may have had on increasing tolerance and similar views toward gays, gay rights, and socialization with lesbians and gay men.

The research on African American attitudes to homosexuality misses an opportunity to investigate the complexity and diversity of both the LGBT community and the African American community since the research does not define sexuality in terms of race. For example, African American and white participants are asked to report on their attitude toward lesbians and gay men in general, not their attitude to African American lesbians or white gay men, specifically. Nevertheless, these insights are still
important as they informed this project as I investigated the ways African American lesbians who parent talk about their experiences (some of which were tied to the discussion of attitudes to sexuality found in the African American community more generally). In the next section, I focus on research that investigates individuals who identify with both the African American community and the LGBT community.

**African Americans and a Lesbian/Gay Identity**

The Williams Institute has reported that same-sex couples living in Florida are just as racially and ethnically diverse as their married counterparts with 24 percent of all same-sex couples identifying as non-white (Romero et al. 2007). And according to the data collected in the 2010 census, nationally, African American or Latino gay couples are significantly more likely to be raising children when compared to white couples (Burgoyne 2012). Furthermore, gay couples in Southern states are more likely to be raising children than their counterparts in other parts of the country (Tavernise 2011). These statistics and the discussion of the literature that follows bring attention to the fact that a more complex understanding of the diversity of the African American lesbian and gay community is important. In this section, I present research that focuses on African Americans who identity as lesbian or gay.

African American lesbians and gay men negotiate the social world as members of two minority groups. As African Americans they negotiate the world through a racial lens and as a lesbian or gay man they negotiate the world as a sexual minority. Green (2007) describes this as being on the horns of a dilemma. He notes the men in his study are “alienated from Black community institutions because of their sexuality but less integrated into white, urban, gay community institutions because of their race”
Researchers are beginning to recognize the importance of this group of individuals to studying the intersection of race and sexuality.

Green (2007) interviewed 30 African American gay-identified urban men using a life course approach hoping to capture the “full impact of social life on sexual identity, sexual practice, and psychological adjustment” (p. 771). As youth, these men were pushed out of their families and church communities because of their sexuality and had to produce specific survival strategies to deal with their emerging sexual identity. As adults, these men were pulled into the urban gay community. Since the urban gay community is very Eurocentric, these men negotiated this community from the perspective of a racial minority. Green cautions that sexual orientation needs to be recognized as an important identity as sociologists increasingly work to investigate the intersection of race, class, and gender.

Green points out these variations of identity challenge the existing literature that assumes an either/or master status regarding race and sexuality. Green encourages future researchers recognize that there are many ways individuals negotiate their racial and sexual identities and this recognition will help generate an understanding of the larger African American and LGBT communities.

Hunter (2010) interviewed 50 African American men who self-identified as gay asking them to articulate the ways they see their race and sexuality as linked, connected, or disconnected. He found three expressions of self: 1) interlocking; 2) up-down; 3) public-private. An interlocking identity conceptualized race and sexuality as united and was expressed by 24 percent of the interviewees. The up-down identity was expressed by the majority of the interviewees (50 percent) and privileged one identity
over the other. In the public-private model, race was seen as a public identity and sexuality as a private one and was expressed by 26 percent of those interviewed.

Battle, Bennett, and Shaw (2004) conducted a literature review hoping to find a direction for future social science research on African American LGBT populations. Like Green, they recognize the impact of a double minority status based in race and sexuality and point to a triple minority status when gender is added to the mix. Battle et al. (2004) suggest that as the African American LGBT community becomes more visible research must continue to expand the knowledge of this particular community through a lens that sees it as healthy rather than deviant.

Moore (2010) conducted an ethnographic study of the African American LGBT community in Los Angeles investigating the relationship these individuals had with their racial and religious communities. She found the majority of people she interviewed maintained their connections with and lived in African American neighborhoods noting the support and membership of the larger African American community was important. Moore also points out that those individuals that fully and openly expressed a gay identity did so at the price of temporarily losing full acceptance from family and friends. This acceptance was only temporarily lost since debate, negotiation, and reconciliation are all common undertakings found to be part of the African American racial community (Moore 2010). She concludes that “group membership was not about sameness or having one voice but about sharing a commonality, a perceived link that connected its members, regardless of other differences that might also have existed” (p. 209) and that connection was through their racial identity.
The research presented in this section highlights the complex ways African Americans with a lesbian/gay identity are on the horns of a dilemma. They negotiate the social world as both a racial minority and as a sexual minority with varying levels of acceptability within each social group. Race is important to an individual’s identity in the LGBT community and sexuality is important to their identity in the African American community. Furthermore, the previous section summarizing research on racial attitudes provides important insight into the complexity of African American attitudes toward homosexuality. Combined these two sections highlight two areas of background research that inform my study and allow me to better understand the way sexuality and race may intersect in the ways black lesbians who are parenting talk about their experiences and the experiences of their families. So what about African American families who have LGBT daughters, sons, or parents? In the next section, I provide a discussion of the empirical research focused on these particular families.

**African American Families and Lesbian/Gay Family Members**

As the visibility of African American lesbians and gay men has increased research focusing on the issues impacting their role as members of African American families has also increased. The following research highlights investigations that center on family social networks and parenting by African American lesbians and gay men. This is research that is important for this dissertation because it highlights the ways African Americans who identify as lesbian or gay are accepted or rejected by their own families and the ways African American lesbians and gay men head their own families.

Mays et al. (1998) focus on how African American lesbians and gay family members influence the social network in their families. They note that African American families are very diverse. With this diversity there are some similarities.
American families: have both immediate and extended family members; have high levels of contact and high levels of support; have strong feelings of family solidarity and family satisfaction (Mays et al. 1998). They also note the reluctance of African American lesbians and gay men to disclose their sexuality is based on their perception that there is homophobia found in the African American community. Their findings indicate lesbians and gay men prefer to disclose their sexuality to women in their immediate family perhaps believing their mothers or sisters will be more understanding and supportive. The family may struggle with accepting the LGBT family member and if they do not fully accept them they may lose a family member who would possibly provide support for aging parents or who may be able to be caretakers of younger family members. Without acceptance, the LGBT family member also loses a network of support which can be especially impactful if they have children. Mays et al. (1998) argue that policies aimed at strengthening African American families need to consider the ways African American lesbians and gay men contribute to their families and the barriers that may be present that prevent their contribution to their families.

Cahill, Battle, and Meyer (2003) summarize reasons that African American LGBT families are little understood or even studied, especially as it relates to parenting by African American lesbians and gay men. They point out most national surveys used to gather data do not ask about sexual orientation or gender identity. Textbooks that focus on African American families for the most part ignore African American LGBT families and family members. And they note distrust in the African American community of academic or scientific research in general because of a past history of abuse by researchers.
Using the Black Pride Survey, Cahill et al. (2003) found over 25 percent of the sample reported having a child. This child was one they gave birth to or fathered; one they were co-parenting with a partner; one they were raising who was a niece, nephew, or grandchild; or one who was an adult and no longer lived with them. Women were more likely to report having children than were men or transgender individuals. Women were also more likely to be living with their children. If African American LGBT people had children, they were more likely to be in some type of committed relationship. These findings indicate that African American LGBT individuals may parent at greater rates than LGBT people in other racial groups (Cahill et al. 2003).

Cahill et al. (2003) acknowledge African American LGBT-headed families face issues related to parenting and experience family in ways that are different from white LGBT individuals or African American heterosexual individuals, but the differences have been exaggerated. As a result, they caution researchers to “stress the similarities between groups as well as the differences” (Cahill et al. 2003:97).

Cahill et al. (2003) observe that parenting by African American LGBT individuals may help to more fully integrate them into white LGBT communities and African American heterosexual communities. But they also note that “anti-gay parenting policies may pose a particular and more serious threat to Black LGBT parents or would-be parents than it would for other LGBT families” and they may “threaten the Black community as a whole” (Cahill et al. 2003:94). Cahill et al. (2003) emphasize that “restrictive adoption policies would serve to not only disproportionately harm Black LGBT people hoping to adopt, but it could reduce the number of homes available to Black adoptable or foster children” (2003:94).
Moore (2011), in *Invisible Families*, reports findings from a study she conducted following more than 100 black women in New York City who were openly gay and raising families. She recognized a limitation in the lesbian identity literature that has failed to thoroughly analyze race as an identity or social location. She maintains “if we allow ‘lesbian families’ to mean ‘White middle-class lesbian families,’ and if we do not fully ‘race’ ourselves and our subjects, we cannot de-center the White gay subject as the norm, and we reify the myth that ‘Black people aren’t like that” (Moore 2011:2). The black lesbian mothers in Moore’s investigation were able to remove the stigma of an assumed lesbian sexuality if they embodied a middle-class politic of respectability in their dress, parenting, and home life management. This respectability allowed them to fit into black environments and allowed them to maintain strong community connections.

Moore also cautions researchers to include a broad definition of “lesbian mother.” She contends this definition should include women who take on a lesbian identity before becoming a parent and those who take on a lesbian identity after becoming a parent. She asserts that “the majority of today’s mothers who identify as gay became parents by bearing a child in the context of a marital or cohabiting union” (Moore 2011:114) and when researchers exclude women who had children in a previous heterosexual relationship they miss a large group of women who would identify themselves as lesbian mothers. She provides a further example of the cost of limiting the definition of “lesbian mother” when she cites Morris, Balsam, and Rothblum’s (2002) investigation of demographic factors of 2,431 lesbian and bisexual women (Moore 2011:114). These researchers found that “84.4 percent of White mothers and 84.9 percent of Black mothers became parents through sex with a husband or male partner, 5.6 percent of
White mothers and 2.8 percent of Black mothers had their children using artificial insemination, and 6.5 percent of White mothers and 12.3 percent of Black mothers adopted” (Morris, Balsam, and Rothblum 2002:152). Excluding women who identify as lesbian and who became parents in a heterosexual relationship would miss a huge segment of the population of “lesbian mother.”

Like other researchers investigating black lesbian and gay families Moore recognizes the influence of church teachings on the women she interviewed. Moore (2011) offers that:

Church rules and rituals are something that residents in predominantly Black communities believe in, even if they do not attend services regularly or have no particular religious affiliation. The involvement of churches and other religious institutions in so many aspects of Black community life means that the teachings of the church or mosque indirectly infiltrate and influence nonreligious components of life, including how people who live in Black communities go about expressing their sexuality. (P. 9)

She adds that despite the homophobia of the Black Church the majority of the women she studied continued to maintain a belief in God and continued to be affiliated with religious organizations (Moore 2011).

The research presented in this section highlights the intersections of race and sexuality in the context of individual experiences, attitudes, and in the context of family. It confirms that a discussion of race must include a discussion of sexuality and a discussion of sexuality must include a discussion of race (also suggesting gender, class, and religion, at a minimum are also important). This interaction, I suggest, is important when discussing perspectives of African American lesbians and gay men regarding issues faced by their families.
Conclusion

There is a need to expand the scholarly research on LGBT families of color since their experiences provide an opportunity to explore the unique circumstances found at the intersection of race and sexuality (at minimum) in an institution and in a community where it has been little studied. To assume the issues for families headed by African American lesbian and gay men are only based in racism or homophobia is not to consider the complexity of racism and sexuality. Scholarly work on the intersections of race and sexuality can guide researchers to better consider the dynamics of interlocking oppressions and the way in which those play out in the lives and concerns of marginalized communities. With this project, I add qualitative grounding to the quantitative demographic data already available. I bring attention to a group that has been largely missing from research in both family studies and LGBT studies. By interviewing black lesbians who are parenting about their perspectives on issues facing their families and then analyzing this data with a constructivist grounded theory approach I give increased voice to those black lesbians heading households. These stories of families headed by black lesbians help explore and expose the complexities and nuances found at the intersections of race and sexuality (and gender and class), especially as it relates to the family.
CHAPTER 3
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH DESIGN

Intersectionality, symbolic interaction theory, feminist theory, and feminist standpoint theory provide practical frames for this project on how African American lesbians frame the issues faced by their families today. Additionally, this investigation was conducted using qualitative research methods. Before a discussion of details describing theoretical frameworks and the specific research design used in this project, I present an overview of the concept “family,” since the family is the context I use for investigating the intersection of race and sexuality.

The Concept of “Family”

There is currently no statistically dominant single family pattern in the United States and domestic arrangements have become increasingly diverse (Stacey 1996). If you ask people to describe their “family” you will get many different responses. Some families are constructed within marriage; some are not. The American family can be a single-mom or single-dad and their kids; it can be grandparents living with a child and helping raise their grandchildren; it can be two people (same-sex or opposite-sex) raising adopted children or their own children; it can be two people who divorced, remarried, and brought kids to the new relationship and then had children of their own. Family can even include people who do not live together. The definition of “family” is as varied as the people one might ask. Yet despite this diversity, one family form is idealized. We culturally have a vision of the ideal family that powerfully shapes institutional life and policy, and influences the way everyone does family (Lempert and DeVault 2000). Smith (1993) has described this ideal as the standard North American family:
It is a conception of the family as a legally married couple sharing a household. The adult male is in paid employment; his earnings provide the economic basis of the family-household. The adult female may also earn an income, but her primary responsibility is to the care of husband, household, and children. Adult male and female may be parents (in whatever legal sense) of children also resident in the household. (P. 52)

This definition has become so prevalent and accepted that it is called the “nuclear family.” What is unwritten here is that this is also an ideal based on white, middle-class norms.

A recent study, using the Constructing the Family Survey, specifically asked more than 1500 people in 2003 and 2006 what counts as family (Powell et al. 2010). Powell et al. (2010) found the definitions of family for those interviewed could be divided into three distinct categories: 1) exclusionists, 2) moderates, and 3) inclusionists. Exclusionists defined family as a married couple living with their biological children, with strict gendered divisions of labor based on notions of appropriate feminine and masculine behavior (Powell et al. 2010). For exclusionists, marriage or other legal arrangement was especially important when defining family. Moderates definitions of family recognize the pivotal role of children. Living arrangements, regardless of marital status, that include children or any married couple counted as family. Moderates also had a greater willingness to include same-sex couples in the definition of family if they were perceived to have a long-term commitment and had children. Commitment was defined as expressing love and caring for each other, and as buying a house together and sharing income. Inclusionists “endorse the most broad-ranging conception of family” (Powell et al. 2010:54) with quality of relationship in terms of love and emotional ties being especially important. For inclusionists love was more important than any legal commitment.
The investigators identified variations in the definition of family based on socio-demographic factors like gender, age or cohort, education, race, and religion. Women were found to be more inclusive than men in their definitions of family and men were more likely to be exclusionist. Most respondents over 64 years of age had an exclusionist view of family and those under thirty were more moderate or inclusionists. Baby-boomers were found to be more liberal in their definitions of family than other cohort groups. Powell et al. (2010) found education had a liberalizing effect. Those with a high school education were more likely to subscribe to an exclusionist definition of family while those with higher levels of education were more likely to be inclusive. And specifically for this project, Powell et al. (2010) found for many African Americans definitions of family were very traditional and exclusionist with family being a married opposite-sex couple and their children. This was particularly the case for African Americans with high levels of religiosity and those with lower levels of education.

As research has demonstrated, definitions of family depend on who you ask. In sociological terms, “family” is a social construct. In this project, I have assumed family is produced through discourse (Gubrium and Holstein 1990) and interpretations made by people. Holstein and Gubrium (1999) further described family as an “idea of configuration of meanings” (p. 5). More generally, I use a symbolic interactionist theoretical frame for this project.

**Theoretical Framework**

**Symbolic Interaction**

As Blumer (1969) explained in *Symbolic Interactionism*, humans act toward things depending on the meanings they have for them and these meanings always develop from social interaction with other humans. Furthermore, these meanings are
modified through individual interpretation. He stated “human interaction is mediated by the use of symbols, by interpretation, or by ascertaining the meaning of one another’s actions” (Blumer 1969:79). One's social location and life experiences influence interpretations; interpretations determine actions and definitions. So one's race, gender, socioeconomic status, and other social positions all come together at “the nexus of interpretive domains” to create a definition of family (Holstein and Gubrium 1999:10).

LaRossa and Reitzes (1993) provide an overview of symbolic interactionism and its value to family studies. They recognize symbolic interactionism contributes to family studies because:

First, the emphasis it gives to the proposition that families are social groups and, second, its assertion that individuals develop both a concept of self and their identities through social interaction, enabling them to independently assess and assign value to their family activities. (P. 143)

As people in family groups assign and assess these values they develop expectations for what a family should look like. And as discussed earlier, for many African Americans this family looks like the standard North American Family described by Smith (1993).

As LaRossa and Reitzes (1993) discuss symbolic interaction as a tool for studying family, they recognize seven assumptions dealing with three central themes. Theme one recognizes “the importance of meanings for human behavior” (LaRossa and Reitzes 1993:143) and has three assumptions:

1) Human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them; 2) meaning arises in the process of interaction between people; 3) meanings are handled in and modified through an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with things he or she encounters. (P. 143)

Theme two emphasizes “the importance of self-concept” (LaRossa and Reitzes 1993:144) and its assumptions are:
4) Individuals are not born with a sense of self but develop self-concepts through social interaction; and 5) self-concepts, once developed, provide an important motive for behavior. (P. 144)

Theme three focuses on the importance of society with its assumptions being:

6) Individuals and small groups are influenced by larger cultural and societal processes; and 7) it is through social interaction in everyday situations that individuals work out the details of social structure. (P. 144)

These themes and assumptions developed by LaRossa and Reitzes help give symbolic interaction a unique position when it comes to investigating family and since the way the African American community defines family is important to this project several assumptions listed within each theme may prove relevant.

Hollingsworth (1999) provides an account using symbolic interactionism and several of LaRossa and Reitzes themes and assumptions to describe the uniqueness of African American families, especially as it relates to transracial adoption. For example, she uses the first theme—meaning has importance for human behavior—to describe the meaning African Americans attach to children. Hollingsworth (1999) notes children have special meaning as “divine gifts” within the African community and this meaning may be part of the hesitation many in the African American community have toward transracial adoption (p. 447). Using assumption two—meaning arises in the process of interaction between people, Hollingsworth (1999) recognizes children in communities of African descent traditionally interact with multiple caregivers, who may be kin or non-kin and this interaction influences the definition of family. Ultimately, Hollingsworth (1999) maintains “the African American community consists of people and institutions similar in their African heritage and in their experience with racism and oppression” (p. 446) and this influences the definition of family for many in the African American community.
Just like Hollingsworth, I think assumption one that notes "human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings the things have for them" (LaRossa and Reitzes 1993:142) and assumption two that recognizes “meaning arises in the process of interaction between people” (LaRossa and Reitzes 1993:143) are important to this project since development of a definition of family comes from interactions between individuals and those around them. The sixth assumption contending that “individuals and small groups are influenced by larger cultural and societal processes” (LaRossa and Reitzes 193:144) is also helpful in conceptualizing the importance societal norms and values, especially those involving same-sex relationships and understandings of racism, have in constraining and limiting the definition of family in the African American community.

**Intersectionality**

Intersectionality is the recognition of interacting social identities. Collins (2005) defines intersectionality as a paradigm where “race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and age, among others” act to “mutually construct systems of power” that “permeate all social relations” (p. 11). The social construction of race and sexuality at the individual and institutional level has created a social system of racism and heterosexism. This system has also lead to a hierarchy where the dominant race is framed as white and the dominant sexuality is framed as heterosexual. Collins (2005) explains:

Racism and heterosexism both require a concept of sexual deviancy for meaning, yet the form that deviance takes within each system differs. For racism, the point of deviance is created by a *normalized White heterosexuality* that depends on a *deviant Black heterosexuality* to give it meaning. For heterosexism, the point of deviance is created by this very same *normalized White heterosexuality* that now depends on a *deviant White homosexuality*. (P. 97, emphasis in original)
The politics of race and sexuality are mutually reinforcing and generate a discourse where promiscuity is assumed among heterosexual African American women and men and homosexuality among African Americans is an impossibility and homosexuality becomes “whitened” (Collins 2005:106). These mutually reinforcing politics also add a heteronormative component to the common stereotypes of what it means to be lesbian or gay man. This heteronormative component contends that lesbians and gay men do not have children and are unable to maintain a stable, long-term relationship (Cahill 2009). This “whitening” of lesbians and gay men and this exclusive and limiting definition of sexuality may be influential in the way African American lesbians and gay men frame the issues faced by their families today.

McCall (2005) defines intersectionality as “the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations” further noting there is a need to better use the lens of intersectionality to empirically examine social issues (p. 1772). An in-depth study of the perspectives of African American lesbians and gay men on issues and concerns facing their families today provides a site to use a lens of intersectionality to explore the complexity of black LGBT families as they relate to race and sexuality.

**Feminist Theory and Feminist Standpoint Theory**

Because an individual’s definition of family depends on social position and cultural background and because the definition depends on specific experiences, values, and norms I use feminist theory and feminist standpoint theory as useful perspectives in this project.

One value of a feminist perspective is the way it critiques traditional family and points out the endless variety in family. Demo and Allen (1996) contend, “feminists
have exposed the sexist and heterosexist underpinnings of any definition of family that takes as given that there is one type of family that can stand in for all other types” (p. 427). In addition, Demo and Allen (1996) note that a feminist perspective:

Recognizes and values diversity across families, acknowledges different and sometimes contradictory life experiences and realities within families and emphasizes that some families are marginalized, oppressed and stigmatized. (P. 428)

Since families headed by lesbians and gay men and African American families, and African American families headed by lesbians and gay men have been marginalized, a feminist perspective will help provide insight into how marginalization influences individual and group definitions of family.

Another value of a feminist perspective is its approach to the way knowledge is generated. Doherty et al. (1993) describe that the “knower and the object of knowledge cannot be separated and that knowledge of the world is possible only in language and symbols constructed by the observer” (p. 16). Ways of knowing the world depend on an individual’s race, gender, class, sexuality, and nation and this is reflected in feminist standpoint theory. This is a perspective I find useful to this project because the African American community occupies a unique social location because of nation and race and individuals within the community are influenced by their social location based on gender, class, and sexuality (among others).

Feminist standpoint theory specifically builds on this notion of knowledge being constructed by the participant as it recognizes that lived realities create different perspectives. Common challenges lead to recurring patterns of experiences for individual group members (Collins 2000). With this project, I have sought to put the experiences of African American lesbians who parent at the center of investigation. As
Collins (2000) asserts, “activating epistemologies that criticize prevailing knowledge and enable us to define our own realities on our own terms has far greater implications” (p. 274, emphasis in the original).

**Research Design**

The method I used for investigating the challenges faced by families headed by black lesbians was semi-structured interviews as outlined by Reinharz (1992) in *Feminist Methods in Social Research* and Holstein and Gubrium (1995) in *The Active Interview*, with participants recruited by convenience sampling from a specific region in the state of Florida. Analysis of these interviews was based on a constructivist view of grounded theory as described by Charmaz (2006) in *Constructing Grounded Theory*.

**Recruitment and Sample**

Jacksonville, Florida, is geographically where I focused my investigation as I asked black lesbians who are parenting to discuss the issues their families face in today’s social world. Jacksonville provides a unique context in which to investigate challenges faced by families headed by black lesbians. Jacksonville is the largest city in Florida and ranks as the 11th most populated city in the United States (U.S. Census 2012). Jacksonville is also ranked as the 10th most conservative city with a population over 300,000 and it is ranked 37th among all cities with a population greater than 100,000 (Alderman et al. 2005).

One explanation for the conservatism of Jacksonville may be found in the settlement and immigration pattern of the state of Florida. Colburn and deHaven-Smith (2010) recognize Florida as one of the most urban, racially and ethnically diverse states in the nation as people from other parts of the United States and Latin America took up residence in the state. A large influx of people from the Northeast, Midwest, and Latin
America immigrated to the state from the 1940’s through the 1970’s. However, Jacksonville was not part of this immigration/settlement wave and today is included in the region with the highest percentage of native Floridians (along with the Tallahassee area and other communities in North Florida and the Panhandle). Most people drove through the pine forests of North Florida as they headed to the beaches of the southeastern and southwestern corners of the state (Colburn and deHaven-Smith 2010). Those who settled on the southeast coast (Miami, West Palm Beach, and Fort Lauderdale) generally came from the northeastern region of the United States and Latin America, while those who settled along the southwest coast (Naples and Sarasota) came principally from the Midwest. As Colburn and deHaven-Smith (2010) explain:

For much of its recent history, Florida has essentially been two states: one that extends south from the Georgia border to Ocala and that has identified with the South and its social, political, and racial traditions, and another that extends north from Key West and Miami to just south of Ocala, with a heritage that typically has little connection to the South, that has historically had a diverse ethnic and racial population, and that has viewed the state as part of a national and international economy. (P. 9)

These new residents brought with them a more liberal world view regarding political, social, and religious values to the southern part of the state. This settlement pattern created a scenario that led “one pundit to observe that as one goes south in Florida one actually moves north” as those residents in the northern part of the state, including Jacksonville, hold firmly to their more conservative southern values (Colburn and deHaven-Smith 2010:32). This political, social, and religious conservatism found in North Florida has generated a history of racial segregation and homophobia.

Taeuber and Taeuber ([1965] 2009) report that Jacksonville was among the most highly segregated cities in Florida during the 1940’s, 1950’s, and 1960’s. The 2010
U.S. Census showed a moderate-high dissimilarity index\(^1\) of 52 (Logan and Stults 2011). This residential segregation has created predominantly black and predominantly white neighborhoods in Jacksonville. As it relates to this project, the Northside is a historically black neighborhood mentioned by participants.

Regarding homophobia, Jacksonville is the largest city in Florida that does not include sexual orientation in its Human Rights Ordinance. Nationally, Jacksonville recently joined Houston, Phoenix and San Antonio as being among the nation’s most populated cities without a Human Rights Ordinance that includes sexual orientation (Hannigan 2012) [this is discussed in more detail in Chapter 4 in the section on Ordinance 2012-296].

Jacksonville’s conservatism especially regarding sexuality and homophobia sets it apart from other cities in Florida. For comparison, within the state of Florida, eight of the top ten most populous cities have at least Human Rights Ordinances that include sexual orientation either within the city or the county. Additionally, all eight of these cities have domestic partnership registries. These cities are (in order of ranking from highest to lowest population): Miami, Tampa, Saint Petersburg, Orlando, Hialeah, Fort Lauderdale, and Tallahassee. Port Saint Lucie and Cape Coral round out the top ten most populous cities in Florida. Like Jacksonville, they do not include sexual orientation in their city’s or county’s Human Rights Ordinance. Two cities were listed as more conservative than Jacksonville, yet they had more favorable LGBT policies. Clearwater (ranks 16\(^{th}\) in Florida population and 20\(^{th}\) in conservative ranking) and Hialeah (ranks

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\(^1\) A dissimilarity index has become the standard indicator of racial and ethnic segregation between pairs of groups within a metropolitan area. If a city is completely integrated so all neighborhoods have the same racial composition the index value would be zero. If a city has areas that are exclusively black and exclusively white then the index value would be 100. Thus, a high value indicates extensive residential segregation and a low value indicates little residential segregation (Farley 1975; Frey and Myers 2005).
fourth in conservative ranking) are both located in counties with Human Rights Ordinances that include sexual orientation (Alderman et al. 2005; Equality Florida Institute, Inc. 2013). The city of Clearwater also has a domestic partnership registry.

Several other factors informed the selection of Jacksonville, Florida as the recruitment base for this project. The New York Times article, “Parenting by Gays More Common in the South, Census Shows,” reported that Jacksonville, Florida is home to the second largest population of gay parents in the country with about 32 percent of gay couples in Jacksonville raising children (Tavernise 2011). This population is second only to San Antonio, Texas, where the rate of parenting by lesbians and gay men is about 34 percent (Tavernise 2011). Additionally, the 2010 U.S. Census found the state of Florida overall had a population represented by black persons of 16 percent while the city of Jacksonville had 31 percent of its population represented by black persons (U.S. Census Bureau 2011a; U.S. Census Bureau 2011b; U.S. Census Bureau 2011c). The Williams Institute (2010) also reports Jacksonville has a large population representing African American same-sex couples with a rate of 1.1-3.0 couples per 1,000 households. For comparison, the scale was ranked into four categories: 0-0.5, 0.6-1.0, 1.1-3.0, and 3.1-6.1 per 1,000 households, so that the numbers of African American same-sex couples in Jacksonville are on the high end, but not at the highest level. The numbers for Jacksonville of 1.1-3.0 African American same-sex couples per 1,000 households are the same as those reported for Bradford, Orange, Broward, and Dade counties in Florida. There were no counties reporting the highest level of 3.1-6.1 per 1,000 households in the state of Florida and most Florida counties reported at the lower two levels.
Another reason Jacksonville was an appropriate city to focus this project in may be tied, in an indirect way, to the influence of the black church. The church is not just a place of worship in the African American community. The church is a community center involved “in social organizations, financial and educational institutions, and political movements” (Schulte and Battle 2004:131). Despite the strong negative message regarding homosexuality from the mainstream black church, lesbian and gay individuals who grew up with a strong faith tradition in the black church can find a strong faith community in gay-friendly churches. According to GALIP Gay and Christian Resources (2011), Jacksonville has 12 affirming churches. This ranks Jacksonville as second in the state of Florida when compared to other cities with affirming churches (behind Ft. Lauderdale, a Florida city that also has a large population of households headed by black lesbians and gay men (Williams Institute 2010a)). The large black population, the large number of lesbian and gay parents, and even the large number of affirming churches found in Jacksonville, Florida, make the city an appropriate site for recruiting black lesbian and gay men as I investigate their perceptions of issues and concerns faced by their families.

Recruitment of participants in Jacksonville Florida relied on two key sources—a gatekeeper and a pride organization. On reading the *New York Times* article, “Parenting by Gays More Common in the South, Census Shows,” I recognized one person who might serve as a gatekeeper to the black LGBT community in Jacksonville—Pastor Valerie Williams. Pastor Val has been part of the gay community

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2 Affirming is a term applied to churches where individuals from the LGBT community are welcome.
3 I asked Pastor Val if she would prefer I use a pseudonym for her in this project and she noted she had no misgivings with the use of her given name. Pastor Val has been a vocal supporter of the LGBT
in Jacksonville for years and in 2010 she was pastor of Saint Luke’s Community Church, one of the oldest gay-friendly churches in Jacksonville. When Pastor Val joined the staff she noted the church was not very child friendly and she recognized the children in the congregation needed a safe place to talk about the challenges they face having gay parents, so she set up a youth program called the “Youth Power Hour” and in just a few months church attendance swelled from 25 individuals to over 90 (Tavernise 2011). Pastor Val started her own worship center in October of 2012 and continues to focus on an affirming and youth-oriented ministry.

On September 27, 2011, I called Pastor Val and in our conversation Pastor Val stated that she knows “tons” of families headed by black lesbians and gay men and offered to be a gatekeeper to the community. In all our conversations, she reassured me that she felt my project was not only feasible, but important for the community. On February 20, 2012, I visited Pastor Williams in person and learned that she is very concerned with the current lack of information available, both publically and in the social sciences, regarding black same-sex families. This is one of the reasons she participated in The New York Times interview and is one reason she is so enthusiastic with her support for this project. She again confirmed that participants for this project could be found both inside and outside her church community.

In August 2012, Pastor Val invited me to speak to the congregation at St Luke’s Community Church. The church was hosting the worship service for Black Pride Weekend and there were many families headed by African American lesbians and gay community in Jacksonville and has been quoted in many newspaper articles and has been interviewed several times by local affiliates for nightly television news broadcasts.
men in attendance who heard my presentation. Many individuals came up after the service to express enthusiasm for my project and I handed out many flyers.

That same month I also presented my project to Jacksonville Parents, Families & Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG). Although there were no African American lesbians or gay men in attendance, once again, my project was enthusiastically received and I obtained several leads to other groups who might help with recruiting participants. Among these leads was the name of the Jacksonville Florida Black Pride president.

Jacksonville Florida Black Pride organization began in the summer of 1995. Their mission statement is as follows:

The Jacksonville Florida Black Pride is a social network created to build the unity and fellowship of the African American, Lesbian, Gay, Bi-Sexual, Transgendered & Questioning (LGBTQ) community in Jacksonville, Florida. We accomplish this mission through community empowerment activities and initiatives focusing on education, health, leadership, and a philosophy of fellowship and inclusiveness of all. (Jacksonville Florida Black Pride 2012)

One way that Jacksonville Florida Black Pride accomplishes this mission is by holding an annual Black Pride Weekend. I contacted the group through the president in the summer of 2012 asking if I could table at the workshop portion of their event to help bring exposure to my project and possibly recruit participants. My project was positively received and I did recruit some participants from this event.

I also hoped to recruit participants using passive snowball sampling by asking participants who are interviewed if they would pass on my contact information to others who meet the criteria and might be likely to participate in this investigation. I created a Facebook page in December 2013 offering details about my project. Unfortunately,
recruiting in Jacksonville became difficult so I contacted various Black Pride groups around North Central Florida asking for assistance. One group was particularly helpful and three members were recruited from their membership. Since the IRB protocol for this project only allowed for the specific mention of Jacksonville, I leave out any identifiers that might place the residence of participants in other cities. As themes emerged from the coding of the interviews of the Jacksonville participants, I found they did not have experiences that could be classified as being particular to Jacksonville. All participants’ experiences reflected the more general conservatism that is found in North Central Florida. Even though these other cities do not rank as conservatively as Jacksonville, participants reported experiences that mirrored those in Jacksonville so their stories were included in the analysis of this project. Also, recall the discussion earlier in this section pointing out the common social, political, and cultural conservatism of North Florida. As Colburn and deHaven-Smith (2010) explain, “the state retains remnants of its southern culture in the northern and Panhandle areas and in a thin line that extends through the center of Florida from the Georgia border to the Everglades” (p. 7).

I had initially hoped to interview individuals who were co-parenting as a couple in what Holstein and Gubrium (1995) call “actual multivocality.” They note actual multivocality “can emphasize the richness of meaning revealed in the active interview” (Holstein and Gubrium 1995:72). Each member of the couple being interviewed can add their perspective to the narrative thus generating more dynamic data. Furthermore, joint interviews may bring up themes that might not come up in an individual interview (Allan 1980). Unfortunately, logistics created scenarios where this was not possible.
Unavailability of partners because of other commitments at the time of the interview was the reason most of these women were not interviewed with their partners. I decided to go ahead with the interview with only one partner, rather than risk losing the interview waiting for both partners to be available at the same time. Also, as will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5, this dynamic is actually part of my results. Participants explained that one way they managed a gay identity was by not being seen as a couple.

**Outsider/ Insider Debate**

As a feminist researcher, the outsider/insider debate informs this research project and played a role in the recruitment process. When interviewing black lesbians and gay men I am an outsider based on race and an insider by virtue of my lesbian identity and because of my identity as a parent. My insider status did aid in building rapport with my participants since we may share similar experiences. However, I also recognize my status as an outsider may have been problematic when race is considered.

Several researchers have discussed this outsider/insider divide as it relates to interviewing (Carter 2004; Dunbar, Rodriguez, and Parker 2003; Foster 1994; Lamphere 1994; McCorkel and Myers 2003; Naples 1996; Shah 2004; Stanfield 1994; Tinker and Armstrong 2008). Foster (1994) admits that “research conducted by insiders cannot capture the total experience of an entire community. But neither can research conducted by outsiders” (p. 144). Tinker and Armstrong (2008) acknowledge “we are all insiders and outsiders to varying extents in every research setting” (p. 58). Carter (2004) even acknowledges there are some positive aspects of being an outsider in a research situation even though ethnic matching between interviewer and interviewee may ultimately be what is desirable. He notes taken-for-granted assumptions based on ethnic categories and identities can be made more explicit and ethnic categories are not
reified which is a good thing since these categories "are far from fixed and are in a constant process of creation and recreation and are inextricably linked to other forms of identity such as age, gender, and social class" (Carter 2004:352). Ultimately, researchers need to recognize and analyze the dimensions of their own positionality. This positionality has multiple layers, which includes not just race, but also includes class, gender, and sexual orientation, and influences our perceptions and the way we come to understand and conceptualize our research (Lamphere 1994; McCorkel and Myers 2003). This attention researchers give to the "dualistic emphasis on both the front and backstage of the research process is a crucial resource for obtaining objectivity and legitimating knowledge claims" (McCorkel and Myers 2003:203).

I kept track of my positionality by using a research journal in which I recorded thoughts regarding my research experience. As Milner (2007) suggests, the real meaning to be found in research comes when the researchers “value and listen to the self, to others, and to the self in relation to others” (p. 395). These reflections exposed concerns and challenges and what was going well and helped me recognize how my own social location and identity influenced my understanding. Since I am building knowledge with my participants I came back to them to provide feedback on issues that emerged during my reflection or to elaborate on themes that were introduced by other participants.

After conducting five interviews and having few leads for future interviews, I became concerned that I would not recruit anymore interviewees so I asked several participants their thoughts on what might be causing people to be reticent about participating since so many people expressed enthusiasm about my project. They
responded that perhaps potential interviewees were wary because they feared being judged or thought there could be no way to keep any information they shared anonymous. These sentiments were expressed by other researchers in Chapter 2 as I reviewed the literature that discussed conducting research in the African American community. Also, as will be discussed in further detail in later chapters I now understand that one way participants manage their marginalized sexual identity is to simply not talk about it.

Thoughts of being judged were also underscored during a conversation at a community roundtable discussion I attended in December 2012, which was sponsored by a Jacksonville group that advocates for LGBT youth. The purpose of the discussion was to interrogate the challenges LGBT youth, especially black LGBT youth, face when they disclose their sexual identity to their families and to develop ways the organization can better support the LGBT youth in Jacksonville. It was brought up that many black LGBT identified youth are disowned by their families because the family members, especially the parents, feel their young family member’s marginalized sexual identity reflects on them. These parents were concerned with the ways others would think about them, feeling they did something wrong causing others to judge them negatively. Perhaps my outsider status brought up these same feelings for potential participants.

With this information, I realized that choosing to participate was an extremely personal decision and as I looked back on who had agreed to participate up to that point I realized it was individuals who had a more personal contact with me by seeing me present on my project and then introducing themselves after the presentation. So I continued to regularly attend church services to maintain a presence in the community.
I also attended River City Pride in October 2012. River City Pride is “an annual event that fosters a sense of community, encourages LGBTQ citizens to live openly, promotes fellowship with our allies, opposes discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression” (River City Pride 2013). It is a diverse pride celebration which is not African American-centered, but it was a venue where I met many black lesbians and gay individuals and couples. I met several contacts who were parenting and three contacts agreed to participate in my project.

When an individual or couple agreed to an interview they were encouraged to select a location where they would feel most comfortable. A majority of the interviews (six interviews) took place in public spaces like coffee shops or restaurants, the remaining interviews took place at the participant’s home. Interviews lasted from 30 to 90 minutes. Participants received $20 in compensation. All interviews were transcribed verbatim by me and a constructivist approach to grounded theory was used during analysis (Charmaz 2006).

The Interviews

I began the interviews with an introduction of this project. I assumed that participants might have concerns and might wonder why a white lesbian is interested in their story. I established rapport and trust by pointing out my desire to add their missing voice to the discourse surrounding race and sexuality. I acknowledged my awareness of the racism they experience in the gay community and the ways racism impacts their families. I also acknowledged my awareness of family initiatives that restrict marriage and adoption in Florida and noted how I understand that these issues have particular relevance, not just to families headed by lesbians and gay men, but to families headed by black lesbians and gay men in particular. My intention with this self-disclosure was to
help put participants at ease and create a sense of the interview being a dialogue, rather than an interrogation (Reinharz 1992).

Confidentiality and the use of pseudonyms were also discussed to build a rapport between interviewer and participant. The rapport generated with those I interviewed created an interactive give and take as described by Holstein and Gubrium (1995) in *The Active Interview*. As such, the researcher and the participant work together in a “non-hierarchical” manner to actively create an understanding of reality (Oakley 1981:41). Holstein and Gubrium (1995) point out, “respondents are not so much repositories of knowledge—treasuries of information awaiting excavation—as they are constructors of knowledge in collaboration with interviewers” (p. 4). In “Interviewing Women: a Contradiction in Terms”, Oakley (1981) further recognizes that in a feminist interview “the formulation of the interviewer role has changed dramatically from being a data-collecting for researchers to being a data-collecting instrument for those whose lives are being researched” (p. 49).

Interviewing provides a glimpse of the reality being experienced by those being investigated. The interview method is ideal in investigating “what people say about what they do, what they say they believe or value, and what they say their opinions are” (Warren and Karner 2005:158, emphasis in original). Reinharz (1992) finds “interviewing offers researchers access to people’s ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher” (p. 19). As a feminist researcher, I feel asking people to tell their *own* story is critical to conceptualizing their construction of reality. Many participants expressed an enthusiasm about being able to tell their story and being part of this project.
In a feminist interview and in an active interview, the goal is for a conversation to flow between the researcher and the participant but this conversation is not completely random, the interview guide gives a starting point and helps provide a sense of direction. An interview guide was generated with open-ended questions to investigate issues and concerns facing families of black lesbians and gay men [please see Appendix A for the complete interview guide]. Guidance on question construction was taken from a feminist researcher’s perspective as outlined in “Talking and Listening from Women’s Standpoint” (DeVault 1990), The Active Interview (Holstein and Gubrium 1995), “Qualitative Interviewing and Grounded Theory Analysis” (Charmaz 2003), and “Feminist Interview Research” (Reinharz 1992). A feminist perspective encourages a more equal status between the researcher and the participant and a move away from a sense that the interview is a cross-examination.

The interviewer is encouraged to be actively involved and guide the conversation with questions that will yield responses that reflect a more nuanced and fuller reality as viewed by the participant. Questions were developed to specifically help participants interrogate their own experiences, make connections, and conceptualize issues (Holstein and Gubrium 1995). Questions were constructed to build in opportunities for reflection on both the part of the interviewer and the participant so more complete responses can be generated (DeVault 1990; Holstein and Gubrium 1995). DeVault (1990) reminds the researcher that they are “actively involved with respondents, so that together they are constructing fuller answers to questions that cannot always be asked in simple, straightforward ways” (p. 21). And Reinharz (1992) further suggests there is a need for researchers to focus less on getting the question answered and more on
understanding the participant—a need to be “interviewee-guided” (p.24). For example, the order of the questions listed in the interview guide might change if a participant answers one question as part of another. Or, a participant may spend more time responding to one question over another thus guiding the interview on an unexpected, but perhaps enlightening, path. This did happen many times, but these were challenges that provided opportunities for participants to tell their own story in their own way.

Finally, regarding actual question construction, Charmaz (2003) notes that “questions must be sufficiently general to cover a wide range of experiences as well as narrow enough to elicit and explore the participant’s specific experience” (p. 315).

I also looked to address ways members of the black LGBT community perceive the policy issues of marriage and adoption as it relates to their families. Family recognition policies such as the ability to marry or adopt children are especially important to black same-sex households who are more likely to be raising children and have less earning power than black married opposite-sex couples and white same-sex couples (Dang and Frazer 2004). The social safety net provided by marriage would give access to federal benefits like Social Security survivor benefits, Medicaid and worker’s compensation. It would also provide access to employer-based health insurance (Battle, et al. 2002). The ability to adopt any non-biological children will give parents the ability to better provide for these children and give a sense of security and permanence.

Families headed by black lesbians are disadvantaged because of racism and heterosexism—issues and concerns found at the intersection of race and sexuality.
Thus questions about these family policy issues were included to help me understand how couples think about these intersections in relation to their families.

**Profile of Interview Participants**

Ten total interviews were conducted and these interviews included 12 people [please see Appendix B for participant’s demographic information] and I assigned pseudonyms to all who were interviewed. All participants self-identified as black gay women, with one woman noting she was biracial with a black father and a white mother. Two interviews were with a couple who were co-parenting one child and eight interviews were with women who were interviewed singly. Of these women, three were single at the time of the interview and five were interviewed without their partners⁴. Eight of the participants had children biologically in a previous heterosexual relationship. One of the participants had a child through in vitro fertilization and one of the participants was raising a child with her partner that she had adopted and one child they were fostering. Eight of those interviewed self-identified with a middle-class socioeconomic status, while three individuals self-identified with a working-class or blue-collar status, and one individual self-identified as being of low socioeconomic status because they were unemployed at the time of the interview. Nine of the participants lived in Jacksonville at the time of the interview, and three individuals lived in other North Central Florida cities. All participants had “come out” or disclosed their sexual identity to their families and were “out” in varying degrees in other social situations like work or at their child(ren)’s school.

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⁴ Unavailability of partners because of other commitments at the time of the interview was the reason these women could not be interviewed with their partners. Because recruiting was not going well it was decided it was better to pursue an interview with only one partner, rather than risk losing the interview waiting for both partners to be available at the same time.
Analysis

Rather than generating theory, which is a typical goal in grounded theory, I provide a conceptual frame that will help explain the perspectives of the challenges faced by families headed by black lesbians. Grounded theory was originally developed by Glaser and Strauss in the late 1960’s to develop explanatory theory of social life using empirical data, specifically in the form of qualitative research (Annells 1996; Mills, Bonner, and Francis 2006). Many researchers recognized the value of this method and have adapted Glaser and Strauss’ traditional grounded theory to fit their own epistemological position (Mills et al. 2006).

Traditional grounded theory clearly defined a line of separation between the researcher and the participant, and assumed the researcher could “discover” an objective reality. The participant is seen as a source of data and in this scenario a hierarchy develops where the researcher is in a position that is superior to the participant. As a feminist researcher, I recognize that in any research method, and in feminist interviewing research in particular, there is recognition of a more equal relationship between the researcher and the participant—the researcher and the participants, together, co-create a view of social reality. Stanfield (1994) would agree and cautions researchers to remember the research process should be a two-way learning experience that “should be structured in such a way as not only to empower ‘subjects’ but also to contribute to the human development of the researcher” (p. 174). With these concerns in mind, I used a constructivist perspective in my strategy for analysis.

A constructivist perspective of grounded theory is described by Charmaz in *Constructing Grounded Theory* (2006). She notes, “a constructivist approach places
priority on the phenomena of study and sees both data and analysis as created from shared experiences and relationships with participants" (Charmaz 2006:130). With this recognition of a shared experience, it becomes important for the researcher to see not only the vantage point of the participants, but their own vantage point as well. The researcher needs to be aware of the influence their own underlying assumptions may bring to analysis and because of this reflexivity becomes important. The researcher moves from being a “disembodied data-gatherer” to a true coconstructor of knowledge (Reinharz 1992:40). The research process moves from simply being “data collection to data generation” (Collins 1998:1.1). And because I am paying attention to the reality of my participant’s lives as it is constructed in interviews, I focused on explaining the hows and the whats (Charmaz 2006; Holstein and Gubrium 1995). I kept these questions in mind: how do participants frame their reality? And what do participants see as reality?

Coding is the first step in making analytic interpretations and proceeds through several stages, with each stage building on the others before ultimately generating an understanding of the data. The levels of coding as suggested by Charmaz are: 1) initial coding which separates the data into distinct short action items; 2) focused coding which groups the initial codes into categories that make analytic sense; 3) axial coding which brings the data back together by highlighting links between categories and subcategories; and 4) theoretical coding which relates the categories to each other.

Memo writing is also an important component in constructivist grounded theory analysis. Memo writing allows the researcher to engage the data. Memo writing provides an opportunity for the researcher to be reflective and explain their own perspectives about what might be going on in an investigation and this will prove to be
important in later analysis (Corbin and Strauss 2008). Mills et al. (2006) further note that memo writing specifically helps the researcher “remember, question, analyze, and make meaning about the time spent with participants and the data that were generated together” (p. 11). And since memo writing starts at the very beginning of an investigation, with the first interviews, it helps keep the researcher focused and immersed in the data.

Reinharz (1992) further encourages feminist researchers to be self-reflexive in order to maintain sensitivity to issues and power issues that may arise based on positionality in the research process. And, McCorkel and Myers (2003) discuss the importance of field notes to self-reflexivity. They point out field notes, which are a type of memo writing, can help the researcher to be self-reflexive and can help researchers confront the positionality they bring to the investigation. Field notes and memo writing were an especially important tool that helped me confront my own positionality as a white lesbian interviewing black lesbian parents [see discussion presented earlier in this chapter in the outsider/insider debate section].

As a way to help organize and keep track of codes I used computer-assisted software. ATLAS.ti© is a popular software package that allows for computer-assisted qualitative analysis. The developer of the software notes that it helps manage a large volume of data like the volume that would be generated in this project with around 10 in-depth, semi-structured interviews. ATLAS.ti© does not generate codes on its own but it does help researchers organize their data and discover patterns found in that data (ATLAS.ti Scientific Software Development GmbH 2011). ATLAS.ti© helped me keep from repeating codes when the data started to become overwhelming with the addition
of more interviews. ATLAS.ti® was fairly easy to learn and is relatively inexpensive for students making it a useful aid to use during analysis.

Providing participants with an opportunity to review preliminary findings and give feedback was also important to the analysis phase of this project. Thompson (1992) emphasizes that “feminist researchers can help empower participants through collaboration and empowering feedback sessions” (p. 15). She further maintains that feminist researchers have no reason not to take their interpretations back to their participants so that they can judge how well their experiences have been represented (Thompson 1992). Finally, “through attentiveness to others and rigorous awareness of ourselves, we create knowledge that is as close to social reality as we are going to get” (Thompson 1992:10).

Because black lesbians and gay men are members of a racial minority group and a minority group based on their sexual identity they face multiple oppressions. The lived experiences of black lesbians and their families provide scholars with an opportunity to explore the subtleties and nuances found at the intersection of sexuality and race. This exploration expands the knowledge and understanding of these families in particular and all families in general. In the next chapter, I begin presenting the key aspects of the stories my participants told.
CHAPTER 4
OUR FAMILY IS THE SAME AS YOUR FAMILY—TREAT US THAT WAY

It's the same when you move that roof off of everybody house you hear the same mess.
   —Eva¹

My family, regardless of who I’m with or who I’m dating, the love and support is still there. I mean, we still can be happy, whether I’m with a male, female, or whatever. We still can be a happy and loving family. That’s what I would want them to know. We’re still close. We’re still strong. And, we’re still loving.
   —Tandice

These quotes from Eva and Tandice underscored the notion that participants wished people better understood that their family was just like any family. In this chapter, I present the ways participants underscored that despite managing a marginalized sexual identity they felt their families’ experiences and challenges were just the same as those in families headed by heterosexual parents. I also present a discussion about the sentiments participants expressed indicating that their families should be granted the same recognition rights as all other families, such as those regarding the ability to marry or adopt children.

We All Bleed the Same Blood

Many participants noted that their families were “normal” or “just like” a family headed by a heterosexual couple. They underscore many ways their families are the same as other families. Sometimes they talk about their family using words like “normal,” “no different,” “ordinary,” and “it’s the same.” Sometimes they point out how their love for each other is the same as in other families. Sometimes they describe all the everyday tasks they undertake, like doing the dishes or homework, are done in the same ways as other families. They also punctuate their sameness to other families by

¹ Pseudonyms were assigned by me and identifiable characteristics were changed for all participants to protect their anonymity.
commenting on the ways their sexuality is not a consideration for determining their fitness as parents.

Many participants clearly stated that they felt their families were “normal” and “not exceptional.” For example, Taye is co-parenting an elementary-school-aged child with her partner, Fola. When asked what she wished people knew about her family, Taye remarked:

Yeah we just try to, I don’t want to say be normal, but I mean we just have a regular life. We go to work. He goes to school. We go to church. He has friends. We have friends. We have family. There’s nothing exceptional about our life. We do everything that everybody else does, probably a little bit more in some instances, because you feel like we have to compensate sometimes for being different, I guess. I mean it’s love, so, my sexuality has nothing to do with my ability to raise a child effectively.

Taye wants people to see that her family is ordinary, “normal”. Later in the interview, she and her partner report that loving and caring for a child is more vital to the child’s well-being than the race, gender, or sexuality of the parent. The sexual orientation of the parent is seen as being irrelevant when considering the participant’s ability to parent. They further commented:

Fola: We’re really no different and that gender really doesn’t matter. And I mean it’s more than just homophobia and racism and all. Race, gender doesn’t matter, it doesn’t. When you’re raising a child, do you think the child cares about who loves him, who feeds him, who takes him to school, who helps him with their homework? They don’t care. They just look for that love and that dependency.

Taye: Yeah, just that there is nothing extraordinary about my family. There isn’t. We live. We love. I guess, um, I mean it’s love.

Others recognized that the children should be the focus in a family and that ultimately love is important—love between the partners for each other, love of the parents for the
Ebony, who with her partner was co-parenting four children, offered:

I wish people would not be so close-minded. I wish they would, uh realize the important, the real important stuff, like I said before, it's not about who I'm sleepin' with or who I want to be with, you know. It's about the support system. How you take care of the kids. Is your household stable, you know? I think those are the more important things. I just, I feel like people just, they focus and put emphasis too much on things that doesn't matter, or that shouldn't matter, shall I say, rather than the things that should be top priority and that's the kids. Or um, how people love one another. How they take care of one another, you know. It just really shouldn't be solely on, um, how people love one another. How they take care of one another, it's just really shouldn't be solely on sexuality.

Ebony again brings attention to the fact that being a good and competent parent does not depend on one’s race, sexuality, or gender, it depends on loving the child and being present in the child's life.

Several participants describe the ordinary and everyday tasks that take place in any family in order for them to be labeled a success. Families, whether they are headed by a cross-sex couple or a same-sex couple, must all manage the everyday and the mundane. Eva is a single parent raising a teenager. Like Taye and Fola and other participants, she offers that her family was not extraordinary and added that all families have the same chores to accomplish daily. She said:

You know I think that is what some people miss, what goes on in a normal house has nothing to do with what color you are. Who’s suppose to take the trash out? Who’s cutting the grass? Whose turn is it to wash the dishes? Who did not clean up the bathroom? Whose turn is it to clean the tub? Did homework get done? That has nothing to do with being gay. The typical things that people think that would be affected being black or white. It's the same when you move that roof off of everybody house you hear the same mess.

Eva reiterates the point that chores and disagreements are the same for all families regardless of the race or sexuality of the parents.
Elaborating on this point, La’Rae who was raising three children with her partner, also emphasizes her family was just like any family because of their everyday family activities. Specifically, she points out her family is no different regarding the places they shopped or the TV shows they watched. She commented:

We eat the same food. I shop at the same stores. There’s no gay store—well I mean there are gay stores, but I don’t take my kids and buy them rainbow shirts to wear to school—I take them to K-Mart and Wal-Mart just like you do, you know. So, we, they watch the same TV shows as your kid.

La’Rae underscores that all families, whether they are headed by lesbians or heterosexuals, perform similar tasks. These tasks are not and should not be labeled as being tasks for someone who is gay or for someone who is straight. She further highlights that families headed by lesbians do not do anything that would draw attention to the sexual minority status of the parent(s); the sexuality of the parents is unremarkable. Again and again participants stress that families headed by black lesbians are no different from families headed by heterosexual parents.

Ulani is raising two children with her partner and she emphasized:

We’re just like them. We have the same problems. We do the same things. We have the same insecurities, maybe a few more insecurities [chuckle] because we are different, quote unquote, you know. But, we are just like the rest of the world. There’s nothin’ special about us. We work hard every day to make sure our boys have food, to make sure they have the things they need, and some of the stuff they want. We have rules in our house just like you have rules. They have chores, you know, it’s the same. It’s pretty much the same structure I grew up in, is what I have in my house, it’s the same. You come home, you know, you grab a snack, do your work, you relax for a little while, do what you wanna do, and then do your chores, you know. It’s the same structure I grew up with, that’s the structure that the boys have. The only difference really is that it’s a two-parent household. I grew up in a single-parent household. So a lot of things that I do with them, my mom couldn’t do because she had to work. But, being a two-parent household, you know, we are able to, every Saturday is Family Day, we go do something fun, you know, we just hang
out. I didn’t always get that. I think that’s the only difference between what I grew up with, and the structure we have now, you know. I think that would be the most important thing: we’re no different than any other married couple with two kids.

Ulani points out the family she has created with her partner and their children has the same dynamic as the one she grew up in as a child. Notice too how Ulani challenges the normalization of the heterosexual family. One of the “cultural legacies” of the Moynihan report (1965), *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, that pathologized black families was that the problem in the “Negro Family” resulted from the “matriarchal” structure and the recommendation for fixing the problem and the way to best meet the needs of black children was to encourage two cohabiting parents of different genders (Bennett and Battle 2001). Ulani describes the importance of structure, rules, and two parents being present in the home. She adds the perspective that the gender of the parents in a family is not the influence that creates the difference in the outcome of the children; it is the fact that there are two parents available to help care, love, and support the children and this is what makes two parent families successful. She notes there are things she and her partner can do to help support their children; things her mother could not fully provide as a single mother. Furthermore, she recognizes gender is irrelevant—these two parents could be two moms, two dads, or a mom and a dad. Ulani is simultaneously challenging the racist legacy of the Moynihan report and asserting a challenge to heteronormative parenting when she points out that two parents matter but those parents do not have to be a woman and a man.

Like many of the participants, Denelle and Nancy similarly assert that their family is no different from a family headed by heterosexual parents, but they simultaneously add that lesbian parents should not be seen as sexual deviants. They said:
Denelle: Yeah, that we’re the same as their family, you know. If you cut me I got red blood just like you do.

Nancy: Do the same things you do.

Denelle: Do the same things you do, every day.

Nancy: You got problems, we got problems.

Denelle: Your kids don’t want to do dishes. Our kid don’t want to do dishes either [laughter] trust me. Same thing goes on, exact same thing.

Nancy: You lost your keys; I have too. [laughter]

Denelle: They [straight folks] just automatically think we are all so uneducated and we are all some type of sexual fanatic, fiends…

Nancy: Perverts.

Denelle: Yeah.

Nancy: And I don’t want you. [laughter]

Denelle: [chuckles] right, not at all.

Nancy: You can pop your collar if you want to, but you’re poppin’ it on your own.

Denelle and Nancy bring attention to and challenge the idea that lesbians and gay men are somehow sexually perverse when compared to their heterosexual peers. They point out that some stereotypes of lesbians and gay individuals mark them as being promiscuous. They explain an assumption they perceive that heterosexual people have when they automatically think that since they are lesbian, they are sexual deviants, and if they are sexual deviants, they must want to have sex with them. Denelle and Nancy’s comments are highlighting how this perceived promiscuity labels lesbians and gay men not only sexually deviant, but it would also mark them as unfit parents. Denelle and Nancy deflect this notion and, yet again, like other participants, they describe their
family as being no different from any other family and assert that their sexuality has no impact on their ability to be competent parents.

Sal also describes how she feels that her sexuality is not relevant to her parenting. Sal is a single parent raising a teenager. She introduces the idea that her sexual identity is so unremarkable that she does not even notice it. Sal commented:

Actually what happens to me as far as family once it becomes a family, I don’t even know I’m gay. It just becomes my family and my kids. A regular life to me. Like if I was walking holding a girl’s hand and somebody said look at [the] gay people. I’d be like really [looks over her shoulder, looking around] Where? [laugher] Oh,[you mean] me! Ohhhh.

Sal describes how her marginalized sexual identity does not enter her thoughts on a regular basis. For Sal, her lesbian identity is irrelevant as a family descriptor. She does not see her family as being remarkable until her sexuality is challenged from outside the relationship. When challenged, Sal later reported that she does not confront her challenger, she moves on, especially since challenges she has experienced have been more covert and remarks have come from people in passing. Because Sal felt no threat at the time of the comments, she perceived no need on her part to be confrontational. Even at a point of potential conflict, Sal sees her sexuality as being irrelevant to her family life.

Sal’s story introduces a discussion of the ways participants manage perceptions of their sexuality. For Sal, this meant brushing off the looks and comments others said in passing while others talked of wanting to be seen as the same. For example, Zoey recognizes a need for tolerance and acceptance. She stated:

I think, my main thing, is that, you know, um, heterosexual people should treat, homosexuals the same way, you know. Be acceptin’ of all. I mean we all, we all bleed the same blood. We all, you know, we all do the same things. I use the bathroom the same way you do. I put on my socks the
same way you do. We are equal, you know, just because I have a sexual preference, doesn’t exempt me from being treated as a human.

Again, Zoey uses a language of sameness when she says “we all bleed the same blood.” Notice how she makes this claim in relation to how homosexuals are the same as heterosexuals. Then she elaborates by adding to the list of everyday activities that other participants felt make their families no different from families headed by heterosexual parents, emphasizing that in her view, lesbians and gay men are entitled to the same rights as heterosexuals.

The participants quoted in this section highlight their perspectives that their sexuality does not make them remarkably different from their heterosexual peers; a lesbian identity does not negatively impact their ability to parent. As they explain, being gay does not change the everyday chores that need to be completed by both parents and children. It does not influence where their family shops or what TV shows they watch or how they put on their socks or the color of the blood they bleed. What is best for children does not change because of the sexuality of the parents. All children need parents who love them and take care of them. Parenting generates the same challenges for all families whether they have two moms or a mom and a dad. These claims of sameness resonate in a climate where families are seeking equal rights. And this makes sense when we recognize the legal language of rights is based in a language of equality and when we recognize the language of the social movement is about being the same as other families.

Furthermore, historically there have been multiple forms of structural and institutional domination and exploitation on the basis of race and sexual orientation (Battle and Bennett 2000). The structural and cultural forces of racism and homophobia
have created responses from participants requiring them to address both systems (among others) simultaneously as they parent at the intersection of race, sexuality, and gender. Racist and sexist policies have generated a picture of inadequate parenting by black individuals. Hill (2005) summarized “white, middle-class families were praised for their modernity and suitability for the new industrial economy, and the handful of researchers who turned their lens beyond that model of family only saw disorder, dysfunction, and pathology” (p. 52). Homophobia has also led to challenges and debates regarding the fitness of lesbians and gay men to parent competently (Biblarz and Savci 2010; Moore and Stambolis-Ruhstorfer 2013). Despite the abundance of research to the contrary [recall the discussion in Chapter 2 about parenting by lesbians and gay men] some researchers have recently argued that having a lesbian or gay parent is detrimental for a child’s development (Marks 2012; Regnerus 2012). It is in this backdrop that participants must confront the sanctions placed on them as members of groups marginalized both racially and sexually, and as mothers. As I have demonstrated in this section, one way these mothers do so is by stressing how their families are the same as any others.

A related strategy to confront racist and homophobic stigma is to create a family that is socially viewed as legitimate and acceptable by advocating for public policies that would provide a sense of stability and permanence for their families. In the following section, participants discuss the importance of being able to marry the partner of their choosing and the importance of being able to provide a sense of belonging to all members of their family through marriage and adoption.
Family Recognition Is Important

Generally speaking, family recognition policies are those laws and constitutional amendments that define, among other things, who may adopt children and who may marry. Cahill and Tobias (2007) note that:

Family policy affects LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender] individuals and influences their security and well-being throughout their lives—from childhood through young adulthood, middle age through older years, and even after death. Much public policy is based on the goal of promoting “the family,” recognizing the economic and emotional interdependence of family members and giving special priority to this bond. Yet policy has historically been based on a narrow definition of family that does not encompass the bonds of LGBT people. Most policy gives preference to heterosexual married couples and their children over all other family formations. (P. 2)

Without equal access to adoption and marriage many lesbian and gay couples have to spend thousands of dollars on the legal documents to protect their families. Bernard and Lieber (2009) report the cost at about $5500. Unfortunately, many times these documents, even when they are accessed, are not upheld in the courts or respected by hospitals, banks, and other institutions (Cahill and Tobias 2007). Those who cannot afford the legal documents are left without protections for their family. And even with the documents there is no way to duplicate all of the rights and advantages of marriage through documents (Riggle et al. 2005). Oswald and Kuvalanka (2008) reported that about half of all same-sex couples lack any form of legal tie. Family recognition policies are important for all families including the families of the participants in this study—families headed by black lesbians—who find themselves confronting racism, homophobia, and sexism.

Many American’s definition of family is very traditional with family being a married opposite-sex couple and their children and this traditional view of family is also held by a
majority of African Americans (Powell et al. 2010). Including lesbians and gay men in marriage has been resisted in the African American community specifically, and in society more generally. Ross (2002) contends:

One impediment to same-sex marriage was the way gay relationships are sexualized, seen as illicit, pornographic. In contrast, marriage is viewed as sacred. To afford marriage rights for same-sex couples is therefore viewed as a jump from profane to sacred, too big a jump to make.

(P.1007)

Dietrich (1994) adds that, “by denying gay and lesbian couples access to the ‘sacred’ union, society proclaims them less worthy, less committed, insignificant” (p.122). The political opposition to government recognition of same-sex marriage has been intense (Herek 2006) and the marriage equality debate has taken place in the courts and legislatures of several states.

At the time of these interviews (the summer of 2012-the spring of 2013) the marriage equality debate was highlighted both locally and nationally. A Pew Forum Poll (2013) reported that in 2013, 49 percent of all Americans favor same-sex marriage, while 44 percent oppose it. When disaggregated by race, 38 percent of black, non-Hispanic individuals who were polled support same-sex marriage; compared with 49 percent of white, non-Hispanics. Marriage equality referendums were on the fall 2012 ballots in four states—Maine, Maryland, Minnesota, and Washington. In all four states, voters passed referendums allowing same-sex couples to marry (Huffington Post 2012). The 1996 Defense of Marriage Act, which federally defines marriage as between a man and a woman, had been argued before the Supreme Court to decide its constitutionality (Barnes 2013). A decision from the Supreme Court is expected in the summer of 2013 (Reilly and Sacks 2013). And, locally Ordinance 2012-296, an amendment to add
sexual orientation and gender identity to Jacksonville’s Human Rights Code, was being debated [discussion on Ordinance 2012-296 is provided in the next section] (Bauerlein 2012; Hannigan 2012).

It was in this social climate that participants asserted their families were the same as heterosexually-constituted families, as outlined above. Participants also explicitly discussed the importance of being able to create a family with the ones they love whether that would be through marriage or adoption. Recall from the last section, participants discussed a family as being individuals who love each other. Being able to marry the person you love was a specific point of concern expressed by many participants. For example, Tandice is a single parent raising an elementary-aged child and she said:

You should be able to marry whoever you want. They shouldn’t have any say so of that. And, I don’t see why the people are so against it, and I feel like the main people that are against it, they’re having issues in their marriage or something like that. They can’t even get it right [chuckle] so why are you judging me, that type of thing. I really just don’t understand that. Everybody deserves to be happy and live their own life, you know, so that’s how I feel about it. I mean to me it’s kind of like they’re trying to decide, make you decide on who you should and should not be with, and I don’t like that. I’m gonna be with who I wanna be with whether you like that or not.

And Eva, who is raising a teenager as a single parent, commented:

I think all that any gay person is asking for is the same mess and confusion that everybody else get, ’cause that’s all it is realistically. We want to be able to walk to the altar while we are carrying our divorce paper in our hands too. [laughter] Let me be honest, there is always the possibility it may not last.

Both Tandice and Eva recognize that there can be trouble in any marriage but that the individuals involved deserve to be able to make the decision on who they marry for themselves without any interference from those outside the relationship. They are
emphasizing that they deserve the same rights to marry as their heterosexual peers because their families are the same as the families of their heterosexual peers.

These same sentiments were expressed by other participants who underscored that the equal right to marry was important to them. But they also remarked that entering a marriage is a serious decision and should not be taken lightly. Sal, who is raising a teenager as a single parent, said:

I just don’t want people to do it because they can. This is something serious you do it the same way as if you was marrying a dude. Take your time. Get to know ‘em, not like hey it’s legal let’s do it. I love you, you love me. I really want people to understand and not just take it because you can do it. Every dude you meet you don’t sit there and be like you know what let’s get married. [laughter] You be looking at him like, ah, no. [laughter] Take that same time that you would any other person. And just take your time and gradually and you feel like it’s the one or it’s just the one. But not everybody think that out. They be movin’ in with each other in the first two weeks. I be like, what’s her name again. [laughter] Like really. Why is that?

Sal emphasizes the notion that a marriage to a person of the same sex is no different from a marriage to a person of the opposite sex. She further emphasizes the seriousness of the decision to make legal commitment like marriage when she notes a relationship and commitment of that level needs to develop over time.

Ebony, who was raising four children with her partner, suggested:

I think gay people should be able to marry, because who’s to say who you’re supposed to love, who you’re supposed to be with. Nobody knows anybody else’s heart, you know. Who are you to tell me I’m not supposed to love this person right here because they are the same sex. It has nothing to do with you. That’s steppin’ into a person’s personal life. That’s the personal part right there. There’s nobody’s business who I love. There’s nobody’s business who I lay down in the bed with. And there’s nobody’s business who I have sexual contact with. It’s my business. It’s in my household. It’s behind closed doors, so why wouldn’t you. I think they should go through counseling before to make sure that’s what they really want, because sometimes you can be, you can feel like
you’re in love with a person, and not to say that you’re not, but marriage is somethin’ completely different.

Ebony underscores the fact that who you chose to marry is a personal choice based in love and should be no one’s concern except for the individuals involved. She also indicates the decision to marry is so important that the couple involved should even consider getting outside input by attending counseling sessions. Sal and Ebony both point out that the decision to marry is important for all people, not just lesbians and not just heterosexuals, and even though any couple might have the option to legally marry in the future this does not mean that every couple should. Being able to marry the one they love is just another way the women participating in this study hope to create a family that will be viewed as respectable, legitimate, and worthy of equal treatment.

**Ordinance 2012-296**

During the time in which the interviews were being conducted for this project there was a move to amend and expand the existing Human Rights Code for the City of Jacksonville to include protections for lesbians, gay men, and transgender individuals. Ordinance 2012-296 would add “sexual orientation, gender identity or expression” to the bans against discrimination in employment opportunities, fair housing, and public accommodations based on race, color, religion, sex, marital status, national origin, age, or disability already present in Jacksonville’s Human Rights Code (Sideman 2012). The discussion surrounding the ordinance was contentious and followed closely in the local news media. The City Council meetings held before the final vote had standing-room-only crowds and the crowd in attendance was a fairly even mix of those supporting the ordinance and those opposing it. The debate generally revolved around religious ideology with conservatives believing the ordinance would give special rights to the
LGBT community and those with more liberal views advocating for inclusion in the name of equality. After three months of debate the portion of the amendment recognizing “gender identity and expression” was deemed too controversial and was removed. This provision was removed in hopes that support would be in place for an amendment to the Human Rights Code that only included sexual orientation. The council voted 10-9 against the bill that had removed gender identity and expression. A vote was forced on the original bill and this version also failed by a vote of 17-2 (Bauerlein 2012).

Several participants expressed their disappointment in the failure to pass Ordinance 2012-296. They indicated the struggle to pass Ordinance 2012-296 reflected the struggles they have to be seen as citizens worthy of equal rights. After a discussion about their desire to marry and complete a co-parent adoption, Nancy and Denelle recognize the long road to gaining full marriage equality and adoption rights for their family. They said:

Nancy: It’s going to be a battle. We can’t even get beyond 296. And in the Folio [a weekly tabloid covering arts and entertainment] what they said this door opens and another will open and that’s probably why, now that we are very close, but being that close, still doesn’t get the job done.

Denelle: I’m just surprised that it didn’t pass, it just blew my mind.

Nancy: I was hurt by that.

Taye and Fola also discuss being upset over the failure of the Jacksonville City Council to pass Ordinance 2012-296, but they express they were not surprised by the outcome. They remarked:

Taye: I wasn’t active in the meetings or stuff like that, I kind of kept up with it.

Fola: I made calls…and I wrote emails, but I didn’t go to meetings.
Clare: But still, that’s pretty good.

Taye: Yeah, I didn’t do as much. I don’t think I did anything to be honest with you, but I had the nerve to be mad when it didn’t go through. I was kind of upset because it just shows that there’s still a disparity there even though you say we are the number two in the country [for gay parenting] it doesn’t seem like it. It just seems like it is always so, you know, so divided on that issue, so I was upset, but I wasn’t shocked, I mean we live in a Bible Belt so [laughter] I’m not shocked.

Nancy and Denelle and Taye and Fola indicate that the exclusion of sexual orientation in Jacksonville’s Human Rights Code is just another form of discrimination that makes them feel as if they are excluded from having full equality with heterosexual individuals and couples. Taye also introduces the idea of living in a conservative area, the “Bible Belt.” The role religion plays in the lives of my participants and in the African American community in general will be more fully discussed in the next chapter.

Several participants underscored the feeling that they were being treated differently when it came to their sexuality, especially after 2012-296 failed. They emphasized there is no reason to be treated differently. Since participants describe themselves and their families as being the same and no different from their heterosexual peers and their families it makes sense that they would feel disappointment from being treated differently. Nancy underscores that she wished people would not treat her or other lesbians and gay men differently when she said, “So yeah, just to know we are normal. We are not second class citizens, third, or fourth, or fifth, whatever you want to call it.” Ebony describes feelings of being treated not even as second or third class, but as being less-than-human by those who spoke in opposition of Ordinance 2012-296. She revealed:
A lady got up in the council meeting and said well she said some old crazy junk about if we pass this then they can lay with animals and stuff, and I’m like what? What are you talkin’ about lady? I mean people is just throwin’ the, I don’t know, the gay community is not a bunch of animals, OK, we’re not animals. We are human beings that have a heart. We have feelings just like the next person. And that’s why it says human ordinance, you know, because we’re humans and they seem to forget that when they find out we’re gay. And that is not important, me being human is more important, than me being gay, a gay human, you know what I’m sayin’. And people need to be able to distinguish between the important stuff and the not so important stuff, you know. That’s not important that I’m gay. What’s important is that I’m human and I deserve basic human rights.

The intense debate and defeat of 2012-296 was particularly salient to participants as indicated in their sentiments. The concerns they voiced about not being seen as human beings were particularly poignant and indicate a level of frustration and a feeling of lack of support from the local government and community. This lack of support led many participants to indicate that if they were receiving no support from government then perhaps they should not support the government in return. This is discussed in the next section as participants criticized the system in which they had to pay taxes without the full support of the government, especially in the form of marriage equality.

We Should Be Able to Marry the Ones We Love

Being able to marry and being able to have that marriage recognized on the state and federal level provides a couple with many social, emotional, and financial benefits. Same-sex couples who do not have legal protection are, when compared to married heterosexual peers, at greater risk for health problems, are more likely to be excluded from a partner’s medical care, cannot receive Social Security survival benefits and the other 1,138 benefits granted at the federal level, receive fewer job-related benefits, and are less able to fully support their children financially and emotionally (Herek 2006). Also, by denying same-sex couples access to marriage a scenario is created in which
“the state compounds and perpetuates the stigma historically attached to homosexuality” (Herek 2006:617).

At the time of this project, 2013, a legally recognized marriage was not an option for same sex couples either within the state of Florida or at the federal level (Human Rights Campaign 2013). Until the fall of 2010, lesbians and gay men were not allowed to adopt children from the Florida foster care system (Equality Florida Institute Inc. and Carleton Fields 2012).2 These policies have had an impact on the families of the participants in this project specifically, and for families headed by all lesbians and gay men living in Florida more generally. Participants listed a legal marriage as being an important way to link family members in a permanent way. Furthermore, being able to legally marry the partner of your choice has the potential to strengthen family resilience and may also help families headed by lesbians and gay men receive a fuller level of support from their heterosexual family members (Ocobock 2013).

Participants pointed out they pay into the federal tax system just like everybody else. Fola insisted, “I always say that if I can’t have all the rights that everybody else has, then I don’t want to pay all the taxes that everybody has to pay.” Since participants are required to participate fully in federal and state policies by paying taxes3 they argue they should be recognized more fully by the government and have the ability to legally marry a partner of their choosing. Participants want to receive the same benefits as

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2 The Florida Third District Court of Appeal held the 33 year old state law banning lesbians and gay men from becoming adoptive parents was unconstitutional (Florida Statutes Section 63.042(3)). Although the statute remains on the books it is no longer being enforced by the Florida Department of Children and Families or the Florida Attorney General (Equality Florida Institute, Inc. and Carleton Fields 2012).

3 Florida has a state sales tax, but does not have a state income tax.
heterosexual couples who are legally married. Nancy and Denelle summarize the sentiments of many participants when they said:

Nancy: Being accepted, um, being able to have equal rights, as everyone else, whether it's adoption, marriage.

Denelle: Insurance, all the benefits just that they allow for families, the traditional type families. We'd like to have that be allowed because I mean we pay taxes. We invest in the same things that they invest in.

Zoey adds a scenario being faced by a coworker. She indicated:

Yeah, I have one guy in here [office building] he’s gay and he has a partner and they are like domestic partners too. And um, he, his partner got sick. He took off work. And it’s like he can't even file FMLA [Family and Medical Leave Act] because they, because federal doesn't recognize same-sex. So, it’s just crazy. I feel like we pay taxes just like everybody else, you know. How come a man and a women they can benefit from FMLA, but two women can’t or two men can’t. It’s just not fair when we all pay the same share.

Zoey echoes what other participants have said. She asserts that if she or other lesbians and gay men participate fully in government they should have full access to all the same benefits government can provide, especially as it relates to being able to marry.

Eva and Ebony spoke poignantly about challenges they faced from not being able to legally marry their partners. For Ebony, it was with the Internal Revenue Service and for Eva the challenge was with access to the health care system.

Ebony comments on trouble she had with the IRS because she had no legal connection with the children. After a rough break-up her partner alerted the Internal Revenue Service and she was audited. She had been claiming her partner’s biological children on her tax return since she was the sole wage earner in the family. I asked if
the Internal Revenue Service took issue with the fact that the children might be doubly claimed. She explained:

No they wasn’t bein’ double claimed, I don’t know. I don’t know to this day what she was tellin’ people, but she told them somethin’ and they audited me. And I explained to them you know the situation and everything, ‘cuz I and we had a commitment ceremony, ah, with her in oh three. And it lasted three years and that was it. We broke up in oh six. So, I said I got my commitment certificate, sayin’ that me and her had a commitment ceremony. They wouldn’t recognize that so, still it ain’t. We, I’m married to their mom, you know what I’m sayin’, they’re my step-kids. I take care of them. There was no way around it. And so even right now, I’m payin’ into that. But, thank God it only went back two years and not ten.

Ebony underscores the fact that, despite being in a committed relationship, without a legally recognized marriage, there are serious penalties for not being legally married. Her story here needs to be read in relation to her earlier description of her family as being the same as other families. When taken together her statements outline how being the same, but not being treated as the same, is quite consequential.

Eva’s challenge involved her ability to obtain health insurance. Eva’s same-sex partner was in the military. Since she was not able to marry her partner, Eva did not have access to her military health insurance. And, since she was a stay-at-home mom, she did not have any health insurance available to her from an employer. A medical crisis occurred and because she had no health insurance Eva could not access the care she needed. She remarked:

My wife served in the service but nobody knows who I am. Because she went and got a job and nobody knows who I am. But if I had married a man, I got punished by the United States for being with a woman and I got re-punished for staying home and doing the right thing and raising a teenager and keeping [them] from being another statistic, dropping out, and on welfare. So because of that America don’t understand that the same thing that if I was at home with my ex-husband, this [illness] would have been dealt with we knew that I was sick, but you go and try to get assistance you got to tell the truth, ‘cause you got to count that income.
You try to do stuff. All we ever wanted to do was legally get married, legally be able to acknowledge, legally put me on insurance. Everybody in the house, every year, get a physical, go to doctor’s appointments, get eye glasses, but because I chose to be with a woman I never did because I didn’t have a choice. The children had it because of their father, she had it because of the service, and she had it on the job.

Clare: You were in that middle spot.

Eva: And so, but I’m not the only one. We’re not asking for anything, we pay more taxes because we don’t get to claim each other. We in the same house and she gonna pay all those extra taxes and I have to pay all those extra taxes. When I am sitting with a woman for ten or fifteen years where if I was with a husband we could write off something. So what are we asking for, I just don’t get it because they are not looking at us. They need to have more of my stories out there you know. They need to.

Eva’s story highlights a particular challenge that she faced from not being able to marry her same-sex partner. She notes that when she was legally married to a man there were no issues with obtaining health insurance for all members of the family. Access to health insurance changed when she was with her same-sex partner. This lack of health insurance had a serious negative impact on her overall health and well-being. She claims access to health insurance would not have been an issue if she had been able to legally marry her partner. Eva’s very serious situation makes her earlier comments about having a family that is the same as other families all the more poignant and again highlights the serious consequences that can come from not being treated the same as other families. Her assertion of being the same as other families is simultaneously an assertion of being deserving of the same benefits and protections offered to other families.

Ulani, who is registered in a domestic partnership and is co-parenting two adopted/foster children with her partner, offered another story about trying to access health insurance for her family. She pointed out:
I worked for a state agency up until last month for 8 years, and they don’t offer same-sex benefits. So even though I can pay for a family plan to include my kids and the person next to me their family plan includes their husband and their kids. I’m paying for a family plan. I’m paying the same price, but it just includes me and my two boys.

Furthermore, at the time of Ulani’s interview the United States Supreme Court was hearing arguments challenging the constitutionality of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) which is a federal law that defines marriage as a legal union between one man and one woman. She offered her hope that soon the federal government would recognize marriage equality. She stated:

Um, I definitely think DOMA, which is pending, the appeal, affects my family, because like we are going to [a large mid-Atlantic city] to get married, but Florida doesn’t recognize it you know. So we are almost getting double taxed a lot of times. So I would definitely like to see that go through and I think if DOMA passes, it’s gonna clear the way for a lot of other things. Because after that passes through the federal government, all the little state stuff kind of has to fall aside, and so I’m really hoping this appeal goes well. That’s the biggest thing.

Recognition of marriage equality is especially important for Ulani as she is preparing to marry her partner in the summer of 2013 in a jurisdiction where marriage is available for lesbians and gay men. The sentiments she expresses indicate that she is optimistic about the future regarding marriage recognition for lesbians and gay men. It highlights how she is striving to have her family legally recognized as the same as other families and her hopes that she will receive the same recognition.

Just like the participants in this project, more generally, all black lesbians and gay men, have been and are challenged by homophobic and racist policies. Bennett and Battle (2001) explain:

Subcultures or minority groups within that oppressed group often have to suppress their own agenda because it is thought to detract from a politics based on race. The problem with this reasoning is that not only has the
The voices of black lesbians and gay men have been left out of the family policy discussion on two levels one based in race and one based in sexuality. As the voices of my participants illustrate, they feel their families are legitimate families and deserve the same treatment. These family policies are of particular importance for black lesbian families who feel the same as other families, but who have been treated differently because of racist and homophobic family policies.

The specific examples provided in this section discuss the challenges that some of the participants have faced because they have not been able to legally marry; in the next section, I present views participants have regarding adoption.

**Adoption Rights are Important**

Just as family recognition policies regarding marriage equality are impacted by racism and homophobia, so are policies related to adoption. Homophobia has forced lesbians and gay men to prove their fitness to parent not only their own children, but any children like those they make look to adopt (Adams 1996) [recall the discussion on fitness of lesbians and gay men to parent in Chapter 2]. Racism has also challenged African Americans to prove their fitness as parents (Moynihan 1965; Staples 1971) [recall the discussion on racism in the study of black families in Chapter 2].

For a majority of the participants in this project, one partner was the biological parent who brought children into the relationship from a previous heterosexual relationship. Participants underscored the need to link the non-biological parent to the children in the family should something happen to the biological parent. They recognized that without a legal connection their family risked being broken up. There
was a possibility that the children would be removed from the custody and care of the non-biological parent by the state Department of Children and Families or by family members of the biological parent should something happen to the biological parent. Being able to adopt children was also discussed as an important way to help the children in foster care find a loving and caring forever family. A discussion highlighting participants’ views on adopting a partner’s child and adopting children in foster care is provided in the next two sections.

**Legal Adoption Links Child(ren) to Non-Biological Parent**

Participants with partners underscored the importance of keeping their family together by creating a legal link to the biological partner’s children and the non-biological partner. Even though the ban restricting lesbians and gay men from adopting in the state of Florida was ruled unconstitutional in the fall of 2010, a co-parent adoption still proves challenging since the couple involved is not legally married (Equality Florida Institute Inc. and Carlton Fields (2012). When asked if they thought the ability to marry or adopt children was important to their family Taye and Fola were unanimous. They replied:

Taye & Fola: Absolutely. [spoken simultaneously]

Fola: Oh, yeah.

Taye: Just not, I mean for my [child], for our kids. I just think it’s important that they understand that we have the same rights. It’s one thing to teach your child that we’re not different, but then when the world is constantly telling you that you’re different, you know, it’s like a contradiction…to what you are teaching your kids. So absolutely, I think it is very important.

Fola: And another issue that’s not really talked about much, but like, for instance, our family, I’ll use this as an example. I have, if something happens to her, I have to go through all this legal tape now, before something happens to her, in case, spend all this stupid money.
And maybe nothing happens to her. Spend all this money, just to say, if something happens that he belongs to me.

Clare: Right.

Fola: And then I have to fight a whole other, I'll be in court and spend all this stupid money, even though I got my paperwork together, before time, I'll still have to spend more money afterwards. It's, nobody's talking about that. That's, I mean even within the gay community, we don't really talk about that much. We talk about adoption, and we talk about insemination, and IVF [in vitro fertilization] costing so much, but we don't really talk about the

Taye: Legal.

Fola: The step-parent legal, right. I shouldn't say step-parent. I'll just say the other parent.

Clare: The co-parent.

Fola: The co-parent, yeah. 'Cause I worry about that too. That's huge.

Clare: And the legal fees are incredible.

Fola: Astronomical.

Taye and Fola indicate a limitation found in the current system and the financial hardship that occurs when a non-biological, co-parent works to file the paperwork necessary to adopt their partner’s child. The legal cost for generating and filing the paperwork is about $5500 (Bernard and Lieber 2009). Since many participants reported a working- or middle-class socioeconomic status completing the paperwork to create a legal connection between family members may be cost prohibitive.

Denelle, who was co-parenting her child with her partner, spoke about the need to make sure there is a legal link between the child and the non-biological parent. She said:

Denelle: So if something would happen to me. I wouldn’t want nobody else to have her, you know what I mean.
Clare: Right.

Denelle: And she wouldn't want to be anywhere else, you know because that's her mom. So you know, at some point, I know that we do have to put something in place for that, so that nothing can happen, because I know that this is where people can just come in [and take the child].

Denelle added that even though people view her partner as more of the mother to her child than she is, she wanted to create a legal connection so that their child would not be removed from her partner and put with other family members should something happen to her. Later in the interview she stated that the disruption of the family created by removing her child from the care of her partner would very likely be traumatic for both her child and her partner. Denelle’s comment highlights the fact that she feels the love between the members of her family is just the same as the love between family members in other families and no one would want feel the loss that would come from removing a child from their family.

Sal brings in the perspective of a co-parent who is left behind. She pointed out that a legal connection is especially important in the case when the relationship between two partners dissolves. Sal was raising her own child, but when she was with her last partner she developed a close relationship with her partner’s five children. She said:

Adoption, I've thought about that. Um, to be honest, I thought about that after me and my last ex broke up. And then when she became involved with somebody new, she said I couldn’t see the kids anymore. And I was just like OK, I need something to help me, ‘cause I'm just like what am I gonna do. So I thought about adoption.

Sal had built a relationship with her ex-partner’s kids and not only was the relationship with the partner ended, but the relationship with the children was also broken, when
they ended their relationship. With no legal connection, Sal had no visitation rights and has since lost contact with her partner’s children although she looks forward to the possibility of reconnecting with them when they turn 18 and can make their own decisions about rebuilding a relationship with Sal. Sal’s comments recognizing the love that developed between her partner’s children and herself reinforces the claims that love between family members is the same in any family.

Similarly, La’Rae\(^4\) also asserted the importance of legal recognition. She suggested that she would make sure that all members of the family legally carried the same last name so that the commitment everyone had to each other would be recognized. She emphasized:

Yes, 'cuz I want to make sure it’s known that she is the other parent. That’s one of the important reasons for us all to carry the same last name. That whole deal. So yes, yes. It won’t just be a child that I birthed, that she has no rights to or anything like that. I want her to have full rights. That if anything ever happened to me or anything I want her to make sure that she has full rights so that she feels a part of it.

She further noted that when co-parenting the biological children of her partner it was important for her to have whatever legal documentation was available to her family.

She said:

It’s a caregiver affidavit. So I was allowed to make medical decisions, enroll them in school and things like that. But that’s as legal as it ever got. We renewed it every year, pretty much every school year because that is when it usually expired because I was the one that enrolled them in school, she didn’t go.

\(^4\) During her interview La’Rae talked about several relationships—some heterosexual and some with women. Pertinent to this project in one relationship she co-parented three children with her female partner and her current relationship where she and her partner soon hope to conceive a child through in vitro fertilization.
La’Rae reinforces the idea that there is a need to link any children to the non-biological, co-parent and to taking advantage of available resources like a caregiver affidavit. These documents are critical to tying children to their non-biological parent and are necessary steps when adoption is not an option that is available. Ulani agrees.

This year Ulani is legally marrying her partner in a jurisdiction where marriage is available to lesbians and gay men. She and her partner are currently co-parenting one foster child and one child that Ulani has adopted. She indicated:

There are a lot of legal reasons to [legally adopt]. Because you know if something happened to me right now, he couldn’t come visit me if I was in the hospital, in intensive care or something because he is not my biological child. He’s not my child, so he couldn’t come visit me. There are a lot of issues that come with wills, you know, that my family technically could contest me leaving something to him because he’s not my child, you know. So there are a lot of reasons to go ahead and do it.

She went on to say that her family has taken steps to take advantage of the legal policies of family recognition currently available to her family. She said:

We did the, um, domestic partnership registration here in [large southern city] so in [the children’s] file is a copy of that so that she can make decisions as well, pertaining to them, so [the school] is aware, as well.

Ulani suggests that she has done what she can to legally protect her family, but that these measures still might not be enough. Participants’ stories in this section bring attention to the fact that they use whatever legal means is available to them to tie the children in their family to their non-biological parent as a way to create a family that will be seen as, and hopefully treated, the same as any other family. Just as they explained in earlier stories that described the way they do the same chores and bleed the same blood, these black lesbian mothers are saying, “We are the same as any other family and just want to be recognized that way.”
Legal recognition that their family is the same as other families is not only important for families where one individual is the biological parent of the children, it is also important for finding forever families for children in foster care. Many participants expressed the sentiment that anyone who could provide a loving, stable, and caring home to a child in foster care should be able to do this. This is discussed in the following section.

**Foster Families Headed by Gay Parents Are the Same Too**

There are a fairly significant number of children waiting in foster care to be adopted. For example, in 2003, Florida had more children in foster care than any other state except New York and California, and had more than 5,000 children available for adoption (Sanchez 2005). A push by Florida’s Department of Children and Families to keep children with their birth families began in 2006 and reduced the number of children actually placed in foster care to just over 19,000 in 2009 (Hirth 2009b), still at any given time approximately 850 children are available for adoption (Hirth 2009a). The African American community is especially impacted by Florida’s adoption ban since African American children represent a disproportionate number of the children in Florida’s foster care system (Child Welfare Research Institute 2009). In 2010, the Florida Third District Court of Appeal held Florida’s 33 year old ban forbidding lesbians and gay men from becoming adoptive parents was unconstitutional (Equality Florida Institute, Inc. and Carleton Fields 2012). As a result, the Florida Department of Children and Families and the Florida Attorney General no longer enforce the ban and have removed sexual orientation references from procedures and forms.

Participants knew about Florida’s ban forbidding lesbians and gay men from adopting. Some knew it had been ruled unconstitutional, others did not. Many
expressed views that they might like to adopt children from the foster care system in the future. They also expressed views interrogating the ban—why should people who want to adopt, not be allowed to adopt because of their sexuality? Just as the ability to parent came up in discussions earlier in this chapter, when discussing what participants wished people knew about their family, it came up again in requirements for adoptive parents and the sexuality of prospective parents. Many participants again argued that sexuality has no impact on an individual’s ability to parent. Ebony commented:

I think that you should be able to adopt. And they shouldn’t, you should not be able to not adopt just because you are gay because some of the best families are a gay household. Some of the best households are gay households. I think the issue should be in the best interest of the child, is this a good home for this child, you know. The person who is goin’ to take care of this child, what’s this person’s background, not their sexuality, that has nothin’ to do with it, you know. Is it a loving person? Do they have the ability to take care of this child? Do they have a good job? Do they have a stable environment for the child, you know what I’m sayin’? Those are the things that should be more important whether than the person’s sexuality, you know. That’s how I feel about it. So yeah, it’s good that the ban [preventing lesbians and gay men from adopting in Florida] has been removed and everything.

Ulani underscores the fact that even though the Florida Department of Children and Families is no longer enforcing the adoption ban it is still written in the state’s constitution. She clarified:

Yes, adoption is important, especially in Florida, because Florida’s one of those states that actually says within their constitution that you cannot adopt if you’re gay. It actually says it. So even though, um, the state has stopped enforcing it, it’s still there. So realistically at any point they can decide, OK I’m gonna enforce it again. So that definitely needs to be amended or taken out.

Ebony summed things up when she emphasized that:

As far as the adoption what really matters is gettin’ the kids in a safe home, safe, stable and loving home, that’s what matters, that other stuff is a bunch of rubbish [chuckle], that’s what I think about it, you know, so I
mean, it’s I mean we’ve traveled a long way, we’ve come a long way as gay community, but we still have a long way to go.

The number of children in Florida’s foster care system indicates a need to take advantage of anyone who is qualified and willing to provide a safe, loving, and permanent home. Participants agree as they argue that anyone who is qualified and willing to provide a child with a safe and stable home should be allowed to. They are using a language of sameness to assert their legitimacy as potential parents and as a means of seeking legal recognition.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has described how participants see their family as no different from other American families. They noted that families headed by lesbians either as single parents or in a co-parenting scenario have the same struggles and challenges as families headed by a man and a woman or a single parent. Parents go to work, children go to school, and all family members help to do the everyday task necessary to maintain a household—just like any other family. Participants underscored the fact that their sexual identity had no bearing on their ability to parent. They pointed out that since their families are the same as any other family, family recognition policies like marriage and adoption should be equally available to them as they are for their heterosexual peers. They assert that if they are required to fully participate in government (like with paying taxes) the government should recognize them as the same and fully support them by allowing them to legally marry the person they love or by providing them the legal ability to adopt children.

The stories participants told in this chapter revealed they want to be treated the same as any other family as they work to achieve the same family recognition as the
families of their heterosexual peers. They want full and equal access to the legal rights that would provide equal recognition and support for their families. Notice however that participants did not talk about their differences from other families only their sameness. They did not explicitly discuss their situations in terms of interlocking oppressions as one might expect if they were focused on differences rather than sameness.

The discussion of sameness in this chapter also highlighted the salience of participants’ sexually marginalized identity. In talking about how their family is the same as other families, participants talked of sexuality, with little mention of race. Just as Collins (2000) argues:

An individual U.S. Black woman’s self definitions intermingle and become more salient: Her gender may be more prominent when she becomes a mother, her race when she searches for housing, her social class, when she applies for credit, her sexual orientation when she is walking with her lover, and her citizenship status when she applies for a job. (P. 275)

However this lack of mention does not mean that race does not play an important role in participant’s lives. The following chapter provides a discussion of how participants shed light on the strategies they employ as they negotiate their social world at the intersection of sexuality and race—how they navigate the social landscape as black lesbians with children. In the next chapter, as they discuss their black lesbian identity, the participants stress difference instead of sameness.
CHAPTER 5
IT REALLY IS, NOT JUST GAY, BUT AFRICAN AMERICAN GAY

The title of this chapter is a quote from Eva that is representative of the thoughts of all the participants as they shed light on the uniqueness of their experience as black gay women. My participants negotiate their social world at the intersection of their identities based in race, sexuality, and gender (among others). Bowleg (2008) clarifies that “[black lesbians’] experiences as women also intersect with their experiences as members of ethnic minority groups as well as other historically oppressed social groups” (p. 313). The complexity of their experiences as black lesbians must be taken together as a whole since these social identities are always interdependent and always present (Bowleg 2008; Collins 2000). As these quotes remind us, and as I will detail in this chapter, participants in this study underscored that African Americans with a gay identity negotiate the social world as both a racial minority and as a sexual minority.

There is a historical legacy and a continuing presence of racism in the United States that makes the support and protection provided by the black community more generally, and the black church and family more specifically, central to the ways black individuals negotiate it (Fukuyama and Ferguson 2000). Participants’ experiences with homophobia in the black community more generally and the black church more specifically are discussed in the following sections.

**Black Lesbian Experiences of Homophobia**

Participants in this study bring attention to the varied experiences they had when dealing with homophobia. They revealed that for the most part they dealt with subtle forms of homophobia that were directed at those women who were more visibly marked
as lesbian by their gender presentation. They also emphasize that their sexual identity is more salient in the black community.

Before outlining how participants discussed their experiences of homophobia, I point here to the complex way in which homophobia can be understood, especially in relation to research on the African American community. Homophobia is the fear of homosexuality and homosexuals. It has been said homophobia remains “the nation’s most enduring form of prejudice” (Martinez and Sullivan 1998:250). Collins (2000) asserts that “homophobia flourishes in a context where the invisibility of the alleged deviancy is perceived to be the problem” further explaining that “homophobia constitutes a proximate fear that anyone could at any time reveal himself or herself as gay or lesbian” (p. 130, emphasis in original). Research has shown that African Americans possess disproportionately negative attitudes toward homosexuals when compared to whites ([recall the discussion from Chapter 2] Battle and Bennett 2000; Battle and Lemelle 2002; Ernst et al. 1991; Greene 2009; Herek and Capitanio 1995; Jenkins, Lambert, and Baker 2009; Lewis 2003; Schulte and Battle 2004). Keep in mind, as Bennett, Battle, and Lemelle (2006) caution, institutional barriers have been set in place in the United States to marginalize same-sex sexuality and this has created a system of homophobia that is embedded throughout national culture more generally. They advise that to claim African Americans are any “more” homophobic than other a racial group is misdirected (p. 65). Yet even despite disproportionately negative attitudes toward lesbians and gay men, Greene (2002) makes note that a Gallup poll showed a greater number of African American respondents favored equal rights for lesbians and gay men when it came to job opportunities and they supported the repeal
of the Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell military policy more than their white peers. This recognition of the importance of equal rights for lesbians and gay men may be influenced by the challenges the African American community has faced as they struggle to obtain their own rights in a society where racism has and still plays a large role. That being said, when participants were asked about their experiences with homophobia, they overwhelmingly described situations that were set in the black community. As will be highlighted in my participants’ narratives, this stress on detailing homophobic experiences in the black community may be a product of a greater social investment in black social spaces, thus making these experiences of homophobia in the black community more salient for them as black lesbians. Furthermore, these more salient experiences of homophobia in the African American community may also be in response to a racist culture that views all black sexuality as deviant and perverse.

When participants talked about that their experiences of homophobia they remarked that these experiences took the form of more subtle practices (of curious glances and derogatory words overheard in passing). No participants reported any incidents of overt violence directed at them because of their sexuality (or because of race, or gender). Ulani’s description of her experiences with homophobia is typical of many of the participants. Ulani reveals that she has not experience any homophobia directed right at her. When asked if she has experienced homophobia, she said:

Not, to me personally, not like in my face. I don’t know what people do, people seem fine when they are talking to me, but I haven’t even in small [town in rural north central Florida], I haven’t really been exposed to anything that made me feel uncomfortable or anything. [chuckle]

Ulani recognizes that living in a small rural town she should have expected some challenges because of the conservative views that are generally expressed by rural
communities regarding sexuality. Just as Powell et al. (2010) reported those living in rural areas and in the South had more restricted views on sexuality and family. People living in these areas are more likely to be opposed to same-sex marriage and are more likely to define a family as a married man and woman and their children.

Shandee similarly talks of not experiencing explicit homophobia. She claims that being confident in her sexuality helps to create a distance from those who might express homophobic ideas. When asked if she had experienced any homophobia, she indicated:

Never, never, um, if I mean, some people carry that look like it’s better unsaid than to say something, because I don’t know how this person will react. And I’m a woman of stature, I walk with my head held high. I cut my eye at you before you need to cut your eye at me to even think it.

Shandee’s self-assurance may be keeping people from making remarks to her directly or at least keeping any derogatory remarks to themselves. Also her confidence is providing an image of strength that indicates to those around her they should keep their thoughts to themselves.

In contrast, Ebony, who has a more masculine gender presentation, reported that she has heard comments about her sexuality made in passing. She said:

Yeah, I mean, I haven’t personally experienced, you know, you’ll have people that’s homophobic but when you are in their face they won’t show it until you walk away or behind your back, and so. I haven’t faced it, you know, head on like that, not in the gay community, you know, you have people that slur, um butch, dyke, lesbo. I’ve had that happen before.

Her sexuality is perceived as being marked by those who are passing because of her more masculine gender identity. Ebony wears her hair in dreads, she wears no makeup, and she dresses in men’s clothing [a further discussion of non-conforming gender is detailed in the upcoming section about the stud/femme dynamic]. Her
“mannish” appearance draws attention leading some people to make comments within her earshot. These derogatory remarks of “butch, dyke, lesbo” highlight the marginalized status found in a lesbian identity, especially one that is more visible through a non-gender conforming presentation.

Importantly, it is not just everyday homophobia on the street that participants discussed. For example, Eva describes another form homophobia can take. She remarked:

And we are having a homophobia not just within the black community, but within ourselves, you know. Because I know black parents that say I don’t want my children to be gay, that is the worst thing, and they are gay themselves.

Eva pinpoints the feelings of shame surrounding disclosing a lesbian identity are so pervasive that not only are they present in the black community at large they also become feelings of homophobia for individual black lesbians. Sal similarly mentions her sense of internalized homophobia. She pointed out that she was homophobic herself before she disclosed her sexuality. She said, “Yep. Most people have [homophobia], I think, to me, I think to be honest, I had it myself before I came out. I had a problem with every gay person that came around me.” Both Eva and Sal highlight the negative attitudes expressed in society regarding homosexuality can become internalized. Not surprisingly, some black lesbians, along with some black women, have internalized these racist, sexist, and heterosexist ideals that have converged to blame African American women for the failure of African American families (Greene 2002).

Furthermore, Eva’s sentiment, “I don’t want my children to be gay, that is the worst thing,” recognizes the historical and racist cultural legacy that maintains the troubles found in black families are due to the poor mothering job done by black women (Collins
2000; Greene 2002; Moynihan 1965). This highlights how internalized homophobia and racism among black lesbians can be consequential to their view of their own parenting.

Importantly, one theme that clearly emerged from my interviews is that participants also describe their experiences of homophobia in relation to their experience in their particular black community. For example, when I asked Zoey if she had experienced any homophobia, she responded:

Yes, I think there’s a lot of that that goes on, yeah a lot of, I get a, from the men and the women, it is in the black community. If they are straight, they are like oh, you’re gay stay away from me. So yes, I have experienced that, um, I haven’t noticed it so much with white. I don’t know why, maybe, I don’t know, maybe just to bring it up. But um, I haven’t noticed it in white people, but I have noticed it in blacks.

Zoey expresses feelings that there is a difference in experiences she has had with heterosexuals and homophobia in the black community compared to those in the white community. When asked about her experiences of homophobia Sal asserts, “It’s mostly my own race. Other than that, nobody else has a problem, nobody really cares that much. I don’t know why that’s like that?” Zoey’s and Sal’s comments bring attention to their sense of the notion that there is a different perception of homosexuality in the black versus the white community. Black sexuality, in general, has historically been seen as being hypersexual and dangerous (Collins 2005). So, in order to maintain a level of respectability, black heterosexual’s homophobia exists as a way for them to avoid being further maligned in a racist society (Griffin 2006). My participants, in tracing their experiences with homophobia from others in the black community, remind us of this point.

Taye and Fola elaborate on the significance of the homophobia experienced in particular black communities when they describe the challenge of living in an African
American neighborhood. Like Zoey, they feel there is a difference in their experiences in a majority black neighborhood compared to the more racially diverse neighborhood they currently live in. They said:

Fola: We had to make changes. I felt like, we were living on the Northside [a historically African American neighborhood], and I’m just gonna be honest, we were living on the Northside, and I felt like it would be more challenging to be a family on the Northside.

Clare: Ok, tell me, ‘cause I don’t know Jacksonville.


Taye: Race. It’s more African American, more black.

When probed on this, they expressed in more detail a feeling that managing a marginalized sexual identity is more challenging in the African American community. They explained:

Fola: I just think that African Americans as a whole, they are the race of people, we’re definitely behind everybody when it comes to sexuality. If a man or a woman is bisexual you are the worse, you know. That’s why we’ve got a lot of down low. There’s more down low people that live one life one way and another life at night or whatever, in the African American community than any community. And it’s more of us getting hurt because of that. It’s a lot of dishonesty and I think because African Americans try to put on a persona of being so religious all the time. They never take that off, even when it comes to their family. That’s why we have that division and judgment. So there’s definitely a difference. I can go to the grocery store and hold her hand and nobody looks at me funny.

Clare: Really.

Fola: And I would get looks.

Clare: In your neighborhood?

Fola & Taye: Oh yeah. [spoken simultaneously]

Clare: On the Northside [a racially segregated black neighborhood in Jacksonville] you would have got looks?
Fola: Oh yeah, absolutely.
Clare: Do you think people would have harassed you?
Fola: No.
Clare: Oh that’s good.
Taye: Nobody has said anything to us, but the looks are enough, you know. I guess if you’re out with your family and people are looking at you like you are crazy because you’re out with your family [laughter] that can create an uncomfortable atmosphere, you know at dinner or whatever. And so there’s definitely a difference in the African American community, I think that they’re just close-minded, talking about I’m not there. I’m not black.
Fola: ’Cause we’re not close-minded. We’re not just talking about the race, but race in conjunction with the people, the mindset. ’Cause there are African American people that are open-minded. There are close-minded [people], as it is in other races, but it seems like it’s just so much worse.

Taye and Fola express feelings that they felt they were constantly being scrutinized when they lived in a particular African American neighborhood. This scrutiny was so intense they felt the need to move to a more diverse neighborhood. These sentiments echo those of individuals who experience racial fatigue from living in a racially segregated neighborhood where they are the racial minority. Steinbugler (2012), in her work with interracial couples, found that when an individual is in a space in which they are the racial minority they experience a “race fatigue” as they contend with the stress of feeling conspicuous and of having to attend to the presence of racial undercurrents in everyday social interactions (p. 19). Similarly, Taye and Fola experienced a “sexuality fatigue” as they experienced homophobia in a heterosexual community.

Also, keep in mind, that when Taye and Fola talk about their experiences in a particular African American neighborhood they are not saying that homophobia is simply
a black issue. As they explain, they are not just “talking about race.” They note that there are African Americans who can be open-minded when dealing with issues of sexuality as it relates to lesbians and gay men. Their discussion is about how they experienced homophobia in a particular neighborhood and how homophobia can manifest in troubling ways in some black communities.

The narratives presented in this section by Ebony, Eva, Zoey, Sal, and Taye and Fola bring attention to the fact that participants negotiate a social world at the intersection of race and sexuality and these interlocking oppressions create a social climate where in some situations they feel support and in others they feel unwelcome. This social climate is influenced by the cultural place of women in the black community, and of lesbians in particular.

The sentiments participants express of the tensions they feel in the black community stem from the fact that black lesbians do find themselves at the intersection of race, sexuality, and gender and they challenge the norms of heterosexism. Their narratives support Collins’ (2000) argument that “visible black lesbians challenge the mythical norm that the best people are White, male, rich, and heterosexual. In doing so, lesbians generate anxiety, discomfort, and a challenge to dominant group’s control of power and sexuality on the interpersonal level” (p.168). As the discussion in this section has shown, participants acknowledge they have experienced both subtle and overt forms of homophobia, often within the black community. This homophobia has created feelings of anxiety and discomfort as they challenge the norms and expectations of not only heterosexism, but expectations of proper sexuality in a racist
society. A discussion of participants’ experiences with homophobia in the black church is provided in the next section.

**Black Lesbian Experiences of the Black Church**

The black church has been called a haven and a sustainer of black life (Gomez and Smith 1990; Greene 2002). Battle (2006) explains:

The Church is the most trusted and dominant institution in the African American community, and has been regarded as a refuge from wider societal injustice. Participation in the Church provides nurturance, support, tangible assistance, a cultural identity, and a sense of belonging to both families and individuals. (P. 179)

The black church has been called an “anchoring institution” in the African American community (Pattillo-McCoy 1998:769). Pattillo-McCoy (1998) describes, “the church acts simultaneously as a school, a bank, a benevolent society, a political organization, a party hall, and a spiritual base” (p. 769). She adds:

The term ‘black church’ encompasses any predominantly black congregation, even if it is part of a predominantly white denomination...denominations founded and controlled exclusively by African Americans include African Methodist Episcopal, African Methodist Episcopal Zion, Christian Methodist Episcopal, National Baptist Convention USA, National Baptist Convention of America, and the Progressive National Baptist Convention. ..These denominations incorporate 80 percent of all black Christians. (P. 768)

The black church is also charged with “protecting the community’s image within the broader society and has resisted any hints of Black sexual deviance, straight and gay alike” (Collins 2005:107, emphasis in original). The heterosexist message found in the teachings of the black church particularly advocates for the superiority of men, the preservation of traditional gender roles, and the devaluation of women, lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender people (Greene 2002). The Christian view supported by many black churches emphasizes a “view of heterosexual supremacy, homosexuality
as sinful, and gays as morally depraved” (Griffin 2006:7). Black leaders and congregants sometimes tolerate lesbians and gay men in their choirs and congregation as long as they do not disclose their sexuality (Collins 2005; Gomez and Smith 1990; Griffin 2006; Martinez and Sullivan 1998). Despite this tolerance of the silent lesbian or gay man, the black church continues to promote an “uncommonly virulent strain” of homophobia (Bennett and Battle 2001:58).

This is not to suggest that the congregations and affiliations of the black church are the only ones with homophobic views. Conservative Christian groups, like Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran, and Presbyterian, as well as some Roman Catholic groups, have all expressed negative attitudes toward lesbians and gay men (Alston 1974; Duck and Hunsberger 1999; Maher, Sever, and Pichler 2008; McFarland 1989; Newman 2002; Schwartz and Lindley 2005). For comparison, those who identify as Atheist, Agnostic, Jewish, or who claim no religious affiliation were found to be the most positive in their attitudes toward lesbians and gay men (Alston 1974; Newman 2002).

For a better understanding of the religiosity of Jacksonville, Florida, particularly, here are some demographics about its religious communities. Generally speaking, Jacksonville, Florida, is part of the “Bible Belt” Barton (2010) explains this is a diverse region of the country that includes large cities, small towns and rural areas with Fundamentalist Christians making up the majority of the population and “they exert a powerful influence on city, county, and state political and cultural institutions” (p. 470). Specifically, forty-four percent of the population of the city of Jacksonville, Florida, is

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1 Barton (2010) describes the Bible Belt geographically as an area that overlaps with the West South Central (TX, OK, AR, LA), East South Central (KY, TN, MS, AL), and South Atlantic (WV, VA, MD, DE, NC, SC, GA, FL) areas of the United States.
reported to be affiliated with a religious congregation. And of those congregants, 42 percent of them reported an affiliation with the Southern Baptist Convention² (Jones et al. 2002). Some of these congregations are racially segregated and some are racially mixed. The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) is the second largest Christian denomination in the United States behind the Roman Catholic Church (Robinson 2012). As a group, the SBC has conservative views regarding sexuality, viewing homosexual individuals as participating in a sinful and destructive lifestyle (Robinson 2012). The SBC (2013) position statement on sexuality states:

> We affirm God's plan for marriage and sexual intimacy – one man, and one woman, for life. Homosexuality is not a "valid alternative lifestyle." The Bible condemns it as sin. It is not, however, unforgivable sin. The same redemption available to all sinners is available to homosexuals. They, too, may become new creations in Christ.

And specifically, as it relates to this project, the SBC believes equal rights for members of the LGBT community are special rights and therefore should not be granted (Robinson 2012).

In this study, six participants noted an affiliation with the Baptist Church at some point in their lives. Five participants noted religious upbringings but no specific affiliation, and one noted being raised in a Muslim tradition. Ten participants report that they currently attend church, with nine attending affirming churches that preach a more positive message about sexuality and one attending a non-affirming church that preaches a more conservative message about sexuality. The importance of church attendance for my participants is consistent with Moore’s findings in her study of black

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² For comparison, in Jacksonville, the next two denominations were 19 percent who identified as Catholic and eight percent who identified as United Methodist
lesbians in New York City. She reports that the majority of her interviewees maintain an affiliation with religious organizations (Moore 2011).

The participants in this study outline a complicated relationship to the black church. On the one hand, they talk of troubles they have had with the black church, and on the other hand, they talk about their allegiances to the black church. Zoey provides a comment that introduces the sentiment of homophobia in the church. She said:

So you know, I really run into problems with the people that's hung up on religion...anybody else is like, whatever, I don't care, you know. But yeah, it's really people that's hung up on religion and it's supposed to be this way, and that's the only way.

Religious teachings in most black churches promote a theological view that homosexuality is a sin but no ordinary sin; it is a monstrosity and part of a wicked spirit (Griffin 2006). Zoey's comments highlight the narrow message regarding sexuality that she confronts from some religious teachings.

Eva was similarly challenged by such views, but they were articulated by her family when she was struggling with accepting her lesbian identity. She said:

The only time I ever felt prejudice about being gay was within my family, never outside. When I was teeter tottering on the fence with my sexuality, my dad, my mom, my godmother, my siblings, everybody, my friends that was straight was constantly attacking me for two years. They were dragging my head left and right. If the car broke down it was because I was gay. God was punishing me.

Eva's family, like many religious conservatives, insists that homosexuality is immoral and sinful bringing on punishment from God. She gave more examples of punishments from God. She said:

If my daughter got pregnant, it's because she had a gay mom. If my [child] act out one time, it's because they mother gay what do that have to do with one or another. It is really difficult when you are living in the African American community regardless of, you know, it's like I am always
trying to prove, to prove to my family in the African American community that I’m just as good, but it never will be. And anything that my children do now, because they are grown [in high school and college], it like a wonder that you came out any kind of way in that environment.

Sal also points out that even those who may not regularly go to church will use the Bible to support their homophobic views. She charged:

Sal: Half the people who say something don’t even go to church. They just claim a religion, ‘cause your mom’s that and here you go saying everything’s out the Bible. Well somewhat out the Bible, just summarizing what you have heard. And then want to put it on me, I’d be like well what are you doing? [laughter]

Clare: Yeah there are a lot of things in there [the Bible].

Sal: Yeah, like you just judged me, hell. [said under her breath—laughter]

Sal brings out that, in her interpretation of the Bible, there are no real passages that condemn homosexuality, yet there are several that recognize the sinfulness of judging the actions of others. Like Griffin (2006) shows, there are no specific references of condemnation for two people of the same sex cohabiting in a loving, committed, and long-term sexual relationship. Sal’s point, like Eva and Zoey’s, is that there are troubling ways in which religious views are asserted and used to support homophobia.

Taye and Fola also stress the way that churches hold an important place in the black community and often foster homophobia in particular black communities. For example, they talked about the number of churches in Jacksonville that preach conservative challenges to sexuality. They said:

Taye: That’s the problem right there is we live in a Bible Belt and there is a generation of people that just can’t wrap their brain around [a gay] family.

Fola: My grandfather used to tell me this statistic. I haven’t looked it up, since, but he used to tell me that there’s more churches in
Jacksonville than there is in the state of New York. We don’t have a nerve to have one big church, we have churches on every corner. And, it’s worse on the Northside [historically the African American side of town], it’s like that everywhere really, but the Northside is ridiculous…there’s probably 300 churches on the Northside.

Clare: And would you say most of them are not affirming?

Fola: Oh, absolutely.

Taye: Oh definitely not. Yeah, definitely not. So it’s kind of, you know, you have that mindset, people have that mindset and if it’s not the older generation there’s a generation of young people coming up with that exact same mindset. So it’s not shocking to me that Jacksonville seems to be very divided on this issue, it is what it is.

Taye points out that not only do the churches in Jacksonville preach a conservative message regarding sexuality, they are perpetuating it. And as discussed in Chapter 4, regarding Ordinance 2012-296, this conservative ideology created a division in the city of Jacksonville. Recall how those with religiously conservative values were against adding sexual orientation, gender identity and expression to the city’s Human Rights Code. These conservatives’ views were for the most part affiliated with the Baptist Church.

Some participants complained they felt targeted because of their sexual identity in some churches. Ulani and her family do not regularly attend any one church because of the challenges to her sexuality she has experienced in church. She noted that when she goes back home she goes to church with her grandmother who is a member of a Baptist Church community. She offered:

I’ve found in the past that [church is] where if you run into somethin’ and it won’t be directly geared towards me per se, but you’ll hear a pastor will say something. I think we have been very selective in the churches that we do attend. We don’t attend any one particular one on a regular basis.

Ebony added:
I move away from home and stuff I kind of stopped going to church like that because I didn't like the looks. You walk into a Baptist church, 'cuz we was Baptist, you walk into a Baptist church, uh, I'm not wearin' no skirt, I'm not wearin' no dress, and heads turn. And for some reason, this is the Sunday that you want to teach about homosexuality. Like man, did you plan this last night, you ain't suppose to be switchin' things up. I think you just switched your sermon 'cuz you seen me walk through the door, you know. I start to feel uncomfortable about churches and stuff.

Ebony has a more masculine gender presentation, as a result felt targeted by the preacher on more than one occasion. The conservative message being regularly preached highlights the deviance and immorality of homosexuality making many participants uncomfortable in a more mainstream Baptist church. Sal told a similar story.

She said:

I did not really grow up in the church. I've been to another church a couple of times but, usually like if they're preaching about gays and lesbians then I'm sittin', I'm listenin' but I'm just like who does this? A whole hour and a half about talkin' about it, you're like WOW can we preach about something else? Please? And it made me feel like maybe I need to reconsider what I am doing or something. But all I did, I just didn't go back.

Ulani, Ebony, and Sal present a perspective of choosing not to attend a non-affirming\(^3\) church because of the messages that challenge their sexual identity. Later in their interviews, Ebony and Sal acknowledged that they were looking for a religious community that would allow them to hear positive messages about their sexuality and they found it in affirming churches.

\(^3\) A non-affirming church is one that does not openly welcome lesbians and gay men and preaches a message that sexuality should be procreative and occurs only in a marriage between a man and a woman.
Shandee tells a different story of continuing to attend a non-affirming church, but similarly brings up the tension she feels. Shandee pinpointed the struggles she has experienced as an active member of a conservative non-affirming church. She explained that she attends what she calls a “regular” church where she has not revealed her lesbian identity to her church community. She offered:

I have a very strong belief and faith, and it makes you question what you are doing sometimes. I don’t want to say sometimes, honestly speaking, it makes you question what you do a lot of times, you know. Is it really right? Am I doing what’s best for my children? Am I living a life that eventually will send me to hell? You know, it makes you consider that a lot. I would need to really, really get deep in my word, to get a true understanding of what’s right and wrong. I mean, I love my women. I love ‘em to death. I love everything about them. But I still have that, mmm, hesitation, you know, of if I walked out there [into a busy street] and got hit by a car today and died, where I’d end up.

Shandee underscores the fact that some lesbians and gay men continue to worship in churches despite the conservative message regarding sexuality. Perhaps these individuals do not want to leave the church in which they have grown up and where they find support in other areas.

Shandee also speaks of how she is not alone in being gay and attending a non-affirming church. She provides an example of those who pass when she talks about a divide that is created in a “regular” church. She reports that she knows individuals who identify as lesbian that attend church while acting straight. These individuals go to church with a feminine gender presentation wearing a dress, makeup, and heels, but later in the day she would see them on their way to meet their girlfriend at Denny’s for dinner with a more masculine gender presentation. Clarke (1983) explains the homophobia in the black community has created a situation where many black lesbians and gay men pass as heterosexuals to avoid the hostility of the heterosexual black
community. These expressions of sexuality may also be tied into respectability. Moore (2011) points out that the black lesbians in her study sought to “embody a definition of respectability in their dress, parenting, and management of home life” (p. 217). This respectability took away some of the deviant assumptions that come with a lesbian self-identity. By dressing in a more feminine way at church, the women describe in Shandee’s narrative present a more acceptable appearance of female sexuality than is expressed when they present a more masculine one on the date with their girlfriend.

In this section, I have brought attention to the challenges faced by participants as they look to maintain an affiliation with the black church. They explained that they wished to continue receiving support from the black church despite the homophobic messages of the mainstream conservative black church. Many participants noted they sought out churches where the messages were less conservative and more affirming of their sexuality. Their stories highlight the ways participants navigate a social world that is racist by maintaining their connections to the black community and the black church. But, they also navigate a social world that is homophobic. And that homophobia (as they describe it) is particularly challenging since it comes from the community and church that they often turn to for support.

**Black Lesbian Identity: The Stud/Femme Dynamic**

If you’re gay and you are a stud, you have to be with a femme.

--Zoey

The quote that opens this section is representative of another dynamic that emerged from the data that illustrates how participants spoke clearly and assertively about the distinctive experience of being black lesbians. I did not ask participants about
their gender presentation\textsuperscript{4}, but they volunteered there was a specific sexual cultural script in the black lesbian community of North Florida. A person with a more masculine gender expression in dress and behavior, a stud, was required to date a person with a more feminine gender expression in dress and behavior, a femme. The term “stud” is racially specific to the African American community (Wilson 2009). As a point of reference, the term “butch” is the racially specific term for a more masculine gender/behavior presentation in the white lesbian community (Crawley 2001). The butch-femme paradigm developed as a social-economic arrangement and was pioneered by working class and poor lesbians as a way to identify each other in lesbian social spaces (Crawley 2001; Keeling 2003; Moore 2011). Greene (2002) underscores the expression of a stud/femme dynamic in the black lesbian community “reflects the acceptance of the Western hegemonic, majority cultural norm of heterosexism that is a function of the gender based hierarchies of a patriarchal culture” (p. 956). Like Crawley (2001) argues, my interviewees are participating in the gender system that is available to them; a gender system to which everyone is exposed, but one that resonates in particular ways for black lesbians.

Eva reports that she was actually taught about the stud/femme paradigm when she first began disclosing her lesbian identity to others in the black lesbian community. They told her that as a femme she \textit{had} to date a stud because femme/femme OR stud/stud just did not happen. Zoey elaborates that the point of stud/femme is especially remarkable in the black lesbian community. She said:

\footnote{\textsuperscript{4} Six of my participants had a more feminine gender presentation (Eva, Nancy, Taye, Tandice, La’Rae, and Shandee) and six had a more masculine presentation (Sal, Denelle, Fola, Zoey, Ebony, and Ulani).}
The only issues I’ve seen in the black gay community is, um, it’s kind of like in the straight community [chuckles] it’s like man and woman and woman and man. So in the gay community it’s like, in the black gay community it’s like oh, if you are a stud, you have to be with a femme. It’s like stud and stud is forbidden, in the black community. I’m like why, you’re both still women, you know. I’ve never understood that.

This sexual cultural script with heteronormative physical representations of gender is seen as important markers of identification within the black lesbian community (Moore 2006; Wilson 2009). The style of clothing and hair are important for letting others know who you find attractive (Moore 2006). Like Eva and Zoey, Wilson (2009) and Moore (2006) note their participants, based in Chicago and New York respectively, felt social pressure to date within these roles and maintain the stud/femme dynamic.

Tandice similarly outlines the expectation of the black lesbian community for stud/femme pairs. Tandice, who has a more feminine gender presentation, discussed the sanction against dating put on two women who have a masculine gender. She said:

I think I have more feminine girlfriends, than I have studdish girlfriends, but, I think it’s just, what I’m attracted to at the time. I don’t change my personality, or anything. So, and that’s pretty much how it goes, but I know that with the stud thing, they’re like, oh no, I’m not dating another stud, type of deal. So, which, I kind of get it. [chuckle]

Tandice’s insights recognize there may be less social and cultural threat when two feminine women are seen together. Shandee and Eva also point out that with their feminine gender presentations people don’t even know they are gay. Shandee said that, “you look at me and no one would ever know, even men, they’ll hit on me when I’m with my partner, like yeah, they don’t see the dreads and all that in her hair.” Eva remarked, “Nobody would believe that I am gay anyway. I hear that all the time.”

Tandice, Shandee, and Eva have an appearance that would be labeled as feminine. They wear makeup, have long hair, have long manicured fingernails, and dress in
clothes that accentuate their femininity. With this presentation they are not marked as lesbian. As Keeling (2003) describes, “an ‘attractive’ (‘feminine’) black female will become perceptible as a ‘lesbian’ to hegemonic common senses only when she explicitly announces herself as such” (p. 41).

On the other hand, a woman who has a masculine gender presentation is marked with a lesbian identity and is more visible. This masculinity is seen in a hairstyle that is generally shorter and may be styled in dreads, lack of makeup, and looser clothing that hides their femininity. Participants note more masculine presenting women have a more difficult time dealing with homophobia. Ebony, who has a more masculine gender presentation, noted that she has experienced challenges to her gender presentation. She recounts, “You have people that slur, um butch, dyke, lesbo. I’ve had that happen before. I think when you are a stud, as they say, you have more, you’re prone to more people sayin’ stuff.” The masculinity portrayed by black lesbian women is the masculinity available to them—black masculinity. And just as black men are disproportionately punished in society so are black lesbians whose gender presentation marks them as studs. As Moore (2011) describes the social pressure is not insignificant. She charges that “the enactment of dress and mannerisms consistent with Black male masculinity can lead to police harassment, distrust from strangers, and alienation from the Black middle class” (p.87). She further notes that black lesbians with a more masculine gender presentation “reify stereotypes of black women as mannish” (Moore 2006:130). This masculine gender presentation poses particular challenges and problems for those women who adopt it.
The gender conformity of the stud/femme construct is important for black lesbians on several levels. My participants provide evidence and support the findings of researchers who have investigated this dynamic. Keeling (2003) suggests that the stud/femme construct “meets certain needs whether erotic, economic, and/or something else” and acts as a vehicle for the survival of forms of ‘black lesbian’ community by creating a “degree of visibility” for those in the community and outside the community as black lesbians interact with dominant hegemonies that enforce a rigid behavioral and aesthetic code (p. 42). Moore (2011) adds that the gender complementarity found in the stud/femme dynamic “fuses Black and lesbian cultures to create and express a distinctive cultural identity” and this norm of the black lesbian community helps to police behavior and encourages conformity to group expectations of identity representation (p. 89-90).

As discussed in earlier sections the participants in this study assert their experiences as black lesbians is unique because of the racism and homophobia in the African American community and the black church. In this section, they again emphasize their experiences, in terms of gender expression as black lesbians living in North Florida, resonates in particular ways as they explain that they learn to negotiate their social world within the cultural social construct of a stud/femme gender/sexual identity. The discussion in this section again highlights the ways participants in this study suggest their experiences as black lesbians in North Florida are unique as they navigate a social world that is both racist and homophobic.

**Black Lesbian Parenting**

Not only did my participants assert a unique black lesbian experience of homophobia in the black community and a uniqueness in terms of their black lesbian
expressions of (gender) identity, but they also asserted their unique black lesbian identity in how they spoke about parenting their children using lessons regarding both homophobia and racism. Participants talked about how their children are also challenged by the social landscape their black lesbian parents navigate at the intersection of race, sexuality, and gender. Just as African American parents teach their children strategies and tactics for dealing with racism in their social world (Greene 2002; Nobles 2007), the black lesbian parents of this study explain that they also help their children deal with the homophobia they experience because of their parent’s marginalized sexual identity. I asked participants questions about if and how they talk to their children about homophobia, and if and how they talk to their children about racism. Their answers are discussed in the following sections.

Talk to Children about Homophobia

Nearly all the participants detailed how they taught their children about homophobia, but they stressed different aspects of it. The narratives of participants describing the ways they talk to their children about homophobia varied from talking about the fact that they lived in a different type of family to talking about bullying, and teaching tolerance. Participants recognized a need to let their children know that their family may be different, but it was not a bad family. For example, Ebony, who was raising four children with her partner, clarified for her children what it means to have two moms. She said:

Yeah, I used to just tell ‘em look everybody’s different. Some people have two moms. Some people don’t even know who their mom is, you know. Then you’ve got some people that got moms that sell their daughters. Some people got moms that their boyfriends touch their daughters and sons. Ya’ll don’t have none of that. We’re not on drugs. We’re not sellin’ ya’ll. We’re not abusing ya’ll. We’re not neglecting ya’ll. There are so many things that could be way worse than two moms.
Ebony’s discussion highlighted for her children that having two moms may make the family appear different from their peer’s family, but that that difference is not a reason to label the family as deviant.

Taking a different approach, Ulani wants her children to understand the impact of bullying. Ulani has adopted/fostered two children and she is raising them with her partner. She says she talks to her children about bullying because the consequences today can be deadly. She highlights how some bullying is centered in homophobia. She explained:

Yes, we talk to them, because they’ll say something typically as kids do, you know one of them will do something and the little one will say well that’s so gay. And I’m like what do we say about that word. And so we go through the whole process again and then he changes his words. So we talk about it in that way and just in general with all that is going on in school. Just talk to him about bullying and in general. I mean, explaining to him just how kids are reacting now to that. [chuckle] There’s no more just fighting in school. People are coming in and killing people. And you know so, helping them to understand that aspect of it. So, yeah I talk to them a lot about a lot things especially homophobia, just name calling in general. Know what your words mean before you use it, if you don't know what it means, don’t say it.

And Taye noted she underscored the need to be tolerant of diversity. She commented:

I just generally try to teach him to be tolerant of people, period. I don’t care what color, race, gender, whatever you are. I just teach him to be tolerant of other people. I let him know that there are so many different people in this world. You are going to meet so many people. You can’t look at a person and say they are this or they are that based on what they look like.

Taye’s focus underscores for her child that the world is made up of different people and that difference does not mean people should be treated differently. Participants recognize a need to let their children know that their family may be different because of their parent’s lesbian identity but they punctuated that all families and all people are not
the same and that everyone should be treated with respect (echoing the sentiment of similarity detailed in the previous chapter).

**Talk to Children about Racism**

At the same time that participants described teaching their children about homophobia, they also described how they talked to their children about race and racism. Importantly, participants described how they approached the lessons of racism with their children in ways that depended on the gender of the children. Four participants were raising only girls, three participants were raising only boys, and five participants were raising both girls and boys. Those who were parenting girls highlighted a more general discussion regarding race, while those parenting boys highlighted very specific ideas of what the expectations of gender and behavior were regarding black masculinity.

For those who were parenting girls, the discussion surrounding racism was not as conspicuous. Sal provides an example of the more general participants talk with their daughters about race and racism. Her daughter had moved from a less racially segregated school where she was in the minority to a more racially segregated school where she was the majority. She said:

> [This was] her first time seeing fights in school. Her first time seeing, you know somebody really cut up in class and get put out. Cops being called, and I’m just like, that’s not normal, that’s not school. They are not coming there to learn. And she started wanted to be real popular and stuff. And I called it she embraced her blackness, ‘cause I was like you are getting real ghetto. [laughter] You are not even from there. Like I told her, we are from the beach [a less racially segregated area of Jacksonville], You always had a dog in your house. That was family. You never went a day without eating, you never had nowhere to live, so what’s wrong with you.

Blackness for Sal’s daughter and her peers meant not taking education seriously and solving problems through fighting, but Sal wanted her child to know that the racial
stereotype of being black that meant you had to be violent and not participate in learning was not appropriate. She pointed out to her daughter that they were black before she attended this new school and that being black did not necessarily mean her behavior had to include fighting, being homeless, and not having enough to eat. Being black can mean having such things as a place to live, food on the table, and even a pet.

The participants who were raising sons were more detailed in the ways they talk to them about racism. Ebony and Ulani were raising sons and they both highlighted it was significantly important to discuss racism with their sons because of the racial construct of black masculinity. Black masculinity is particularly feared because it tends to be associated with violence (Collins 2005; Moore 2011). Because of the violence associated with black masculinity, black men risk being targeted by civil authorities, especially in a city that is highly segregated like Jacksonville. Ebony said:

Oh yeah, I’ve talked to them about racism before. Yeah, um, basically you know, we’ve watched movies and they ask questions and I say well, we’re still in the struggle. This is not over, the struggles not over [laughter] It’s better. We’re not slaves any more, you know, and everything. But racism is still alive, still alive and well, you know. And people try and hold you down. Now I especially talk to my boys about it because they are black males and I say you’ll be stereotyped just because you’re a black male, you know what I’m sayin’. And it don’t matter, your education, it doesn’t matter, you know. And they’ll forget about the fact that you’ve got two moms because you’re a black male and they’ll just automatically stereotype you.

Ebony explains to her sons that the legacy of slavery has made racism a part of daily life. She went on to illustrate how she parents in ways to minimize the stereotyping they may experience as young black men by helping them maintain a more socially acceptable gender presentation of black masculinity. She explained:

That’s why I used to keep their hair cut, I never let them grow dreads or braids because I didn’t want them to be stereotyped just because they had
braids or dreads or whatever. They had it hard enough, I’m like, you guys are gonna have it hard enough, just because of the color of your skin and you’re a man, so I used to always tell ‘em to keep a clean cut haircut, dress appropriate, you wear your belts, no saggin’, go to interview, no saggin’, wear your tie, and I tell them how they need to dress, and to present themselves for a job interview, for school, or any type of professional setting. If your home and you want droopy pants, you’re in the house, you can go ahead, go ahead. If you’re outside, you need to tighten it up, you know, because racism is out there, and we’re in Jacksonville, and it’s real bad here, it’s real bad for a black man, and I don’t want them to get caught up, in a situation.

Ebony sheds light on the everyday challenge black boys and men face as they work to present an acceptable appearance that will not bring unwelcome scrutiny.

As Ebony described a scenario centered on appearance, Ulani provides an example of the ways she talks to her sons based in behavioral expectations for black masculinity. She stated:

You know, I explain it to them, because they’ll ask me, something will happen in a store or something. Like the youngest one, he rides his bike to school and he said he stopped at the store on the corner one day and they wouldn’t let him in the store. And I said well why. He said, they said that some of the other kids from the school had stole some stuff. He said but I showed them my money and they still wouldn’t let me in and then they said something to him. And then I was explaining to him, don’t beg for them to take your money, you know, it’s fine, go to the next store, [chuckle] and buy. But, I also explained to him how, why, people have certain views and how you can get grouped with certain people just by being associated with them. So I think everything is a teaching moment, especially for young black men. You’ve got to be aware of your surroundings. You’ve got to be aware of the people you’re around. What they’re doing, because you could be doing everything right, [chuckle] but be guilty by association.

Ulani’s narrative of behavior expectations for her black sons highlights her awareness of the racist stereotype that black boys and men should be watched because blackness is associated with criminality. She lets her sons know they need to make sure to avoid being labeled guilty just because of the peers they hang out with.
The discussion in this section has provided stories in which the participants help their children navigate a social world based in racism and homophobia. Once again they highlight the uniqueness of their experience as black lesbians. As black lesbians they point out they deal with both racism and homophobia in their everyday experiences, but they are not alone. Their children also experience racism and homophobia because of their family dynamic. And just as they have learned strategies to negotiate the simultaneity of the oppressions generated in a racist and homophobic social world, participants in this study teach their children to do the same.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter participants' narratives confirmed the unique challenges of their lived experiences as they negotiate in a social landscape at the intersection of both race and sexuality. Institutional barriers have set in place social systems in which their black lesbian sexual identity is marginalized in the multiple areas of both racism and homophobia. Again and again, participants described their everyday experiences with *both* racism *and* homophobia. They acknowledged their ties to the black community and the black church as a support against racism as they highlighted their challenges with homophobia in both the black community and within the black church. And yet despite the challenges negotiating homophobia in the black community, they pointed out that for the most part they maintain a commitment to each. Participants also bring attention to a stud/femme gender construct that recognizes the importance of presenting both masculine and feminine gender ideals in their black lesbian community and in the process assert a unique expression of identity at the intersection of race, sexuality, and gender. They also reveal that as parents they teach their children to negotiate a social world at the intersection of race and sexuality, and thus how to deal
with both racism and homophobia. Throughout this chapter, I have highlighted how the participants in this study articulated the many different ways they are both black and gay with experiences negotiating both racism and homophobia. Their experiences do underscore the many different ways that “it really is not gay, but African American gay.”

Participants in this study articulate that their lived experience is not as black or lesbian; their lived experience is as black and lesbian. Collins (2000; 2005) explains that all individuals must navigate systems of oppression like racism and homophobia and that these systems of oppression work together in interlocking ways to create challenges for those with a marginalized racial identity and a marginalized sexual identity (among others—she would add gender, social class, and nation—which my participants sometimes stress as well). The participants in this study give voice to their unique experiences at the intersection of racism and homophobia as they navigate their social world as both black and lesbian.

In the previous chapter, participants emphasized the similarities of their experiences as black lesbians. They spoke in terms of “sameness” as they sought to be seen as legitimate families and to be treated equally. In this chapter, they articulated their experiences in terms of difference, especially highlighting how they define their sexuality in racialized terms, negotiate it in racially-defined communities, and help their children learn the different strategies of resisting racism and homophobia. In the next chapter, I present more examples of how participants describe feeling different, emphasizing their strategies of controlling visibility as they manage intertwining stigma and stereotypes.
CHAPTER 6
SURE THERE’S RACISM. BUT HOMOPHOBIA—THAT’S DIFFERENT

Racism…it’s still very much real, but homophobia that’s something totally
different…that’s a different animal
—Taye

The title of this chapter and the quote from Taye are representative of a point
repeated by many participants. Black lesbians live in a social world where they are
challenged by both racism because of their African American racial identity and by
homophobia because of their lesbian sexual identity. In Chapter 5, I provided a
discussion of the results that focused on the way participants experience homophobia in
a racial social landscape at the intersection of race and sexuality. In this chapter, I
provide a more focused discussion on the salience of participants’ lesbian sexual
identity because it is a point they emphasize throughout this dissertation. As in the last
chapter, when participants articulated their lived experiences at the simultaneous and
interlocking social oppressions of both racism and homophobia, they continue that
discussion of both/and (both racism and homophobia) as they stressed that “sexuality is
bigger” and different.

Overwhelmingly, participants’ reported that race and racism were unremarkable
for them on an everyday basis. While they valued the black community for support in a
racist society, taught their children about racism, and spoke of themselves as distinctly
black in relation to their lesbianism [recall the discussion of the last chapter], they also
explicitly said that managing their racial identity and the associated racism were not part
of their daily experience in the same way that sexuality and homophobia were. They
stressed how they frequently managed their sexual identity. Many times in the
interviews, participants reflected on ways they self-policed their lesbian identity in order
to avoid conflict, to make others feel more comfortable, or to make themselves feel more comfortable depending on the situation or the social spaces they were in. Many revealed they regularly do not volunteer information about their sexual identity. They also noted, however, that sometimes their sexual identity was revealed by certain behaviors, like by their gender presentation or the gender presentation of their partner. All in all, participants told narratives that revealed how they regulated their behavior in a social world that marginalizes their lesbian identity through homophobia. Before a discussion of how participants managed the visibility of their sexual identity, I provide an explanation for why they may be emphasizing their sexual identity as the more remarkable identity in their everyday lives.

**Everyday Homophobia as More Salient**

The little research available about black lesbians and gay men explains how they often find themselves in a social world where they have been defined outside the realm of the fully human because of both race and sexuality (Bennett and Battle 2001). With this in mind, I asked participants if they had experiences dealing with racism, homophobia, or both. When asked explicitly, if they had experienced racism all participants replied they had not dealt with specific instances of racism in their everyday lives. Eva remarked, “I have never experienced any racism or anything toward being a lesbian.” Sal indicated, “let’s see, not that I know of. I don’t really even pay attention to [racism].” Nancy and Denelle also note the main issues that challenge them are in regards to sexuality. They said:

Nancy: Yeah, [racism]’s not. It isn’t as big an issue.
Denelle: It’s really not. I’d have to say more sexuality. I’m thinking.
Nancy: Yeah, because we are faced with not being able to share.
Denelle: Yeah, I think that sexuality is bigger. That’s my answer because I don’t think race so much.

As illustrated here, participants spoke of never having experienced racism and simply not paying attention to race. And when asked, most spoke of dealing with issues of homophobia as more of a daily challenge than was dealing with issues of racism. But, when participants were asked about their experiences in dealing with homophobia overwhelmingly race did enter the discussion. This seeming erasure of race from their social identity does not mean race is not a consideration for them. As Greene (2002) acknowledges, “we cannot make arbitrary assumptions about which of those identities is most salient to a given individual. Moreover, we cannot even assume that one identity is ever more important than the others” (p. 932-3). Participants’ sentiments reflect the complexity of navigating the social world at the intersection of race and sexuality. Indeed, it is important to note again that when participants were asked about their experiences in dealing with homophobia overwhelmingly race did enter the discussion as was underscored in the last chapter and as will be further explored in the analysis provided in this chapter.

Importantly, several participants framed their struggles with homophobia in relation to the struggle for race rights during the Civil Rights Movement. Denelle pointed out that she sees overcoming homophobia as a continuation of this earlier civil rights work. She said:

I think a lot of the issues that the gay community face are the same issues that blacks have faced as far as civil rights for years. And I think that the more people recognize that and come together that is the only way we are going to become the minority, I mean the majority, over being the minority, that we all are [stigmatized] for being the minority.
Here Denelle is articulating a parallel between the challenges of the gay community and the black community suggesting both are civil rights struggles. Denelle further asserted that, “once you have that behind your name, or you’re labeled as GLBT, whether you’re black, you’re white, it doesn’t matter, you are a minority now, point blank.” For her, sexual identity is a marker of being a marginalized identity and one that she stresses as “mattering” beyond race and rendering race irrelevant. Denelle’s way of speaking about her marginalized status, in terms of sexuality beyond race, makes sense in a social world that has interlocking racist and homophobic stereotypes of sexuality. These stereotypes make a claim to black lesbian sexuality quite complicated. As leading intersectional scholars argue, the combination or racism and homophobia have socially defined black sexuality in terms of heterosexuality thus rendering the idea of a black gay identity an impossibility (Collins 2005; Ferguson 2004).

Like Denelle, Taye and Fola highlight that their everyday experiences with homophobia are different and more remarkable than their experiences dealing with racism. They also compared the struggle for gay-related rights to the struggle for race-related rights. They suggest:

Taye: I think homophobia trumps racism on any day.
Fola: It’s the new racism.
Clare: Oh yeah?
Taye: Yeah, I believe that.
Fola: At least that’s what I think. It’s the new racism [laughter].
Taye: It trumps it, I think racism is something. I don’t know it’s kind of, I don’t want to say it’s archaic but, it’s still very much real. But homophobia, that’s something totally different, that’s a different animal.
Fola: This is just as bad, it’s inhumane, to say that we can’t have the same rights.

Taye and Fola contend that a marginalized sexual identity is more salient for them than a marginalized racial identity. Importantly, they do not just say homophobia is more salient and leave it at that. They call it a “new racism” acknowledging the parallel between racism and homophobia. Taye does not negate racism; she later states racism is “still very much real. But homophobia, that’s something totally different.” Fola’s comment about “new racism” and Taye’s comment about homophobia being different are not assertions that racism is no longer relevant and should not be read that way. Their comments underscore the idea of how homophobia impacts their everyday lives in a different and significant way. This is a reminder of what Miller (2011) argues. She suggests the challenge of “disentangling race from sexuality was often impossible” (p. 561). Participants’ racial identity is so embedded in their sexual identity that in many social situations it is hard to tease them apart and as they assert the salience of homophobia (for example) they return again and again to reminders of how race is still relevant to their lived experiences.

For Eva, the salience of homophobia came after she began disclosing her sexual identity. Eva transitioned to a lesbian identity after a heterosexual marriage that lasted about 10 years. She noted she has a different perspective now that she has a gay identity. She revealed:

Well when I was straight I was more committed to being an African American family. Now that I am gay, I am more committed, unfortunately I have to admit it, to being gay. My life and my fight is not for being African American, it is for being gay.
Salience of a marginalized sexual identity may, in fact, not be because participants feel their racialized identity is unremarkable, but actually highlights the fact that they live in a social world at the intersection of race and sexuality. All participants, as black lesbians, experience an “everyday racism”—a form of racism that is so recurrent and systemic that is taken for granted (Steinbugler 2012:28). This everyday racism they experience is unremarkable because of the visibility of their racial identity, but the invisibility of their lesbian identity gives their experiences with homophobia a more prominent status in their everyday lives. They regulate their behavior to maintain that invisibility. Just as Collins (2005) emphasizes, this increased salience of participants’ marginalized sexual identity may be because racism and heterosexism differ. Collins observes:

> Blackness is clearly identifiable, and in keeping with assumptions of color blindness of the new racism, many Whites no longer express derogatory racial beliefs in public, especially while in the company of Blacks. In contrast U.S. society’s assumption of heterosexuality along with its tolerance of homophobia imposes no such public censure on straight men and women to refrain from homophobic comments in public. As a result, closeted and openly LGBT people may be exposed to a much higher degree of interpersonal insensitivity and overt prejudice than the racial prejudice experienced by Blacks and other racial/ethnic groups. (P. 114)

Participants are not “erasing” race, they are highlighting the visibility and distinct experiences they have of racism that operates differently than homophobia and thus makes it seem less remarkable in their daily lives. In fact, I argue that their statements need to be read as evidence that the institutional and social barriers of racism and homophobia have created a social hierarchy that oppresses them at the intersection of race and sexuality.

As explained in this section, it may seem that participants are claiming that the challenges they face dealing with a marginalized sexual identity are more remarkable in
their daily lives when compared to the challenges they face when dealing with racism. However, on further examination of their comments, they reveal that dealing with both homophobia and racism are important parts of their experience; it is a dynamic of the ways the different oppressions work in their daily lives that creates the difference in importance. Homophobia may be the “new racism,” but the old racism is still just as challenging as the participants in this study negotiate a racist and homophobic social landscape.

**Don’t Want to Tense Nobody Up**

Several participants note that managing a lesbian identity in the black community has been a particular challenge because sexuality is not a topic of conversation. Eva indicated:

> I would say that the African American community outside of gay people are homophobic. It’s taboo, we don’t talk about it, we can sit down, we are not going to discuss it, it is very taboo.

Like Martinez and Sullivan (1998) suggest, “homophobia in the African American community is a function of how ‘out’ the individual is; engaging in homosexual activity is not so much rejected as is talking about it” (p. 252). This silencing of any discussion relating to sexual identity in the black community is explored in this section.

As others have explained, because of homophobia in the black community lesbian and gay sexuality is largely unspoken (Gomez and Smith 1990). Barbara Smith quotes a line from black lesbian writer Ann Allen Shockley, ‘Play it, but don’t say it’¹, noting “this is a line that capsulizes the general stance of the Black community on sexual identity and sexual orientation” (p. 49). Greene (2002) further explains, “quiet

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tolerance is usually contingent upon a lesbian’s silence about her sexual orientation; open disclosure, discussion, or self-identification may give rise to serious conflicts” (p. 938). As I will detail below, the participants in this study confirmed that this expectation of silence was true in their lives. As they did so, they again stressed the way that homophobia for them, as black women, was different; they explain how they experience a racism-inflected homophobia.

One key way participants of this study spoke of their everyday experiences of homophobia was in terms of an expectation to remain silent. Shandee used the term “don’t ask don’t tell” when she described experiences she has had at church. She acknowledged:

Church is a, it’s almost like ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’, they haven’t asked, I haven’t told. I don’t think they would have a problem with it. I mean, some people, you can tell. If you really are ordained by God, you’ll be able to pick up on any type of signs of anything, but they’re still loving. I’m the youth ministry coordinator over the kids, and I have a group of girls, and they do praise dances or whatever. So, I don’t think if they ever to noticeably find out it would be an issue.

Just as Moore (2011) suggests, “this ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ policy enabled the women to remain on good terms with family and old friends rather than cause a breach for a relationship their families did not want to fully acknowledge” (p.187). So because Shandee is not openly discussing her sexuality, she is not sanctioned because of her lesbian identity.

Sal explains that she recognizes a potential source of conflict if she talks about her sexuality with her family or members of the black community. Because of this potential, she self-monitors her conversations so as to avoid talking about sexuality. She said:
So many people have their opinion within the black community to where it is like you know what, never mind. They’re not that accepting. And when I say they, I mean my own family also. Yeah, you’ve got some people, well you’ve got a lot of people that always want to say how they feel and you don’t want to really say something back because you know it’s going to start a talk war, to a fight. And it’s just, how can I describe it. Yeah, it’s like a battle sometimes, where you are just like, you know what, and you just have to ignore ‘em. And then when you do say something most likely it is not going to be nice at all. Like you can’t just be like you know I can live my own life, do what I want to. They’re like scht. [whistles through teeth]

She later reported that she has a strained relationship with her mother because of her lesbian status. Sal offers that she does not visit at all because of the friction she feels from her mother. She revealed:

My mom is from [the Caribbean]. A lot of people from down there say they have trouble. I guess being that it is so small and everybody’s so narrow-minded to bigger things that they are just like, nah, that’s it [throws hands up]. So it’s hard for her. So I’m like if it’s that hard, then I just won’t come around. She’ll say she’s OK with it [sexuality] but not really.

Sal’s strategy is to not only keep silent about her sexuality, but to also avoid her family and her mother in particular. She is “covering.” As Moore (2010) explains, “when in Black social spaces, many gay people do not express a public gay identity. Instead they seek to minimize what they believe is a stigmatized status by practicing ‘covering’” (p.3). Covering was first described by Goffman (1963) in his discussion regarding stigma. He noted covering and passing were similar management techniques for a social identity that may be sanctioned. He advised:

The individual’s object is to reduce tension, that is, to make it easier for himself and the others to withdraw covert attention from the stigma, and to sustain spontaneous involvement in the official content of the interaction. However, the means employed for this task are quite similar to those employed in passing—and in some cases identical, since what will conceal a stigma from unknowing persons may also ease matters for those in the know. This process will be referred to as covering.” (Goffman 1963:102, emphasis in original).
Examples of covering, as a strategy for managing their sexual identity, are described by other participants.

Shandee’s partner’s family has several members who are not accepting of gay family members. She explained:

[Partner’s] family, her mother is one of those funny acting people, men are with women, women are with men she really doesn’t say no, don’t bring her around me. But, I don’t go around, you know because of that. You know, she explained it to me. So if they have some type of family function I really just don’t go. Don’t care to go around, ’cuz I am who I am.

Here Shandee is describing how she and her partner practice covering by just not “going around.” Ebony, who struggled to come out to her family, tells a similar story of how she would visit alone. She would not bring along her partner and the children when she visited her family. The children were from her partner's previous heterosexual relationships. She said:

But I had never used to do that, ’cuz I knew how they felt. And I don’t want to tense nobody up, so I didn’t bring [the children, partner] around like that, you know. I didn’t try to take them with me when I did go home and visit. I’d go by myself, you know what I’m sayin’, and stuff, you know. I wanted to have a good visit. I didn’t want nobody to be tensed up, and stuff, and that’s how that part goes. And yeah, they’ve pretty much accept me as bein’ gay right now.

Ebony is covering by not bringing her partner and hoping this results in nobody being “tensed up.” She further discussed how she avoided interacting with her grandmother because of her grandmother's negative reaction to her sexual identity. Ebony noted:

My grandmother, and she just recently stopped sayin’ it, ah, a couple of years ago, well she always said God didn’t make you like that, I don’t like that and stuff. And me and my grandmamma was always real close, and um, I used to call her all the time. But then I stopped callin’ her so much ’cuz every time I called her she’d be like, well you need to get your life together, God don’t like that, and he didn’t make you like that, this that and the other. And I’m like well how you gonna tell me Grandmamma, you know what I’m sayin’. He did make me. He did, what do you mean? He
don't make no mistakes, right, yeah but He gave you choices, this that and the other, you know. And I used to get stressed out about it. And now, I'm just not gonna call her, you know what I'm sayin' or whatever, she don't tell me that anymore.

Here Ebony describes another strategy of avoidance as mechanism of covering. These strategies of avoidance that Sal, Shandee, and Ebony describe may be part of what Moore (2011) has called a narrative of respect. This narrative of respect is a type of covering strategy of black lesbians. She reports her understanding of how black lesbians use a narrative of respect. She said:

While they act in a limited way around family, they frame this behavior using a narrative of respect rather than a feeling that they do not have the freedom to be gay, and in other ways reveal the importance of significant others in their lives. So while they may choose to downplay their gay identities during social interactions, they nonetheless remain clear in their refusal to give up or deny their gay sexuality. They may not kiss their partners during Thanksgiving dinner, but they will have them sitting right with them at the family table. (P.196)

Participants in this study also engage in a narrative of respect when they keep silent about their sexuality or “just don’t go around” to family gatherings. This way of managing sexuality is distinctive for black lesbians.

Participants are also strategically managing the visibility of their lesbian sexual identity when they self-police or regulate their behavior to avoid unwelcome attention (Steinbugler 2005:435). Managing visibility includes the practices where individuals interpret social cues from their social environments modify their actions in public to avoid possible harassment or confrontation (Steinbugler 2012:48). Lasser and Tharinger (2003) provide a more detailed definition. They suggest visibility management is the “dynamic and ongoing process of careful, planned decisions about whether they will disclose their sexual orientation, and, if they decide to disclose, to whom and how they disclose, and how they continue to monitor the presentation of their sexual orientation in
different environments” (p. 233). As I have discussed in this section, the participants of this study spoke of how they often implement visibility management with their families.

Covering is significant in the lived experience of the participants in this study because it allows them to keep important family ties. For example, although Shandee does not speak of hiding her sexuality she explains the way it works in a black family.

She explained:

They don’t have a choice. Yeah, it was never secretive, I mean they are loving in their aspects, but I mean the only person that probably, she doesn’t really shy away from it, if I was to say today I’m going to get married, she’d be like no I’m not coming, which is my aunt. But, everybody else would be there, I mean I’ve had a commitment ceremony and I didn’t invite one of my aunts because she’s in church, but of course, she showed up anyways, fussing. But, I mean, it is what it is, they don’t care, they’re pretty cool. They love me as who I am. If me and my partner came around, they wouldn’t say oh, no, she couldn’t come here. They’d be cool with it.

Shandee’s families’ reluctant acceptance of her sexuality has been described by other scholars investigating black families with lesbian or gay family members. Like Greene (2003) reports, “because of the importance of family to African Americans, lesbians are not typically ‘disowned,’ or formally cut off from family members to the extent that their white counterparts may be” (p. 938). As Shandee’s story highlights, the covering spoken about as part of their everyday lives with their families is another way that participants are telling their story of being both black and lesbian and living at the intersection of race and sexuality.

**People Are Able to Pick Up on It**

Lesbian identity management involves individual sexual identity self-disclosure (Miller 2011) and for black lesbians the tactics and strategies may be particularly important as they work to manage visibility and cover their sexual identity in order to
maintain the connection to their families. Despite the silence and the managing their visibility members of the community about their sexual identity sometimes there are breaches. Participants' narratives about these breaches and reluctant disclosures are revealing and bring attention to strategies undertaken when their sexual identity is made visible. A discussion of these narratives is provided in this section.

Despite self-policing and covering, some participants describe instances when their sexual identity is exposed. La’Rae describes a scene that took place in her workplace. She revealed:

People assume, that I’m married to a man until they may see a picture. ‘Cuz I would just say my kids this, my kids that. I never said my partner’s kids or my partner and I kids, ‘cuz I just don’t talk like that. So I would just be like my kid’s bad or my kids did this, my kid did that. Oh, I’ve got to go to the school to see about my kids. So people assumed, that I was married to a guy unless I showed them a family photo, and then they are like [pause, like thinking], but [laughter] Then I’d have to explain that their not really my kids. I didn’t birth them. I don’t have any, ’cuz I’ll say my kids, my kids, my kids. And then, you may have worked with me for about two or three years and I say my kids, my kids, my kids. And then I’ll say, and then somebody’ll be pregnant, or somebody will say how contractions felt or something like that. And I’ll be like sayin,’ ohh see that’s why I could never be pregnant. And they be like, but wait a minute, but you’ve got three kids. Then I have to say well I didn’t birth them. They’re my partner’s kids. Then I have to clarify what I mean by partner’s kids, and then that’s how people usually find out, that they are not my kids.

At work, La’Rae did not voluntarily disclose her sexual identity because she did not want to make people or herself uncomfortable. Her management status in the workplace helped to deflect some harassment. La’Rae’s example shows us how sexual identity can be revealed despite the self-policing work black lesbians may do as they look to “not tense people up.”
Nancy and Denelle similarly tell a story of when covering is breached through their description of a situation that occurred at their child’s school. They did not tell anyone at the school they were partners. One person did figure it out. They said:

Nancy: I mean one teacher knew. So for her it was OK. That teacher, she was fine with it, black lady, but the rest of them. I wouldn’t feel comfortable. And we never told her, but she just knew.

Denelle: She knew, the black teacher, yeah, and she was cool about it.

Nancy: She mistakenly said it one day and then it was like, she was trying to blow it up like she never said anything. [laughter]

Denelle: Yeah she did, that’s how we knew she knew. [laughter]

Nancy and Denelle highlight a scenario where they do not talk about their sexual identity yet people “know.” Even though a teacher figured it out, sexual identity was still not talked about and now the teacher even became part of helping them manage their (in)visibility regarding their sexual identity by keeping silent.

Zoey tells a different story of visibility management. She commented that her masculine gender expression marks her as gay. Furthermore, she recently married her partner and does not want to draw attention to her sexuality by displaying her wedding ring. She explained:

I go to the gay events, and try to support the gay events, and stuff. And I feel as I get older I am trying to come out more. Like, I was really in the closet, but now I pretty much, people can look at me and say oh, she’s gay. [chuckle] So, and you know I’m still uncomfortable wearing my band. I notice that I’ll be like this [covers it up with other hand] or I’ll keep my hand in my pocket, ‘cuz I don’t want people to be oh what’s that, are you married, or something. So, I’m just getting used to it.

When people notice she has a wedding ring and ask about her partner, Zoey is not comfortable revealing to others the fact that her partner is a woman. Zoey acknowledges that her masculine gender presentation makes her sexual identity visible
to those around her. She works hard to cover the fact that she is married so that she does not further mark herself as lesbian by acknowledging that her partner is a woman.

Sal and Eva also talk about being more visible and marked with a lesbian sexual identity when the gender of a partner is revealed or is visible. Sal explained:

I think when I have a partner it makes it worse. Only as far as like getting to know the people, ‘cause then they’re sitting there looking at the both of us like what they be doing. Then they see the kids. What I can really go based on my last relationship, because she was the one with the most [five] kids. Everywhere we go we all had to go together and be together. So, when somebody introduce the kids they had to see both of us, teachers both of us. Um, the only thing I think, the only battle would be just somebody trying to understand like how does this family work. With myself and my [child] I don’t think it’s that hard for people. It’s just like, well, that’s her [child]. They don’t really see, there is nobody else, to either compare or try to adjust, like well who’s who and who does what. So I think it’s real easy for people to accept me and my [child]. Well OK, that’s OK.

Eva has a feminine gender presentation (long hair, long fingernails, and feminine style of clothing) and when she is with her more masculine presenting partner she is made visible as gay. She noted:

Well the women that I generally get with they look like studs, so there was no need to hide due to the fact that everybody would know, so if you just look at me and my son you would never suspect that I am gay. But if I had gotten with women who look more like me then I don’t know if I would have been as open but when you get with someone that looks and dress and carries themselves more masculine than they do femme it just came out that it was just going to be open and I knew even before I decided what type of woman I was going to get with I knew from March 18 2002, I was never going to be in the closet. That I was going to come out flaming. [snaps fingers]

Sal, Eva, and Zoey highlight the importance gender presentation has in covering (or uncovering) their black lesbian identity.

The stories presented in this section bring attention to how self-policing a lesbian identity is particularly important for black lesbians as they negotiate a social world where
they are marginalized both as racial minorities and sexual minorities. Covering for black lesbians becomes not only important for avoiding exposure, it is also becomes important in maintaining an invisible sexual identity after that marginalized sexual identity is exposed and breached. Participants explained that they work to cover their sexual identity in order to avoid conflict and discomfort from family members or others in the community (and for the most part they mean the black community), yet sometimes their sexual identity is revealed when they are seen with their partners or when the gender identity of their partner is revealed in conversation. Sometimes despite the exposure of their sexual identity, other members of the community help maintain their invisibility in a silence of acceptance that is unique to the black community.

**Conclusion**

This chapter explored the ways participants explained the difference between homophobia and racism; a difference discussed as being separate from each other, but still intertwined. Participants talked of their marginalized sexual identity as being more salient than their racial identity when it was made visible, especially in the black community. Participants in this study explained that salience of their lesbian identity by talking about how racism is a “different animal.” This discussion of salience revealed that participants were reaffirming the simultaneity of oppressions in their lives but doing so with an assertion that the oppressions manifest differently in their lived experiences. Participants discussed how they managed the distinctive homophobia they found salient in their everyday lives by covering, not hiding, their gay identity. This covering was different from being invisible or closeted. I argue that it is a distinctively black lesbian way of resisting homophobia by negotiating doing so while they are simultaneously managing racism as they work to maintain ties with family. Finally, in this chapter I also
showed how participants told of many situations where people “knew” their identity because of a breach in their management of their behavior, specifically their gender presentation or because of their partner’s gender presentation. These breaches remind us of the discussion from Chapter 5 that highlighted how gender expression is distinct in black lesbian communities and as such breaches that occur via gender presentation are important for understanding visibility management (its successes and its failures) since visibility management was important for helping participants avoid harassment and conflict with family members and other members of the black community.

This chapter was significant in providing examples of the ways participants explained the different forms of the oppression they experienced. Race was not erased from their experiences, but became less remarkable in certain circumstances, especially those in the African American community. “Sexuality was bigger,” but race was still present. The interlocking oppressions of racism and homophobia create a system where the participants in this study are challenged as both black and lesbian.

Like the discussion in the previous chapter, this chapter focused on a discussion of difference. Participants talked about the differences in their lived experiences as black lesbians, but unlike the discussion in the last chapter the difference was framed in terms of the interlocking oppressions of racism and homophobia. This contrasts with the results described in chapter 4 where the participants in this study focused on their sameness. But as the discussion in the last two chapters has suggested it “really is not just gay, but African American gay” and sometimes “sexuality is bigger,” even as racism is still present.
CHAPTER 7
BLACK AND LESBIAN AND PARENTS: WE ARE DIFFERENT, BUT WE WANT THE SAME RIGHTS

My central goal for this dissertation has been to add to the limited scholarship on African American families headed by individuals with a gay identity. With qualitative interviews of black lesbians who are parenting and with a focus on intersectionality, symbolic interaction, and feminist and feminist standpoint theories for analysis, in the previous chapters, I explored the everyday lived experiences of individuals who negotiate their social world at the intersection of sexuality and race (and gender). In this chapter, I provide a summary of findings as well as limitations of the study and ideas for future research. I also include a comparison to the findings of others who have conducted scholarship in the black lesbian community and end by pointing out the contributions of my study to existing scholarship.

Summary of Significant Findings

In talking with my participants during the interviews, I learned that the women who participated in this project perceive their family as being no different from any other family in the United States. As I discussed in Chapter 4, they described how they want to be seen as a respectable family with access to the same rights and privileges that come to all families, like those of their heterosexual peers, who are already fully equal.

As the literature review of the scholarship on families showed in Chapter 2, treating families headed by black lesbians as if they are deviant is unfounded. Racism in the study of families compares African American families to a white, middle-class family standard and this comparison has resulted in showing the “African American family” to be deviant and African Americans were viewed as inferior parents. Yet as empirical research has pointed out African Americans are fit parents (Chatters, Taylor,
Homophobia in the study of families has viewed “the family” through the lens of heterosexual experience and assumes heterosexist experience is the norm. Since “lesbian and gay families” differ from this nuclear, two-heterosexual-parent “family,” they are generally considered deviant and inferior and unfit to parent. But as discussed in the review of scholarship on LGBT families showed LGBT individuals are fit parents (Allen and Burrell 1996; Anderssen, Amilie, and Ytterøy 2002; Chan, Raboy, and Patterson 1998; Flaks et al. 1995; Gartrell and Bos 2010; Pawelski et al. 2006; Stacey and Biblarz 2001; Tasker and Golombok 1995; Vanfraussen, Ponjaert-Kristoffersen, and Brewneys 2003; Wainright, Russell, and Patterson 2004). Just as in the study of race and families and as in the study of sexuality and families there is an emphasis on difference at the expense of similarities. My findings suggest that black lesbian families also feel that difference at the expense of similarities when they talk about their families.

Without equal access to family recognition policies, like marriage and/or adoption, the black lesbians in this study feel they are being treated as second class citizens. And participants assert there is no need for this second-class treatment. As they say, their family experiences are the same as everyone else. Being gay (or African American) does not change the everyday tasks and chores that need to be completed by both parents and children. What is best for children does not change because of the sexuality of the parents. Parenting generates the same challenges for all families regardless of the sexuality or race (or gender) of the parents, according to the participants in this study.
My analysis acknowledges that while the black lesbians in this study asserted the sameness of their families when compared to their heterosexual peers, they also talked about difference noting their unique lived experience as black lesbians. Participants articulated they are not just black and they are not just lesbian, but they are both black and lesbian all at the same time. That being said, as they talked of sexuality there was little mention of race. As I argued in Chapters 5 and 6, this lack of mention does not mean that race is unremarkable in participant’s lives. Like intersectionality scholars point out, this salience of their sexuality and less remarkable discussion of their race may be from the nuanced complexities of negotiating multiple social identities in different social contexts (Collins 2000; McCall 2005). Institutional barriers have set in place social systems in which their black lesbian sexual identity is marginalized in the multiple areas of both racism and homophobia. Salience of a marginalized sexual identity may in fact not be because participants feel their racialized identity is unremarkable, but actually highlights the fact that they live in a social world at the intersection of race and sexuality.

All participants in this study negotiate their social world as black lesbians. As a result the visibility of their racial identity makes those experiences so recurrent and systemic that they are taken for granted as unremarkable, but the invisibility of their lesbian identity gives their experiences with homophobia a more prominent status in their everyday lives. This increased salience of participants’ marginalized sexual identity may be because the oppressive systems of racism and heterosexism differ (Collins 2005), a point the participants in this study returned to as they described
heightened salience of their sexuality in their everyday negotiations of oppression (see Chapter 6).

My analysis also brings attention to how participants articulate the importance of maintaining ties to the black community and the black church, points I discuss in Chapter 5. Participants look to these social institutions as a support against racism as they highlight their challenges with homophobia in both the black community and within the black church. And yet, despite the challenges negotiating homophobia in the black community, they pointed out that for the most part they maintain a commitment to each.

My findings bring attention to several strategies participants implore to manage a sexual identity; some strategies are particular to the African American community. As I discuss in Chapter 5, the black lesbians in this study revealed a stud/femme gender construct in which they present both masculine and feminine gender ideals in the black lesbian community and in the process assert a unique expression of identity at the intersection of race, sexuality, and gender. This stud/femme gender presentation created a degree of visibility for those in the community and outside the community as they interact with dominant hegemonies that enforce a rigid behavioral and aesthetic code.

Participants discussed the importance of covering their sexual identity rather than hiding it, especially in the black community, so that they could avoid conflict or alienation if their marginalized sexual identity was exposed. I discuss this in Chapter 6 and assert that they did not deny their sexuality, but they practiced a narrative of respect as they avoided situations that would make members of their family or community upset or uncomfortable.
My findings highlight how the participants in this study articulated the many different ways they are both black and lesbian with experiences negotiating both racism and homophobia. Participants’ narratives give voice to the way intersectionality scholars explain that all individuals must navigate systems of oppression like racism and homophobia and that these systems of oppression work together in interlocking ways to create challenges for those with a marginalized racial identity and a marginalized sexual identity (Collins 2000; 2005). The women who participated in my study are not just black and they are not just lesbian, but they are black and lesbian all at the same time. Additionally, as black lesbians who parent they are not alone in navigating a social landscape of racism and homophobia, and just as they have learned strategies to negotiate the simultaneity of the oppressions generated in a racist and homophobic social world, participants in this study talk about how they are striving to teach their children to do the same.

In sum, my analysis revealed how participants shed light on the strategies they employ as they negotiate their social world as both black and lesbian at the intersection of both sexuality and race.

**Areas of Future Research**

Qualitative research methods generally use a smaller sample size to develop a greater level of in-depth understanding that may not be available in other empirical methods (Berg 2004; Creswell 2013, Warren and Karner 2005). The analysis of the interviews from the twelve individuals in this dissertation project captures an important portrait of the lived experiences of black lesbians parenting in the South. However, no single project can foresee all the complexities and nuances found in the lived experiences of a group of people. As it relates to this project, future research should
include interviews with the children of participants to develop a more in-depth understanding of the total experiences of all the members of the families of black lesbians.

Future research should include a focus on black gay men who are parenting since black same-sex couples generally are more likely to be parenting than white same-sex couples (Biblarz and Savci 2011; Cahill 2009; Dang and Frazer 2004; Gates and Ost 2004; Movement Advancement Project, Family Equality Council, and Center for American Progress 2011). I was able to tease out the significance of gender in parts of my discussion in this work, but adding gay men could bring in a more nuanced analysis of the intersection with gender, race, and sexuality.

Future research should also explicitly and carefully untangle the significance of socioeconomic class as a part of the intersectional analysis. Moore (2011) suggested a socioeconomic class dynamic influenced her participants and their stud/femme presentation. It would be relevant to find out how class plays out in more detail in the lives of black lesbians in other LGBT communities. This focus would better address how class operates at the intersection of gender, race, and sexuality.

**Significance and Contributions of this Study**

Scholarship on black lesbians and their families is growing and the analysis in this dissertation confirms some of the findings of studies produced by other scholars. My findings confirm the presence of a stud/femme sexual cultural script articulated by black lesbians in other scholarship. Greene (2002), Keeling (2003), Miller (2011), Moore (2006, 2011), and Wilson (2009) also found the gender presentation of stud/femme to be part of the black lesbian community, and my participants noted its relevance to their lives as black lesbians living in North Florida. Moore’s (2011) study
further suggested a class dynamic was also involved as black lesbians in New York City managed their masculine gender presentation in order to maintain a middle-class respectability. Middle-class studs gender presentation was not as “mannish” as the masculine gender presentation of working-class black lesbians. Class did not emerge clearly in the results of this dissertation, but it is worthy of further exploration.

Moore’s study (2011) of black lesbians detailed in Invisible Families is perhaps the most thorough exploration of a black lesbian community to date. She followed over 100 women in New York City for three years hoping to gain insight into how they negotiate their lives and form their families as openly gay people (Moore 2011). My participants reported some similar experiences when compared to Moore’s participants. Like Moore’s participants, the participants in my study looked to maintain their connection to the black community and the black church as they provide support for navigating a racist social world. Also confirming Moore’s findings, my analysis revealed how participants manage their sexual identity with a narrative of respect and covering, especially in the black community, as ways to avoid conflict and make others more comfortable. The acceptance of silence, as in “don’t ask don’t tell,” was also confirmed (Greene 2002; Miller 2011; Moore 2011). These similarities suggest some commonalities of black lesbian experience despite region and parental status.

In this dissertation, some findings emerged that seem to be unique to the black lesbian parents raising children in the South. The black lesbians in this study articulated that not only do they have a unique black lesbian experience of homophobia so do their children, and just as African American parents teach their children strategies and tactics for dealing with racism in their social world (Greene 2002; Nobles 2007) the black
lesbian parents of this study explain that they also help their children deal with the homophobia they experience because of their parent’s marginalized sexual identity.

Participants also asserted that despite a different unique experience as black lesbians there was a “sameness.” They described being the same as other families and expressed a desire for equal rights regarding family recognition. This discussion using the language of sameness is unique given that they did not explicitly discuss their situations in terms of interlocking oppressions as one might expect if they were focused on differences rather than sameness. Black lesbian’s lived experiences are at the intersection of race and sexuality within the social systems of oppression, racism and homophobia, but the politics of sexuality also exists within these systems and tends not to recognize an intersection of race and sexuality, so the participants in this study are limited to using a language of similarity while at the same time living a life they describe as being different.

The discussion of “sameness” occurred when participants in this study were asked what they wished people knew about their families. Overwhelmingly they articulated that their families are the same as any other family. They described being “normal” and “not extraordinary” and because they were the same as everyone else they describe feeling as if they were being treated as “second class citizens” when they were denied access to the equal rights accorded to other families. Participants in this study asserted that their families were built around love and support for each other, just like any other family. Furthermore, they wanted to be able to marry the one they loved and make sure their children had a legal connection to both parents, just like any other family.
The findings generated from the analysis presented in this dissertation add to the limited qualitative research on families who find themselves challenged by racism and homophobia. I add to the scholarship and give voice to the black lesbians who are parenting and find themselves negotiating their social world while being challenged by the interlocking oppressions of both racism and homophobia; negotiating their social world as parents who are both black and lesbian.
APPENDIX A
SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE

Participants were first asked how they identify themselves regarding race and sexual orientation. Possible responses will then not be limited to gay or straight, black or African American, but will open up to include terms of their choosing further empowering participants to tell their own story. I then asked individual participants to tell me the story about the family they have created together. The following questions helped facilitate the conversation. Key questions are bulleted and questions for further probing are listed as sub-questions.

- How do you identify yourself in terms of race?
  - Have you always identified in this way?
- How do you identify yourself in terms of sexuality?
  - Have you always identified in this way?
- How do you identify yourself in terms of gender?
  - Have you always identified in this way?
- How do you identify yourself in terms of class?
  - Have you always identified in this way?
- During this interview are there any terms you prefer I use?
- How did you and your partner meet?
- How would you define your relationship?
- How many children do you have? What are their ages?
  - Are you and your partner both legally recognized as the child(ren)’s parents?
  - Do you mind if I ask their racial identity?
  - Would you mind my asking how you had the children?

I asked them how they define their family and their community. I also asked questions specific to the issues and concerns their families experience as members in the black and LGBT communities. The following questions helped facilitate the

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1 Terms relating to sexual orientation might include, but are not limited to: lesbian, gay, queer, bisexual, in the life, same-gender loving, or two spirit. Terms relating to racial identity might include, but are not limited to: black, African American, Afro-Caribbean, biracial, or multi-racial.
conversation and helped participants conceptualize the issues their families face. The key questions are bulleted and questions for further probing are noted as sub-questions.

- Have you always lived in Jacksonville?
  - If not, what brought you to Jacksonville?
  - Is Jacksonville a good place for your family?
- Tell me a bit about your family.
  - How do you describe your family to your friends?
  - How do you describe your family to your kids?
  - How do you describe your family to their school?
- How do you generally define or describe your family's community?
- Are you, as a family, committed to the black community more generally?
  - If yes, how so? If no, why not?
  - Has your family faced any issues or challenges in the black community?
    - If yes, how did your family respond?
  - Has the black community offered support to your family? If yes, how?
  - Would you label the challenges faced in the black community as homophobic? If yes, why? If no, why not?
  - Do you talk to your kids about homophobia? If so, what do you say?
- Are you, as a family, committed to the LGBT community more generally?
  - If yes, how so? If no, why not?
  - Has your family faced issues or challenges in the LGBT community?
    - If yes, how did your family respond?
  - Has the LGBT community offered support to your family? If yes, how?
  - Would you label those challenges in the LGBT community as racist? If so, why? If no, why not?
  - Do you talk to your kids about racism? If so, what do you say?
- Do you feel some of the challenges your family faces are a combination of racism and homophobia? If so, what are these challenges?
- Are there other challenges your family faces that cannot be labeled as racism or homophobia? Has your family faced issues that reflect other forms of discrimination?
- Are you a member of a church community or support group?
  - Does being a member of a church community or support group help you in dealing with issues and concerns you may face regarding your family? If yes, how?
- In today's political climate, what do you feel are the main issues facing families like yours?
Do you think adoption is an issue for your family? If yes, how so? If no, why not?

Do you think marriage is an issue for your family? If yes, how so? If no, why not?

• What do you wish people knew or better understood about your family?

Answers to these questions helped participants conceptualize their families’ experience with the goal of generating a picture of reality that participants encountered in both the black community and the LGBT community.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Sexual Orientation</th>
<th>Racial Self Identity</th>
<th>Socioeconomic Status</th>
<th>Current Relationship Status</th>
<th>Length of Co-parenting Relationship</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eva</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Blue Collar</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>3 years</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sal</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Low-Class/Unemployed</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denelle &amp; Nancy</td>
<td>Prefer no labels</td>
<td>Biracial/Black</td>
<td>Middle-Class</td>
<td>Partnered</td>
<td>4 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>African American</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fola &amp; Taye</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Both=African American</td>
<td>Middle-Class</td>
<td>Partnered</td>
<td>7 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tandice</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Middle- or Working-Class</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Hasn’t co-parented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La’Rae</td>
<td>Gay or Lesbian</td>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>Middle-Class</td>
<td>Partnered</td>
<td>8 years</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shandee</td>
<td>Femme</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Working-Class</td>
<td>Partnered</td>
<td>4 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoey</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Middle-Class</td>
<td>Partnered</td>
<td>6 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ebony</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>Working-Class</td>
<td>Partnered</td>
<td>10 years</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ulani</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Middle-Class</td>
<td>Partnered</td>
<td>2 years</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
REFERENCES


Adoption Law. Florida Statutes Section 63.042(3).


Burgoyne, Sarah. 2012. "Demographic Profile of Same-Sex Parents (FP-12-15)." National Center for Family and Marriage Research, Bowling Green, OH.


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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Clare Walsh graduated from the University of Florida with a Bachelor of Science degree in Forest Resources and Conservation in 1982. She pursued a Teaching Certification and graduated with a Master of Science degree in Education, Science Curriculum and Instruction, from the University of Kansas in 1990. From 1990-2004, she was employed as a teacher of math and science at the secondary level in Campbell County School District in Wright, Wyoming. Clare again looked to further her education and graduated with a Master of Arts degree in women’s studies from the University of South Florida in 2007. She returned to the University of Florida in 2007 to pursue a doctorate in sociology with a concentration in women’s studies and received her PhD in 2013. Following graduation, Clare will be a visiting assistant professor in sociology at Texas Tech University.