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Fitting in: A study of lesbian mothers in rural Southeastern Michigan

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Fitting In: A Study of Lesbian Mothers in Rural Southeastern Michigan

by

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Thesis

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in

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Thesis Committee:

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Abstract

Lesbian parents residing in rural and small communities have received little scholarly attention. The primary focus of the existing research has highlighted the isolation experienced by lesbian parents within such locations, but little examination has been made of other issues or their coping mechanisms. This study was designed to address these deficits in knowledge and understanding through a series of eleven in-depth, qualitative interviews. Several stigma management strategies were discovered. For example, it was reported that engaging in farming and trade helped lesbian mothers “fit in” enough to gain some level of acceptance from their immediate neighbors. Stigma was also managed by being “model citizens” and by attempts to educate the community on LGBT issues. While participants saw some small progress using these strategies, at the same time, they also disclosed experiences with harassment, being made to feel uncomfortable, and being the victims of crimes.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.....	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	8
Chapter 3: Methodology.....	19
Chapter 4: Results.....	27
A. The Decision to Move and the Adaption to the Area.....	28
B. Harassment, Discomfort, and Crime.....	40
C. Representation and Education.....	58
D. Experiences with Being Out.....	64
Chapter 5: Conclusion and Limitations.....	75
References	82
Appendix A: Recruitment Flier.....	86
Appendix B: Interview Questions.....	87
Appendix C: Informed Consent Form.....	90

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

For people who identify with a non-heterosexual identity, the decision to reveal their sexuality can be socially or physically dangerous. However, choosing not to disclose one's sexuality and attempting to "pass" as heterosexual can lead to a feeling of inauthenticity. An individual may choose to reveal their sexuality in some instances but not others. For example, some LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) individuals might be "out" to close friends and family, but try to pass as heterosexual at work.

Although many gay, lesbian, and bisexual people move to the cities to pursue a community they believe will be more accepting of their sexuality, others stay in their small rural communities; while still others migrate to rural areas from suburbs and cities. Though it is the stereotype that LGBT people live in liberal and progressive cities in fact, twenty percent of LGBT people live outside of urban areas (Gates, cited by Bishop, *The Daily Yonder*, 2011).

This study was designed to explore the stigma management strategies of lesbian parents in rural and suburban areas their strategies for coming out and forming relationships within their community, their reasons for visibility, and why they sometimes chose to pass as heterosexual.

Background

The participants of this study consisted of eight lesbian parents in rural areas of Southeastern Michigan as well as three lesbian mothers living in suburban areas. Initially, I chose to examine the experiences of lesbian parents in rural areas for a number of reasons. Both people living in rural areas and LGBT people are underrepresented in social research. Much of the research done on LGBT people is conducted in metropolitan and urban areas. In LGBT-oriented research, rural areas are often underrepresented. There is more outreach to LGBT people in urban areas, leading to easier access for researchers. It was my goal to fill the gap in

LGBT-focused sociological research to get a fuller picture of the lives and experiences of this group of people. I chose to focus on female couples because they are more likely than male couples to live in rural areas, and they are more likely than male couples to raise children (Gates and Ost 2004).

I was interested in exploring the different ways in which lesbian women interacted with their community. Rural life for gay people has been described as an isolating experience (Bell and Valetine 1995; Connolly and Leedy 2008; Yarbrough 2008). Rural towns were reported by several researchers to be places with strong traditional family values, high religiosity, and a lack of privacy (Friedman 2008; Panelli and Little 2010). The existing research shows, however, that some LGBT people chose to stay in rural areas because they genuinely enjoyed the lifestyle; they embraced the slow pace and neighborly feel. Those who expressed these views typically lived in places they had lived their entire lives and were accepted as “good, honest people” before they came out. They were grounded in their community, and their good reputation was able to withstand their coming out experience (Kazyak 2010).

Some participants of my study expressed feeling isolated by their neighbors; however, some expressed they enjoyed living in a rural area because they liked the culture and lifestyle. One couple stated they moved to their rural area before their children started school, because they felt their children would be more accepted among their peers if they started school with the other children, rather than being “the new kids with gay parents.”

The participants engaged in a stigma management strategy called “normalizing,” which is part of the overarching stigma management strategy of “revealing.” By introducing their children into the school system in kindergarten, the other children would now always have had an experience of having children with gay parents in their class. The participants’ believed that the

earlier a family is integrated into the rural community, the easier the transition would be for the family.

During my recruitment, a lesbian woman, and one lesbian couple living in suburban areas, offered to be interviewed. While this study focuses primarily on rural lesbian couples, interviewing lesbian couples living in suburban areas was an interesting comparison. I found that suburban couples also made a point to normalize their stigma, as well as protect their family through passing as heterosexual when they felt it appropriate.

Justification and Significance

I believe the data gathered have created a better understanding of the stigma management strategies and hardships faced for rural and suburban lesbian parents. I was able to learn about how they present themselves in various community settings, and the life experiences they have had that led them to these levels of disclosure. I learned what drew these women to their communities, and what apprehensions they had about moving. I learned that these participants took pride in educating their community about LGBT-centered issues and being a positive representation of lesbians for their neighbors and community members. Many of the participants believed that they made their own luck with their community members, and that they would be accepted over all, if they had respect for themselves and displayed that level of self-esteem to the community.

There is a body of research on lesbian women, but it generally involves urban lesbians. Rarely have we seen how living in a rural or suburban area, specifically, affects a lesbian couple. This study has stepped out of the box and explored a population that is rarely considered in literature.

Purpose of Study

By focusing my research on lesbian parents living in rural and suburban areas of Southeastern Michigan, I hoped to illustrate the experiences of these participants, and make their stories accessible for other women who may benefit from their shared experiences. Through this study, I also hoped to encourage inclusiveness of other populations that are overlooked within LGBT research. By making these women's stories available, I hope that the reader will absorb the experiences of these participants and find similarities among the women in this study and themselves. I hope that in its small way, this study will contribute to the effort to make all types of families visible and respected.

Theoretical Framework

I constructed my interview questions within the frameworks of two sociological theories. *Social Identity Theory* states, an individual does not have a "personal self"; instead, they have several "selves" that correspond to various group memberships (Turner and Tajfel 1986). Social identity is the individual's self-concept formed out of their membership of social groups. According to this framework, societal members categorize people into in-groups and out-groups in order to understand their social identities. They then self-identify with a social group and adopt the identity of the group they have claimed as theirs. In order to maintain their self-esteem, their group must compare favorably to the other groups. The "in-group" will position themselves against the "out-group" in order to protect their place in a social hierarchy, therefore ensuring their high self-esteem and self-worth (Turner and Tajfel 1986). The search for being identified as part of the in-group means that people's sense of who they are is defined in "we" rather than in "I" (Turner and Tajfel 1986).

I explored how the participants of my study perceived their treatment by their heterosexual community members. This is an example of the in-group versus the out-group that Turner and Tajfel referred to. While my participants often identified as “the other” in the community, some also expressed pride and belonging as a rural community member. They shared stories of trading services with neighbors, earning respect from the community as “hard working farmers,” and feeling as though they had more freedom and were able to express themselves better in their rural community. One participant stated that, as a “butch” lesbian, she felt more comfortable and fit in better in a rural setting.

The other theoretical framework tied to my study is *Stigma Management*. The framework was originally introduced by Émile Durkheim in 1895. Regarding stigma, Durkheim (1895:68-69) stated in his publication, *Rules of Sociological Method*, that society is determined to stigmatize and criminalize traits and behaviors, even if they are harmful to no one. Durkheim professed:

Imagine a society of saints, a perfect cloister of exemplary individuals. Crimes or deviance, properly so-called, will there be unknown; but faults, which appear venial to the layman, will there create the same scandal that the ordinary offense does in ordinary consciousnesses. If then, this society has the power to judge and punish, it will define these acts as criminal (or deviant) and will treat them as such.

Durkheim stated that even if everyone had absolutely perfect morality, society would still choose groups to judge, punish, and criminalize. The historical treatment of LGBT people is an example of how a trait that is not criminal, or harmful to society, can become criminalized because society demonizes what it does not understand. LGBT identities question the status quo, leading the majority to push back that stigmatizes the outsiders.

Through his published work *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, Erving Goffman (1963) made the framework of stigma and stigma management more widely acknowledged in the 20th century. According to Goffman (1963:6),

[a stigma is] the phenomenon whereby an individual with an attribute is deeply discredited by his/her society [and] is rejected as a result of the attribute. Stigma is a process by which the reaction of others spoils normal identity.

Erving Goffman (1954) also explored this theatrical framework in his essay *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* to explain social interaction. Goffman believed that when an “actor” (individual) interacts with others they will attempt to control the impression that others make of them by adjusting their setting, appearance, and behavior. During this time, the other actor the actor is interacting with tries to form an understanding of who the actor is. The roles societal members play constantly shift and evolve as their relationships shift and evolve, and sometimes how to present or what the appropriate role should be is not clear. This can cause unease and discomfort for the actors involved until they discover how they should behave within the framework (Goffman 1954).

According to Goffman (1954), there are invisible and visible stigmas. Examples of stigmas that are typically invisible are sexuality, religion, and mental illness. These are stigmas that cannot be known about a person from their appearance. These groups may give signs of their stigma away either purposefully or accidentally, or they may contain their stigma.

Those who have an invisible stigma have a unique burden of choosing how much of their stigmatized identity to disclose, to whom they will disclose it, and at what point. There are times when one’s sexuality is simply not relevant to the interaction they are having with a person, so they may not disclose it. When it is relevant, however, the individual must decide how to present themselves. Stigma management is a key concept of my study, and I wanted to learn the different

ways the participants managed their stigmatized trait, why they chose to disclose their sexuality to others (or why they chose not to), as well as their perceived reaction by their heterosexual community members.

Within the theoretical frameworks of *Social Identity Theory* and *Stigma Management Theory*, I formed the research questions for this study. My specific objective was to explore the different stigma management strategies of the participants as well as the perceived community reactions to the participants.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Throughout the existing literature, several themes are evident. Former researchers have explored issues of isolation for lesbian and gay people living in rural areas. Those who lived in a town where everyone knew one another experienced difficulty being their authentic selves because there was a perceived lack of acceptance by the majority. This could lead to an isolating experience for lesbian and gay people. In addition to isolation, the reactions of the community to gays and lesbians, have also been explored. The accounts of community reactions reported lesbian couples being estranged from their rural area churches, tornado-inflicted destruction being blamed on a gay couple, and members of a rural town expressing concerns about their town being seen as a “gay town” for hosting a LGBT pride festival. The strong but geographically distant support networks available to lesbians and gays living in rural areas was also reviewed in the existing literature as was the predominately negative experiences of lesbian and gay people in rural areas with professionals, such as doctors and judges.

Isolation

The majority of LGBT research has been conducted in urban areas; thus, we know little of the experiences of rural LGBT identified people. The work that has been collected reflects a difficult and unsatisfying life for LGBT people in rural areas, as discussed by Buchner and Moses (1980:173). “Rural areas are characterized by conservatives, traditionalism, religious fundamentalism, isolation of deviants, resistance to change, lack of confidentiality, and see problems as personal instead of system based.”

The traditional values instilled in rural communities caused gays and lesbians to become excluded and marginalized from main society (Panelli and Little 2010). Traditional values were dominant and boundaries were often closed, allowing for a lack of tolerance of different ways of

life (Smith 1997). Many organizations and communities were closed to gay people, leaving these individuals to choose between secluding themselves or hiding their stigmatized sexuality and trying to “pass” within their community (Smith 1997).

A study conducted in 2001 explored the experiences of gay people living in the rural state of Wyoming. It involved a survey that focused on participants’ ties to their rural communities, the degree of their disclosure, their perceived attitudes of their community on gays and lesbians, and their experiences with harassment (Bouldren 2001). The majority of respondents in this study were “out” or “somewhat out” in most areas of their lives, Bouldren reported. Surprisingly, eighty-six percent of respondents stated they had at least some ties to the lesbian, gay, and bisexual community. However, many also reported fearing their immediate community due to the intolerant views of many rural community members (Bouldren 2001). Because of this, many rural gay community members engaged in a “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” style of living, meaning they did not outwardly discuss their sexuality with others. In this way, they isolated themselves in an attempt to gain protection.

Many gay people involved in previous research were not open to their community about their sexuality and feared discovery and rejection. Due to this fear, contacts with people they knew to be gay were avoided because they feared the reactions of others seeing them with a “known homosexual.” The lack of privacy in rural towns made it difficult to date secretly (Bell and Valentine 1995).

In Ducker’s 1998 book *Families of Value*, Denise and Alisha, two lesbians from the state of New York, discussed their discretion and selective isolation within their community.

Denise: “There’s not one particular person I’m not out to. It’s more a degree of openness in certain settings, for example at work and with neighbors. We don’t hide who we are, but we don’t kiss in the yard, for example.” (Ducker, 1998:186)

Alisha: “We’ve never hidden anything from our neighbors, but they’ve never asked me directly, nor have we had a big announcement. My guess is that some have figured it out, others don’t have a clue, others don’t pay attention.”(Ducker 1998:187)

Both women engaged in a “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” disclosure policy. They saw their relationship and their family as their business. By not kissing in the yard, they were protecting themselves from potential community disapproval, or worse.

Following World War II, there was a flight of gay people to the cities. Many gay people felt that in order to live their lives openly they needed to travel to urban areas. Others still wanted to live discreetly, but still felt that moving to an urban area provided the safest option for them. According to Yarbrough (2008), those who stayed in rural areas, while the gay rights movement occurred in the cities, experienced little of the movement’s affects during this time.

Heterosexism

Heterosexism and heteronormative thinking made it more difficult for those who wanted to disclose their sexuality to do so and be easily understood by others as identifying with that sexuality. Heterosexism is the belief that heterosexuality is the superior and normal sexuality and that other forms for sexuality are inferior and abnormal. Heteronormative thinking causes our society to assume that everyone is heterosexual unless they are giving off certain behavioral or appearance based cues, which society has deemed to be “gay characteristics.” Participants of previous research studies struggled with heterosexism, as did the participants of my study. In a study by Gowans (1995), one lesbian respondent from a rural area expressed her frustration with her heterosexist surroundings by saying, “It must be exciting to be heterosexual, because at least then you have places to socialize freely” (Gowans 1995:116).

Friedman (2010) also explored heterosexual privilege in contrast to the experiences of gay families. Everyday activities that heterosexual parents engaged in were automatically a

source of concern and anxiety to gay parents: “Everyday activities such as children having friends to visit in the home, carpool arrangements, and school holiday programs present new challenges for the lesbian-headed family” (Friedman 2010:78).

Heterosexual parents did not have to worry about explaining their family to school personnel, and other children’s parents or preparing their child for the experience of any backlash from the community for having gay parents. Participants in my study also experienced the effects of living in a heterosexist society. For example, one of the participants shared her frustration with school permission forms having a line for “Mother” and “Father” rather than having the more inclusive “Parent 1” and “Parent 2.” She stated she chooses to cross out the given labels and put her own in so that it is reflective of her family.

Unfortunately being gay in a rural area was an isolating experience for many participants of previous research, as it appeared to be for some of the participants of my study as well. In former studies, traditional values, conservatism, and resistance to change made it difficult for gay people to gain inclusion. The participants in my study experienced isolation from some neighbors, while other participants were embraced after proving themselves to the community. Some participants of my study experienced isolation from certain neighbors due to perceived religious reasons, and exclusion occurred because of the misconceptions neighbors held of gay people.

Community Reactions

Closely connected to the experience of isolation many gay people in previous studies have faced are the community reactions and perceived conceptions that gay people believe their community has of them. Many Americans have made the assumption that there is higher religiosity in rural areas, and that a higher religiosity is correlated with a less tolerant view of

LGBT people. According to a study conducted in 2006 on values and religion in rural America, that assumption is correct (Dillan and Savage 2006). However, the severity of religiosity and anti-tolerant views of same sex couples varies depending on the region. According to Dillan and Savage (2006), the rural South had the highest weekly church attendance from 1998 to 2004, followed by the rural Midwest. The rural South also had the highest percentage of Americans who said that same-sex relations were wrong, followed by the rural Midwest, in a survey conducted from 2000 to 2004 (Dillan and Savage 2006).

The autobiography of Louie Crew, which is written in 1977, described his experience growing up as a gay person in the rural South. Crew was afraid of being cast out of his community for being gay, so he attempted to pass as heterosexual for twenty-eight years. When he did decide to reveal his sexuality to his community, he experienced discrimination from realtors and employers. The bishop of his town wrote a column in their newspaper stating that the tornado that destroyed large parts of their town was the result of Crew and his partner's relationship; that it had been sent by God (Crew 1977).

Friedman stated that in 2010, life could still be difficult for lesbian mothers in rural areas. Friedman found that some lesbian parents and their children were estranged from their churches due to the doctrines which condemned homosexuality. Church is an important aspect of rural life, and because religiosity is generally higher in rural areas than in urban ones, the community can be heavily influenced by the church's teachings (Friedman 2010).

Gibson, Gorman-Murray, and Waitt (2006) explored the community reactions to a LGBT pride festival held in a rural Australian town. This study largely revolved around their 2006 gay pride event *Chill Out*. The researchers collected data, which included interviews with residents, newspaper commentaries, and visitor's surveys, in order to better understand how the town was a

unique site of LGBT belonging. They found that the *Chill Out* festival largely contributed to the rural town's "gay friendly" reputation; however, there was some conflict within the community regarding this identity. For instance, the local council refused to fly the LGBT rainbow flag at town hall during the festival (Gibson, Gorman-Murray, and Waitt 2008).

The responses from community members in the local newspaper revealed their aversion towards *Chill Out* and the LGBT community overall. Some residents argued that town hall needed to represent the whole community not just a select few. Others stated that town hall needed to be primarily representative of a shared "Australian identity" and that it needed to have an association with normative "family values" (Gibson, Gorman-Murray, and Waitt 2008). Community members may have been uncomfortable experiencing an associative stigma for living in a "gay area" (Gibson, Gorman-Murray, and Waitt 2008).

According to the current research, the community reactions to rural LGBT people have been largely negative, driven by religious fundamentalism and fears of associative stigma. LGBT people have been estranged from their churches and have had natural disasters blamed on their sexuality by religious leaders. A couple in my own study also reported an experience of rejection and humiliation. While attending a church service, the priest began preaching homophobic teachings to the congregation.

LGBT Community Support

While researchers reported finding predominately negative rural community reactions to LGBT individuals, they have also found there to be strong LGBT networks, even for rural individuals. These networks have expanded and grown today. Due to the popularity of social media, rural LGBT people can have a supportive network that extends worldwide.

Another theme discussed throughout previous literature is the extent of an LGBT community in the area. Connolly and Leedy (2007) found that eighty-six percent of the respondents of their study on gay young adults in Wyoming had at least some ties to other lesbian, gay and bisexual people within their communities. This is surprising given what past researchers have found in regards to the social isolation experienced by LGBT people in rural areas.

Moses and Bucher (1980) researched the evolution of informal LGBT support networks for LGBT people living in rural areas. They found these networks to be geologically distant, but that they were strong communities. Important advances that made this community's progression possible were phone helplines and chat-lines, which lessened feelings of isolation and fears of disclosure. The sites and phone services were anonymous, which made people more comfortable using them, and they supplied individuals with important information and support (Moses and Bucher 1980).

Today there is a multitude of LGBT organizations that work to educate others on LGBT issues as well as fund and support the goals of LGBT people. There are also organizations formed especially for LGBT teens, friends and family members of LGBT people, and LGBT people of color. There are countless YouTube videos of LGBT youth and adults sharing their coming out stories and giving advice on how to cope with family, school, and community issues. Various LGBT anonymous helplines and online counseling are available for teens and adults.

According to the current literature, LGBT support systems have been strong in the past, if not close in physical proximity. Several participants of my study used an online listserv to communicate with other LGBT parents to learn about how accepting different communities were of LGBT families. The participants of my study who used this tool found it immensely useful,

and it was actually a large factor in how they chose where they would live and what school they would send their children to.

Reactions to LGBT Parents by Professionals

In addition to LGBT supportive networks, the current research also illustrated the experiences of LGBT people and their interactions with professionals in the health care and legal fields. Researchers found that doctors and judges often times held anti-tolerant views of LGBT parents. Poulland and A'Dugelli (1989) noted that the health programs in rural areas may have been affected by popular rural attitudes on homosexuality. They found that a quarter of the health workers surveyed felt that gay men should do everything they can to overcome their homosexuality, and that twenty percent of the health workers studied found homosexuality “disgusting”(Poulland and A'Dugelli 1989).

Bell and Valentine (1995) stated the few studies that have been done on gay and lesbian individuals in rural areas have found that they experienced isolation, unsupportive social environments, and a lack of structural services and facilitates. Panelli and Little (2010) also stated that there was a lack of services and information for gays and lesbians within rural environments. The authors concluded that this invisibility of LGBT people was reinforced by a culture that emphasizes a conventional nuclear family as the natural form of social organization, in which homosexuality is seen as “out of place” (Panelli and Little 2010).

In rural areas, there were often a minimal number of pediatricians and physicians. A household with gay parents may have had to settle on a homophobic pediatrician or physician, which led to uncomfortable and possibly poor health services, or they were forced to drive far distances to cities with more supportive medical personnel. In addition, attorneys were often not as supportive of gay mothers in rural areas in comparison to urban areas (Friedman 2010).

King (2001) stated that custody rulings in the United States have indicated that lesbian mothers were viewed with more negativity than parents who had other stigmatized traits, such as a history of mental illness or a criminal record. King discussed a 1995 custody ruling in which a Florida circuit judge awarded an eleven-year-old girl to her father, who had served time for killing his first wife, because the girl's mother was a lesbian. Similar to this case, in 1997 a judge gave custody of two daughters to a father with a history of mental illness and violent and destructive behavior rather than give the lesbian mother the two daughters. According to King (2001), lesbians were often seen by society as being at the bottom of the mother hierarchy, even though lesbian mothers have been repeatedly shown to be effective parents.

The current literature reflects a life for rural gays and lesbians that involved unfair judgment and disgust from community members who hold a place of power such as doctors, pediatricians, and judge.

Conclusion of Literature Review

While certain issues discussed in the literature are still evident problems for the participants of my study to various extents, America is a far more accepting place for LGBT individuals than it was twenty, ten, or even one year ago. With marriage equality recently becoming a legal reality in all fifty states, America seems to be progressing quite rapidly. But the question I raise is this: are rural areas experiencing this rapid progression of LGBT acceptance? How welcomed by neighbors do LGBT people living in rural areas feel? How do they manage their stigma as gay couples? Through my conversations with the participants of my study, I was able to gain knowledge of their experiences and learn how they compare to prior literature.

The literature currently displays a grim life for LGBT individuals overall. Former researchers reported that rural area communities were made up of conservatives, traditionalists,

and religious fundamentalists. Moses and Buncher (1980) found there to be a resistance to change, a lack of confidentiality, and that if a person had a problem, the community believed they needed to figure it out themselves. Panelli and Little (2010) found that LGBT people experienced exclusion from main society in rural areas.

Within my own research, I found some of this to still be true for the participants of my study, and some to not. For instance, two of the four couples I interviewed from rural areas shared that they had experienced exclusion by religious neighbors and places of worship. However, one of these couples stated that, with time, their fourth generation, religious, conservative, farming neighbors warmed up to them, and they are now friends. Another participant from a rural area spoke in detail about the importance of trading and sharing with neighbors, believing that rural areas are actually more willing to support their neighbors, and have a stronger sense of community than city dwellers. In terms of a “lack of confidentiality,” none of the participants talked about broken trust; however, they did share that they were victims of gossip as the only, or one of the only, lesbian couples in the area.

While exclusion and isolation did occur with some of these rural area participants, particularly with issues involving neighbors that socially isolated them; it was not the average experience of all the participants. Bell and Valentine (1995) stated that many LGBT people living in rural areas were not open about their sexuality because, in a small town, word can spread fast. While some of participants would not reveal their sexuality and try to pass as heterosexual to protect themselves physically or socially, these stories were significantly less frequent than stories involving outing oneself to benefit their children, to educate their community on LGBT issues, or to show their community what a lesbian individual/couple is actually like. Being a positive representation of the lesbian community was of importance to

each participant. In this way, the experiences of the participants of my study vary greatly from the LGBT rural area to the people Bell and Valentine interviewed twenty years ago.

Heterosexism was a strong force in rural areas in the reviewed literature, and it was an issue for the women in my study as well. One suburban participant stated that when her and her partner decided to have children they knew they would have to be constantly outing themselves, several times a day, because our heterosexual society does not see them and their children as a family by default,

Much like previous findings on rural area supportive networks, many of the participants of my study also reported being a part of a strong, geographically expansive listserv, which served as a communicated and informational tool to learn from and alert other LGBT parents of LGBT friendly, and non-LGBT friendly communities and schools.

Past researchers reported unwelcoming and discriminatory LGBT practices and viewpoints from legal and medical professionals. Fortunately, the participants did not report any issues with discrimination from professionals, other than with religious leaders. The professionals they spoke about most were school teachers and principals and they stated they were very welcomed and happy with their experiences with their children's school personal.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Study Design

I interviewed eleven women in lesbian relationships, who were raising at least one child, regarding their stigma management strategies and how they believed they are perceived by their community. Eight of these women lived in rural areas; three lived in suburban areas.

As a gay woman who was raised in a large metropolitan area and attended college in a small, liberal city, I have spent little time in rural areas. The only time I have been on a family farm was during my interviews with my participants. While I tried to enter into my research from an unbiased standpoint, I did have an expectation that same sex-couples in rural areas would face a heightened amount of discrimination, harassment, and an overall unfriendliness from their heterosexual neighbors. I had the expectation that they would be the sole same-sex family that they knew of living in their rural area. I also expected the participants to be quiet, private, and guarded. These standpoints come from biases I have been exposed to about the attitudes of rural people; that they are conservative, hold traditional family values as sacred, and have a stronger religiosity than people in the cities or metropolitan areas. Along with these thoughts, I also kept in mind that there has been stronger representation of LGBT people on television as of recent years, hopefully normalizing LGBT people to individuals who may not know an openly gay person themselves. Also, the participants in my study lived in Southeastern Michigan, within somewhat close proximity to a large liberal city. I assumed that being located close to a liberal city had an effect on the viewpoints of rural area community members.

In order to keep my expectations in check I made sure not to ask any questions that made it seem like I assumed that the couple was being harassed, or discriminated against just because they lived in a rural area. Having a standpoint that fed into the typical stereotypes of rural areas

worked as both a pro and a con. It was helpful because when people did share that these expectations I had were true for them, I was not thrown off and I was able to empathize with them. Meanwhile, my expectations also worked against me because when people told me that life in a rural area was absolutely perfect and they wouldn't change a single thing about it, I was a little thrown off.

Study Type

This research was conducted qualitatively, involving six semi-structured, open-ended interviews with eleven people. I chose to conduct a qualitative study because I believed that the area being explored needed to be described and discussed openly by the participant. It was not the place of the researcher, in this particular study, to define the experiences of the participants and have them quantitatively identify their experiences from a list. Also, because this topic has not been studied extensively, inductive qualitative methods were a preferable method to deductive quantitative methods. I did not want to create a survey only to learn I had not adequately provided the correct questions and options as possible answers.

I chose a semi-structured framework for my interview questions. I had specific questions I asked the participants, but sometimes the participants branched out from those questions and discussed other areas that were related to the research question but were lacking from my initial questions.

Study population

According to Gary Gates (2004), a demographer at the University of California, there are at least 901,997 same sex couples in the United States, a number that has doubled in the past decade. Gates states that eight out of every ten same sex couples in the United States live in urban areas. Rural counties have twelve percent of the nation's same-sex couples, and exurban

counties have seven percent of the nation's same-sex couples. The term "exurban" refers to counties that are metropolitan areas in which more than half of the population lives in a rural setting. According to these percentages, 180,399 same-sex couples in America are living outside of urban areas. Of this grouping, 108,239 same-sex couples are rural, while 63,139 are exurban (Gates cited by Bishop, *The Daily Yonder*, 2011).

According to Gates, female same-sex couples are more likely than male same-sex couples to live in a rural area. Gates stated the reason is related to the fact that, statistically, men make more money than women and it costs more to live in an urban area than a rural or exurban area. Another reason Gates offered was female couples are more likely than male couples to have children, and many people with children prefer exurban and rural areas to urban areas (Gates cited by Bishop, *The Daily Yonder*, 2011). Twenty-two percent of male couples have children in relation to the thirty-three percent of female couples (Gates and Ost 2004). The amount of same sex couples who choose to live in rural or exurban areas (that we know of) is in the minority; only about twenty percent of the entire same sex couple population. However that is still a substantial population and one worth exploring.

Study sample

Participants:

Eleven women were interviewed for this study. Ten of the participants were interviewed as couples, and one was interviewed alone, due to a scheduling conflict with her wife. This resulted in a total of six interviews. All of the interviews were conducted within the participant's home, though I did offer the option to meet at a public place within or outside of their community.

Meeting Space:

I found that meeting at the participants' homes worked well. The participants appeared to feel comfortable at their home, and I was able to see the interactions they had with their children, pets, and partners in their most comfortable setting. In all six interviews, at least one child was at the home at some point, and I was introduced to them, but none actually participated in the interview. Though having children present at the interview location did cause some interruptions, I appreciated the opportunity to observe the interactions of the participants with their children in a rather organic fashion. I found these slight interruptions made the interview more relaxed and natural.

The houses of the rural participants were in spread out areas. None of the participants were in a "small town." Two of the participant couples stated they had a large amount of land (100 plus acres). The other two participant couples did not state how much land they owned, but it appeared to be a large amount. The other participant couple and individual lived in homes that were in suburban neighborhoods.

Atmosphere:

For each of my interviews, I experienced a welcoming friendly attitude from the participants. Most participants were warm and unguarded from the start. However, in two of my interviews, one participant in the couple appeared slightly guarded upon my initial arrival but warmed up to me soon afterward. All of the participants genuinely wanted to assist me in recruiting more participants. They provided names of organizations I could contact and told me about friends they would pass my information to, without me even asking for their advice or assistance. I perceived this willingness to tell their friends about my study as a sign that they felt comfortable with me themselves.

In some interviews the participants would ask, “How many people do you need for your study?” or “Where have you checked so far?” One participant even used the word “we” when trying to brainstorm how “we” could get me more participants. I felt supported by the participants of my study in the way that they were genuinely interested in seeing me succeed.

I was very open about why I wanted to research the experiences of same-sex mothers, both from curiosities that intrigued me as a sociologist and personal curiosity as a gay person who plans to be a mother myself someday. I think that my openness made my participants feel comfortable. I also tried to be laidback while still maintaining a professional and respectful attitude. I empathized with their stories regarding hardship, and I laughed at their funny stories. I felt that I had a good rapport with all of my participants.

One of the participants from the first couple I interviewed asked me if I had eaten dinner yet, offering me pasta, while we waited a few minutes for her partner to get home. Another took me on a tour of her farm, let me pet their various animals, and gave me a few eggs from their hen house; another rural couple gave me a whole carton of eggs from their hens. And a suburban couple gave me several of their lesbian mother, baby books after they asked if my partner and I wanted children. Overall the atmosphere of my interviews was warm and welcoming.

Recruitment:

Initially, I planned to recruit participants by posting fliers in rural areas of Southeastern Michigan. My strategy was to go to coffee shops, restaurants, bowling alleys, libraries, and convenience stores in small towns and post my fliers on cork boards there. I never actually conducted this recruitment strategy due to a hate crime against a lesbian woman who had recently gotten married in a small, Southeastern Michigan city. My thesis committee and I

believed that posting information in places geared toward the LGBT community would make my recruitment experience safer.

I started my recruitment by pinning fliers on corkboards in LGBT-centered businesses in a mid-sized city near my home. It was not my intention to draw mid-city residents, but I thought that rural residents from neighboring areas may come to these LGBT-focused places. I had no success with this approach. I changed my approach and reached out to the various local LGBT organizations by means of e-mail. I did not locate any LGBT organizations with a focus on rural people; however, I did find an organization that was exclusively for lesbian mothers. I also contacted every other LGBT group I could find in my area, ranging from LGBT choirs to LGBT biking clubs. I also contacted the pastors and office staff at LGBT-affirming churches in the area in hopes they could pass the information on to parish members. I also reached out to two LGBT community leaders and asked them to share my information. In addition to this online outreach, I also attended Michigan Pride in Lansing in August 2014 and approached middle-aged couples, told them about my study, and asked if they would like a flier. I passed out approximately fifteen fliers to couples, and approximately ten of those couples appeared to be genuinely interested in my study, but no one followed up on participating in the study. Everyone who participated in my study became aware of it online or through friends. From April 2014 to January 2015, I interviewed eleven participants.

Materials:

A copy of the flier I used for recruitment is in the appendix. On my flier I disclosed my sexuality in hopes that those who were interested in participating felt more comfortable knowing they would be talking to another gay person about their experiences. The materials used during the interviews were a series of open-ended interview questions and a tape-recording feature on

my smartphone. I also discussed with my participants, prior to the interview, my informed consent agreement, which is also found in the appendix. All of the participants allowed me to tape-record the interviews.

Confidentiality/Data Gathering Procedures:

In the initial contact with my participants, I told them more details about my study, why I was interested, and their options in meeting places. We settled on a time, and I got directions to their home. Because we usually had to accommodate three schedules, it sometimes took one or two weeks after the initial contact to meet.

Qualitative data was obtained through semi-structured interviews. During these interviews, I had a set of questions, but the order of information being obtained often times varied from interview to interview, with some participants answering several questions before being asked, in the course of conversation. Interviews lasted from forty-five minutes to an hour and a half. After the interview I mailed a thank you card with a 20 dollar gift card to the couple, thanking them for participating.

After the interview I recorded my observations and worked on transcribing my interviews to my computer. Once I completed the transcribing process I deleted the recordings. The informed consent agreements were kept in my thesis chair's office, on Eastern Michigan University's campus.

I used pseudonyms in replacement of my participants' actual names and replaced their children's names in directly quoted sections of my thesis with "our daughter", "our son", or "our child". I did not provide the name of their town, school, or work place to protect the confidentiality of the participants and their families.

Data Analysis:

I used Grounded Theory Methods to analyze the interview data. Traditionally researchers start with a theory and measure the data collected against the theory to analyze if the data supports their original theory. However, Grounded Theory involves studying the collected data in order to discover themes (Glazer and Strauss 1967). I chose to use Grounded Theory Method because this was exploratory research. My population has not been studied extensively and I did not want to infer theories, which could cause me to enter into the data collection phase of my study biased. I chose to start with the raw data and work from that point to eventually reach my theories.

I read through my transcripts multiple times and wrote memos notating themes I found within each text. I then clustered similar themes into categories. Following this step, I made chapters for each emerging theme and included the related texts, explaining the connections the participants had to the category and to one another. I was able to create several chapters which organize the extensive amount of information I learned from each participant's unique experience.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

In previous research, experiences with isolation within a heterosexist society were explored. There were also stories of execution and discrimination from religious leaders, and medical and judicial professionals. In addition, the current literature also expressed strong but geographically distant networks of LGBT people living in rural areas. The literature shared little on how lesbian and gay rural community members managed their stigmatized identity; passing, and engaging in a “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy were lightly discussed. However, few stories of gay people in rural areas being purposefully out and how they tried to manage how other’s viewed and understood their sexual identity was not extensively examined. The participants of my study shared how they managed their stigma, both by passing as heterosexual and revealing their stigmatized identity, and what they did to try to control how others saw them. They also shared stories of negative community encounters they had, when even their best efforts to gain acceptance failed.

In the following sections, the themes that emerged through the interviews with the participants of this study are examined. In Section A, participants share why they chose to live where they did and how immersing themselves in rural culture helped participants to gain respect. Section B highlights the difficulties experienced by the participants due to how their community viewed their sexuality. Experiences of harassment, discrimination, and victimization were shared by the participants. In Section C, the importance of maintaining a positive representation of lesbian women and the self-gratification participants received when they were able to educate a member of their community on the normalcy of lesbian parents are discussed. Section D exhibits the variation of how public the participants were about their sexuality and what being “out” means to them.

Section A: The Decision To Move and the Adaption To the Area

As previous literature illustrates, rural areas have been found to be historically less welcoming to LGBT people than suburban and urban areas. I was eager to learn what inspired the participants of my study to take on the challenges of living in a rural area, even though rural areas have a stereotype of being an unwelcoming and isolating place for LGBT people.

Many of the participants who lived in rural areas stated that the amount of space, beauty, wild life, and independence available to them strongly motivated their move to their current home. Meanwhile, the suburban participants stated that racial diversity was one of their prime reasons for making their move. The school district the area belonged to was also a strong motivator discussed in several of the interviews with participants from suburban and rural areas alike.

“Like a little Garden of Eden”: The draw of natural beauty and wide open space

Amy and Carmen shared how much they enjoyed the wildlife and alleged privacy their rural property had to offer.

Amy: “It’s just beautiful. We have to do a lot of driving, that’s one of the drawbacks, but you don’t mind it because it’s always so nice; you get to see a lot of wildlife.”

Carmen: “Turtles will come and show up on the front yard and make little nest holes and lay eggs, it’s cool... We like the space, we like the privacy; back here it’s like a little Garden of Eden.”

For Amy and Carmen their home was a “Garden of Eden”; it was a peaceful, beautiful, and tranquil place that was exclusively theirs, but this Garden of Eden is the only place they had any privacy, they later disclosed. It might seem contradictory that this couple stated privacy was important to them when they later stated they were, in fact, very visible as one of the only LGBT couples in the area. This couple and other rural couples in this study viewed privacy as the amount of distance between them and their neighbor’s homes. For the most part, the rural

participants of my study were able to do what they wanted, when they wanted to on their own property because they lived in a rural area. That is what they referred to when they talked about their privacy. However, when they left their property, they were of heightened interest to their neighbors and community members. This is because, in these rural areas, they are one of the only, — if not *the only*— same sex couple in the area. This experience of increased social visibility and attention is something that these couples may have not planned for, anticipated, or appreciated when they arrived. However, many of the rural area participants stated that they used their heightened visibility to bring education and awareness to community members that may have had ignorant viewpoints of gay people prior to meeting them.

Alex and Kate, another couple from a rural area, lived in New York City before they moved to their small Michigan town. Kate is originally from the small town they lived in during the interview and moved to New York City several years ago where she met Alex. When Kate's mother became ill, they moved back to her hometown to help care for her mother. After she passed away, they decided to stay in the area.

Alex: "Yeah, we moved four years ago. My mother-in-law was ill, and we just thought that it would be a nicer life out here. It's a little slower, for the kids. It's just a beautiful idyllic place. I mean the woods behind our house are 200 acres."

Kate: "I love the small town flavor of [this area]. I love Halloween. [This] is the most wonderful place to trick-or-treat. Houses have little cauldrons, and the people who live there will have fires in it, and people will have parties, and it's just a joyful atmosphere as opposed to the 'let's go trick or treating and get as much loot as we can' kind of mentality. So that's sort of an example of how it's just got that sort of nice feel about it and people are genuinely friendly."

Alex had been from New York City and had felt comfortable and happy there, but she enjoyed some parts of living in a rural area; whereas, Kate was from this rural town originally and enjoyed the culture of a rural area. Kate says "people are genuinely friendly"; perhaps she

did not feel that way in New York City. This connected with other rural participants; outlooks on rural areas; that there is a stronger “community feel.” There are quotes from participants in later chapters that show that this “community feel” was not always extended to these gay couples, and that people were not always genuinely friendly. In fact, Kate and Alex had to work on their relationship with their fourth generation farmer neighbors who were not always so welcoming to them, on the perceived basis of their sexuality.

“Everybody is their own person”: *The freedom to be yourself in a place you might not expect*

Sam and Justine were drawn to their rural area home primarily by the school district offered in that area. In addition, Justine also focused on the beauty of the area and the level of involvement that parents had in the school district.

Justine: “The other thing I really like from this area is the parents are all very, probably overly dedicated to their kids, like overly involved.”

Justine attested to being a “stay at home mom” in our interview. While e-mailing back and forth to set up the interview date, Justine stated how busy she had been, baking cupcakes for a sports banquet and getting her daughter’s prom dress hemmed. She was obviously very involved with her children’s activities, so it makes sense for her to be excited about other parents being involved as well.

For Sam, the ability to be herself and express her independence was something that drew her to living in a rural area.

Sam: “In the same way that I don’t like being told what color to paint my door, I don’t want to be told what to think, I don’t want to be told I can’t be noisy between two am and four am. If I’m awake and want to do something in the barn, I can do that.”

Sam does not want to be tied down with regulations and rules; throughout the interview she boasts of her independent and non-apologetic personality. Sam feels that she is more likely

to be judged in an urban area than a rural area for the way she expresses herself and the interests she has. Similar to Amy and Carmen, Sam values the sense of freedom and privacy that comes with living in a rural area.

Sam: “It’s common sense. There is no political correctness here at all. There’s no judgment. [Acts out conversation between herself and two neighbors] ‘Well you want to have a gun?’ ‘Yeah.’ ‘And you don’t?’ ‘Yeah.’ And no one really cares. There’s no debate over anything because everybody is their own person. There is no judgment over ‘I want a purple house’ or ‘I want a brown house,’ ‘I want to play cards’ or ‘cards are the devil work.’ Because you have this hardship that you all need one another and that brings you together. In town I don’t feel like anybody needs anybody. You know? And so it’s so much easier to judge people.”

As I continued to speak with Sam, I came to understand that she liked people in rural areas because they were not worried about making sure they said the “exact right thing” as to not offend anyone, but rather, she believed they coexisted as different types of people who respected one another. Sam believed that people in her community were inherently good and that living in a rural area brought them together. She believed labels weren’t as important in rural areas because the inhabitants’ identities as rural neighbors trumped those labels.

Sam shared that she thought she fit in better in a rural environment and actually had more apprehensions about moving to their former city than moving to their current rural area home.

Sam: “I had apprehensions about moving to town because I don’t fit in. Justine looks like a ‘girly girl.’ What do I look like?”

Interviewer: “Not one.”

Justine: “A big old butch.”

Sam: “Yeah I have *Lesbian Butch* on my forehead. I don’t fit in those places. Here people value you for what you bring.”

Instead of Sam feeling unsure whether or not she would fit in as a gay woman in a rural area, she felt the opposite because her personality and interests aligned better with the community members in her rural area. In Sam’s opinion, her identity as a butch lesbian was more

aligned with a rural identity than a city identity, which had helped her make close friends who enjoyed the same hobbies she did. As Sam explained it, people in rural areas all need each other; they rely on each other, so they are not as quick to judge each other. While Sam identified as an independent person and believed that she was the sole shaper of how she was perceived by others, she did admit that she has an interdependent relationship with her neighbors. While Sam assumed her self-confidence was the reason other community members respected her and several had befriended her, she and other participants had shared that they “won their neighbors over” by being a good neighbor, someone willing to trade services or lend a helping hand. It is clear that these participants came into their communities needing to prove themselves as “good wholesome neighbors” to their community. This is why many were focused on being a good representation of the LGBT community. While Sam and the other participants may be treated with respect, their efforts in stigma management showed that they had to work hard for that respect and are not on equal footing with heterosexual couples who moved into the area.

A lot of space, but a “community feel”: Having the best of both worlds

Isabelle and Violet stated their major reason for moving to a rural area was the extra space and a better school district for their children.

Isabelle: “We knew we wanted the girls to go to a different school, we weren’t really happy with [their] school, the way the middle school was running. We found out about [our small town], and the idea of the swim program here, and the new school that they built, and that got us interested in coming here.”

According to Isabelle, her and Violet’s main reason for moving out of the comfort of their former city to the country was to better the lives of their children. They wanted their children to have access to a better educational system and better opportunities as athletes.

When I asked what Isabelle and Violet’s favorite aspect of living in a rural area was, they said the vast amount of land was something they enjoyed.

Isabelle: “A lot of space. There is like no one around. I like that. The boys love it. They are outside all the time. They like to do archery and what is the other thing they do? With the pellets; air....”

Violet: “Airsoft.”

Isabelle: “Airsoft guns which are way easier to do here than if they were running around in the city...”

Here the concept of privacy was discussed again. Isabelle stated, “There is like no one around.” Their children liked to do outdoor activities that are more acceptable in rural areas. This freedom kept their lives private in some ways, while they also had heightened visibility as gay residents of a rural area. For rural participants, privacy for their families at home comes at a price of increased visibility in the community. Isabelle and Violet, especially, experienced heightened visibility when they moved to their rural area. They shared that they were known as “The Lesbians” by the other people in the community for some time, until the community got to know them, and those labels fell away, and they began to be seen as regular people.

Violet and Isabel had discussed receiving some neighborly support from other parents within the community.

Violet: “Some of the families have been really helpful. When the kids were younger, the swim coach would watch me come and get them and she was like, ‘[Your son] can just come to my house with my kids’... So she took them after school, took them to swimming, and I didn’t have to worry about it.”

This is the type of “community feel” that Sam and Kate both discussed in their interviews; neighbors who look out for and help one another.

A common theme discussed by participants from rural areas was that several of them had felt welcomed and supported by at least some of the members of their community, in addition to enjoying their space and independence on their property. In contrast, as discussed in later sections, a darker experience was expressed by the participants when they shared stories of

exclusion, ignorant questions and comments, and even criminal acts imposed on them by members of their community.

“They are just like me”: Family representation is a draw to the suburbs

The participants that I interviewed who lived in the suburbs were both part of biracial families. The participants in the families appeared to be White, and the children appeared to be Black. A reason they discussed for moving to the suburbs of a liberal city was so that their family could live in an area that was racially diverse. One of the participants in the study, Jordan, was interviewed alone because her spouse worked long hours and could not be home for the interview. Her child had medical issues, so she wanted to be in the suburbs of the small city partially because it was close to her child’s hospital. Their home also was more affordable for their family than other possibilities in the area, and Jordan perceived it to be more accepting of LGBT families.

Jordan: “It was close to the hospitals for my daughter. She is in remission for a lot of medical issues, and we knew it was more accepting here. We could afford the taxes, and it was close enough to all of her medical specialists.”

When asked what she liked about living in [the suburbs] Jordan stated:

“The diversity. Just, it’s a welcoming community. I really love [our city]. I feel really at home here. There are a bunch of interesting people and everyone kind of feels, it feels like a community.”

Whereas Sam had stated that she felt a stronger sense of community in her rural area than the city she formerly lived in, Jordan felt differently. This is an interesting contradiction because Jordan lived in the suburbs of the same city that Sam previously lived in, but on the opposite side. The difference in these two women’s experiences with the friendliness and inclusiveness of the same city may have been influenced by how Sam and Jordan differ in their identity presentation and interests. Sam identifies as “butch” and enjoys doing outdoor activities such as hunting, whereas Jordan is a more feminine presenting individual.

Jade and Grace, another suburban couple, also stated that their decision to move to their suburban home was heavily influenced by the racial diversity of the area.

Jade: “It was much more racially diverse for our kids. The school systems were more racially diverse, and we knew people who lived here both personally and just as acquaintances who had had good experiences at a particular school [in the area].”

Grace: “One of the reasons we came here is we felt like we wanted to give our kids a place to have at least a small group of people who they can look at and say, ‘They are just like me. They are not the same color, they have two moms, and they are adopted’.”

Jade and Grace felt it was important that their children had other kids to look toward to see families similar to their own, in terms of racial and gender make up. To Jade, Grace, and Jordan diversity was important more so than for the rural area participants. This may have been influenced by the fact that not only were these families minorities because they had same sex parents, they were also minorities because they were racially blended. The diversity of this town made their families less unique; they stood out less and received less unwanted attention than they would in rural areas.

While Alex lived in a rural area, she was a person of color and had children who were biracial. She stated that something she missed about living in a city was the racial diversity. An issue that Alex experienced was that people in her small-town community did not understand that her country of origin was its own separate country. Many people assumed she was Mexican, and when she stated she was something else, people did not understand that it was different. I have omitted the name of the county to further secure the participant’s anonymity.

Alex: “I’ve talked to a couple of people and everybody thinks I’m [from another country]. They don’t know what [my ethnicity] is, and that’s weird.”

Alex stated that this experience was new for her when she moved to her rural Michigan area. New York City is highly diverse, and people were more attuned to different cultures, so it

was a significant change to move somewhere where people did not know that her country of origin was its own country.

While living in a rural area was not always easy for the White participants of my study and their children, being White did carry with it some social privileges, especially in a rural area. Because race is a visible stigma, rather than an invisible stigma like sexual orientation, the parents of biracial families I spoke with were more comfortable living somewhere where they were not the token biracial family (a far more likely situation for a rural area family) as well as the token lesbian parents of their community.

Interviewing these women about their reasons for moving to the area in which they lived generated some interesting patterns. Moving to unfamiliar territory in pursuit of an “excellent school system” was a motivator for several participants living in rural areas. Diversity (both in regards to race and sexuality) was a motivator for parents who moved to suburban, racially diverse areas. Rural participants stated that they found rural areas to be beautiful, life to move slower, and that they had the ability to raise their children in a way that provided them with opportunities to be outdoors and in nature. An increase of independence was an enjoyed luxury mentioned by the participants from rural areas.

Subsistence Farming and Trading Practices of Rural Participants

Many of the participants from rural areas made connections with their community members by participating in the neighborly practice of trading goods and services. They explained that rather than going to the store and buying an item they needed or contacting a maintenance person when they needed a repair, they first reached out to other people in their community for assistance. Several of the rural participants of this study also had an interest in subsistence, or the ability to maintain oneself through independent effort, particularity

subsistence farming. Many participants had chickens that laid eggs for them, and one couple had a whole farm.

“We grow our own”: Subsistence farming for rural participants

The concept of raising farm animals, growing food, and trading services were themes which emerged in interviews with participants from rural areas, as well as utilizing animals as a means to branch out to community members.

For instance, when Amy and Carmen made an attempt to befriend their new neighboring family, they brought eggs as a gift to welcome them to the neighborhood. They also brought their pony along and informed the neighbor their child was welcome to ride the pony sometime. Carmen used her farm animals as an attempt to welcome the new neighbor.

Kate and Alex had a substantial farm with vegetables, sheep, goats, chickens and even a llama. They used their creamery to turn milk into cheese, and they did not need to do a lot of grocery shopping because of all of the food they got from their farm.

Kate: “We started with a couple chickens, and we started because [our local] library had a book called, ‘Animals, Minerals, and Vegetables.’ We realized that, we could live off what we grow and we could sustain ourselves by just doing everything ourselves, so we really don’t buy a whole lot. We grow our own vegetables, we have our own eggs every day, and we are starting a creamery.”

This was a significant transition in lifestyle from a life in New York City, and I wondered if the lifestyle being led by their neighbors helped to influence them to take a book out of the library about farming. Regardless, choosing to become farmers caused them to earn respect from other farmers in the area who may have not known what to make of the lesbian couple from New York City when they moved to the area. Just as Carmen and Amy tried to create friendships using their pony and eggs, Kate and Alex shared with me that her farm was appreciated by the community.

Alex: “Many people are appreciative that we have the farm, because they’ll drive by and we are very open. A neighbor down the road I’d never met before said, ‘You know my grandchildren wanted to see your llama and your goats’ and we said, ‘Sure!’ And we’d go in and we’d look at them and people appreciate that.”

Alex and Kate’s farm acted as a sort of icebreaker with members of their community they may never have interacted with otherwise, and it helped to increase their respect in the community.

Sam and Justine also demonstrated their subsistence nature during our interview. When I asked if there was anything Sam and Justine would change about their community experience, Justine shared the things she missed from her old neighborhood, when she lived in the suburbs of a progressive, small city.

Justine: “I was thinking, why did I want to move to [our old neighborhood]? Good burritos, good bread, and good bakeries.”

In response, Sam teased that those were not good enough reasons because Justine made all of those things herself.

Sam: “But you make your own anyway. And no one’s is as good as yours so what are you going to do now? That’s just whiney.”

During this part of the interview, I saw that there was some differences between Sam and Justine in how enthusiastic they were to be living in a rural area. Sam minimized Justine’s reasons for missing the city they were in before, and while Justine seemed to enjoy where she lived now, I noticed a pattern of Sam praising the rural area and criticizing city people for not being part of a “true community.” Throughout the interview Sam made efforts to protect her community from scrutiny, and defend it, even against her wife. It appeared to be important to her that I walked away with a positive impression of their community.

Being able to be in control and independent in terms of sustainability seemed to be important to the participants from rural areas, as was being seen as a “good neighbor.” I found this contradiction interesting because on one hand, the participants gained respect from the community if they were farmers, or handy in some way, making them more independent. While at the same time, supporting one another, looking out for neighbors, and trading with neighbors also helped participants to gain respect. Participants stated that independence, as well as *interdependence* was important factors of a rural area lifestyle.

“People value you for what you bring”: The value of being a good neighbor

In addition to the participants of my study growing their own food, raising their own farm animals, and making their own breads, there was also mention of working within the community to build and fix objects, rather than paying a professional to do it. Participants also noted that this custom brought the community closer.

Sam: “Here people value you for what you bring, so my neighbors call me and say, ‘Hey could we trade something because I don’t want to pay to have my oven fixed, and I don’t know how to fix an oven or a toilet but I can build you cabinets?’ I can’t tell you how many things I’ve fixed at [our friend’s] house and [he] has put our siding on, it’s community. That’s what it is.”

Sam was proud to be a handy person and to be part of a community in which neighbors go to one another first, in this informal trading of goods and services, instead of reaching out to professional outsiders for their needs. In Sam’s opinion, this is what makes a community thrive.

Alex stated that having a farm and sharing that bond with their neighbors had helped them to foster a friendly relationship.

Alex: “[Our] neighbors are fourth generation farmers, it took a while for them to ... not really “accept us” but sort of have conversation, because, you know, we’re two women who moved next door with kids. I think that they appreciate that we work so hard. And I think that that has been something that has broken the barrier. We just gave them a turkey

for Thanksgiving to thank them for helping us with the hay, because they sell us their hay...I think it's been a fascinating development because we had sort of biases about what we thought he thought about us. And you know... 'Oh my god, he's a fourth generation, he's from here...you know, he goes to the Catholic Church', but I think that because we see each other working so hard, as farmers... if we need help, they give help, and if they need help, then we give help."

Despite the differences between this couple and their neighbors, they bonded over their shared identity as hard-working farmers. The relationship forged by this bond assures that if one family needs help from the other, they will be there to support them, similar to Sam's experience with her neighbors. While the concepts of privacy and independence were stated as being important aspects of rural life for the participants, the social reality of their visibility and interdependence is seen again in Sam and Alex's accounts above.

Section B: Harassment, Discomfort, and Crime

While the participants from both rural and suburban areas had positive experiences to share about their community, they had some negative stories to share as well. The participants recounted stories of harassment, offensive ignorance, and even criminal activity from homophobic members of their communities, both rural and suburban. While the types of harmful experiences differed among participants, there was no participant that did not have at least one story of discomfort, regardless of if they were a suburban or rural area couple.

The participants of this study all experienced various degrees of discomfort due to how homosexuality was viewed by their community. These uncomfortable interactions ranged from confusion and ignorance, to bullying and name calling, to being victims of crimes. In the current literature, life for rural area gays and lesbians was described by researchers as being isolating, and exclusionary. Many gay and lesbian people chose to engage in a "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" lifestyle. The current literature displayed church communities and church leaders in a negative

light, excluding gay and lesbian people and even blaming them for natural disasters. From the current literature, we know that rural communities have a heightened sense of religiosity, and their communities are often built up around the church. This caused me to expect to find some resistance and exclusionary practices of rural community members to gay and lesbian couples. I expected those community members who were described as “very religious” by participants to have a negative reaction, at least initially, to the participants involved in my study.

This section explores the varying degrees of discomfort experienced by the participants of this study, due to their communities’ reaction to their sexuality. This discomfort ranged from inappropriate questions asked by children and adults, to unwanted attention for being the only lesbian couple in town, to experiences of rejection and exclusion, and to experiences of crimes against these participants for being lesbians. Though I did expect rural area participants to be met with some apprehension and exclusion, I did not expect both rural area and suburban lesbian couples to experience crimes at the hands of their community members for being gay. Unfortunately, one rural area couple had been victims of Arson, and one suburban couple were victims of vandalism.

“Who’s the real mom?”: Awkward questions and hurtful gossip

Some of the participants were asked questions by small children trying to understand the concept of a family with same-sex parents. This is one of the examples of the participants experiencing the effects of heteronormativity in their towns. Heteronormativity is the belief that the only “normal” and “natural” sexuality is heterosexuality. Heteronormativity is deeply engrained in our society so it is difficult for individuals to break out of this way of thinking. For instance, Justine stated:

“Sometimes in elementary school when they were like in kindergarten, first grade, and second grade, kids would ask us [who we were], and I would simply say ‘oh well we are

[our son's] parents just like your parents,' or you know 'we are married like your mom and dad,' or they would be like 'who's the real mom?' Because their only concept was a step mom model, like if someone divorced they could understand you would have two moms if you had a mom and a step mom."

When confronted with questions from children, Justine would attempt to normalize her sexuality by saying, "We are married like your mom and dad"; the fact that they are a married couple as well normalizes the experience to children because marriage is such a strong social institution. It will be interesting to see if the stigmatization of same-sex couples decreases to a degree as the legality of same-sex marriages nationwide continues, especially in the eyes of future children who will grow up with same -sex marriage as a norm for gay couples.

Alex's experiences differed from Justine's in the manner that people were not as straightforward regarding their curiosities. She stated that people were more willing to ask her questions about her relationship in New York City than in her rural community.

Alex: "We've never had that here, ever. I think people in the beginning might have been curious and said, 'who carried the kids' but there was never that *intrusion*. I think because people in the Midwest really don't ask you a lot of questions to your face. They are a little bit more reserved that way, so I've never confronted that. I've confronted that more in New York I think, like 'who's the mom?' Here people will probably just ask their neighbor."

Alex assumed that people in her community were more willing to gossip with their neighbors and passively try to learn about their family, rather than in New York where people are more upfront about their curiosities.

Some participants reported that they were seen as predatory. Even though they were in a long-term, committed and married relationship, one couple shared that community members were afraid to get close to them as friends, and those who did were stigmatized. Sam and Justine stated that some community members held ignorant viewpoints of what a friendship with Justine or Sam would become.

Sam: “Some of our women friends are afraid to be close friends with us. [My friend] was like ‘My husband won’t let me have lunch with you at the pub.’ Ok whatever. I’d say that only happens with the uneducated, traditional [people]. It’s rare.”

Justine: “Because one of my stay-at-home mommy friends, another friend of hers... another swim mom said to her, ‘You’re hanging out with [Justine]? Like what if she picks you up or something?’ And she was like, ‘She’s married! I’m married! We’re both married, what are you talking about?’ We are just both stay-at-home moms that are going to Costco, and going to lunch and using the coupons at Chilies, it’s really not that exciting.”

While Sam and Justine shared stories of the friendships they had formed in their town, the account above also shows that there was ignorance, fear, and homophobia embedded in the community as well. Sam and Justine started the interview by expressing the viewpoint that life in their rural area is perfect for them and that those stereotypes about how rural areas aren’t good for gay people, are unfounded. However, this contradiction arose when they discussed their experience with being the victims of gossip, exclusion, and ignorance. Sam still tried to save face for her community by stating that the experience of having a friend being banned to see them by their husband is a rare occurrence; that it only happened with “uneducated” and “traditional” people. She was separating the rural people who accepted her, and the “uneducated” and “traditional” people who did not. She was saying that yes, there were some issues, but it was only with a certain group, so it was not as bad as it seemed. Sam put herself and the accepting community members, in the in-group, and pushed the people who did not accept her in the out-group, in order to protect her self-esteem.

Justine shared her experience with her friend’s associative stigma. Her female friend who she would spend time with, as she described it, doing “stay-at-home mommy” activities, was asked by another friend if she was worried Justine would try to seduce her. Justine found this laughable and stated that she does the same sorts of things other stay-at-home mothers do with

their friends (run errands, go out to lunch, etc.). She did not want to be seen as different because she was a lesbian mom; she was still a mom and still part of the community. She was tried to normalize her stigma as a lesbian mom, by saying, yes I am a lesbian but I am *married*, and when I go out with my other married friends, we do normal things stay-at-home moms like to do together. I am no different than any other stay-at-home mom.

Because navigating the discourse of an invisible stigma can be exhausting and challenging, some parents chose to sidestep disclosure and made their stigma more obvious to avoid hurtful, heterosexist questions. This is what suburban moms Grace and Jade did when they decided to purposefully adopt children of another race.

“We didn’t want White children”: Sidestepping disclosure

Grace and Jade are both White and lived in a suburb of a small, progressive, and diverse small city. They stated that one of the reasons they had for adopting children that were of another race than theirs was to avoid the “Who is the real mom?” question, and other questions of that nature.

Grace: “We didn’t want White children. I know that probably sounds strange because we are White, but we didn’t want anyone to ask us, ‘Who’s the real mom?’, because it can be so damaging to children.”

Since most people automatically assumed their children were adopted, it took the weight of that question off Grace and Jade’s shoulders and the shoulders of their children. In this way, they felt that they could protect their children because when people looked at their family they would see two White women with four Black children and think “adopted,” “lesbian moms.” Grace and Jade wanted to avoid heteronormative awkward questions. Initially one might expect that the more differences between a “nuclear family” and one’s own family, the more struggles one would have in society. The children of these two women were already going to be different

because they would have two mothers instead of a mom and a dad, which differentiates them from the social norm. But in addition, the children were a different race than their parents. I found it interesting that this couple felt that the more different their children looked from them, the easier time they would have because it would be more obvious that they were adopted by both of their mothers.

While Grace and Jade wanted to adopt kids that were of another race so that their family dynamics could be fairly obvious and out in the open, Violet and Isabelle were just trying to blend into their towns, which unfortunately didn't happen when they moved to their rural area.

“We were known as ‘The Lesbians’”: Initial unwanted attention

When Violet and Isabelle first moved to their home in a rural area, they experienced a heightened sense of social visibility. Bell and Valentine (1995) stated that it was difficult for gay people to date in rural areas because there was such little social privacy. Some gay people who were not open about their sexuality avoided being around known gay people for fear of their sexuality becoming public knowledge.

Violet and Isabelle did not have this issue, already being married with children, but they did experience the whole town becoming fascinated by them. They were likely the first openly lesbian couple many of their community members met. The couple remarked that people seemed to be observing them to gather an understanding of what gay parents were like. To their community, Violet and Isabelle were the representation of gay parents everywhere. While they had stated that they enjoyed living in a rural area, being lesbian moms stripped away their privacy whenever they went into town. This publicity was in direct contrast with a value that many of the participants living in rural areas valued; privacy. Sam had stated in her interview that she enjoys the freedom to be loud in the middle of the night, paint her house whatever color

she wants, and live with fewer regulations to follow than people in the city. Because neighbors are spread out, the participants had a great deal of land to “be themselves” on without having to interact with other community members. However, being a part of a small population, in Violet and Isabelle’s experience, had caused them to become some of the most well-known and wondered about people in their area because they were the only same sex parents in their area. They enjoyed a sense of independence and privacy on their direct property but once they left their property they become quite visible.

Violet and Isabelle might have seen the unwanted attention as a tradeoff for being in a rural setting and a school system that they believed was good for their children. When the participants spoke about their encounters with community members, they shared they felt that they were making a positive impact by educating people about what gay parents were really like.

Violet: “Well, we are the only lesbians so we stand out. It’s better now than when we first came, like a lot of people seemed to know us, who we didn’t know because we were known as ‘the lesbians’.”

Isabelle: “We would be like ‘who are those people?’ People would know us but we wouldn’t know them.”

Violet: “Yeah they were usually swim people... but that’s all I would know.”

Isabelle: “Yeah some of them were but some of them were just people who knew other people, who said ‘oh those are the lesbians’. But it’s definitely lessened. People like our kids, and they like us.”

Isabelle suggested that her and her family had to “prove themselves” to the community and show people that they were just a normal family. They fought their stigma and educated people, and eventually the pointing and whispering subsided. This is an example of a rural identity meeting a LGBT identity with conflict. Lesbian parents cannot quietly move to a rural

area unnoticed. LGBT couples who want to move to a rural area have to first reconcile with the fact that they will initially be the topic of discussion for members of their new community.

In addition to curiosity by community members and children, some of the participants shared examples of other issues they experienced with community members. These issues involved experiences of rejection and exclusion by neighbors, as well as community members intercepting possibly new friendships, experiences with harassment, and becoming victims of crimes.

“Our neighbors are kind of hostile”: Rejection and exclusion

Work by Moses and Buncher (1980), Smith (1997), and Panelli and Little (2010) expressed that rural areas were characterized by conservatives, traditionalism, and religious fundamentalism, which created a resistance to change and contributed to exclusion and marginalization for LGBT people. Because traditional values were dominant, alternative family structures and ways of life were oftentimes not tolerated by the majority. Alex and Kate’s family had experienced rejection and humiliation by the priest at the Catholic church of their small town.

Alex: “The priest there had said something about homosexuals, so that was unpleasant. It’s just intolerance. I tuned it out because I’m not religious. I think as a consequence of that, [our children] have moved away from religion to a certain extent, at least the Catholic religion.”

As Friedman stated in her 2010 work, some lesbians and their children have become estranged from their churches due to doctrines which condemn homosexuality. Kate and Alex were not necessarily “estranged”; however, they were put into an uncomfortable situation in which they were unlikely to return to that parish. Just as religion was used by a bishop to turn the people of Louie Crew’s town against him, as recounted in his 1977 autobiography, Alex and Kate’s parish priest also used religion as a tool to speak against gay people.

Amy and Carmen also shared experiences of rejection during their interview. Their experiences of rejection occurred with several neighboring families in their community. The first lived down the street when Amy and Carmen moved in. Amy and Carmen described them as unwelcoming and even hostile. The couple shared their frustration and anxiety about being unsure what to tell their daughter when she said she wanted to play with the neighbors' child.

Carmen: "Currently our neighbors are kind of hostile. The neighbors across the street are very religious in some way. We've never really spoken to them much, but we have heard through sort of other people that we know who were friendly that they don't approve of us. They have a little daughter who is barely older than [our daughter] and they have never played together."

Amy: "It's really sad because there are not a lot of options. They have never been friendly. They never came to say hello when we moved in, and they are just very stand offish, and we saw that they have this child, and they saw that we have this child. They were never like 'oh let's get the kids together!' I'm just praying that [our daughter] never notices there's these two girls within a few years of her age and neither of them talk to us. A couple times she's said, when we've been going in or out, something about saying hello or playing and I just say... 'oh I think they are pretty busy, they don't seem to want to play.'"

Amy and Carmen showed obvious signs of frustration and hurt that their daughter had to experience isolation because their neighbors were homophobic. When they moved to their area, they did not think they were going to be excluded and ignored by their neighbors, and when it happened, it came as a hurtful surprise that angered them, largely because they felt their daughter was missing out on friendships that she should be entitled to at least exploring. They even stated that if they had known they would have had such bad luck with the neighbors they would not have chosen this area to raise their family. While they stated previously they enjoyed the privacy on their land, the nature, and wildlife, they were deeply hurt by the rejection they faced by their neighbors. The experience of rejection was more painful for them than their enjoyment of their natural surroundings. While some participants were able to adjust to and rationalize the

experiences of occasional rejections, and harassment, this couple had been rejected by their two closest neighbors (both whom had children), and it had significant effects on them.

I found it interesting that Carmen and Amy, and Grace and Jade, worked to protect their children's feelings in completely opposite ways. Grace and Jade adopted children of another race so people they come in contact with would see their different skin colors and (hopefully) understand that they were most likely adopted, making them less likely to ask the harmful "who is the real mom" question. Meanwhile, Carmen and Amy tried to shield their daughter from people who may have had hurtful things to say about her and her family. Unfortunately, exclusion was not the only issue Amy and Carmen faced in their rural area. They also experienced having potential relationships intercepted from them, by already exclusionary neighbors.

Intercepting new friendships

Not only did Amy and Carmen have issues with neighbors who did not accept them, but their neighbors also actively intervened to prevent new friendships forming for Amy and Carmen. When Amy and Carmen first met the family that moved into a home next to theirs, the family had a negative reaction toward Carmen and her daughter when they went to welcome the family to the neighborhood. Amy and Carmen were very excited to learn that a family with young children was moving in because their daughter could have potential play mates in the area. Unfortunately, they learned that the family who had moved in was friends with their already exclusionary neighbors and that those neighbors had shared their negative opinions about Carmen and Amy.

Amy: "Carmen tried really hard. She went over there; she brought eggs and said, 'Hi, I'm glad to see somebody with kids move in. We have a daughter too. How old is your daughter?' And the woman was just completely cold to her and they didn't even say thank you for the eggs, kind of was like, 'Why are you bringing these?'"

Carmen: “She was really cool. We had [our horse] and [our daughter] was riding her and...she was just kind of looking at me and I was like, ‘We have this horse, if your kids would like some pony rides or something, if you had some time we would totally like to meet them, here’s some eggs, we have chickens, it’d be fun or whatever....’ And she just looked at me like I was insane.”

Interviewer: “Do you think that she knew who you were?”

Carmen: “Well then it came out that she said ‘Oh we are friends with the people across the street. We go to the same church. That’s how we know about this place.’ and I was like... ‘Oh.’”

Carmen shared that when their new neighbors said that they knew their other neighbors from church, she assumed they held the same opinions of gay people as their current neighbors. Carmen and Amy appeared to have been hurt by this interaction; Carmen put a lot of effort into being hospitable and tried to play the part of a nice neighbor welcoming a new family to the area. According to Amy and Carmen, the new neighbor couldn’t see past her gay identity, regardless of how welcoming Carmen was. When the neighbor explained they learned about the available house (through a “church friend”), Carmen automatically correlated her rudeness with religion-influenced homophobia.

Amy and Carmen assumed that religious viewpoints against gay people were the motivator for the behavior of their neighbors. Frustrated, they discussed with one another what they thought the neighbors tell their children who might ask their parents if they could play with Amy and Carmen’s daughter.

Amy: “And what do [our neighbors] tell [their] kids? You know? ‘You can’t play with that little girl because her parents are bad, they’re sinners’? Like what do they say?”

Carmen: “I think so, like if they are really super religious.”

Amy: “Say we are sinners?”

Carmen: “Yeah that probably works for them.”

While Sam and Justine, and Kate and Alex were able to make friends with their neighbors through trading and sharing with them, and Kate and Alex also formed bonds with their neighbors through having a farm and sharing in a famer identity, Carmen and Amy did not have such luck with their neighbors. This contradiction in experiences, as I understand it, was due to Carmen and Amy's neighbors not being able to see past their identity as a gay couple to have a chance to meet and come to understand Carmen and Amy as people with interests that may be similar to their own. Carmen and Amy had stated that their various neighbors who excluded them were "very religious" and that was their assumed reason for their treatment. Perhaps the neighbors that Sam, Justine, Kate and Alex had positive relationships with were not part of a religious organization that condemned homosexuality, and if they were, they were at least open to seeing the participants past their sexuality.

"We don't want there to be some sort of weirdness": Accelerating disclosure

Carmen and Amy shared another story involving two young neighborhood girls who would occasionally visit with them and their daughter. Carmen and Amy told the girls to explain to their parents that they were a lesbian couple, after which, they never saw the children again.

Amy: "One time there were these two little girls, I don't know maybe eleven or twelve years old. And they were waving over the fence and looking at the ducks and you know we waved at them and they came over and they saw that we had a little girl and they said we babysit and everything.... They were nice but we had never met their parents or anything."

Carmen: "They came over. They hopped over a couple of times. And we thought, Ok if you're coming over here we need to make sure the parents know, so we asked 'Do your parents know that we are together as a couple?'"

Amy: "And the kids didn't understand what we were saying."

Carmen: "Because at first they did kind of know that we were together. They did know that we were both the moms but I think they hadn't really thought it through and then I said 'Do they understand that we are together as a couple? Like you need to make sure

that that's That your parents are not surprised by that.' Because we were already getting this vibe that the parents were very conservative... We never saw the kids again."

Carmen and Amy assumed the reason the two little girls never came over again was because their parents told them never to go near them again after learning they were a gay couple. However, an alternative explanation might have been that the parents may have just been uncomfortable with this couple having the children relay a message about how Amy and Carmen are in a relationship. Perhaps if they had they spoken to the parents directly, the outcome may have been different. Carmen and Amy had dealt with two unwelcoming neighbors already, so it is not surprising that they did not want to confront the parents directly. Amy and Carmen stated that when children are involved, they accelerated their coming out process, which is normally more passive in their everyday life.

Amy: "Our general policy is just be out in the normal course of our lives, but in that particular situation we felt like we wanted to accelerate the process just because it was kids and stuff."

Carmen: "Because we are aware that there are still those stereotypes, you know, 'You are going to try to convert my kid, you're going to try to molest my kid,' and so we want to get ahead of that curve if that's going to be an issue then we don't want there to be some sort of weirdness."

Amy stated that the involvement of children was the reason they accelerated their disclosure. This was because there was still a stereotype held by some that gays and lesbians were predatory toward children. Some people believed that if a child is abused by someone of the same sex, the victimizer automatically identified as gay or lesbian. Contrary to this stereotype, *The American Psychological Association* stated in 2001 in an article titled "Understanding Child Sexual Abuse: Education, Prevention, and Recovery":

"Studies on who commits child sexual abuse vary in their findings, but the most common finding is that the majority of sexual offenders are family members or are otherwise known to the child. Sexual abuse by strangers is not nearly as common as sexual abuse by family members. Research further shows that men perpetrate most instances of sexual

abuse, but there are cases in which women are the offenders. Despite a common myth, homosexual men are not more likely to sexually abuse children than heterosexual men are."

Amy and Carmen did not believe that everyone in their area knew that there was no link between sexual orientation and pedophilia. They had already experienced a crime of arson, which they believed was due to bigoted views others held of their sexuality. It is not surprising that they tried to protect themselves and keep themselves from being vulnerable.

Jordan also stated that she accelerated her disclosure of her sexuality in her own life in the suburbs but for a different reason. She stated that she perceived being out as a personal requirement for having children.

Jordan: "You can't be in the school system and not be out, like I don't see how people can do that it just doesn't make since to me. It teaches kids shame in their families.

She shared that she knew of a child that was raised by two gay men, and they were not out to their community, and she felt badly for the situation the child's parents had put him in. She believed that parents needed to be in a place where they can be comfortable enough to be out; that they owed that example of confidence and pride to their children.

In addition to awkward situations, experiences of isolation, exclusion, and accelerated disclosure, verbal harassment was an issue experienced by several participants. Strategies for dealing with harassment for these mothers were *normalizing their experience*, and *rationalizing their experience*. Jordan normalized her verbal harassment from straight men, for having a wife, by stating she assumed it happened to all women who have a same sex partner. By making it an issue that all lesbian women face she moved her personal experience into a communal, rather than personal realm, making it less about her own personal experience, and more about just what lesbian women all "put up with."

Isabelle and Violent also shared a story of harassment. They assumed that the people that verbally harassed them were not from the area, rationalizing that they are not a part of their community, so they are not as upset by it. This is the same in-group versus out-group coping mechanism that Sam used when she shared that the only people who have been prejudice to her are the “uneducated,” “traditional” people; the participants put distance between themselves and those who had bigoted views of them.

Harassment experienced by participants

Jordan shared that she was very involved in the LGBT community and was out about her marriage to her wife in her day-to-day conversations with people. She noted that she would sometimes receive “lewd comments” from straight men when she casually shared that she had a wife. She stated that she did not expect anything different, and that she thought it is probably the norm for most lesbian women.

Jordan: “I’ll get some lewd comments sometimes, but I think any lesbian gets lewd comments from men when they disclose that they have a wife.”

Jordan downplayed the experience of getting harassed by normalizing it, saying it’s bound to happen to any woman with a wife. I did not believe that Jordan saw this as acceptable. However, believing that it happens to most women in same sex marriages, seemed to help her cope with the experience.

With the exception of unwanted attention, Isabelle and Violet reported a fairly positive experience with their community but stated that several years ago they experienced harassment at the Fourth of July fireworks in their town.

Isabelle: “So the kids are sitting there, watching fireworks, and the people behind us are like swearing, ‘That’s a fucking great firework’ and I’m like guys, come on this is a family. And I was like getting really irritated, and I can’t remember what they said but they said something like oh you know. I don’t know what did they call us? They made dyke comments... You know I don’t think they were from [our town], and other people were irritated with them too but nobody said anything.”

This couple stated that they had not thought the people harassing them were even from the area, showing solidarity with their town, in an attempt to rationalize their experience with themselves and the interviewer. Like Sam, Isabelle is going out of her way to shield her community from the interviewer, attempting to idealize her town and the experiences she has had within it. Isabelle and Violet had previously shared that everyone in town knew they were “the lesbians.” It would have been hard for the harassers to tell that Violet and Isabelle were lesbians just by looking at them, but someone from the town would have known their sexuality. Isabelle stated it could have just been the insult they chose at random to call them, not knowing they were actually lesbians, which is possible, but I found it interesting how important it was to them to convey to me that they did not believe it was someone from their community. Violet and Isabelle wanted to portray the most idealized version of their town. When I asked if they had experienced any issues being a gay couple in a rural area, they stated that only one incident ever occurred (the fireworks harassment), and that it took place years ago. They did not think to include the stares and extra attention they received when they moved to town, as a “negative experience.” While they had stated they believed the people harassing them were outsiders, they mentioned that none of the other community members attempted to defend their family.

Participants as victims of homophobic crimes

Unfortunately, the negative experiences of some couples did not end with verbal harassment; participants were also victims of crimes. Three participants were put in danger due to homophobic neighbors. One couple was the victims of an arsonist, and another participant had a rock thrown through her window, and the shattered glass landed in her baby’s crib. These experiences had a lasting impression on these participants who, to this day, take some precautions against strangers and possible homophobic attacks.

The lives of one couple from a rural area and one participant from a suburban area were put in physical danger due to homophobia. Amy and Carmen were victims of arson when they lived in a rural area of another state.

Carmen: “We always had this interest in having more space. We lived in [another state] for a couple of years. I had a job out there, and we were involved in a civil rights case for same sex domestic partners to get health benefits. Us and another couple were the named plaintiffs and shortly after it was filed, there was a bunch of press. Somebody broke into our house and set it on fire while we were in it.”

Amy: “[Our daughter] was not even two at the time.”

Carmen and Amy were obviously severely emotionally affected by this experience. Amy adding that their daughter was under two years old, shows that they thought about how their daughter was not even in a position to be able to escape the home on her own; she was most likely too young to have gotten out independently. Interestingly, when Carmen and Amy moved back to Michigan they chose to move to a rural area. They may have felt that being in a rural area close to a progressive city would put them in a safer position. While Justine stated that the professionals from the progressive city nearby were changing the perspectives of her own town, Carmen and Amy, unfortunately, still experienced significant exclusion from their neighbors. While they did not believe that their neighbors would harm them, they were still cautious in some aspects of their lives, for fear of being attacked again.

Jordan, who lived in a small city, stated that the landlord of the properties near her home had been harassing her and eventually (she believes) threw a rock through her daughter’s window.

Jordan: “There has only been one person that had an issue. She manages apartment complexes that back up to the back half of my acre. We had a rock thrown through [our daughter’s] bedroom window when she was just a baby, like two years old. And there was broken glass all in her crib. I put her to bed one day and I didn’t realize. I thought I was brushing sand off of her bed and it turned out my hand was bleeding, and I didn’t realize I put my baby into a bed of broken glass.”

Similar to Carmen and Amy, Jordan lamented that her daughter, who was around two years old, could have been seriously harmed. In her rendition of what happened, she seemed exasperated with herself for not seeing the glass before setting her daughter into the crib. Like Carmen and Amy, Jordan was deeply affected by this experience primarily, it seemed, because of the harm it put her daughter in. Her story demonstrated that hate crimes can happen anywhere. While rural areas have more working against them because of their traditional viewpoints, heightened sense of religiosity, and conservative politics, these types of acts can happen in the suburbs and cities too, even cities characterized as “progressive” and “liberal.”

It was interesting to see how diversified the experiences of these participants were within the same interview. When comparing the reasons why the participants moved where they did and what they liked about the area, to the harm they had endured during their time there; it felt like two separate distinct places. At some points in the interviews, the participants, specifically the ones living in rural areas, defended their communities with stories of the great things about it, before divulging into some of the more negative aspects of their treatment.

I also found it interesting that many participants put the responsibility of how they were treated and perceived by their community on their own shoulders. Even though victimization is never the fault of the victimized, many of the participants I spoke with stated that they felt like they had control over how people perceived them as well as how their community perceived lesbian couples in general. They felt a sense of responsibility to positively represent the LGBT population to their rural areas and educate their communities.

Educating people about LGBT issues and being a “positive representation” of an LGBT family were strategies participants used to manage their stigma. Like Sam, they felt they had some control over how others perceived them. Being a visible, positive example of an LGBT

couple and working to dispel harmful myths though education were ways that the participants fought harassment in their communities, and in a way, for those living in rural communities, it is how they justified living where they did.

Section C: Representation and Education

“If you don’t think you’re lesser, then no one else will think you’re lesser”

A common theme found among the participants of my study was a feeling that they were “representing” what a lesbian family was to their community. Just as Dale expressed in Ducker’s book *Families of Value* (1998), participants found that being open about their sexuality was a way to broaden the minds of others in their community. The participants of my study used words like “education” “represent” and “send a message” to describe their interactions with their community members. Several of the participants of my study were the only lesbians they knew of in their area. These couples took on the role of educator to those in the community who may have never met an openly gay person. Sam believed that each person is in control of how others perceive them.

Sam: “It’s all about you, that is all I can tell you. If there is one take away, it’s if you’re embarrassed of you, then they’ll be embarrassed of you. If you whisper, they’ll whisper. You set your own example. That’s all it is, if you’re not embarrassed of you then they’re not embarrassed of you. You know, like we’re no different than anybody else, if you don’t act different you won’t be treated different.”

Sam believed that the most important point she would make in this interview, the one thing she wanted me to remember and share is that she led the community in how she was perceived. Because she was not ashamed of her sexuality people respected her for it. She believed their reactions to her sexuality were set by how confident she was. She had stated in the interview, however, that there are some women whose husbands would not let them spend time with Sam. Sam had stated that they were this way because they were “traditional” and

“uneducated.” Therefore, while Sam’s method of managing her stigma, through normalizing it (“I’m no different than you”) may have worked with some people, there were others who were not swayed, regardless of how confident and comfortable Sam was with herself.

Sam believed that being a supportive neighbor to others and good person in general breaks down the social labels that separate us as a diverse society.

Sam: “So you really have to look at yourself. It’s not about your community. It’s about you. If you see your neighbor needs help and you go help them, and you be that person that a neighbor would want to be... they will then step up for you. You’re just a neighbor you’re not a gay neighbor, you’re just a neighbor.”

Once again, Sam stated that by respecting herself and holding her head up high, she made others have respect for her as well. They saw how she presented herself and mirrored that. In addition, Sam believed that being part of a rural community supportive system normalized her as a person, and the community was able to see past her sexuality.

Sam: “It’s all about your attitude about yourself. If you don’t think you’re lesser, then no one else will think your lesser either. If you think you’re lesser, then everyone will think that too. I really think that’s true.”

Sam stated strongly “I really think that’s true.” Still, she and Justine contradicted this statement when they spoke about their experiences with neighbors who held ignorant viewpoints of them as sexual predators, wanting to seduce female friends of theirs.

While I agree with Sam that she did have *some* control over how she was seen by others in her community by the way she presented herself, I did not agree that the fate of how someone is accepted or not accepted by their community is a direct result of how that individual carries themselves. After all, it may take a homophobic person years to become comfortable and accepting of LGBT people (if they do actually come to be accepting at all), even if they live next door a LGBT person. The fault of that continued bigotry is not on the hands of the LGBT person. LGBT people can be proud, hold their heads high, and represent themselves as upstanding rural

citizens and still face discrimination. I had the impression that Sam was someone who liked to be in control of her surroundings, previously in the interview she stated that she did not like being told what to do. Sam also wanted to be in control of how others saw her, but in reality, biases people hold often run deep and people's opinions might not change drastically due to an individual's impression management.

Jade and Grace, a suburban couple, shared a similar viewpoint to Sam's, showing that impression management was not only important for couples in rural areas but could also be on the minds of those who live in "progressive cities" too.

Jade: "It's all the way in which you present, you know? Taking your kid to the doctor, the way you present that whole situation is the way they are going to read the situation, and so when we present our best side, give people time to get to know us, and like us and the rest of that stuff just kind of..."

Grace: "Falls into place."

Jade's statement about the importance of having confidence when taking her child to the doctor was similar to the points made by Friedman (2010) about the heterosexist moments experienced and fought against during the everyday life of lesbian mothers.

Jade shared that she needed to strategize and made sure she presented herself and led from a place of confidence when her and her White lesbian partner took their Black children to the doctor. While in a progressive city, their family is still a family make-up their doctor may not have seen very often, and they wanted to come from a place of confidence when they embarked on these types of social situations. Similar to Sam, Jade believes that if she presented herself positively, she would naturally be liked by her neighbors, putting the responsibility on herself to be accepted.

The importance of presenting yourself as a good neighbor, parent, and community member was also discussed in my interview with Isabelle and Violet.

Isabelle: “I think if we were obnoxious, everyone in this community would start to think that lesbians are obnoxious, because that’s [what we are presenting]. We participate, we go to conferences, we show up for the kids’ swim events, we support fundraiser things. We do the things that everyone else does, so they’re like ‘Hey they aren’t that different from us.’”

Isabelle shared that their community saw that they are not as “sensational” as they thought they were when they initially moved to the area. This was because they acted like any other couple that was committed to their child and their community. They managed their stigma by normalizing it; they were doing the same things as the other parents, so the community realized “they aren’t that different from us”. They are a family that loves their children, supports them, and supports this community.

Amy and Carmen shared their experience living in a rural area, in another state. This couple believed that their visibility as a gay couple with a baby raised awareness of the restrictions gay couples’ experienced, and encouraged their community to ask why these restrictions existed.

Carmen: “[We were] certainly the first lesbian family with a baby [in this community] so we did a lot of education we got a lot of cluelessness but it wasn’t hostile or malicious in any way. It was just ‘we don’t know what to make of you’. So we just did a lot of education and people would talk to us about stuff happening, ‘well can’t you get married’, and they didn’t even know, and then they would be kind of like ‘you have this kid together and you can’t get married? That’s terrible.’ In that way being out can be so valuable. Where they are like ‘oh, well you’re these nice people. You clearly care deeply about your child, and you can’t get married?’.”

Carmen believed that being visible to people who had never met a lesbian couple, especially one with a child, helped her community to grow, and question the status quo. Through Carmen and Amy, their community learned about the struggles gay couples faced. Previously if they had learned these facts they may have felt neutral on the subject or even believed gay couples deserved their social and political struggles. However, by Carmen and Amy made themselves available for questions and discussion, and the community was able to grow to

support Carmen and Amy. Unfortunately not everyone was supportive; someone lit their house on fire with them inside in their old rural community. Violet and Isabelle believed the arson was committed by someone who had come into the home as a hired worker, a plumber for instance. They did not want to believe they were being harmed by someone from their direct community. Violet and Isabelle saw themselves as part of the community that they worked to educate on LGBT issues, and they did not believe that they would have been attacked by their community members.

Some participants also recalled times when they believed their visibility as a gay person encouraged a person in their life to stand up to bigoted language.

Isabelle: "I had a friend when I was working at the middle school, we had lunch together every day for a couple of months and I mentioned my partner and she was like 'oh you're gay?' and I was like 'yeah' and she was like 'Wow, I've never known a gay person.' And she was older. She was probably in her fifties at the time, and within a couple of months her sons came for dinner or something and they made a gay joke and she said 'Hey, one of my good friends is gay, don't say that.' I think that what it showed me was that you have to like... you represent, you know what I mean?"

This was an example of Isabelle's natural and passive way of coming out and managing her stigma on her own terms. Isabelle took some time to get to know her coworker, then came out by mentioning her female partner in conversation. However, this casual disclosure made a big impact on her friend who then disciplined her son for making a "gay joke." Isabelle shared that learning what an impact she had on her friend showed her the importance of being out and "representing" the lesbian community in a positive light.

Alex and Kate shared that members of their community had hurtful opinions of gay people and that their opinions were influenced by religion, specifically, the Catholic religion. Like several other participants, they stated they were trying to alter people's opinions, by showing what a LGBT family truly was like.

Alex: “Some people have very strong opinions of [gay people] and we are trying to change those opinions. And you know, a lot of those opinions are based on, what they believe Catholicism is, and we don’t believe that.”

When their religious neighbors warmed to her family, Alex gave a rationale for their acceptance. She had stated that their own family was responsible for their neighbors becoming more open minded about gay people.

Alex: “I don’t think they’ve ever met a gay person or a gay person with children, and I think that’s made a big difference because they’ve had conversations with their friends where they have been like, ‘not all people should be damned,’ and its changed their dialogue with their peers. When we approach people like the guy up on the road that’s like this fourth generation farmer who is Republican, maybe putting a face that they can identify with who they are discriminating against makes a big difference...”

Kate shared her experience with becoming friends with people different from her and how she believed their friendship had affected their neighbor’s interactions with their friends.

Kate: “I think it’s because we want to be a part of their community... quite frankly I think people embrace you when you embrace them. Like our friend was just here, he helps out with our farm, I think he and his wife are involved in some sort of Evangelical Church. I’ve never asked them about it, but I think that we are probably one of the only gay people they have ever met. We have become friends and we are just as different as different could be and that’s kind of nice in a way.”

Kate and Alex believed that their farm was a source of social support for them, just as it was a food source. This coupled had stated earlier that they were respected more by their neighbors than they might have been as a lesbian couple without a farm because people could appreciate that and see similarities to themselves in the participants. Kate believed that their neighbors’ religious background would have originally turned them off from their family, but because Kate and Alex involved themselves in the community, and embraced their neighbors, they were embraced back.

Being a positive representation and educating the community were clearly important to several of the rural area participants. Many of these participants were the only gay people that

their neighbors knew personally, which made these couples the example for LGBT people overall. In addition to representation and education, I also explored how these couples managed their stigmatized identity and to what extent the participants were out about their sexuality in their communities.

Section D: Experiences with Being Out

In Ducker's 1998 work, *Families of Value*, she shared stories of women who were not out in some aspects of their lives, such as at their child's school, because they did not want their children to suffer harassment on their behalf. However, all the participants in my study were out with their children's schools because they believing that the benefits outweighed the harms.

All eleven of the participants of my study stated that they were open about their sexuality to their community. Upon further discussion, I came to realize that some of the participants of my study were more comfortable being out in some areas of their lives than others. I specifically chose not to ask about their disclosure at work because I did not want to draw the focus away from their experience in their community; however, some participants had chosen to share that information with me. As discussed above, Isabelle shared that she came out as gay to her coworker who later told her sons to not make gay jokes because she had "a gay friend".

Justine: "We have always been out and open. We have always been kind of on the bleeding edge of, or I have forced [my wife] to be on the bleeding edge and our point was: I am not having kids if we are going to be ashamed of who we are, we are not having children. Because I am not laying that shit on them."

Justine believed that when a gay person has children, it becomes their responsibility to be out, open, and unashamed of their sexuality, for the sake of their children. When Justine said "I am not laying that shit on them," I believed she meant "shame," in themselves and their family. She did not want her children to experience any internalized homophobia about their parents because they were afraid or ashamed to be out. Once again, these couples put all the pressure and

blame on themselves. They saw it as their responsibility to be “out and open,” regardless of what reactions they may receive. Violet and Isabelle stated that even if a couple wanted to remain closeted, having children makes it impossible.

Violet: “Once you have kids, you can no longer be closeted.”

Isabelle: “They will out you really fast. I think having kids makes it not an option.”

Violet and Isabelle made the point that, making the decision to be out, could be irrelevant because children made the relationship more obvious to the community. Violet went on to state that having children grounds one more deeply into the community, making the coming out process easier and more casual.

Violet: “I think that having kids makes it easier because you meet more people that way. Going to different swim events and the banquet and all the things that they do, you just keep running into the same people, over and over, so they might not have been quite sure at first but the more we showed up to stuff and we participated in stuff, they were like ‘oh, ok’; and that was just sort of the way it was. Whereas without the kids, I don’t know if we would have been to that many things; there’s not a whole lot going on to be involved if you don’t have kids really.”

For Violet, the routine that having children can create, especially in regards to attending swim meets and school events helped her and her partner become more visible as a couple in the community. They let themselves be seen, over and over again, together at their children’s events and let the community figure it out for themselves.

The participants who lived in suburban, progressive areas shared that they were open about their relationship and their sexuality with the community. For instance, Jordan stated her family had been featured in LGBT magazines as “poster children” for an LGBT family.

Jordan: “We were the poster children for gay marriage in [the] county... literally we were holding a poster that said ‘Love Makes a Family.’ We were featured in all these kinds of magazine articles and a bunch of the Michigan marriage initiatives used our picture.”

Jordan and her family felt comfortable being a visible LGBT family and being featured in these LGBT specific magazines and marriage initiative publications. While they were visible within the LGBT community, Jordan stated that, due to the time a brick was thrown through her window, she took some precautions at home. For instance, she did not have any LGBT pride items on her lawn, or in her windows, so her house was less likely to be targeted by homophobic people. I found this contradiction interesting that this family is so open within the LGBT community, yet on their own street they felt the need to take these safety precautions.

Grace and Jade, another suburban couple, were out to their community, especially when it involved their children.

Grace: “When we came to the point of being parents doing a lot of talking beforehand, knowing that we would have to be out, every day, several times a day, and be really comfortable about that in order to be parents in the first place and we talked a lot about that before we went through the process of adoption. [Jade’s] process is that she always e-mails teachers ahead of time or prints out a letter, you know ‘a little background on our family, just so you know what’s going on,’ so that our kids don’t have to out us or tell their teachers that they have two moms, and also [we let them know] that we have lots of [LGBT] books, and we are willing to talk about it.”

Jade: “We lead with it pretty strongly with first contact with kids friend’s parents. I had an experience recently where [our daughter] wanted to go to a birthday party and we don’t know the family and ‘the first thing you should probably know is that [our daughter] has two moms’ . . . So it’s very intentional, where it would be quite easy to pick up the phone if you are calling that person for the very first time and say, I’m [our daughter’s] mom, or you know whatever, or even walking in for the first time with the kid’s friends or whatever I always say “I’m *one of* [our daughter’s] moms.”

This couple was in a mode of constantly outing themselves to others. Grace stated that in order for them to become parents, they needed to be comfortable being out “several times a day.” I interpreted this as constantly correcting misused pronouns when strangers assume their spouse is a man and getting ahead of the curve by mentioning their “wife” in conversation, so people didn’t mistake their sexuality. Jade stated that she outed herself before there was even a chance for someone to mistake her family situation. Before playdates, they were forward about their

family situation. For instance, they would say they were “one” of their children’s moms. Jade and Grace stated that with these various interactions they had never experienced any negativity from community members. Often times, there was a nervous reassurance from their daughter’s friends’ parents such as, “Oh that’s just fine” and “That’s great!” when Grace or Jade explained their family dynamic. Most likely these parents were slightly taken aback by this couples straightforwardness. This was very much in contrast with rural couple Violet and Isabelle, who came out to others through visibility at school events as a united couple, and let people figure it out on their own.

Jade and Grace made a strong effort to engrain themselves in their community, and also come out to their new neighbors. When they moved to the area, they had a party and invited all their new neighbors. They felt they needed to show people that they were a “normal, friendly family,” and that having gay neighbors was nothing to be worried about or afraid of.

Jade: “The very first summer we were here I said ‘we are going to have a neighborhood get together, and we are going to invite the people over. We’ll say come on down so that we all know each other because I do believe that you have to lead with that strong, ‘this is ok, I’m a real person.’”

The concept of leading by example, showing the community that “yes, you are a real person,” is one expressed by participants, rural and suburban. These couples tried to show there community who they were, so they could see beyond what they had heard or thought about gay people and respect these couples as other human beings.

While all the participants shared stories of being out in their community, the suburban participants seemed to be the most purposefully exposed about their sexuality. Jordan’s family picture was in LGBT magazines, and Jade and Grace invited their whole neighborhood over after, so everyone would have the opportunity to meet them and see them as regular people. Jordan had stated in her interview that she was one of many same sex couples in her

neighborhood, which likely makes her more comfortable with being out in such a public way.

Jordan, Jade and Grace live in suburban areas so there was less privacy in terms of neighbors and space; they were certainly not living on a hundred acres like some of the rural participants.

However, because there were other same sex couples living in the area, they had the opportunity for more social privacy than the rural area participants because they were not such a novelty.

Carmen went out of her way to make sure her children's teachers were aware that her children come from a two mother household, particularly the teachers of their young daughter who had developmental delays in her verbal communication skills. She wanted to make sure her child's teachers could explain that their daughter had two moms instead of a mom and dad to another student, if the situation were to arise.

Carmen: "Sometimes we'll work with the teacher to kind of pave the way for the new kids because she's not as easily able to explain [our family] herself as [our son was able to] at the same age..."

Amy shared how she came out very naturally and casually at work, to her boss.

Amy: "I just started a new job. I didn't bring it up in an awkward way, but it happened that one day the boss didn't have childcare, and he ended up bringing the kids to his office, and he knows that I've got kids too. It just became natural in the course of conversation to say well 'I'm lucky my wife's home for the summer' so that's how I ended up coming out to him and that's how I usually do it, when it comes up, in a natural way."

It was interesting to see the different ways Amy and Carmen managed their stigma under different situations. When it affected their child's social experiences at school, Carmen made sure her relationship with Amy was clear to their child's teacher, so he or she could explain it to classmates if necessarily. However, Amy waited awhile to come out to her boss in casual conversation after she got to know him. This diversity in stigma management strategy connects with what some participants said about not being able to be discreet when your children are

involved. The participants believed that for the good of their children's self-esteem about themselves and their families, parents must be out.

Luckily, Amy had a positive experience coming out to her boss. In Connolly and Leedy's 2007 article, which focused on the experiences of gay and lesbian people coming out to friends and coworkers, they found the majority of reactions were either positive or mixed. Amy's coming out process went hand-in-hand with Sam's philosophy on exposure. Sam stated: "If you're not embarrassed of you, then they're not embarrassed of you... You know like we're no different than anybody else, if you don't act different you won't be treated different." Amy found a commonality between her and her boss (being parents of small children) and used that commonality to come out in natural, casual conversation.

Sam and Justine also came out to school personnel, before their children started attending the school. Justine was hesitant to move their family to a rural area and insisted that she and Sam meet with the principal before they considered moving to a rural area.

Justine: "Before I would buy the house I made us an appointment with the principal, and we went to meet with her and she was absolutely lovely. I asked her, 'Well how are you going to protect my daughter?' and she was like, 'We will take care of all situations as they occur and she will be just fine.'"

Justine was not going to live in an area that was in a school district that would not support the safety and wellbeing of her child. If her child was being bullied for having two moms, then she expected the school to do something about. If they were not going to do anything, then it was not going to be the school for her children or the area that they would be living in.

Justine and the other participants were out in their community largely because they wanted to do what they felt was best for their children. In addition, having children made it difficult to not be out due to the community events they became involved in. Still, there were

several barriers mentioned to being open about their sexuality that the participants of my study shared.

Barriers experienced by participants to being out

Hetrosexism

When I asked the participants if there were any aspects of their lives where they chose to conceal their sexuality, some quickly said “no.” Upon further discussion there were some barriers that were discussed by the participants that were not automatically thought of as barriers to them.

Justine stated that their children’s school forms still used “mother and father” instead of a more inclusive “parent one, parent two” standard. Jordan shared that she and her wife were often assumed to be heterosexual, and they made an effort to increase their visibility as a gay couple by adding a rainbow keychain to their keys, and having a LGBT “stick family” bumper sticker on their car.

Jordan: “We go to home depot and her rainbow keychain is hanging out, that’s part of the reason she wears all the rainbows and everything because otherwise she’s never visibly a lesbian...My wife also has the two women with a daughter sticker on her car.”

For Jordan and her wife, visibility was extremely important. Similar to Jade and Grace, they went out of their way to make sure people knew they were a couple; they wanted to be that representation for people in their community. From being featured in LGBT magazines to Jordan’s wife having rainbow decorations and her “stick figure family,” it was clear how important displaying their gay identities were to them.

Several of the participants also stated that they informed the teachers about their family dynamic for various reasons. The fact that these parents had to put forth such an effort to make sure their families were being understood correctly by their community is an exhausting task,

and even if carefully monitored, it was likely that misunderstandings and wrongful assumptions about their family's dynamic happened frequently. In addition to the effects living in a heteronormative society had, some couples felt the need to somewhat conceal their sexuality as a precaution against violent attacks. The three individuals who had been victims of crimes in the past now take some precautions to protect themselves from further victimization.

Fear of Violence

Fear of violence was a barrier to being out for some participants, both rural and suburban.

Amy and Carmen shared that they did not hold hands in unfamiliar rural areas.

Amy: "We are careful if we are somewhere rural and alone, or vastly outnumbered, like a trailhead where I wouldn't hold hands with Carmen; where somebody could be observing us and they could follow us somewhere; or in a smaller unfamiliar town or unfamiliar neighborhood."

Amy and Carmen did not display that they were a couple on the trails where someone could be hiding to ambush them, or in a town or neighbor that they were unfamiliar with. They did state that they would hold hands when they go into town in their own area; it was the unfamiliar they were uncomfortable with. This strategy of self-preservation was very much in contrast to the concept of being out and open, having it be the participant's responsibility to educate and set an example for how the community reacted to them. Rather than educating and normalizing their stigmatized trait, Amy and Carmen chose to pass in situations they considered dangerous. Amy and Carmen also shared they did not out themselves if a stranger came to do work in their home.

Carmen: "When people are here [working on the house], we don't like to let people on to [our relationship], like that makes me a little nervous."

Amy and Carmen had been victims of arson in their previous home so they were cautious about strangers. They believed that the arsonist who set fire to their home was a person who had been inside it to work on it. Now they conceal their relationship when those situations arise.

Jordan stated that after a hate crime against a lesbian woman occurred in her town, she tried to make her house less identifiable as a home of lesbian parents, as a precaution.

Jordan: “I did take down the sign after the woman was beaten in [our city] who had gotten married. So I don’t do that anymore. I don’t identify our home; I try not to do that.”

Jordan, who was very out and open in the LGBT community, felt that to protect her family she needed to take down objects that identified her home as belonging to a lesbian couple. Due to a fear of violence, Jordan and her wife were forced between a rock and a hard place, wanting to be visible as members of the LGBT community and a good example for their children, but also wanting to protect themselves and their family. Therefore, disclosure was somewhat of a balancing act for some of the participants of my study.

Fear of Judgement

Some participants also stated that a fear of judgement sometimes prevented them from being out in their community. Alex shared a story about how she felt uncomfortable outing herself at the town fair to another community member because she was not sure what their response would be.

Alex: “There was this raffle and they were like ‘Do you have a spouse?’ and I was like, ‘Oh yeah!’ And then I [thought to myself]... ‘Now I have to come out’. And they said ‘What’s your spouse’s name,’ and I [nervously told them] and they were fine about it.”

This is in relation to a conversation Alex had with a volunteer who was selling raffle tickets at a fair. The volunteer wanted to collect her spouse’s name and phone number as well as her own, so they could reach them if they won. The fair volunteer had a positive response, but this short example was a representation of the “is it worth it?” game LGBT people such as Alex play with themselves. “Is it worth it to honest with this stranger, use the right pronouns regarding my partner, change their ‘he’s’ to ‘she’s’ and hope for a positive outcome, or do I just let this one

go?” Sometimes participants chose to pass as straight rather than go through the social awkwardness of correcting someone they’re speaking to just briefly.

Carmen stated that sometimes it was just easier to let people assume she was in a heterosexual relationship, and it could even be beneficial at places such as the hardware store.

Carmen: “I have to say sometimes I work [the assumption I am straight] just because I’m at the hardware store and I want help but I don’t want to get into it with the guy. I want to play this role of helpless wife, who doesn’t know anything. ‘Oh my spouse does it’, and just kind of let him assume ‘husband’ and go from there.”

Carmen says sometimes she “works” the assumption by others that she is a heterosexual, when it can be to her benefit, like at the hardware store. Employees will likely help her through the steps of buying the right parts. Carmen alluded to the idea that if she were to out herself to the hardware store worker she would not have received as good of service. She stated she might have “gotten into it” with the worker, perhaps meaning that she would have had to experience some “lude comments” like Jordan reported she sometimes received. Rather than dealing with all of that, she chose to pass because it benefited her in the moment with a stranger she’ll only be working with for a few minutes. She did not lie necessarily; just let the male worker assume she was straight because that was the heteronormative default for “spouse.”

While the participants of my study shared several examples of how they were out in their everyday life and the ways in which they tried to manage their identity by education, positive representation, and embracing the culture of their community, some participants also shared times when they felt more comfortable passing, be it for safety reasons or to avoid social discomfort. It was interesting to learn of this handful of passing stories because several of the participants put so much pressure on themselves to be out in their community. The couples who were willing to share their passing stories were the participants who were less adamant on the importance of visibility and education, but it was still something that was of somewhat

importance to all of the participants. I found it to be a brave act that these participants were willing to share their moments of fear and uncertainty with me, in addition to their stories of steadfast visibility.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS

Through speaking with these eleven participants, I was able to discover themes involved in the experiences of being a lesbian parent in rural and suburban areas and how those experiences were managed by these participants. Most of the participants, rural and suburban, were living where they were because they believed it provided a better life for their children. Parents in rural areas believed that the schools, slow pace of things, and extensive land and wildlife was good for themselves and their family. An interesting contradiction found was that many rural area participants stated they enjoyed their independence and privacy by not having to live “on top of their neighbors.” However, because many of these participants were the only (or one of the only) lesbian couples in the area, they attracted a lot of attention and gossip when they went into town. Carmen and Amy were simply known as “The Lesbians” when they moved in to the area, and Sam shared that a female friend of hers was forbidden by her husband to go to the pub with her. Lesbian parents with small kids made having any privacy unlikely, but lesbians who moved to an area where they were the only gay couple, guaranteed them heightened community visibility.

Two rural area participant couples, Carmen and Amy, and Sam and Justine, initially stated that they thoroughly enjoyed living in a rural area, and that there were no problems at all. Alex and Katie stated that they had had some coldness, but their neighbors had warmed up to them. There was only one couple from a rural area, Violet and Isabelle, that extensively shared their continued exclusion by several community members because of their sexuality. Those who had managed to become friendly with their neighbors had to work at it; they were not automatically accepted. They engaged in stigma management strategies by way of farming and trading goods and services with other rural neighbors. Amy and Katie stated that their fourth

generation conservative farming neighbors grew to respect them and even become their friends because they saw how hard they worked as farmers. The participants managed their stigma by trying to shift from the out-group, to the in-group. As discussed in Social Identity Theory, there is always an in-group and an out-group, and by trying to integrate themselves into the rural society, they were making their identity as a rural person stronger than their identity as a gay person in the eyes of some of their community members.

Sam stated that the secret to community acceptance was respecting oneself, and letting that respect show. She said if you are not embarrassed of yourself, then the community will follow suit and treat you with the respect you act like you deserve. Several of the participants from rural and suburban areas put the pressure on themselves and other LGBT individuals to put themselves out there, demand respect, simulate into the community, and be a model gay couple and available for any questions from the community on LGBT issues. They felt that if a couple held their heads high, participated in events just like any other community members, and were available to assist their neighbors when they were in need, then they would be accepted. If a couple was not being accepted by the community, Sam, in particular, stated that person should look at themselves and see what they are doing wrong. This sort of thinking put the pressure completely on the participants when in reality several participants followed these rules and still experienced exclusion and harassment. These stigma management strategies, while most likely somewhat helpful in getting the community to warm up to them, were not one hundred percent effective. For instance, Carmen and Amy experienced exclusion from three separate neighboring families. In one instance, Carmen and her daughter headed down to meet their new neighbors. They brought them eggs, and offered to let their child ride their horse sometime. Unfortunately they were responded to coldly by the neighbor. When exclusion did occur, being “religious,”

“ignorant,” “traditional,” or “not from the area” were the reasons used by participants for why they were not welcomed. Most of the participants who faced issues with exclusion or harassment saw the people wronging them as being part of an out-group and themselves as part of the in-group. These participants were overall defendant of their rural community, so if they did share any experiences with homophobia, they separated the perpetrator out from the main community. For instance, when Sam’s female friend was forbidden by her husband to spend time at the pub with her, she stated that it was because they were the “ignorant, uneducated, traditional” type of person; she put them in an out-group category separate from herself and those in the community that have accepted and befriended her. When Isabelle and Violet were harassed at the fireworks, they stated that the people who called them “dykes” were most likely not from the area, putting these people in the out-group. For the most part, these couples felt that by being a part of the community, being visible and unapologetic as a gay couple, and being a positive representation for lesbian women were contributing factors to their acceptance. If there were people who still did not accept them, participants stated was because those people were part of a small unfavorable out-group.

Of the stigma management strategies shared by the participants, educating their community on what a “regular” lesbian couple was like, being out and open with the community, and being good parents and neighbors by emerging themselves in their community was discussed the most. This was followed by rural participants sharing that being a good honest farmer, as well as sharing and trading services and goods with other community members helped them gain respect by other farmers, even farmers who were “religious” and “traditional.” The stigma management strategy discussed the least was when participants chose to pass as heterosexual in their community. This was done either out of fear of judgement or violence. The majority of the

couples I spoke with shared how important it was to be completely out for their children and how not being out could be detrimental to a child's self-esteem. Still, participants displayed that there were exceptions to this rule; physical safety and the avoidance of occasional social awkwardness were named as two reasons participants chose to pass.

Were the experiences for these participants as isolating as the experiences for rural LGBT people that were discussed by previous researchers? It certainly seemed that way for Carmen and Amy, who were rejected by three of their geographically closest neighbors. However, most of the participants were able to form close bonds with neighbors and community members. While society has made some progress, it is important to remember that these women had to actively work at being accepted; it was not something that was just handed to them. Even with these social strides in being respected by community members, they still were victims of social exclusion, homophobia, and heterosexism. In addition to this, some participants still sometimes concealed their sexuality and passed as heterosexual to protect themselves from violence. This is in quite a contrast to the ideal rural lifestyle originally painted by the participants when the interview first started. To be fair, I had asked them what they liked about living where they did, and they told me. However, the violence, homophobia, and harassment reported felt in contrast with the type of place they initially described.

In terms of the support networks of LGBT organizations that stretch long distances discussed in the current literature, the participants had a practically identical experience. Several were a part of an online group of LGBT parents who shared their experiences with different schools, teachers, towns, and worship communities, in online threads so other women knew where LGBT affirming places were and what places to avoid. This became incredibly useful when participants were choosing where to send their children to school for instance. While I felt

that I was able to learn a great deal about the stigma management strategies of rural and suburban lesbian couples and the hardships they face, my study was not without limitations.

One limitation was I only recruited lesbian couples who were already somewhat involved with other LGBT people and organizations. Thus, those who participated in this study were more likely to be at least somewhat out, than someone who was not involved in the LGBT community at all. Another limitation was that the pride the participants had in their community may have made participants kinder in their rendition of their experiences, than what they truly experienced. Several participants certainly carried a protective and defensive tone when talking about their community.

Another limitation of the study is that I only interviewed eleven participants. The population was so specific that it was hard to access couples who fit the criteria. If I had opened the study up to all LGBT parents, both male and female without residential constraints I may have received a greater interest, but that would have negated the purpose of my study, which was to learn about the community experiences, barriers, and stigma management strategies of rural lesbian parents. I wanted to interview this population because there was little research done on this demographic in the past. Even though the sample population is small I found the data I was able to collect to be significant in learning more about rural community life for lesbian couples with children and suburban life for my three suburban lesbian mother participants.

All of the participants lived within approximately a half-hour from a mid-sized city that was noted for being progressive. I believe this made a significant difference in the findings. I think if these interviews were held with participants who were a hundred miles away from a progressive, liberal, city the results would have differed. Several of the participants noted that people moving out of the city to the surrounding rural areas had a significant impact on the

culture of their towns. Amy stated, “In some ways we feel like the kind of work that we would have to be doing has already been done” in regards to educating their neighbors and schools about LGBT families.

A situation that was possibly both helpful and deterring was that I outed myself as a gay person on my fliers, as well as within minutes of speaking with the participants in case they didn't notice it in the flier. I chose to do this because I wanted them to know that my interest in their experiences came from a positive place, and that I was not going to twist or misuse the information they shared with me. I wanted to make them feel as comfortable as possible when I asked my questions, and I felt that by being honest about myself, it would help them to trust me and open up to me. Prior to our interview, Alex called me on the phone and asked me questions about my study to decide if she wanted to participate. She asked very straightforwardly, “This isn't going to be written from an ultra-right winged perspective right?” That is when I assured her that I was gay as well, and I had no plans to do that, and she completely let down her guard.

During my interviews, I would causally out myself. For example, if the participant(s) had a dog, I would mention that my girlfriend and I planned to adopt one soon. If one of the participants worked in the school, I would mention that my girlfriend was a teacher. I did this to make the participants feel more comfortable. It may have been a limitation in some ways, however. It is possible that being out about my sexuality and relationship to the participants made them want to appear to be more out than they truly were. Regardless of this, from the examples they shared, it was apparent that the participants were out to their community to some degree.

Through speaking with these eleven individuals, I was granted a unique opportunity to gain insight into a population that researchers have previously largely passed over. I am thankful for the opportunity to speak with them, hear their stories, and learn from their experiences.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Recruitment Flier



Volunteers Needed for Research Study



We need participants for a research study:

“Fitting In: A Study of Lesbian Mothers in Rural Southeastern Michigan”

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to learn more about the lives of women in rural areas and small towns who are raising children within a lesbian relationship. This study is part of a Master’s Thesis being conducted by Allison Ranusch, a lesbian graduate student at Eastern Michigan University.

Eligibility: I am interested in interviewing women living in a rural area or small town in Southeast Michigan who are in a lesbian relationship in which they share a household and are raising at least one child (K-12th grade).

Participation: Couples who agree to participate in the research will be asked to grant an interview, which should last approximately 45 minutes to an hour. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Your identity and the identity of your community will be kept strictly confidential.

Compensation: If you participate in this study, you and your partner will receive a **\$20 Visa gift card** to share.

Contact: If you would like to participate in this study or have questions about the study answered, please contact Allison Ranusch, at aranusch@emich.edu or (586) 354-4329

This research is conducted under the direction of Dr. Denise Reiling, Sociology Department, and has been reviewed and approved by the Eastern Michigan University Institutional Review Board.

Appendix B: Interview Questions

Introduction

1. Tell me about yourself.
 - a. How long you two have been together.
 - b. Tell me a little about your child/children?

Rural Area

2. What is it like to live in this area?
3. Please share with me how long you have lived here.
 - a. What led to your decision to live here?
 - i. What is one of your favorite aspects of this area?
 - ii. What is one of your least favorite aspects of this area?
4. Do you find that your family faces any barriers to acceptance by your community due to being a same sex parent household?
 - a. Could you give me some examples?

Community disclosure

5. Please share with me how open you are about your partner/family with your neighbors and community members.
 - a. Could you give me an example of a time you displayed your level of openness in your community.
6. What factors led to how “out” you are, regarding your family dynamic within your neighborhood and community?
 - a. In what aspects of your family’s life do you protect your family’s identity, if any?
 1. Could you share with me what led to this decision?

7. Please discuss how accepting you have found your community members to be, who are aware of your family dynamic. Could you give me an example of how you came to this conclusion?

Organization involvement and disclosure

8. Could you discuss the types of programs/organizations you are involved in, if any?
 - a. How out are you about your family to these program/organization members?

Disclosure at child's school

9. Could you discuss with me the level of disclosure your child has regarding your family dynamic, among his/her school/social circle?
10. Does your child participate in any sort of after school activity?
 - a. Is there ever a time when you and your partner are around a lot of other student's parents?
 - i. When you attend a game or function of your child together, how out are you around the other parents?
11. Are you open about your relationship to your child's teachers, coaches, friends, friends parents, etc.
 - a. Has this level of disclosure had an effect on your child's school experience in anyway? (Please explain)

School's level of inclusion

12. How supportive/inclusive would you say your child's school is? Could you give me an example of what made you feel this way?
 - a. Do you know of any LBGT programs at your child's school or LBGT books or people discussed in your child's classes?

- a. To your knowledge, does the school bring to light the existence and/or experience of same sex parent families?
 - i. If it does, how so?

Additional Comments

13. Is there anything else you would like to share, that you feel is an important factor in understanding your family's experience?

Appendix C: Informed Consent Form

Eastern Michigan University: Informed Consent Agreement

Project Title: “Fitting In: A Study of Lesbian Mothers in Rural Michigan”

Investigator: Allison Ranusch, Eastern Michigan University

Co-Investigator: Dr. Denise Reiling, Dr. Tricia McTague

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this research study is to gain a better understanding of the experiences of women raising a family in a rural area who are in a same sex relationship. A goal of this research is to aid to the visibility of this understudied population, in hopes that continued understanding and education will improve the lives of rural same sex couples and their families. This study involves research in the form of interviews.

Procedure: I will be asking you questions regarding your experience, as a rural woman and mother in a same sex relationship, in your community. These questions will allow me to learn about your experience living in a rural area, as well as your experience with disclosing your sexuality and relationship to the community. I will also ask you questions regarding your level of involvement in various community organizations. The questions are designed to be open ended, rather than “yes or no” questions. I will be interviewing you and your partner together, and your joint narrative will be recorded either through the use of audio recording, or if you prefer, I will only take written notes. Upon completing the interview, you will be given a duplicate copy of this informed consent, which includes follow up contact information, if needed. The interview will last approximately 1 hour.

Confidentiality: To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms will be assigned to you, your children and anyone else you discuss, as well as the towns in which you reside. You will be described as residents of a rural area or small town in Michigan. I will be the only person who has access to audio recordings. Transcripts of the interviews may be viewed by me as well as my two committee members who are advising me on this study after they are entered into my computer. Paper notes will be transferred to my password protected personal computer by the day following the interview, and then the paper notes will be destroyed. If you consent to it, I will be using an audio recording device to record and store data. . If you are participating in a phone interview, if you consent to it, you and your partner and I will conduct the interview on “speaker phone”, and I will use a separate recording device to record the conversation. You may request that the audio recorder be shut off at any point during the interview. If you chose be audio recorded I will

transfer our interview to my computer and have it deleted off of my audio recording device. This informed consent form will be kept in my thesis chair's office, where it will be safe and secure.

Expected Risks: The only foreseeable risk of this study is you may become emotionally stressed during or after the interview. Though it is not my intention, it is possible that my questions may stir unpleasant memories and negative feelings. If you feel any distress following this interview, the references below may help.

Affirmations (Southeastern Michigan lesbian and gay community center)

Phone: (248) 398-7105

Helpline: (248) 398- GAYS (4297)

Gay & Lesbian National Hotline

Services are completely free and totally confidential.

Monday - Friday 6-11 PM

Saturday and Sunday 5-10 PM

1-888-THE-GLNH

Expected Benefits: You may find that you benefit personally from this study through talking about your experiences in a confidential environment. Also, there has been very little research done on this topic. Making your experiences more visible may help other women who are living in rural areas, and are in same sex relationships in the future.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary. In order to conduct the interview, you and your partner need to give consent. You may choose to end your participation at any point during the interview and your input will not be used in the study publication. If one person chooses to end the interview, and the other wants to continue, I am open to continuing the interview with that individual. There will be no penalty for choosing to terminate the interview. If you are not comfortable answering a specific question, we can skip it, and continue on with the interview.

Compensation: You and your partner will receive a \$20 Visa gift card to share, for participating in this study, even if you and/or your partner decide not to finish the interview.

Use of Research Results: The results of this study will be used as a part of my Master's Thesis I am writing as a Masters student of Eastern Michigan University's Sociology Graduate School Program. Statements made by you may be used in my Master's Thesis which will be published and presented at Eastern Michigan University. No names or identifying information will be revealed in the publication or presentation of the results. I may also submit my findings to academic conferences. No identifying information will be given at the academic conferences either.

Future Questions: If you have any questions concerning your participation in this study at any time, you may contact the principal investigator, Allison Ranusch at (586) 354-4329 or via email at aranusch@emich.edu. You can also contact the thesis chair of this study, Denise Reiling, at dreiling@emich.edu. This research protocol and informed consent document has been reviewed and approved by the Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Committee (UHSRC) for use from April 16th 2014 to April 16th 2015. If you have questions about the approval process, please contact the UHSRC at human.subjects@emich.edu or call 734-487-0042.

Consent to Participate: I have read or had read to me the above information regarding this research study, including the research procedures, possible risks, and the likelihood of any benefit to me. The content and meaning of this information has been explained to me. All my questions, at the time, have been answered. I hereby consent and do voluntarily offer to take part in this study.

Participant's signature _____

Print name _____ Date _____

Investigator's signature _____

Print name _____ Date _____

In Person Participants Only: I give my permission for this interview to be audio recorded. I understand that my ability to participate in this study is not affected by my decision on whether or not to be audio recorded. I understand that I still may participate in the study if I do not consent to this interview being audio recorded. I understand that even if I sign this, if during the interview, I decide I do not want to be audio recorded, I can request that the audio recording device be turned off.

Participant's signature: _____

Print name: _____ Date _____

Investigator's signature: _____

Print name: _____ Date _____

Phone Interviews Participants Only: I give my permission for this interview to be audio recorded while I participate in this interview on "speaker phone". I understand that the interviewer will be in a private room when this interview takes place, and she will be the only person who will hear this interview. I understand that my ability to participate in this study is not affected by my decision on whether or not to be audio recorded. I understand that I still may participate in the study if I do not consent to this interview being audio recorded. I understand

that even if I sign this, if during the interview, I decide I do not want to be audio recorded, I can request that the audio recording device be turned off. I understand that if at any point I want to be taken off of “speaker phone” my request will be granted. I understand that I still may participate in the study if I do not consent to this interview being conducted on speaker phone. If I do not wish to be on speaker phone, I understand that I will also not be audio recorded.

Participant’s signature: _____

Print name: _____ Date _____

Investigator’s signature: _____

Print name: _____ Date _____