

## Intentional Families: Fictive Kin Ties Between Cross-Gender, Different Sexual Orientation Friends

*This study explores the nature of intentional family relationships between friends of different genders and different sexual orientations. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 46 members of 23 friendship dyads, I first make the case that the friends considered one another family and I specify the criteria they use for making such designations. I then focus on the ways in which gender and sexual orientation influenced relationships between lesbians and straight men and between gay men and straight women. The data provided evidence that the dyad members identified one another as family and served the functions of family for each other. The findings also suggest that various gender issues affect cross-gender, different sexual orientation relationships. Exploring the meaning and functioning of these intentional family ties documents their existence and illuminates their meaning and maintenance.*

There is a pervasive cultural belief that biolegal family connections are the most salient and durable bonds between individuals. They are reinforced through customs, rituals, and laws that privilege familial relationships over nonkin ties and determine who may be defined as family. As experienced, however, family life often diverges from normative definitions. This study

explores one type of divergence: the mutual experience of friendship as family in close friendships between gay men and straight women and between lesbians and straight men.

This work builds on prior research about experiences of family relationships with nonkin. Through discourse (Gubrium & Holstein, 1990) and practice (Stack, 1974), friends often are defined as family. For many gay men and lesbians, friendship and family are combined into chosen family networks (Weston, 1991) that typically comprise not only other gay men and lesbians but also some straight people (Oswald, 2002; Weston) who presumably deem the gay men and lesbians to be family members as well. Virtually, no previous research has examined the mutuality of gay men and lesbians serving as chosen family for their straight friends. This study explores close friendships between gay men and straight women and between lesbians and straight men to learn how each feels about and enacts these fictive family ties.

### EXISTING LITERATURE ABOUT FRIENDSHIP AND FAMILY

There is a considerable overlap in the functions that friends and family serve (Fehr, 1996). Trust, respect, caring, and intimacy have been identified as attributes of friends, family, and romantic relationships (Wilmot & Shellen, 1990). Friendships are less regulated than romantic relationships by social norms, receive less time, are less exclusive, and are easier to dissolve (Wiseman, 1986; Wright, 1985); thus, friendship is, at once, the most flexible and most tenuous of social relationships. In contrast, family is a regulated social

---

Department of Sociology, Loyola Marymount University, One LMU Drive, Los Angeles, CA 90045 (amuraco@lmu.edu).

*Key Words:* family, fictive kin, friendship, gender, sexual orientation.

Table 1. *Themes Used to Code and Analyze Intentional Family Data*

Theme	Subtheme	Sample Quote
Identification as family		[It's] as important as my relationship with my husband, and more important than my relationship with both of my parents, who I'm not very fond of anyway—If I lost him, I would be devastated. It would be the same as losing a spouse, or a brother, or something like that.— <i>Monique, straight woman</i> He feels really kind of more like family to me than a friend, so he's kind of like one of those people that you always know will be there.— <i>Debbi, lesbian</i>
Functions of family	Financial support	I'm always trying to get her stable in her life. I'm always worried about her finances and everything and worried about her getting a 401K going, I'm worried about her when she's 70 and all that stuff, so I wanted her to own real estate ... — <i>Scott, gay man</i>
	Emotional support	We've been there for each other in a way that my family hasn't necessarily been there for me.— <i>Stuart, straight man</i>
Gender issues, different by dyad type	Life transitions	We do have future plans for when we're old. Well, you know, he bought this place in Tahoe. It's this beautiful place. And it's on this hill and right below it there's this little cottage (laughs). That's where I'm going to live.— <i>Ruth, straight woman</i>
	Anxiety over chosen family	She's going to make me an uncle one day. Well, depending on where they are living. Although that's what I worry about too, just because people change.— <i>Connor, gay man</i>

institution that is expected to provide material and social care and connection to its members (Cherlin, 2002). Although definitions of family are socially and legally contested, the functions that families serve are similar regardless of who performs the tasks. That is, various forms of work including emotional support, financial assistance, and care throughout the life course lie at the center of family life (Carrington, 1999; Hartmann, 1981; Hochschild & Machung, 1989). These functions are important to the extent that people who lack or are alienated from desired family support often build fictive kinship networks (Weston, 1991).

The pervasive notion that there is only one definition of family has been challenged by contemporary kinship studies (Stacey, 1996; Weston, 1991). For instance, chosen family structures of gay men and lesbians typically comprise partners, former partners, and friends and may also include biological family members (Nardi, 1999; Weston). These structures provide social and instrumental support in a reciprocal and voluntary manner (Carrington, 1999; Nardi; Stacey, 1998). Chosen family networks are important for gay men and lesbians who, historically, have had compromised access to families of origin because of rejection or geographical distance resulting from a move to live in lesbian, gay, bisexual,

and transgender (LGBT) communities (Chauncey, 1994; Nardi). Gay men and lesbians also have constructed alternative family forms to challenge normative conceptions of "the family" (Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan, 2001). Moreover, restrictive laws limit gay men's and lesbians' full participation in legally sanctioned forms of family life that emerge from marriage and parenthood.

Prior studies showed that straight people also form chosen family relationships when nuclear family ties are limited (Lindsey, 1981). The previous research focuses on communities that are marginalized with regards to age (MacRae, 1992), race (Chatters, Robert, & Jayakody, 1994; Stack, 1974), or country of origin (Ebaugh & Curry, 2000). For example, in Black and recent immigrant communities, fictive kin are added into an extended family unit, which increases the number of people who participate in a family network (Chatters et al., 1994; Ebaugh & Curry; Stack). Fictive kin and chosen families have in common an expansion of resources through familial arrangements.

In general, nonmarginalized straight people who have access to nuclear families are not expected to rely upon chosen family bonds despite wide historical variations in family life (Coontz, 1992; Lindsey, 1981). Similar to gay men and

lesbians, however, both straight individuals who are alienated or geographically distant from their families of origin and lifelong straight singles sometimes turn friends into chosen families (Rubin, 1985; Stein, 1981). Changing demographics also contribute to straight adults' contemporary creation of chosen families. Many people remain single well into adulthood; in the Year 2000, one in four individuals aged 35 years and older had never been married (Egelman, 2004). Similarly, single and widowed older adults often rely on support from friends whom they view as family members (MacRae, 1992). Hence, many singles form networks to fulfill family functions.

Because research about chosen families has focused either on gay men's and lesbians' networks (Carrington, 1999; Nardi, 1999; Stacey, 1998) or on straights' fictive kin arrangements (Chatters et al., 1994; Ebaugh & Curry, 2000; MacRae, 1992; Stack, 1974), there appears to be little overlap in their networks. The fact that straight friends are identified as part of lesbians' and gay men's chosen families (Weston, 1991), however, suggests that choosing kin may bring gay, lesbian, and straight people, same and cross-gender, together in family networks (Oswald, 2002; Tillmann-Healy, 2001). An examination of such friendships is an important step in understanding the interconnectedness of these family structures.

This study explores the nature of intentional family relationships between friends of different genders and different sexual orientations. Drawing on in-depth interviews with members of 23 dyads, I first make the case that the friends considered one another family and I specify the criteria they use for making such designations. I then focus on the ways in which gender and sexual orientation influenced relationships between lesbians and straight men and between gay men and straight women. I explore the meaning and function of these friendships to document their existence and to illuminate their maintenance and significance.

#### METHOD

This study is based on interviews about close friendships between gay men and straight women and between lesbians and straight men. I did not include lesbian-straight woman or gay man-straight man friendships in the sample because the goal of this research was to explore how the intersection of gender and sexual orientation af-

fects close, platonic relationships between men and women who are free from sexual and romantic expectations.

Gay men and lesbians were recruited via convenience, snowball sampling, beginning with personal contacts in the San Francisco Bay Area LGBT communities and expanding through participants' own social networks. Some participants were recruited via fliers sent to local LGBT organizations and advertisements posted on community bulletin boards. Respondents were asked to volunteer to participate in a study designed to learn more about close friendships between gay men and straight women and between lesbians and straight men. The respondents were told that to be included in the study, both members of the friendship needed to be willing and able to participate in an individual interview.

Between October 2002 and August 2003, 53 people who were part of 25 friendship dyads and one triad were interviewed. For the purposes of the analyses in this study, I omitted the data from seven interviewees: three of the individuals were in a triad, two in a dyad who were interviewed together, and two individuals whose friend was unavailable to be interviewed. Thus, data from 46 interviewees in 23 friendship pairs were analyzed for this study. The interviewees self-identified as male ( $n = 23$ ) and female ( $n = 23$ ) and as straight ( $n = 23$ ), gay ( $n = 12$ ), and lesbian ( $n = 11$ ). None of the participants were transgender. The participants ranged in age from 21 to 64 years, with a median age of 32 years. The racial composition of the sample was 59% White, 17% Latino, 19% Asian, and 4% Black. All participants were high school graduates, 19% with some college, 43% with a bachelor's degree, 31% with a graduate degree, and 7% with a doctoral degree. I did not collect data about income level. Of the 46 participants discussed here, 24 were partnered or married and 22 single or unpartnered. By dyad, the marital/partnered status was as follows: members were married/partnered in eight pairs, both members were single in four pairs, and one member was married/partnered and one single in 11 pairs.

The participants primarily were residents of the San Francisco Bay Area and surrounding counties, though six interviewees resided in the Los Angeles area. Two of the participants from Los Angeles were members of friendship dyads with a San Francisco Bay Area resident; the two Los Angeles dyads were referred to me by other participants. In two cases, I traveled to interview

participants who lived in other parts of the country (Seattle and Chicago).

### *Procedures*

I interviewed the 46 members of 23 friendship pairs separately. I kept confidential what one friend said of the other. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 2 hours, with an average length of 90 minutes, and were tape recorded and transcribed.

The interview schedule asked respondents to focus on their close friend and to address questions in five primary areas: friendship formation and maintenance including norms and expectations, the significance of the friendship, the role of the friendship within the participant's larger social network, the role of gender and sexuality in the friendship, and other peoples' perceptions of the friendship. I used Nardi's (1999) study of gay men's friendships as a model to develop my areas of focus and interview questions; his work concentrated on social support, self-disclosure, and activities, and all these areas are incorporated into the areas listed above. I constructed additional questions to target dimensions specific to cross-gender, different sexuality friendships, such as the effects of compulsory heterosexuality and negotiations of inequality. I included these questions because prior research suggests that gender and sexuality norms can be both reinforced and challenged within the context of cross-gender friendships (O'Meara, 1989; Walker, 1994; Werking, 1997). As such, I wanted to explore how cross-gender, different sexuality friends might uniquely experience interactions and processes when expectations of sexual and romantic involvement are presumed to be relaxed. Moreover, several questions were designed to prompt discussion about the friendship with respect to family relationships. For example, the interview schedule included the questions: "Would you characterize your friend as a family type of friend, meaning that they are present for special occasions?" and "How does your family get along with your friend?" Discussions about friends as family, however, emerged at various points throughout the interviews.

Throughout the coding process, I treated the participants as individual cases rather than dyads. Data were coded into the most prevalent themes and then qualitatively analyzed. In order to code the data, I started with a process of open coding

(LaRossa, 2005); as such, while transcribing the interviews, I noted the themes that emerged from participant responses to interview questions and examined the transcript data line by line with these themes in mind. I coded the transcripts for participants' use of the word "family" as well as the language participants used to distinguish and compare friendship with family (e.g., "as family," "part of family," "like family"). I noted the distinctions in language but ultimately treated these concepts as indicators that individuals to some degree experienced their friendship as a family relationship on the basis of Gubrium and Holstein's discussion of discursive practices of defining family: "in experience, things are things because we think of them, act toward them, and speak of them as such" (1990, p. 6). Through this process, the following themes emerged: identification as family (e.g., definition), functions of chosen family (e.g., financial support, emotional support), and gender issues that differently affect dyads (e.g., differences in life transitions, anxieties about chosen family; see Table 1).

To preserve confidentiality, I used pseudonyms throughout the study. I also changed minor details about the interviewees' identities, such as age and occupation, which might have compromised confidentiality because the study examines both individuals involved in friendship dyads. As such, I attempted to keep confidential within the text what interviewees said about their friends so that quotes cannot easily be attributed to any particular individual.

### FINDINGS

Throughout the course of the interviews, three primary themes emerged. First, the data provided evidence that the dyad members identified one another as family. Second, the data suggested that the dyad members served the functions of family for each other. Finally, gender issues emerged that affected cross-gender, different sexual orientation relationships with respect to differential experiences and attitudes toward life transitions and anxieties about the longevity of the friendship.

#### *Identification as Family*

The bonds between these lesbians and the straight men they identified as family were described as deep and enduring relationships as were those between the gay men and the straight women. The majority of participants characterized these

friends as family; in nearly half of the sample, the friendship appeared to supersede relationships held with biological family. For instance, Patrick, who was aged 41 years and straight, said of his lesbian friend, Emily, aged 41: "I totally would invite her to Thanksgiving, and it would feel like having another family member, probably more. I'd probably be happier to see her than some of my blood family members." Similarly, Ruth, who was aged 44 years and straight, described her relationship with Scott, aged 44:

I really think that close friends are a deeper bond for me than even family. And I think most people if they really thought about it would say that, too, because you can't choose your family. You can choose your friends ... But you cannot choose your family. I mean, I love my family, but a lot of that is culturally prescribed. You have to love your grandmother. You have to love your brother. You know, if I saw my brother on the street without being my brother, I wouldn't even interact with him at all, ever. So, you know, it's interesting, I think of Scott as a true family member.

In his interview, Scott said that he also considered Ruth and her daughter to be his family.

The identification of these significant friends as family may be, in some part, related to strained relationships with families of origin. Nearly a third of this sample reported alienation from families of origin or a lack of access to a traditional family unit, which may have influenced the intentional familial connections they built with friends. There were no apparent differences in the tendency to create families from close friends with respect to gender and sexuality. In other words, the gay men and lesbians in the sample appeared no more likely than their straight friends to construct intentional families because they were alienated from families of origin. For example, Monique, aged 36 and straight, likened the bond she shared with Jesse, also aged 36 and gay, to the one she shared with her husband and furthermore, deemed it more important than her relationship with her parents, with whom she maintains a distant and strained relationship. Similarly, Jill, aged 33 and lesbian, described her friendship with Paul, aged 38: "I definitely consider him part of the family. Part of the family that's a nonjudging person. My family is very, I think, judging, and he's not that way. He's very open minded. So, yeah, he's definitely part of the family." Here, Jill compares her relationship with Paul to the one she has with her family of origin, at once designating him family while differentiating him from

conditions that strain her relations with family of origin.

Another way that nearly half of the respondents characterized their bonds as familial was to compare them to siblings or other relations, a finding consistent with prior studies (Nardi, 1999; Rubin, 1985; Werking, 1997; Weston, 1991). Cristina, aged 34, stated that her friendship with Mark, aged 24 and gay, provides her an opportunity to act maternal. Despite being 3 years older than Carrie, his 34-year-old friend and roommate, Ken described her as being like a "stabilizing mom." Debbi, aged 41, saw Carl, aged 45 and straight, as a brother. Participants who described their friends as siblings did so in part to emphasize that the bond was platonic. Cassandra, aged 29 and lesbian, employed this strategy when asked whether she had ever had sex with Stuart, aged 35: "That would be a big N-O. He's like my brother." Ethan, who is gay, was very surprised to be asked whether he and Leyla, both aged 25, had ever been sexually involved:

That is so far from where our friendship is, and that, and I kind of view her more as a sister, so I'm more protective of her in terms of, you know, people that may want to make advances on her and things like that. So I would never go down that road with her, just because it is just like my sister, and that would just be wrong.

Leyla commented that her future children would know her friend as "Uncle Ethan."

### *Functions of Chosen Family*

Many participants stated that their friends served the functions that are expected of family. In particular, they provided financial and emotional support.

*Financial support.* One key element that distinguishes friendship from family is the provision of financial support. In particular, loaning money and negotiating feelings when lending it are typically considered to be a responsibility of family (Carrington, 1999). That at least a fourth of these friends borrowed and lent money to one another is evidence that their ties are familial. Brenda and Dan, both in their 40s, had lived together for many years with their collective families in a home they bought. Brenda explained their conscious decision to create a family network:

At the time we bought this house, it was something mutual we were buying and [I knew] we

would eventually raise our kids together ... I said at the time that I wanted us to think of ourselves as more like family. I used to do a lot of traveling and I always needed rides to and from the airport and we sort of switched to thinking of us as family which just symbolized for me—I don't want to ask my friends to take me to the airport. Like if Dan goes on a trip, it's obvious that [Dan's wife] is going to pick him up, right? So, when I go to and from the airport, one of you is going to pick me up. You know? That's family.

Thus, this formal financial tie led to an expectation of a familial commitment. In another case, Nadia, aged 27 and straight, explained that Connor, aged 35, lent her money when she was out of work for 8 months. Similarly, Ruth, aged 44 and straight, and Scott, also aged 44, recalled relying on each other in leaner years, although at the time of the interview, Scott was the more fiscally secure of the pair. He described his concern for Ruth's well-being:

I'm always trying to get her stable in her life. I'm always worried about her finances and everything and worried about her getting a 401K going. I'm worried about her when she's 70 and all that stuff, so I wanted her to own real estate ... the scheme was okay, I'll sell this condo and we'll use all that money for a down payment on a bigger condo and you and me can get a condo together and you'd have real estate.

*Emotional support.* Although the giving of financial support was normatively gendered in these friendships, the conditions of emotional support were more complex. Many of the gay men in the sample identified their straight female friend as a crucial source of emotional support. For instance, Ethan described his reliance on Leyla:

I can literally say that without our friendship, I probably would not be alive today. 'Cause she's helped me through some really, really dark times. And she's the only person, even of my very, very close friends, I feel 100% comfortable with. I don't have to worry about, you know, how I come off. I don't have to worry about how I act or what I say. She'll always be there and she'll always stand behind me.

Yet emotional support was not solely the domain of women in these friendships. Monique, for example, recalled that Jesse was the first person she called to discuss past romantic problems. Also, Ming, aged 29, often turned to Ben,

aged 29 and gay, when she had issues with her parents.

Financial and emotional support were intertwined several years before the interview when Paul, aged 38 and straight, convinced Jill, aged 33, to make dramatic life changes. Jill explained that Paul said:

Don't worry about it. Go for it. We'll figure it out. You can move in with me." And everything sort of happened so quickly, next thing I know, I'm living with Paul. I broke up with my girlfriend ... and I had no worries. I mean he basically, he paid for the bills for a really long time until I could get things figured out ... he was totally there for me.

Through his financial support of Jill, Paul also provided her with the emotional support necessary to make important changes to her life.

#### *Gender Issues That Affect Cross-Gender, Different Sexual Orientation Relationships*

Although many dimensions of the friendships discussed here are consistent across types of dyads, several issues emerged that are specific to either lesbian-straight male pairs or gay male-straight female dyads. Here, I address how lesbian-straight man relationships differed from gay man-straight woman relationships with respect to life transitions and anxieties about the longevity of the relationship.

*Life transitions.* Different issues emerged in how the dyads navigated or planned to travel through life transitions together, another process in which family support is expected. In particular, there were distinctions in the ways that gay man-straight woman and lesbian-straight man participants discussed the life transitions of growing old together and of parenthood.

Several of the lesbian-straight man and the gay man-straight woman pairs similarly anticipated growing old together. Bruce, a straight man aged 28, discussed his desire to continue his bond with Vanessa, a 25-year-old lesbian: "One of the things I wrote in [a] note to her is like, I imagine, that I would like to grow old with you and we'd sit on the porch and scare all of the little kids on the block and play dominoes and just be loud old people." Similarly, the gay man-straight woman pairs in the sample also expected to grow old together. For example, Leyla envisioned her friendship with Ethan as they

age: “13 years is just a small step, I think it’s going to be going on probably until the day we die. I have no doubt; we talk about long term stuff all the time—getting old together. And he says I’m gonna wear those flashy muumuus and it’s gonna be his job to tone it down!” Whereas Leyla likely has not considered the realities of aging, she clearly views her friendship with Ethan as enduring.

Yet there existed a gender difference in how participants viewed the transition to old age such that the gay man-straight woman pairings tended to have a more serious and tangible plan for aging together. For example, Ruth explained that she and Scott (and Scott’s longtime partner, Bradley) will retire together someday: “We do have future plans for when we’re old. Well, you know, [they] bought this place in Tahoe. It’s this beautiful place. And it’s on this hill and right below it there’s this little cottage (laughs). That’s where I’m going to live.” Ruth and Scott’s plan for the future seemed feasible. After caring for many people during the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s, both were familiar with illness; hence, they likely had a clear perspective about caregiving as part of their family connection.

Another difference in reference to life transitions occurred in discussions of parenthood. In particular, one third of the gay man-straight woman pairs discussed various aspects of parenthood with respect to their friendship. For instance, several gay men in the sample identified their straight woman friend as potentially providing access to a family life that involves children; there were no similar discussions in the lesbian-straight man dyads. Scott explained that through his 25-year friendship with Ruth and her now teenage daughter, he has been able to experience childrearing. Similarly, 34-year-old Seth identified Shayna (also aged 34) as his primary connection to straight family life:

I’ve been thinking about this lately too—she’s also my connection to kids, to like families—She’s the, she’s gonna be the person in my life that’s going to set up a family—it’s just the closeness with her, the fact that our friendship can be so close—I’m going to be part of her little family, which I don’t think other friendships would give.

Hence, both Seth and Scott indicated that they have valued the opportunity to participate in a family life that involves children by virtue of their close bond.

Another related issue that highlights gender differences in these friendships was that several straight women in the sample noted a willingness to be a surrogate mother for their gay male friend. In most cases, however, the gay male friend did not express an interest in being a father. Such was the situation for 35-year-old Crystal, who said that she would consider having a baby for her friend, Derek, also aged 35: “I don’t really necessarily want to have children, but I’m not ready to tie my tubes or anything, and I’ve thought about the possibility of having a child for someone else.” In his interview, Derek explained that he has briefly thought about being a parent but is still too busy raising himself to give it any serious consideration.

Marriage also influenced the ways that straight women think about having a child with or for a gay male friend. For example, Nadia explained that being married complicates her thoughts about bearing a child for Connor:

Now that I’m married, it is different, but I always told both him and [another close gay male friend] that if they wanted a baby, I’d have one for them—When I would say ‘I’d have a baby for you,’ it was because I would assume they were with a partner and they have their life and they want a baby. I always assumed that if I was going to have children that I would be married because I do not want to raise a child alone, so I never really thought of it that way, co-parenting, I mean I would be a part of the baby’s life ... but I wouldn’t be co-parenting really—I have no idea what my husband would think if I wanted to have a baby for Connor. He’d probably not go for that very well, you know?

Thus, marital status affected a straight woman’s thoughts about having a child with or for her gay male friend. Accordingly, Ming explained that although she had never told Ben that she would be willing to have a child for him, she now would have to reconsider the possibility because her husband would likely disapprove of such actions. To be clear, the women still indicated a potential willingness to have a child for their friend despite being married. At the same time, neither of the gay men referred to above expressed a desire to have a child.

*An anxious family bond.* Another issue that differed according to dyad type was that gay men in the sample expressed a concern that their family bond with straight women will dissolve; lesbians did not voice a similar anxiety about their

ties with straight men. Several of the gay male participants worried that once their friend settles into a more traditional straight family life, the family relationship will change. For instance, Ben expressed concerns about what will happen to his role in Ming's life once she becomes a mother. Moreover, Connor voiced a similar concern:

[Nadia's] going to make me an uncle one day. Well, depending on where they are living. Although that's what I worry about too, just because people change. Being gay in a gay relationship, you sort of stay the same as your other gay friends—But when you're married—things are different. Then you have kids and your life goes in other directions.

Here, Connor voiced anxiety over the perceived precariousness of his family bond now that Nadia is married. Connor welcomed an opportunity to be an uncle to Nadia's future child but simultaneously braced himself for the possibility that her heterosexual family life may terminate or at least diminish their chosen family bond.

## DISCUSSION

The data provide a means for understanding the complexity of intentional family relationships across sexual orientation and gender categories. Two significant findings emerge as broader analytical themes from this study: (a) these close friendships illustrate how chosen family connections exist not only for gay men and lesbians but also for straight people and (b) such friendships are both normative and transformative not only with respect to family structures but also in terms of gender and sexual privilege.

### *The Mutuality of Chosen Family Bonds*

These friendships defy normative expectations about what constitutes family. One of the most noteworthy findings from this study is that there is mutuality in chosen family connections between gay men-straight women and lesbian-straight men friends. In particular, the data demonstrated that like gay men and lesbians (Nardi, 1999; Weston, 1991), many straight people in such friendships considered their friends to be intentional family members. This is significant because the mutual nature of gay men and lesbians in straight people's networks has heretofore gone unacknowledged (see Tillmann-Healy,

2001, for a notable exception). Indeed, the data provided evidence that these friends played a mutually important family role.

In some cases, chosen family satisfied expectations that were unmet in other family connections. Some participants create intentional families to supplement or replace strained ties with families of origin. Family, as a cultural construct, is idealized to such an extent that many familial relationships are likely to fall short of the desire for them to fulfill all social, instrumental, and emotional needs (Coontz, 1992). In such cases, disappointment with or alienation from bi-legal family may make a friend's choice to perform familial duties especially meaningful and worthy of designation as family. Yet, two thirds of the sample did not note any bi-legal family shortcomings; hence, this cannot be the sole reason that such friends were considered to be family. Rather, it appears that the participants actively constructed family networks for various reasons.

An important consideration is whether the conceptualization of friends as family was more a metaphor than an authentic family relationship. Prior research concluded that in gay male communities, friendships played the role of ideal families in providing material and emotional assistance, identity, history, nurturing, loyalty, and support (Nardi, 1999). Other research identified family as the only existing term that encompassed the depth and importance of intimate, significant bonds (Gubrium & Holstein, 1990; Ibsen & Klobus, 1972; Nardi). The usage of family language reflects an underlying issue: There is no sufficient social script to guide or characterize nonbiological, platonic, emotionally intimate, and socially reliant relationships between close friends. Hence, some may have identified their significant friends as family because such a bond is easily understood as being a meaningful connection.

Yet, second guessing the identification of these relationships as family discounts the interviewees' perceptions of their relationships. According to Gubrium and Holstein (1990), the identification of friends as family serves as a public announcement of the significance of the relationship as well as a designation of the expectations inherent in the bond. Furthermore, Carrington's suggestion that "any family is a social construction or set of relationships recognized, edified, and sustained through human initiative" allows for the expansion of definitions of family



(Carrington, 1999, p. 6). This perspective is consistent with Thomas's (1967) conceptualization of the definition of the situation, which asserted that circumstances perceived or defined as real to the individual are real in their consequences. Thus, the participants who defined their friendship as familial likely experienced and defined their relationship as an authentic family tie.

### *Normative and Transformative Bonds*

The complex dynamics of intentional family bonds extended beyond the participants' designation of friends as family. Indeed, there exists a tension between the normative and the transformative elements of these friends' intentional family bonds. Specifically, the normative aspects of these friendships occurred with respect to the ways that conventional expectations of gender and heterosexism operated in the dyad. Simultaneously, the friendships were transformative in that they supported transgressions of gender norms and defied traditional familial conceptions such that friendships are expected to remain primary bonds throughout the life course and into old age, despite other familial obligations.

*The normative.* The reinforcement of conventional gender norms was one normative element present in these intentional family bonds. One way in which gender norms were reinforced was in the tendency for male friends, both gay and straight, to assume a provider role through material assistance, whereas female friends were expected to be (and were) nurturing and emotionally supportive (Hartmann, 1981; Hochschild, 1983). In some cases, these normative elements were likely related to concrete differences in financial position, where relative to their women friends, many men in the sample were more financially stable. Yet, the data also suggested that there was an expectation that women would be unconditionally nurturing and emotionally supportive.

Normative elements were also present in the unrealized efforts to alter the shape of family life. Many of the gay male participants reported that they valued the familial tie to children provided by their straight female friend. Accordingly, many of the straight female interviewees appeared to recognize that they could help their gay male friend by having a child for him, though none of them had been in a position to enact this

offer. The intent to act outside social norms in helping gay male friends to become parents was transformative; yet, the pressures of normative family life, including laws that regulate child support both in and outside marriage (Ingraham, 1999), inhibited the realization of these intentions.

Also at work here, however, was straight women's application of heterosexual norms of family life, norms that assume that family life is defined by children (Morell, 1994). Many of the straight women in the sample assumed that gay men wanted to be parents themselves, despite the fact that none of them verbalized such a desire. To be clear, a straight woman's willingness to bear a child for a gay male friend is a generous and transgressive action, particularly because laws exist to enforce parental support of biological children (Ingraham, 1999). The women's offers to give birth and to relinquish the child to their gay friend not only challenged traditional gender norms of motherhood but also contested beliefs that gay men make inappropriate parents. Straight women's assumptions that their gay friends aspired to the same family constructs as they did, however, seemed to falsely conflate the identities (and in this case, familial desires) of gay men and straight women, making this move both normative and transformative.

A similar finding was absent for the lesbian and straight man pairs in the study. Although lesbian-straight man dyads were as likely as the gay man-straight woman pairs to characterize each other as family, they did not describe reliance upon the relationship to provide ties to children. Furthermore, the lesbian participants did not note a willingness to bear a child for a straight male friend in order to help him achieve a normative family life, nor did the straight male friends say that they wanted their lesbian friend to play such a role. That neither the lesbian nor the straight male friend discusses the possibility of the lesbian's surrogacy suggests that the gender dynamics differ between these and the gay man-straight woman dyads. In this respect, the lesbian-straight man pairs appear to hold less normative perceptions of gender within the friendship. One explanation for this difference is that the friends could have perceived that straight men's gender privilege would enable them to attain a normative family life through a heterosexual relationships, without the lesbian friend's assistance, if they so choose. Another possible explanation for this difference in findings is that the lesbian

participants seek definitions of family life distinct from the heterosexual norm (Lewin, 1993; Sullivan, 2004) and therefore are not motivated to take actions to replicate straight family life in these friendships.

*The transformative.* In addition to the nonnormative dimensions of gender involved in straight women's willingness to have and then give a child to a gay friend, there was a degree of gender transformation in the provision of support between these intentional family members. True, the majority of the data suggested that the gender norms were upheld such that men assumed a role as financial provider and women as emotional nurturer. Some data were contrary to these gender norms, however, which is most clearly illustrated by the lesbian-straight man dyad that combined their resources to buy and live in a communal residence. Also, consistent with prior research (Werking, 1997), gay and straight men's provision of significant emotional support for their female friends also defies conventional gender norms. Overall, the data suggest that the behavior within intentional family ties in some ways reinforced and in others challenged normative gender expectations.

One of the transformative elements noted by participants was the intent for these bonds to endure as primary relationships throughout adulthood and into old age, despite other familial obligations. People expect spouses or other family members to provide care and companionship as they age (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1987). Both gay man-straight woman and lesbian-straight man pairs expected that their bond will not only persist into old age but also fantasized about plans to grow old and retire together. Notably, the lesbian-straight man pairs indicated that they would grow old as buddies, whereas the gay man-straight woman dyads discussed the future in terms of living together and supporting each other, much the same way married couples do. Yet the dreams of aging together rarely included a potential spouse; rather, the friendship was imagined as a self-sufficient and insular dyad. Whether these intentions will be realized in the face of other familial responsibilities is difficult to discern, but the spoken goal of maintaining a family connection with cross-gender, different sexual orientation friend through old age indicated a commitment to the relationship and thus was transformative of family life.

The intention to grow old together also exposes how a chosen family that includes heterosexuals differs from that of gay men and lesbians: Straight persons may not be as reliant upon their chosen family to meet familial needs and can live normatively, legally marrying and potentially procreating. Quite notably, only the gay men in the sample acknowledged anxiety about the tenuousness of their chosen family ties with straight women, suggesting that they may be more reliant upon this connection than lesbians are with straight male friends. Gay men's concerns about the precariousness of intentional families with straight women were not unfounded: Prior studies showed that when people marry, friends become more peripheral to marital partners (Werking, 1997), at least in part because cultural scripts determined the romantic relationship to be the most socially and personally valued (Rubin, 1985).

In this context, the gay male friend occupied the role of what Collins (1991) describes as the *outsider within*, which is the position of being subjugated in a social situation where dominant cultural norms are being acted out and insiders fail to notice, much less question the subjugation (Ebaugh & Curry, 2000; Oswald, 2000). According to Collins, the outsider within recognizes the power relations behind social norms and the alternative realities they obscure. For example, both Connor and Ben and their respective straight woman friends were deemed chosen family, but the men worried that their family relationship may be overshadowed by their friends' adherence to dominant social norms. Concurrently, Nadia and Ming, the straight female halves of each dyad, were unaware that their participation in normative family life may jeopardize their respective chosen family ties. In this sample, the longest and most rewarding familial bonds were those where the straight friend was unmarried or committed to a life that defied heteronormative conventions by residing in communal households or holding radical political ideologies about gender and family.

Such concerns ultimately may reflect the difficulty that gay men have in building a family that includes children. Current policies limit adoption for gay men and lesbians (HRC, 2004), but even if laws to facilitate parenting were passed, gay men would be reliant either on a surrogate or on adoption to have a child. Lesbians also face challenges in constructing families that involve

children; their potential reproductive capabilities, however (which also require some degree of intervention), may account for differences in the findings. Perhaps because gay men face great difficulty in building families that involve children, the participants felt reliant upon their chosen family bonds with straight women for such connections and therefore also worried that these bonds are precarious.

The lesbians in the sample do not identify feelings of anxiety in connection to their intentional family bonds; in this context, they do not similarly experience the role of outsider within. One explanation for this difference is that the lesbians in the study may expect a degree of marginalization in normative family structures. For example, many lesbian mothers occupy what Hequembourg and Farrell (1999) call a "marginal mainstream identity," which refers to a simultaneous occupation of the socially revered role as mother and the stigmatized identity as a lesbian. As such, because they have a precarious relationship to normative family life, lesbian participants may not feel anxious about the stability of their intentional family bonds. Moreover, lesbian families reportedly are most resilient when lesbian mothers sustain a sense of family and symbolically redefine situations to bolster their family networks (Hequembourg, 2004; Oswald, 2002); perhaps the lesbian participants seek out a resilient and flexible rather than a fixed intentional family bond with their straight male friends.

#### *Limitations and Future Directions for Research*

Although this study makes an important contribution to the study of families, there are also some limitations. First, the sample was biased in terms of self-selection. The study represents the experiences of individuals who were willing to volunteer to talk about their friendships that cross sexual orientation and gender categories. As such, there is likely a positivity bias, which is the tendency for individuals to talk about their friendships in idealized ways (Rubin, 1985). Furthermore, given that the participants were interviewed at one point in time while the friendships were current, there is little information about whether (and how) these relationships may continue over time. Also, it is difficult to ascertain whether the participants have had similar familial bonds that dissolved. A longitudinal study that examines other gay man-straight

woman and lesbian-straight man friendship pairs to see if and how the familial relationships persist over time would also provide a greater understanding about the nature of these bonds. As such, one recommendation for future research is to examine friendships over time, either by following the same individuals over a several year period or by sampling dyads at various points across the life course.

A second limitation is that the study examined the dyad in isolation from the rest of the social network in which it existed. Hence, it is difficult to know the degree to which the participants were integrated into each other's family structures and also to assess how welcome each individual felt in the wider family context. Addressing both of these dimensions would provide a greater understanding of the mutuality of chosen family bonds for similar friendship dyads. Thus, another recommendation for future research is to interview not only the individuals involved in the dyad but also those with whom they have primary relationships.

Finally, the study was limited in its specific focus upon the intersection of only two categories of difference, gender and sexual orientation. This research is grounded in a third wave, intersectional feminist approach to the study of families. Such an intersectional approach considers institutionalized inequalities as components of social structure and interaction (Zinn & Dill, 2000) and is concerned with the simultaneous influence of multiple identities, such as race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, and ability upon social phenomena (Collins, 1998; De Reus, Few, & Blume, 2005; Dillaway & Broman, 2001). Because so little is known about friendships that cross sexual orientation and gender categories, the specific goal of this work was to examine relationships that operate at the intersection of gender and sexuality. Future research should encompass a truly intersectional agenda that focuses not only on gender and sexuality but also on race, class, age, and other categories of difference to more fully understand how such intersections shape and are shaped by interactions within primary relationships.

Studying intentional family ties provides a unique view of contemporary relationships. Whereas the data showed that these friends were identified and fulfilled the same functions as family, the occurrence of the chosen family in heterosexual networks differed from that of gay men and lesbians because in many cases, it lacked

the same sense of necessity. In general, heterosexuals have varying degrees of privilege with regards to family structure; yet, because socially sanctioned forms of family life are not equally available to gay men and lesbians, they may assign chosen family a greater degree of importance. Nonetheless, the data provided evidence that relationships that cross categories of gender and sexual orientation were often mutually beneficial and meaningful. The data also exposed the strong yet complex ties that made friendships into family for gay men, lesbians, and straight men and women. Contrary to allegations that the family is threatened by gay men and lesbians, we may instead be viewing an expanding definition of family via the voluntary bonds of friendship. More generally, the findings may reflect the state of the postmodern family arrangements, biolegal or chosen, as various and fluid.

#### NOTE

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author was supported by National Institute of Aging Grant AG000117. I thank Sarah H. Matthews for her generous assistance with the revisions of this manuscript. Additionally, I acknowledge the assistance and contributions of Jennifer A. Reich, Stephen T. Russell, Diane H. Felmlee, Lyn H. Lofland, Clare Stacey, and Jeff Sweat, as well as Ruth Dunkle, Berit Ingersoll-Dayton, and the National Institute of Aging writing seminar at the University of Michigan.

#### REFERENCES

- Antonucci, T. C., & Akiyama, H. (1987). An examination of sex differences in social support among older men and women. *Sex Roles, 17*, 737 – 749.
- Carrington, C. (1999). *No place like home: Relationships and family life among lesbians and gay men*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Chatters, L. M., Robert, J., & Jayakody, R. (1994). Fictive kinship relations in black extended families. *Journal of Contemporary Family Studies, 25*, 297 – 313.
- Chauncey, G. (1994). *Gay New York*. New York: Basic Books.
- Cherlin, A. J. (2002). *Public and private families: An introduction*. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Collins, P. H. (1991). Learning from the outsider-within: The sociological significance of black feminist thought. In M. M. Fonow & J. A. Cook (Eds.), *Beyond methodology: Feminist scholarship as lived research* (pp. 35 – 59). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Collins, P. H. (1998). Intersections of race, class, gender, and nation: Some implications for black family studies. *Journal of Contemporary Family Studies, 29*, 27 – 37.
- Coontz, S. (1992). *The way we never were: American families and the nostalgia trap*. New York: Basic Books.
- De Reus, L. A., Few, A. L., & Blume, L. B. (2005). Multicultural and critical race feminisms: Theorizing families in the third wave. In V. L. Bengston, A. C. Acock, K. R. Allen, P. Dilworth-Anderson, & D. M. Klein (Eds.), *Sourcebook of family theory and research* (pp. 447 – 468). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Dillaway, H., & Broman, C. (2001). Race, class, and gender differences in marital satisfaction and divisions of household labor among dual-earner couples. *Journal of Family Issues, 22*, 309 – 327.
- Ebaugh, H. R., & Curry, M. (2000). Fictive kin as social capital in new immigrant communities. *Sociological Perspectives, 43*, 189 – 209.
- Egelman, W. (2004). *Understanding families: Critical thinking and analysis*. Boston: Pearson.
- Fehr, B. (1996). *Friendship processes*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Gubrium, J. F., & Holstein, J. A. (1990). *What is family?* Mountain View, CA: Mayfield.
- Hartmann, H. I. (1981). The family as the locus of gender, class, and political struggle: The example of housework. *Signs, 6*, 366 – 394.
- Hequembourg, A. (2004). Unscripted motherhood: Lesbian mothers negotiating incompletely institutionalized family relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 21*, 739 – 762.
- Hequembourg, A., & Farrell, M. (1999). Lesbian motherhood: Negotiating marginal-mainstream identities. *Gender and Society, 13*, 540 – 557.
- Hochschild, A. (1983). *The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hochschild, A. R., & Machung, A. (1989). *The second shift: Working parents and the revolution at home*. New York: Viking.
- Human Rights Campaign. (2004). *Family net*. Retrieved April 14, 2004, from <http://www.hrc.org/Template.cfm?Section=Family>
- Ibsen, C. A., & Klobus, P. (1972). Fictive kin term use and social relationships: Alternative interpretations. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 34*, 615 – 620.
- Ingraham, C. (1999). *White weddings: Romancing heterosexuality in popular culture*. New York: Routledge.
- LaRossa, R. (2005). Grounded theory methods and qualitative family research. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 67*, 837 – 857.

- Lewin, E. (1993) *Lesbian mothers: Accounts of gender in American culture*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Lindsey, K. (1981). *Friends as family*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- MacRae, H. (1992). Fictive kin as a component of the social networks of older people. *Research on Aging*, 14, 226 – 247.
- Morell, C. M. (1994). *Unwomanly conduct: The challenges of unintentional childlessness*. New York: Routledge.
- Nardi, P. M. (1999). *Gay men's friendships: Invincible communities*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- O'Meara, J. D. (1989) Cross-sex friendship: Four basic challenges of an ignored relationship. *Sex Roles*, 2, 525 – 543.
- Oswald, R. F. (2000). A member of the wedding? Heterosexism and family ritual. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 17, 349 – 368.
- Oswald, R. F. (2002). Resilience within the family networks of lesbians and gay men: Intentionality and redefinition. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 64, 374 – 383.
- Rubin, L. B. (1985). *Just friends: The role of friendship in our lives*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Stacey, J. (1996). *In the name of the family: Rethinking family values in the postmodern age*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Stacey, J. (1998). Gay and lesbian families: Queer like us. In M. A. Mason, A. Skolnick, & S. D. Sugarman (Eds.), *All our families: New policies for a new century* (pp. 117 – 143). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Stack, C. B. (1974). *All our kin: Strategies for survival in a black community*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Stein, P. J. (1981). *Single life: Unmarried adults in social context*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Sullivan, M. (2004). *The family of woman: Lesbian mothers, their children, and the undoing of gender*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Tillmann-Healy, L. M. (2001). *Between gay and straight: Understanding friendship across sexual orientation*. Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press.
- Thomas, W. I. (1967). The definition of the situation. In J. G. Manis & B. N. Meltzer (Eds.), *Symbolic interaction: A reader in social psychology* (2nd ed., pp. 331 – 336). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Walker, K. A. (1994). Men, women, and friendship: What they say, what they do. *Gender and Society*, 8, 246 – 265.
- Weeks, J., Heaphy, B., & Donovan, C. (2001). *Same sex intimacies: Families of choice and other life experiments*. London: Routledge.
- Werking, K. (1997). *We're just good friends: Women and men in nonromantic relationships*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Weston, K. (1991). *Families we choose: Lesbians, gays, kinship*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Wilmot, W. W., & Shellen, W. N. (1990). Language in friendships. In H. Giles & W. P. Robinson (Eds.), *Handbook of language and social psychology* (pp. 413 – 431). Oxford: Wiley.
- Wiseman, J. P. (1986). Friendship bonds and binds in a voluntary relationship. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 3, 191 – 211.
- Wright, P. H. (1985). The acquaintance description form. In S. Duck & D. Perlman (Eds.), *Understanding personal relationships: An interdisciplinary approach* (pp. 39 – 62). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Zinn, M. B., & Dill, B. T. (2000). Theorizing difference from multiracial feminism. In M. B. Zinn, P. Hondagneu-Sotelo, & M. A. Messner (Eds.), *Gender through the prism of difference* (2nd ed., pp. 23 – 29). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.