COMING OUT TO FAMILY AND COMMUNITY: NARRATIVES OF AFRICAN

AMERICAN LESBIANS

by

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(Under the Direction of Lynda Henley Walters)

ABSTRACT

Conclusions for the influence of African American lesbians' social context and their

coming out experiences primarily that widespread homophobia in African American families and

communities' isolate lesbians; and in turn, lead lesbians to deny or avoid disclosing their

homosexual identity. With such conclusions in place, there is little effort to develop a

comprehensive and culturally relevant analysis of lesbian identity development as it relates to

African American mother-daughter bonds. The studies in this project are a chronicle of the

coming out narratives of five young African American lesbians (26 to 30 years of age). Study 1

is an analysis of African American lesbian daughters coming out stories to their mothers.

Daughters believed that mothers allowed space for their lesbian identity in spite of mothers'

messages about religion, fear of homophobia, personal homophobic beliefs, and/or ideal

womanhood. Women did not have any regrets about coming out but instead reflected on best

approaches to come out. Study 2 is an analysis of the stories of two African American lesbians

(ages 26 and 27) that reveal their lesbian identity development and how they defined and

navigated *don't ask, don't tell. Don't ask, don't tell* refers to the reality that sexual minorities are

accepted in the context of African American families and communities as long as they do not

label themselves or acknowledge publicly that they engage in same sex relationships. The implementation of this policy within their families was found to affect their lesbian identity development. They encountered challenges and successes in a quest to find communities that would embrace and affirm their multiple marginalized identities. One woman found a African American lesbian community that provided positive affirmation of her identities and consequently maintained lesbian identity pride even within the confines of *don't ask, don't tell,* where the second woman did not such a community. There stories are offered as a point of entry to further inquiry concerning the diversity of mother-daughter relationships among African American lesbians and their mothers, as well as issues of lesbian visibility and identity affirmation within African American families and communities.

INDEX WORDS: African American, Lesbians, Mother-Daughter Relationships, Coming Out, Narrative Analysis, Qualitative, Lesbian Identity Development, *Don't Ask, Don't Tell,* Child and Family Development

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my grandmother, Ardalia Washington. Thank you for sending red birds during the hard times. Your spirit lives. Ashay!

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION/LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic researchers often ignore culturally relevant aspects of African American lesbians coming out in African American communities. Theories and concepts most commonly used to inform and guide research questions rarely address the issue of daughters coming out to their families (for exceptions see Gomez & Smith 1990; Parks, 2001; Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2004). Using Black feminist theory to interpret this phenomenon reveals the potential strength in African American families and the factors shaping the coming out experience of African American lesbians. For lesbians, the decision to come out hinges on ideologies of gender and sexuality; for African American lesbians, this decision is compounded by race and culturally specific heterosexism within African American communities. At present, there exists a dearth of research that specifically describes coming out within the context of African American mother-daughter relationships.

Although negative attitudes towards homosexuality is not isolated to or more prevalent in African American communities, researchers often exaggerate the challenges lesbians and gays face when coming out to African American communities and families (Herek & Capitanio, 1995). Rarely do scholars highlight the strengths and contributions of African American lesbians to their communities and the larger society (Elze, 2007; Jackson & Brown, 1996). The current body of literature seems to suggest that African American communities often avoid combating sexual oppression in fear that it might diminish efforts to address racism (Gomez & Smith 1990). Some churches, often the backbone of African American communities, sanction messages that

heavily degrade and criticize same-sex relationships (Brown, Dutton-Douglas, & Walker, 1988). Moreover, African Americans have traditionally viewed homosexuality as a "White thing" which can lead them to believe that those who engage in same-sex relationships reject African American culture as a whole (Boykin 2004; Gomez & Smith 1990).

For African American lesbians, relationships with mothers are thought to hinder rather than support decisions to fully embrace lesbian identity. Martinez and Sullivan (1998) and Savin-Williams and Cohen (1996) revealed that compared to men and other racial groups, homophobia in African American families isolates African American lesbians and delays their coming out or keeps them forever closeted. Gochros and Bidwell (1996) reviewed studies comparing coming out experiences within a diverse sample of ethnicities and concluded that usually gay males report same-sex activity at approximately 15 years of age, whereas females tend to report same-sex activity at 20 years of age. For females, self-labeling as lesbian usually comes later still if it occurs at all. Researchers conclude that lesbians tend not to come out until their twenties, and when compared to Whites, African American lesbians delay coming out to their families longer (see Golden, Savin-Williams, & Cohen, 1996; Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2004).

I report in these studies a comprehensive and culturally relevant analysis of lesbian identity development as it relates to African American mother-daughter bonds and *don't ask, don't tell* (an informal policy for the acceptance of sexual minorities within African American families and communities as long as they do not label themselves or acknowledge publicly that they engage in same-sex relationships). These studies chronicle the coming out narratives of five young African American lesbians (26 to 30 years of age). The following literature review is an examination of mother-daughter relationships; as well as, the historical underpinnings of Black sexual politics. First, I provide a definition of terms used throughout the paper.

Definition of Terms

Race

Race, now widely considered a social construction, varies from one society to another with respect to the physical characteristics commonly used to classify people into racial types. The Census Bureau explained that race is a sociopolitical construct and "should not be interpreted as being scientific or anthropological in nature" (Census, 2000). In the United States, a person who has a traceable amount of Black ancestry has been socially defined as Black (Jones, 2002). The Census Bureau defined Black or African American as "a person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa" and White as "a person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa" (Census, 2000). Defining race as a social construct does not negate its ramifications. Indeed, Americans still use racial descriptions as homogenous characterizations of all members of a race, and racism continues to be a tool of oppression (Leone, 2005). Race has long united Blacks in America. In 1915, W.E.B. DuBois (1915, 1940) explained that Blackness denoted a shared history of oppression. In this project, I define Black as having African heritage. It follows DuBois' assumption that there is a shared experience in being Black in America. However, Black does not represent a monolithic group in spite of having a shared experience. Black Dominicans, Haitians, Jamaicans, Cape Verdeans etc., differ culturally from African Americans who have been in the United States for generations. Thus, although my sample included only African Americans, I sometimes use Black in the paper to refer to the shared history of Black people throughout the diaspora.

Coming Out

Coming out refers to any one or a combination of the following: (a) self-awareness and acceptance of one's own same-gender physical/emotional attraction; (b) an announcement or admission to other lesbians, gays, or bisexuals that your sexual orientation is gay, lesbian or bisexual; or (c) acknowledgment to others who are not gay, lesbian, or bisexual that your sexual orientation is gay, lesbian, or bisexual (see Johnston & Jenkins, 2004; Radonsky & Borders, 1995). In this project, coming out is defined as a self-acknowledgment and disclosure of one's sexual orientation as queer, gay, lesbian, or bisexual.

Lesbian

Eliason and Morgan (1998) interviewed self-identified lesbians who provided their definitions of lesbian identity. Two major categories emerged. A political definition framed lesbianism as not only woman-identified but also as operating from a broader worldview through connections with other oppressed groups. Non-political definitions framed lesbianism as a combination of sex and love with women. In this project, lesbian is defined as a woman who self-identifies as lesbian and who has sexual attractions towards other women.

Several assumptions influenced the decision to study self-identified African American lesbians as opposed to bisexual women. According to Clarke (1995) *bisexual* can be a safer label than *lesbian*, as a lesbian encounters constant contact with heterosexual presumptions, privilege, and oppression. African American womanhood is grounded in a heterosexual framework that instructs women to endorse traditional gender ideology as an obligation to the race, and heterosexual marriage is considered the goal for all African American women (Stephens & Phillips, 2005). A major component of African American lesbian oppression is the absence of the

possibility for marriage. A bisexual identity, on the other hand, maintains the illusion of the potential for marriage regardless of the frequency or nonexistence of relationships with men.

<div align="center">Literature Review</div>

African American Mother Daughter Relationships

African American mothers play a vital role in navigating their daughters through society's negative perceptions of African American women. Feminist scholar Sara Ruddick (1989) defined maternal thinking as the disciplined reflection on and critique of strategies employed in mothering. She argued that "the larger social environment in which women live" influences mothering strategies (Ruddick, 1989, p. 79). Patricia Hill Collins, a well-known scholar of Black feminist thought, addressed the role that a social environment has on maternal thinking (1990, 2004). She highlighted the significance of African American mother-daughter bonds in the conceptualization of Black feminist thought principles. She explained in *Black Feminist Thought* that raising Black daughters under the constraints of race and gender leads Black mothers to two primary goals in terms of mothering practices. Black mothers must teach their daughters the survival skills needed to navigate through a hostile world and simultaneously instruct them on avenues that avoid internalizing and facilitate overcoming negative messages (Collins, 1990).

Collins (1990) and Collins, Gergen, and Davis (1997) maintained that teaching daughters to resist racist opposition demonstrates a key maternal task. They argued that although contemporary racism in America, a concept Collins (2004) labeled the "new racism," often operates passively; it operates under the same racist ideology that has plagued minorities historically. Indeed, racist ideology continues to perpetuate institutional, scientific, and personal racism [and in turn leads] to continued inequalities between African Americans and other

Americans (Carroll, 1998). A historically understanding of gender and race in America is important in understanding mother's messages to daughters.

Black Sexual Politics

The possession of Black bodies is rooted in the United State's long history of slavery. I refer to "possession of Black bodies" because Americans commoditized the bodies of enslaved Africans to support economic production. The atrocities and inhumane treatment committed against Blacks during slavery did not end with the legal end of the system. Legacies of slavery continue to have adverse effects on African American communities. Racist myths, emerging from the institution of slavery, of African American women's hypersexuality stand in stark contrast to White "ladies" in the Victorian Era. This distinguishes privileged White women from the subordinate group and serves to justify continued racist behavior against African American women.

Black feminist queer theorist Evelyn Hammonds (1994) outlined three themes that emerge from the historical narrative that furthers an understanding of African American women's sexuality. The first is the construction of the African American female body as the embodiment of sex. Collins (2004) argued that through intersecting racist and sexist ideology, myths of African American women's sexuality serve to distinguish White women from African American women and to justify racist behavior. Racist ideology also defines "Whiteness" by labeling those without European ancestry as the "other." African American women's bodies have been constructed as animalistic and hypersexual in the literature. According to Hammonds, this leads to resistance and silence among African American women.

Hammonds (1994) contended that throughout history African American women history have responded to intersecting racist and sexist imagery by refusing to accept negative

stereotypes of their sexuality. In addition, Hammonds argued that some women used silence as a political tool to promote an ideal of sexual purity and protect African American women from the harms of racial and sexual oppression. African American women face the challenge of countering these stereotypes. In Hammonds (1994, p. 132) words:

> Black women's sexuality is often described in metaphors of speechlessness, space, or vision; as a 'void' or empty space that is simultaneously ever-visible (exposed) and invisible, where Black women's bodies are already colonized.

In post-Civil War society, African Americans supported sexual purity to promote an ideal of African American womanhood in an effort to garner respect for all African American women. This seemingly self-imposed invisibility through silence did not come without challenges.

Challenging Silence

According to Hammonds (1994) silence did not shield African American women from the negative stereotypes society developed to describe them. Instead, the silence robbed African American women of a potential safe space for discussing discrimination. Silence also works against social change, especially in terms of addressing issues pertinent to African American lesbians. The problems with silence highlighted by Hammonds (1994) continue to be an issue today as mothers attempt to prepare their daughters to survive future racist and sexist encounters. The restraints of Black sexual politics; however, make African American mothers more inclined to teach their daughters the benefits of being silent about their sexuality. Some mothers believe that society will perceive females who openly discussion their sexuality as animalistic and hypersexual. Revealing a non heterosexual sexual identity and adapting a lesbian identity is tantamount to discussing sexuality. Therefore, from the perspective of African American

mothers, refusing to reveal anything other than the most general impression of heterosexuality may best serve African American daughters.

Lesbian Daughters' Relationships with Mothers

After being nestled in the refuge of their mothers love and acceptance, African American daughters often develop into women who desire to live up to their mothers' expectations. Unfortunately mothering practices may result in the desire of lesbian daughters to keep their sexuality visible. Collins (1990) explained that human ties, including African American mother-daughter relationships, can be freeing and empowering as well as confining and oppressive. The spaces where mothers function as beacons of support and strength can also be sites of oppression that keep their lesbian daughters closeted.

The rationale and instructions for silence, although potentially problematic for daughters regardless of sexual identity, are best understood through Black feminist theory. Black sexual politics account for the cultural relevance of silence and for the instructions from mothers to keep silent. Silence appears to function as a parenting strategy intended to maintain their daughter physical survival as they operate within the political confines of African American womanhood.

The goals in African American mothers' parenting practices, as highlighted by Collins (1990), (teaching their daughters survival skills to navigate through a hostile world while simultaneously instructing them with avenues to avoid internalizing and overcoming negative messages) can serve as a double burden that is taxing for mothers and confusing for daughters. African American mothers have the arduous task of maintaining their daughters' physical survival while keeping their emotional well-being undamaged. However, silence practices may not foster a healthy emotional well-being, especially for lesbian daughters. Fortunately, African

American mothers also want their daughters (both heterosexual and homosexual daughters) to avoid internalizing negative messages. Mothers also want all daughters to surpass their own achievements.

African American Lesbian Identity Proclamation

Despite mother's instructions, it may be advantageous for lesbian daughters to reveal their identity within the bond of mother-daughter relationships with the recognition that, "the listener most able to pierce the invisibility created by Black women's objectification is another Black woman" (Collins, 1990, p. 104). Hammonds (1994, p. 56) echoed the necessity of visibility, self articulation, and self proclamation to other Black women as she wrote,

> … but in overturning the politics of silence the goal cannot be merely to be seen: visibility in and of itself does not erase a history of silence nor does it challenge the structure of power and domination, symbolic and material, that determines what can and cannot be seen. The goal should be to develop a 'politics of articulation.' This politics would build on the integration of what makes it possible for Black women to speak and act.

Rhonda, a Black lesbian featured in Rose's (2003, p. 282) collection of Black women's sexuality narratives, recounts the experience of being an out lesbian and its connection to Black sexual politics:

> In terms of society, I really think it hasn't changed very much. I think we're still either Aunt Jemima, Sapphire, or the industrial workhorse, and nowhere in between. People are very uncomfortable with my out lesbianism when I'm in a position of organizing. When I'm doing something and I'll say something that so clearly makes me a dyke, everybody's uncomfortable because that has no place here in a political context… If

you're powerful, you can't have sex. If you're a mother you can't have sex. Now, if

you're a whore, you can have all the sex you want, but that's all you can do is have sex.

You have no validity anywhere else. And I think that's still the case. It has not changed.

It is important to have open relationships with other African American women that offer the

space for women to be honest about their identities. African American mothers play such a vital

role in their daughters' well-being that the mother-daughter relationship can be a key place for

them to articulate themselves to their mothers.

The Current Project

This project used narratives from in-depth interviews to gain a deeper understanding of

how African American lesbian daughters construct meaning associated with their coming-out

stories to their mothers. This area of research is important as our understanding of African

American lesbians' experiences is enriched by obtaining the stories of African American lesbians

and focusing on their decisions to come out to their mothers. This project includes two studies.

Study 1 Overview

The first paper, entitled, *"Coming Out to Mother: Stories of African American Lesbians,"*

is a chronicle of African American lesbian daughters coming-out stories to their mothers. The

literature usually depicts coming out to family members as a difficult task that many African

American lesbians delay or chose not to face. These findings, however often fail to develop a

comprehensive and culturally relevant analysis of lesbian identity development as it relates to

African American mother-daughter bonds. This study fills a void in the literature by chronicling

the coming out narratives of five young African American lesbians (26 to 30 years of age) to

their mothers. Daughters believed that mothers allowed space for their lesbian identity in spite of

mothers' messages about religion, fear of homophobia, personal homophobia beliefs, and/or

ideal womanhood. Women did not have any regrets about coming out but instead reflected on best approaches to come out. There stories are offered as a point of entry to further inquiry concerning the diversity of mother-daughter relationships among African American lesbians and their mothers as well as issues of lesbian visibility and identity affirmation within African American families and communities.

Study 2 Overview

The second paper, entitled, *"African American Lesbian Identity Development: The Complication of Don't Ask, Don't Tell,"* is an analysis of two African American lesbians (ages 26 and 27) stories to reveal their lesbian identity development and how they define and navigate *don't ask, don't tell. Don't ask, don't tell* suggests that sexual minorities are accepted within African American families and communities as long as they do not label themselves or acknowledge publicly that they engage in same-sex relationships. The implementation of this policy within their families proved to affect their lesbian identity development. They encountered challenges and successes in a quest to find communities that would embrace and affirm their multiple marginalized identities. There stories are offered as a point of entry to further inquiry concerning the diversity of mother-daughter relationships among African American lesbians and their mothers as well as issues of lesbian visibility and identity affirmation within African American families and communities.

Appendices

The following is a list of the twelve appendices included in this project.

1. Appendix A "Detailed Study Method" is a detailed description of the method used in the overall research project.

2. Appendix B "Recruitment Advertisement Protocol" contains the participant recruitment advertisement statement and flyer.

3. Appendix C "Verbal Introduction and Screening Questions" is a list of questions used to confirm that interested participates met critical for inclusion before the interview was scheduled.

4. Appendix D "Consent Form" is an outline of study goals and procedures and form used to obtain informed consent from participants.

5. Appendix E "Participant Contact Form" is a list of participant names and preferred pseudonym.

6. Appendix F "Participant Information Form" is a documentation of participants' name, birth date etc.

7. Appendix G "Interview Protocol" is a list of questions asked to participants. The actual interviews often extended beyond this list.

8. Appendix H "Debriefing Statement" is a statement read to participants at the conclusion of the interview.

9. Appendix I "Narrative Analysis Holistic-Content Analytic Procedures" is a detailed list of data analysis procedures.

10. Appendix J and K (Appendices j "Participant Information" and k "Participant Family Information" provide a participant breakdown of participant information

11. Appendix L "5 Best Practices of Coming Out to Mother" presents a compilation of best practices for coming out to mothers.

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CHAPTER 2

STUDY 1: COMING OUT TO MOTHER: STORIES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN LESBIANS[1]

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Abstract

African American lesbian daughters' coming-out stories to their mothers are chronicled in the present paper. The literature usually depicts coming out to family members as a difficult task that many African American lesbians delay or chose not to face. These findings, however often fail to develop a comprehensive and culturally relevant analysis of lesbian identity development as it relates to African American mother-daughter bonds. This study fills a void in the literature by chronicling the coming out narratives of five young African American lesbians (26 to 30 years of age) to their mothers. Daughters believed that mothers allowed space for their lesbian identity in spite of mothers' messages about religion, fear of homophobia, personal homophobia beliefs, and/or ideal womanhood. Women did not have any regrets about coming out but instead reflected on best approaches to come out. There stories are offered as a point of entry to further inquiry concerning the diversity of mother-daughter relationships among African American lesbians and their mothers as well as issues of lesbian visibility and identity affirmation within African American families and communities.

Introduction

Researchers examining the coming-out process suggest that parents experience a multitude of emotions in realizing that their son or daughter is gay (Adelson, 2003; LaSala, 2000; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003). Namely, shock, a typical first response for parents, eventually may evolve to feelings of acceptance by parents. According to Savin-Williams and Ream (2003) this particularly holds true for daughters coming out to their mothers. However, studies examining the coming-out processes of lesbians have focused primarily on White lesbian women, overlooking the extent to which these experiences and processes vary for lesbians of color in general, and African American lesbians in particular. Moreover, little is known about the specific processes that occur as African American lesbians come out to their mothers.

Explanations for the influence of African American lesbians' social context and their coming out experiences in African American communities vary. Some researchers have concluded that widespread homophobia in African American families and communities' isolate lesbians; and in turn, feelings of isolation lead lesbian daughters to deny or avoid disclosing their lesbian identity (see Martinez & Sullivan, 1998; Savin-Williams & Cohen, 1996). These researchers fail to consider the centrality of mother-daughter relationships in African American communities and the ways in which this relationship may serve as a buffer to the lesbian coming-out process. Researchers examining African American mother-daughter relationships; however, primarily focus on mothers' attempts to equip their daughters with survival skills for combating racial and gender oppression (i.e., Collins, 1990, 1997; Hill, 2001; Lawrence & Thelen, 1995). These studies too are incomplete because they fail to describe how this socialization operates for African American mother-daughter relationships in which the daughter is lesbian. In this study, I sought to bridge this gap by presenting narratives of African American lesbian daughters who

made the decision to come out to their mothers. Included in these narratives are factors that shaped their decisions, including considerations for the racial and gender socialization messages they received in their families and communities. A review of relevant literature follows.

African American Mother-Daughter Relationships

African American communities' response to homosexuality has been narrowly defined as unsafe for lesbian women, while research findings that highlight the identity-affirming role of African American mothers to their daughters are ignored. Collins (1990, 1997) asserted that by instilling racial and gender pride, mothers help their daughters resolve the tensions between their own self-perceptions and others' perceptions of them. According to Lawrence and Thelen (1995), mothers alert daughters to the existence of gender and racial barriers, but also equip them with essential skills for navigating within these systems that devalue their existence. Furthermore, these skills are considered to buttress African American women's resilience and success in spite of discrimination.

Understanding the processes through which African American mothers promote pride in their daughters' identity as African American women also provides a foundation for exploring how African American women later hold pride in their lesbian identity. Collins (1990) argued that the promotion of self-reliance and independence is a strategy African American mothers use to teach their daughters to avoid internalizing negative messages and to help them achieve their goals. Whether by choice or circumstance, African American girls have observed their mothers fierce projection of independence. African American daughters recount witnessing their mother's independence and ability to provide in the face of difficulty emerged as a major theme in Josephs study (1984). Mothers in Banks-Wallace and Parks' (2001) reported valuing self-reliance and independence more in daughters than in sons.

African American daughter's sexual orientation does not preclude mothers' transmission of messages about self-reliance and independence. Yet due to the dearth of studies that focus on the coming-out process of African American lesbians, little is known about how African American lesbians' sexuality intersects with mothers' early socialization practices for navigating through society's negative perceptions of African American women. The present study sought to reveal the ways in which African American mothers play a vital role despite their daughters' sexuality. Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory is useful in understanding contextual factors (i.e., race and gender discrimination) and the protective utility of mother-daughter relationships on daughters' development and adjustment.

Theoretical Perspective

Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory and a risk/protection model of family functioning serves as a guide in this study. Bronfenbrenner (1996) emphasized the role of context in development and argued for an understanding the interaction among contexts and persons to adjustment. According to ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, Morris, et al., 1998), patterns occurring inside the family are often adaptive responses to challenging circumstances emerging from social-contextual factors external to the family. It is possible that healthy mother-daughter relationships and mother's promotion of race and gender pride buffer the effects of homophobia and in turn protect the development and adjustment of lesbian daughters. Adjustment in spite of discrimination is resilience (Bowleg et al., 2003), and in this study, mothers' contributions to daughters' resilience is of interest.

The Current Study

The stories of African American lesbian daughters who disclosed their lesbian identity to their mothers are presented in this study. Narrative analysis is used as the methodological approach to explore the nuances of African American lesbians' relationships with their mothers during the coming-out process. Key areas of inquiry include (a) the process of coming out to mother; (b) factors that facilitate coming out; (c) feelings of their mothers' disapproval, tolerance, acceptance, and/or embracement of their lesbian identity; and (d) the role of coming out on in the formation of a lesbian identity.

Methods

Participants

The sample included five 26 to 30 year-old self-identified African American lesbians who disclosed their sexual orientation to their mothers within the past 10 years. Participants were recruited through purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling allows the researcher to select subjects on the basis of the researcher's informed judgment of the most useful and representative respondents (Babbie, 1995). The study was conducted in a large metropolitan city located in southeastern region of the United States. This city contains an active lesbian, gay, and bisexual community, and hosts annual gay pride and Black gay pride events.

Participants were recruited through lesbian/bisexual Internet list-servs, organizations and events frequented by this population, and personal referrals. Interested participants contacted the researcher at which time the researcher determined whether they met criteria for inclusion (i.e., self-identification as an African American lesbian, between the ages of 26-30, and disclosed sexual orientation to mother within the past ten years). Although not an inclusion criteria, all of

the women held a feminine gender presentation. The interviews were scheduled in a private

place that was acceptable to the participant.

Procedures

Participants were asked to provide a pseudonym for themselves. The unstructured

individual interview began with a grand tour question, *"Tell me a story that describes your*

relationship with your mother. What was it like to come out to her." The grand tour question (the

opening question) follows the framework of narrative analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 2006;

Sobal, 2001). Narrative inquiry follows respondents' comments. Thus, interviews were based on

a few questions that invited respondents to tell their stories. Questions were developed to explore

the mother-daughter relationship prior to and after lesbian daughters disclosed their sexual

identities to mothers. All questions were open ended to maximize the amount of variability of

data collected. The order of questions differed depending on the participants' responses.

Questions focused on both the challenging and identity affirming aspects of the coming out

experience. They also highlighted factors that influence a lesbian's decision to come out. This

interview technique allowed participants to speak freely about their coming-out stories, and gave

them the opportunity to identify the topics they considered most relevant to their coming out

experience.

Prior to the interview, the investigator explained the goals of the project (see Appendix

A) and during the beginning of the interview, obtained informed consent (see Appendix B).

Participants also completed a brief demographic questionnaire (i.e., date of birth, relationship

status, educational background, salary, parent(s) educational level). In-depth interviews ranged

from two to three hours. Through a follow-up interview results were shared with each participant

to check for credibility of my interpretation. In turn, meanings of results were negotiated with

participants as they were able to verify the authenticity of their story. Participants received a personal journal as a thank-you gift.

Narrative Analysis with Holistic-Content Focus

The narrative analysis was focused with a holistic-content as described by Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber (1998). In this approach, the individual's conceptualization of her life story is spotlighted as the focus of the research. The researcher analyzes each narrative as a data source that is comprehensive. This analytical technique is composed of a first-person participant interpretation of experience that comes together to form the account. In each interview, the researcher analyzed narrative data using the holistic-content analytic procedures adapted from (Lieblich et al., 1998) and outlined in Appendix F.

Application of narrative inquiry and analysis. Narrative inquiry and analysis particularly suits this study. As Marshall and Rossman (2006, p. 6) explained, "Narrative analysis seeks to describe the meaning of experiences for those who frequently are socially marginalized or oppressed, as they construct (narratives) about their lives." This methodological approach can also have emancipatory outcomes for participants when exploring issues of social change, causality, and social identity (Elliott, 2005). This made narrative inquiry ideal for chronicling coming-out stories of African American lesbians to their mothers.

Role of researcher in study. The researcher functions as the instrument in qualitative studies (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). The relationship between researcher and participant is an important component of narrative inquiry studies, as the researcher must maintain sensitivity and responsiveness to the participants' viewpoint (Flick, 1998). Leiblich et al. (1998) stated that the context affects the aim of the interview, the relationship formed between teller and listener, and the mood of the narrator. As the researcher, I provided a degree of participation throughout the

interview, and disclosing my identity as an African American lesbian functioned as a bridge between participants and myself and was valuable in building trust.

Results

The following are excerpts from the narratives of Rita, Jade, Emiline, Denise and Lyric. They focus on (a) the process of coming out to mothers; (b) factors that facilitate coming out; (c) feelings of their mothers disapproval, tolerance, acceptance, and/or embracement of their lesbian identity; and (d) the role of coming out on their lesbian identity.

Rita's Story: "I should tell her right now."

Rita, age 27, is simultaneously quiet, shy, and unapologetically assertive. She grew up in a large northeastern metropolitan city. Rita resided with her step-mother since the age of four after her father removed her from her biological mother because of neglect allegations. She refers to both her biological and step-mother as mother. She came out to her step-mother during college at age 20.

Coming out story. We're riding in the car and my mom is telling me this story about her husband. In the story she tells me how his oldest daughter thinks she's gay. My mom is baiting me, that is what she is doing, and I know she is baiting me. She says, 'So and so daughters now thinks she is a lesbian. She done came out to her dad.' And I was like, 'Mommy, whatever, I'm not even listening to you right now.' But I am sitting there like 'Yea, maybe I should tell her. I should tell her right now because she doesn't seem real mad about the girl.' And all of this stuff is in my head while we are driving. And so, a good four hours must have passed, and we get back to the house. So I get out the car and I'm like, 'well,' I was like 'Mommy I,' I was like, how do I tell her, because mind you, the whole summer was pretty much gone at that point. And I said I was going to tell my momma this summer because there was no way I could go back [to

college] and not, and my mother not know. So I'm like, 'mommy,' I can't remember the exact words, but I was so freaking antsy, I just remember her standing against the car, she just chilling, just cool as a fan, and I'm like, 'remember when we were talking about so and so earlier and her being gay?' I was like 'well' I said, 'well I like women too.' And, she was like 'ok, well that is ok, I mean if that is what you want to do. It's not what I approve of. I am not going to sit down and talk to grandma at the kitchen table about it, but I'm not going to disown you either.' And I was like [emotional sounds of happiness], ok, I can deal with that. She was like, 'You know, I already knew that.' Yeah, she was like 'I was waiting for you to say something.' Because she was baiting me, 'when I told you about so and so,' 'I knew you were mommy.' I didn't say anything. We were just standing up in the street leaning against the car, and I was looking at her. She was like, '[A cousin] already told me.' My mom said [my cousin] told her maybe about a year or two before this. Because my best-friend, who is still my best-friend, used to come to my house all the time right. We went to school together. So I guess my cousin happened to be there when we came home from school. And my cousin I guess saw my best-friend and just assumed that we were together. I was like 'mommy I never did anything with her. That just used to be my best-friend; no.' Because it was weird for me to think that my mom would even think that I would be in her household and my room is right next to hers, and my best-friend is all up in her face. And everyone is just cool. I was like, 'No I didn't.' This is before I ever started dating at all. So I was like, 'I wish she would have told me.' She was like 'ok, well, I'm glad you told me.' and I was like, 'Oh, I love you' and I gave her a hug. And then I left, gave her a hug and went on my way. And we never talked about it since.

Factors leading to coming out: First relationship. I couldn't take the relationship serious because I hadn't told my mom. We just spent all our time together for the most part and, and I

think about after about 6 months or so, I was like, 'I need a break. We need to talk. You can't just like throw words like marriage and moving in together all around.' And I was just like, 'My momma don't even know yet, so I don't think so.' I was trying to transition away from her to get some space, but I still wanted her there. I didn't want her gone.

Significant event: Mother says her girlfriend is an embarrassment after Thanksgiving visit. Everybody's there. And I hear this later on—after the cookout was over, but that weekend. Apparently my mother says something to the effect of, 'my relationship is an embarrassment.'
Investigator: To who?
Rita: I don't know, everybody but me. My problem was my mother and I have already had this conversation. So 'you know who she is, and not that I need you to stand up for me, but you're my mom. And before you say it's an embarrassment to them, I expect you to keep that to yourself and say something to me. I don't understand.' So that's why I was upset about it. But, and I never said anything to her. I was mad. And eventually it turns into hurt, but I was mad at the time. I was just like, when you don't give a shit about anybody else and then the one person that you do care about, or especially for that situation, got something to say, you kind of just feel a little smacked.

Beliefs about mother's level of acceptance. I think that she tried to be a supportive mom as opposed to saying, 'this is how I really feel about it.' She gave the good face. And I think I was more hurt because I felt like, 'All the stuff that we have been through, that we have enough of a relationship for you to be like "I'm not feeling you."' And I'm not saying to any extreme or anything but be honest with me about it. My mom has never met anyone expect my first girlfriend – and she may, she might have heard a name, another name, one other name that is it, if anything. But she's never been presented with anybody else.

Significant event prior to coming out. I don't think I mentioned it earlier. I told my mom, 'This girl tried to kiss me.' I said, 'Mom, this girl tried to kiss me' and she was like, 'Well I hoped you moved.' And I just started laughing. I didn't even say anything because it was just so funny the way she delivered it, 'I hope you moved.' 'What mommy' ok. I told her that on purpose. I knew I told her on purpose because I didn't know how my mom felt about gays and lesbians. Even if she did have a particular view, how she felt about it concerning her child. So I needed some way to feel out something. But see, she was still cool. She wasn't irate. She wasn't anything. Her tone raised a little bite. But she's told me before you know, 'I got hit on, all the time,' 'yea, mommy, but I don't know if you didn't do nothing. I don't know, I just don't know.'

Messages about womanhood. From our conversations I feel like this is who she would want to have as a daughter. I think it is somebody who is ambitious. Who is willing to try things. Who isn't scared. Who's not going to allow herself to be held back. And I might be married with kids. That is about the only thing, maybe, maybe. But I don't even think my mom really thinks about that unless I am around her. And that's the other thing; she would want me around her more. That's the only thing I would probably add to me right now, because she was very much, 'I've lived my life and I want my children to live theirs, and to be happy doing whatever it is that they are doing. Don't be no fool.' I know she would like me to be more religious. I can't even say godly, I feel like she wants me to be more religious.

Concluding thoughts about coming out. I haven't dated a man in two year? Growing up you're raised to think that it's going to be a guy, and then I thought 'well maybe it will be a woman,' and then I thought 'I can't not have a woman.' Now I'm realizing I can't not be with a woman. I've had great boyfriends and guys that I have never had any real issues. I just thought that was what you do. I thought you grew up, you got your career, you found your husband and

you got married and had kids. That's what I thought. I don't even want it to be that. And I don't have too. I am confident in the fact that I've said - and granted that I only said that I liked women and kind of just left it at that – but the fact that I even mentioned it that then it should be no surprise when I come to her and say, 'Mommy I'm getting married to Lisa.' And we can at that point have a conversation. But I think that I have the approval that I needed. I was scared of being disowned and to be disowned by the only person who took you in to begin with is what I felt like is crushing. But now I know that even if we disagree, and we don't talk about that part of my life - even though that would be sad – it is sad because we don't – I would not be disowned. And so I am ok.

Jade's Story: "She sent me to bootcamp."

Jade, age 27, is a confident self professed diva and young professional. She grew up in a large eastern metropolitan city. She was reared by her biological parents until they divorced when she was 14-years-old. Jade indirectly came out to her mother through a diary during high school. Later, during college at age 18, she verbally disclosed her sexual identity to her mother.

Coming out story. My mother read my diary and that's when she kind of flipped. I was 15 and she said she was cleaning my room and she read my diary. And yes, it said I kissed a girl. And the girl that I kissed, my mom loved her to death. But afterwards, my mom couldn't stand her. And then I denied it. I just said, 'I just wanted to see how it felt to kiss a girl, Mom.' I officially came out when I was 18. I went to college, and I was smelling myself, 'I was like, I'm going to be me, and I'm going to do me. I'm not going to live in no closet. I'm going to do what I want to do, I'm grown now.'

Investigator: Walk me through the story.

Jade: I wanted to go home for something and [my girlfriend] drove me home. That's how I kind of brought it up to my mother. As, 'Oh Mommy this is my girlfriend.'

Investigator: Did your girlfriend know what she was getting into?

Jade: No, my mom was thinking that I meant, 'girlfriend' as just a female friend. And then, and she brought it back up. After we left she called me and said, 'When you said girlfriend, what did you mean by girlfriend?' And I said, 'Girlfriend, she's like my lover.' And my mom flipped. She did not like that at all. She started, well, she started treating me different in high school when she found out I kissed a girl. But after this, oh it was not pretty. She was just like, 'I didn't raise you this way. I'm going to tell the church, and I'm going to pray over you. I'm going to snatch you from college. You're not going to do this, I don't care what them other little girls do - going through those phases when they go off to college. I didn't raise you that way.' She was just really, really mean anytime she saw me. She was really, really negative.

Factors leading to coming out: Romantic relationship. I felt I was so into her. I really loved her. I was going to spend years and years, if not the rest of my life with her. So, why hide. If I'm telling everyone in school that, 'yes, my family knows,' and I'm out of the closet, why am I still living like I'm in the closet. If they know, then why not introduce them to whoever I'm with.

Significant event: Jade is sent to bootcamp. She sent me to boot camp [a disciplinary facility for minors], because she had connections - because she was the [leader in probation and parole]. Right after she read my diary, that summer I went to boot camp. And then my sister was like, 'You are stupid for sending her to boot camp; you are going to send her somewhere where there is a whole bunch lesbians.' And that was when my mom said, 'It's going to straighten her out.' She thought it was just going to scare me. I guess from the stories of people usually going

to boot camp right before they go to jail. It scares them because of the big women and all that kind of stuff. But boot camp - I enjoyed it. I loved boot camp - waking up running and stuff. I was already doing that with cheerleading and dance. So getting up at 5 o'clock was nothing because I had a dance class before my actual school started. It was nothing. I met a lot of cool people there. I even ended up singing at our graduation.

Messages about womanhood. I just think that [my mother] didn't know how to handle it. She didn't know how to take it. That her little girl love girls. Mothers have this image of what their daughters are going to be. I think she wanted me to be a lawyer. She said I was a great debater. I was on the debate team in high school and stuff. I think she wanted me to be a lawyer and get married and have all these kids and stuff like that. Like any other mother wants your child to be happy, successful and in love, with the opposite sex.

Significant event: Responding to mother's rage. Christmas [my girlfriend and I] went up there and the trains weren't working after a certain time and I didn't know this. And at the time my mother lived on one side and my girlfriend lived across town. And so, I asked my mother to come pick me up at the train station. She got upset, and she came to pick me up, and she calling me all kinds of names, cursing me out, 'lesbian B.' All because I asked her to come and pick me up. When we got back to the house and she was still calling me names. I packed my things. I kissed my brothers and sisters goodbye. I went and kissed my mom. I said, 'Thank you for everything.' I called my girlfriend, and then she came and picked me up. And I left. We drove back down [to college]. And I didn't talk to my mother for almost a year.

Investigator: What sparked it?

Jade: Me being a lesbian.

Effects of mother's rage. I didn't tell her anything. I just dealt with females only. It was like, 'I came out to her already. I told her.' After we stopped talking for a year, my little brother is the one who actually got us to talk again. I would always wait until she went to work or something to call him. I told her, 'you're either going to be in my life or not, but I'm not going to go back in the closet for you. I'm going to live my life as a lesbian. You either can join in. You don't have to like it, but you have to respect me. No more calling me names, calling me Bs and all that kind of stuff. You wouldn't want anyone calling you that so don't call me that.' At first she was like, 'I'll do whatever I want.' I was like, 'Ok, do whatever you want then we're not going to talk again, and you're missing out on my life.' And my grandmother actually had to talk to her. She was like, 'this is your daughter. How are you going to treat her like this?'

Beliefs about mother's level of acceptance. It's like a newfound respect that she found for me. Because growing up, I was the quiet one. I was shy, I didn't say much. I smiled all the time and I was friendly, but talking back to my parents, I didn't do. I always just accepted whatever my parents did. But it kind of brought us closer… And she helped me through my breakup. That's when I knew, 'ok she is ok with it.' Especially when she said, 'it doesn't matter who you with. They have to respect you. They have to do this. And if she is going to cheat on you, she doesn't deserve you. It doesn't mean for you just to run to a man because she cheated on you.' When she said that about [my ex-girlfriend] that's when I was like, 'Wow, wow.'

Concluding thoughts on coming out. I think I would ask myself if she's the one I want to introduce to my family. I would ask myself to put other people's feelings ahead of your own. Know that you think you're all in love, but the world isn't about you. Even thought this is your coming out make sure you're ready fully for all outcomes because I couldn't have expected the outcome that happened. I would ask myself, or I tell myself to set the atmosphere better. Don't

just spring the girl up on your mom. Knowing how my mother is, I could have done it better.

And maybe she would have accepted it better. I was young. I was young and naive and stupid.

My mother loves the gardens. I think I would have taken her out to the brunch at a garden, she

loves it. I think I would have taken her out to lunch in front of a beautiful garden and actually

talked to her. And had grown talk, not 'Mom I love girls.' No. Actually find out her opinions on

certain things. Let her get her feelings out and how she would accept or not accept. Because I

have to remember, it's not just my feelings.

Emiline's Story: "I feel very good about myself."

Emiline, age 26, is a friendly, personable and opinionated woman who laughs was ease.

In the mist of her heightened Black consciousness, she jokingly refers to herself as a Black

valley girl. She grew up in a large southeastern city, and was reared by her biological parents

until their divorce when she was 15 years of age. Emiline co-parented her younger sisters with

her mom after the divorce. She came out to her mother recently during graduate school at age 24.

Coming out story. We were on a walk together, and she brought up, 'What is the deal

between you and Susan?' and I was like, 'I like her.' And she was like, 'What does that mean?'

and I told her, 'I like her.' And she was like, 'What does that mean?' I think I told her, 'We're in

a relationship; we're seeing how this works.' And I think she asked me if I had had sex with her.

And I said, 'yes.' Then she went into this long tirade about - we were very religious - how

homosexuality is wrong, 'It goes against the bible and everything I've been taught,' and on and

on about, 'I knew better than this; she didn't raise me to be this way.' I'd had an ex-boyfriend,

and she thought I was going to be getting back together with him so she was like, 'Charles is

such a good man; why are you doing this; this is just a phase; you're going to hate that you did

this later in your life.' I was like, 'I am ok with who I am, you're not going to guilt me and make me feel bad about who I am. I really like this woman. Leave me alone.'

Investigator: Did you expect that she was going to ask you?

Emiline: I felt like it was going to happen. It was inevitable that we had this conversation, and I kind of wanted to share. She knows every move that I've made because she was my best-friend. Who else am I going to tell what's going on; what I'm feeling? We've always been close. So I wanted to share. I think that walk gave us that alone time where we weren't sitting across from each other face to face to get it all out in a more informal way. We walked together a lot. Yeah, I kind of knew it was coming. I almost feel like that walk was kind of planned in my mind, 'Ok, I'm just going to let it all out, and try to get it all out or whatever.' It was kind of ironic. I mean, I was really happy. I was really happy with Susan. I was really happy that I was being an adult and living on my own. There was no shame. There was no fear or embarrassment on my part. I'm sure my mother was embarrassed, and I'm sure she was a little ashamed. She wanted me to talk quietly, and I was like, 'I don't care that I'm gay.' and she's like, 'You want everyone else on the trail to hear you?' I'm like, 'whatever, and they're gay too'. She was like, 'Do you want everyone to know?' And I was like, 'I don't care.' And being gay, and coming out was the most natural thing for me.

Significant event. Navigating religion and extended family. I'm very comfortable with who I am, so I tell people all the time. I talk about it in my blog, and I came out to my classmates at the end of the school year, but I was like, I told them, I wanted ya'll to know me before you knew me as the only Black gay person in the whole building. But for her, she hasn't told anyone - she's only told one or two of her friends, and they can pray for me and help her deal with this. She hasn't told any of our extended family; which is surprising because I expected that to be out.

It's not like one of those things we we're going to sweep it under the rug and never talk about it, but it's definitely not one of those things she talking about with everybody herself. It's still very immediate family, very hush-hush with everyone else. She thinks it's wrong. She thinks I'm going to hell.

  Response to mom's religious beliefs and other explanations for her mother not coming out to extended family. And I sent her literature on how liberals and conservatives misconstrue the bible or it can be interpreted to whatever you want it to mean. She and I had lots of conversations over many, many years about how the bible was written for the Israelite people for a certain point in time, and it had to do with their history and their culture. Then you have preachers who also interpret to their own understanding, and we don't know if they are right, and how can you say what you've always been taught is right, and what I'm telling you now is wrong. So at this point we've just decided – she loves me, and she told me this on my birthday this past year. She's like, 'I love you. I will always love you. You're my first born child. I'm so proud of who you are and how you've made choices to be who you are authentically.' She's like, 'We're going to have to agree to disagree on the morality of it.' She doesn't say the word lesbian, she doesn't say gay, 'She's dating' or she'll say, 'You and Susan.' But it's, 'we have to agree to disagree on what it means, and I'm praying for you, that you come back to your senses.' I'm like, 'Whatever mom.'

Investigator: You think it's anything else there too.

Emiline: I think the issue is her brother was gay. He's dead now, but she heard how they talked about him. And how they made fun of him, and how they called him all kinds of names. And I feel like part of her doesn't want them to say anything negative about me. Because, A. it's going

to hurt my feelings and B. it is going to piss her off. She's going to have to defend me, and she doesn't want that kind of tension going on. So I think that has a lot to do with it.

  Messages about womanhood. Her life was mother and wife. When my parents split she became mother and provider. She had been a housewife while my parents were together. It wasn't until like my sister was old enough to go to school that my mother started teaching again, because she was a teacher before she got married. And I remember having lots of conversations about seeing the world, and having your own life and it was always about being successful and excelling, 'you have to do better, you have to do well, and you have to be in stuff.' And there was that second expectation, 'You have to be in the church. You have to be active in the church.' And having Jesus in your life. But, so there is that, and I feel like she always expected, especially with me, because I was always head strong and independent - I kind of think she expected me to do my thing, and to work and have that financial backing, and to be married and have children later in life; especially as I got older and I was very adamant of, 'I don't necessarily want to get married. I don't see the point and marriage, and I know I don't want to have kids.'

Investigator: Where do you think you got those thoughts of independence?

Emiline: I got it from her. It was kind of one of those reverse psychology where I knew I didn't want her life. I knew I didn't want to depend on a man for anything. I knew that if I wanted to have anything, I had to get it myself. I couldn't just depend on anyone else to take care of me. [My sisters and I] learned that when you're pretty much dependant on a man, if things don't work out, you're screwed. My mother had to work almost from scratch to restart her career. I don't think it was ever us talking about it. I think she was like, 'You see how this goes don't you?' She talked out of both sides of her mouth a lot of the time. And it was very much like she wanted us to be happy and to be in relationships, but she also didn't want us to be stupid, and she

didn't want us to fall into those same types of traps, because she was such a dynamic and independent person before she got married.

Beliefs about mother's level of acceptance: Closing thoughts about coming out. I'd say [my mom is] tolerant but is she accepting that I'm gay and will always be gay, probably not. But I think she's doing the best she can… When I talk to people about how I came out and how it all happened, they are like, 'you had it easy.' I feel like I've been really blessed to be in a situation where I had a really strong relationship with my mom to begin with. So it wasn't like she didn't know me, and she loves me enough and we have a fairly adult relationship to begin with that it wasn't a huge deal... I feel very good about myself.

Denise's Story: "I know I'll never be shunned."

Denise, age 26, is a proud member of a popular African American sorority and embraces all things feminine. She grew up in a small midwestern city. She considers her biological mother, older cousin, and aunt her mothers. Her biological mother died from cancer when she was 12-years-old. Denise went to live with her older female cousin. She came out to her cousin's mother during her senior year of high school. She later came out again to her cousin and aunt while in college at age 20.

Coming out story. There was another girl who came to my school, and I was head over heels in love with this girl. I couldn't stop thinking about her. So of course I tell her I like her. And she's like, 'I like boys and you're disgusting, and I don't want to be your friend anymore.' So I was really embarrassed. But from that experience I decided, 'ok I'm going to go on the internet now and find me somebody to date.' So I met this girl on the internet and we start hanging out. And my cousin knew that I was friends with this girl but she didn't know the nature of it. So one night she was with another girl, and I was crying and really upset about it. My

cousin - I'm in my bed and she's on the steps - she's like, 'Why are you crying?' And I'm like, 'Because Tiffany is no good.' And my cousin's like, 'You don't think it's weird that you are crying about a girl?' And I'm just shaking my head at this point because I don't want to deal with this and Tiffany. And I'm like, 'Well, yeah' and she's like, 'Denise, while we are on it, you always take a shower when you're going to see Tiffany and you just do a lot for you and Tiffany, so, what's going on with that?' And I said 'Ok, well Amy's my girlfriend.' That's just what I said. And she was like, 'Well [your aunt and I] already knew that, we were just waiting for you to say something.' And I was like, 'Wow, whatever, no you didn't. I haven't even done anything with the girl.' I'm trying to be all defensive at this point. From then on I just started to be more honest about it. But I was still with this guy. So I think it was ok because I was with him but I was with her too. So they weren't feeling that I was super gay yet.

Second coming out attempt. I guess Labor Day weekend would have been the first weekend that I was off from school freshman year. So, I went back home and by this time I had already had a crush on another girl, and just kept coming with the girls and crushing. So I had to say something. So I went home and told [my cousin], 'I think I really might like girls.' It was always 'kind of' or 'might be.' Now I'll say this, I don't ever remember there being formal conversation like, 'I am a lesbian.' I don't think that has ever happened. I've said some stuff like, 'I like girls and so and so, and so and so.' And I just started having girlfriends. I was never like, 'Let's just sit down and have dinner and talk about how gay I am.' It was never like that. But I remember just telling her I wasn't getting married, and she knew what that meant. And she knew I liked girls at that point, but now I did have a formal conversation with her mother [aunt]. This was probably my sophomore year in college. I came home for the summer, and she wanted to buy me some condoms. And I said, 'Auntie, I don't really need condoms. I don't sleep with

men.' And she let me know, 'We had been hearing this,' because it was two years since I was 17, but we really never talked about it. And I said, 'I just think I really like girls.' And she goes, 'Oh, you're just mad about [your boyfriend]. He hurt your feelings and you're just mad about him.'

Significant event: Comments about being gay and biological mother. I think my parents were very – I call them my parents, my auntie and my cousin – were very permissive of me because my mom was dead. So they never really were too critical of me because they felt like, 'Well her mom is dead. She's probably whacked out, and there is nothing we can ever do about it.' But they did, not my cousin so much, but my auntie continues to try to get me to talk to men…Every problem in my life is because I'm gay. Every problem it's, 'That's why.' If I can't find a job, 'Leave them girls alone.' If I'm not happy, 'Well, the girls.' Because they feel like from a spiritual perspective that - they feel like I'm not a Christian because I'm gay. They feel like I'm not into god because I am gay; so if I was not gay then god would be on my side, and I would have a wonderful like. So whenever I have an issue with a girl, it's always, 'well, you know you have a girl friend. You need a boyfriend and you'll be ok.' So they still do that. It's getting a little bit better. But it's still a struggle for them.

Significant event: Attempts to respond to religious beliefs. My auntie has always been very religious. They have brought me all type of pamphlets, and my auntie sends me cards with bible verses in it. Yeah, they are not happy with it. I think they accept it but they aren't happy with it… There was a Pride…, and I brought [my aunt] a pamphlet about – because they have these pamphlets that have the bible verses and break them down, and some of the things in the bible that are noted that are anti-homosexual. And I brought it to her, and I was like, 'See Auntie look.' And I was really happy because I'm not a bible historian. I don't know anything about the bible for real. So I can't fight bible people. So I brought her the pamphlet, and I gave it to her

and I said, 'Look auntie, it's the bible and its ok to be gay. And she was like, 'whatever.' She starts pulling out her bible, and she starts telling me different stuff. So from then she started to send me more and more things, 'Why god is unhappy.' And it's like no sin is greater than another sin; they feel that way but they feel it's still a sin… If we didn't have the religious issue a lot more people will feel free to come out. But you can not take Jesus away. Black people are not letting go of their Jesus. They are not.

Beliefs about biological mother's level of acceptance. Well they have said that they don't think she would have accepted it. That she would have thought it was wrong. But I don't remember my mother going to church a lot. I don't remember my mother being judgmental. I remember my mother being weird too. So I think she would have accepted me. I think that they would not have known. I think it would have been something between me and her.

Messages about womanhood. [Mother's] thing was be smart. I will tell anybody, I wasn't raised pretty. I was raised smart. I remember somebody told me I was pretty one day, and I came home and told her. And she was so disgusted. And I'll never forget this - the bus cost $1.25, and she goes, 'Denise, being pretty and a $1.25 will get you a ride on the bus.' So I remember that message. She didn't care about that. She was really into being smart. It's interesting because now that I'm a little older I can look back and see how things manifest themselves. I think if you have a path in life you really got to go for that path, because if you get deterred from it your life changes. I don't know what [my mother] wanted to do with her life, but I think that what happened was that at some point she had to get a job. I think as she got older, she kind of settled into what her life was becoming, and wasn't like this, 'fuck it, I'm gay.' Which is a fear from me, and that's like a wake up call for me to get where I want to be doing what I want to do.

Concluding thoughts about coming out. Some people are like, 'Don't bring her home, and we don't acknowledge it.' They are not that. They are kind of like, 'Don't talk about it; Kind of like don't ask, don't tell." But they don't disown me or shun me. I don't have the fear of being disowned or shunned by them. I know everything I've done so far, I know my family would never disapprove of it. I know they wouldn't ever say anything to me about it. Do I think that they have some quiet discussions amongst themselves? Perhaps. So I am a little careless when it comes to how I plan my future with a woman because I know they are not ever going to say anything even if they are shocked and appalled. They aren't going to ever say anything. Part of me is like, 'well I don't care. I have a girlfriend so what.' And then part of me goes 'well let me not say too much. Let me not do too much when it comes to them.' I don't know if that makes sense.

Lyric's Story: "It was time that she listened to me."

Lyric, age 30, is a straight-forward, assertive, independent woman. She holds her identity as an artist as dear as her African American and lesbian identities. Lyric grew up in a large northeastern city. She was reared by both her biological parents and has a close relationship with her father. She came out to her mother and father during college at age 21.

Coming out story. I came out my junior year in college. I was 21 or 22. I had been dating women. I officially called my self gay in 1998. It was the first time I slept with a woman. I was like, 'Ok, I'm confirmed, it's good, I'm gay.' I had been dating since that time, but this was when I was going through with this girl. She just had my mind gone. So I just had to talk to someone... I had never talked about my relationships with guys or, dating anyone. [My parents] never knew who I dated. It was always a mystery. They saw a prom date. They would hear guys call me on the phone, but they never knew I was dating. I never talked about it. We never talked

about sex or anything. [My mom] found some condoms. She told me I better not be having sex, and that was it. That was my birds and bees conversation. That was the kind of woman she is. So, I think at that point we were probably talking more because of her mental illness. I would call her more, check up on her more, 'How are you doing? How are you feeling?' But this time I was like, 'you're listening to me.' And I can't remember – I just remember calling her up. And I was just telling her how sad I was, how distracted I was, and how I wanted her to calm down. Then I probably said, 'Somebody hurt my feelings,' and she was like, 'Who?' and I was like, 'A GIRL,' and her response was, 'Ok,' and then after I calmed down, later on she asked me if it was it a phase? And that was the extent of her commentary about the whole thing… I think she knew exactly what I meant because I had taken some people home previously, and they were kind of masculine. And then from later conversations with my dad, he said he knew I was gay since high school. And they are really tight, so I know they've talked about it before. Just from that conversation. So when I told her 'A girl,' she said, 'Ok.' If she didn't understand, she would ask questions. So in her saying, 'Ok' and just proceeding to calm me down, 'It'll be ok, try to calm me down, it'll be alright,' but then she did stick in, 'you sure it's not a phase?'

Investigator: During that conversation?

Lyric: Yes, and then I was like, 'it's not a phase' I said, 'I've been doing this for a while; it is not a phase.' She was like, 'Ok, don't cry.'

Factors leading to coming out. I came out to my mom because she is my mom. She is the one who knew me the longest and I had no one else to talk to. I mean other than my friends. I can't even say my friends at the time because not that many people were out or gay - most of my friends, to my knowledge, where all straight around me. I went through a lot with my friends. I lost some, I gained some, but they still were straight, and they didn't' understand my story. And

other than the people I dated, and a few other people that were shady, that I didn't trust, my mom was the only one I trusted. And I was going through a real bad break up, so I was like, 'Let me just call her. Let me just tell her because I have to tell somebody. Because I know she won't judge me.' She wouldn't make me feel bad. If anything, all she would do was just listen, if anything else.

Significant event: Mother no longer strong woman. She didn't stand up for herself. And I was like, "what happened to the strong woman who would come home and nothing phased her, and was going to get through." I just saw her real defeated all the time. Me and my dad are just alike, and he's very strong willed, strong personality, loud voice. He shouts when he talks. That's just how he is, and whatever he says goes. In that he is the decision maker, 'This is what is going to happen.' So, yeah, that really made me who I am.

Beliefs about mother's level of acceptance. She doesn't talk about it. She won't directly address it. I have brought people home, and she'll ask about them, 'How is your friend, how is your friend?' she always refers to anyone as, 'How is your friend?' So they could be a friend or a lover. But she doesn't talk about it… In a round-about way she'll mention someone's gay. Somebody on TV, or we're walking down the street, and 'Oh, [they] look kind of gay.' I don't know; that is her way of trying to connect. She is not condescending. She is just, 'it's a gay person, or a gay woman' or whatever - But not too much. I have mentioned girls later on. The next crisis I'll call her, 'you need to calm me down' and of course she'll be, 'you'll be ok, and you just…' She'll just refer to them as that person, 'that person, blah, blah, blah did this or did that.' But she'll never directly say 'your girlfriend, your lover,' or anything like that.

Discussion

The coming out narratives of five lesbians, Rita, Jade, Emiline, Denise and Lyric reveal the challenges and successes in coming out to their mothers. Valuing a close relationship with mother in combination with the onset of a romantic relationship with a woman prompted the coming-out process. Mothers often warned daughters against coming out to others, and it was often difficult for daughters to decide whether these messages originated from mothers' personal homophobic beliefs and/or mothers' desire to protect their daughters from homophobia among extended family members and the community-at-large. Nevertheless, none of the women regretted disclosing their lesbian identity to their mothers.

Mother-Daughter Relationships

Relationships with mothers were important for lesbian daughters, and the label "mother" was not allocated solely to biological mothers. The title "mother" widened to include an aunt, cousin, and stepmother. Rita and Denise referred to multiple women as "mother." Rita's mothers were both her stepmother and biological mother, and Denise considered her cousin and aunt to be her mothers after her biological mother's death.

Early romantic relationships with women as well as the importance placed on relationships with mothers, motivated women to disclose their lesbian identity to mothers, a finding that is consistent with Savin-Williams and Ream (2003) who found that lesbians tended to come out after entering their first same-sex romantic relationship. However these narratives also illustrated how relationships with mothers equally and sometimes outweighed the influence of romantic relationship. For example Rita explained, "I couldn't take the relationship serious because I hadn't told my mom." Rita, Jade, and Emiline used coming out as a tool to seemingly legitimize their early relationships with women. Coming out to their mothers both affirmed their

relationships and validated their lesbian identity. Lyric did not allow her mother's mental health challenges to deny her of the identity affirming potential of coming out, "…this time I was like, 'you're listening to me.'" These findings speak to the potentiality for self-actualization through identity affirmation. Moreover, African American mothering may ameliorate the perception of risks, particularly the discrimination daughters may encounter as a result of being African American, female, and lesbian.

Challenges Distinguishing Homophobia from Protection

Lesbian daughters reported that mother's degree of acceptance of their lesbianism was often filtered through religion, making it difficult to untangle homophobia as inspired by religious institutions or from mothers' own homophobic beliefs. Brown Douglas (1999) identified religion as a culturally specific factor in African American families and communities' attitudes and beliefs regarding homosexuality. They explained that some churches, often the backbone of the African American community, sanction messages that heavily degrade and criticize same-sex relationships. Denise made strong connections between Christianity, African Americans, and homophobia: "If we didn't have the religious issue a lot more people will feel free to come out. But you cannot take Jesus away. Black people are not letting go of their Jesus." Jade believed that her mother thought her lesbianism would send her to hell. Denise and Emiline both made several unsuccessful attempts to counter their mothers' belief that Christianity was in direct opposition to lesbian identity. However, Christianity was not central to Rita's and Lyric's mothers, but they did link homophobia with religion. Lyric explained that her parents were not very religious but instead embraced spiritual beliefs from multiple religions.

Mothers' warnings against daughters coming out to the larger community, including extended family, can be interpreted as a homophobic practice and simultaneously an act of

protection. Rita felt wounded after hearing that her mother expressed to extended family members that her same-sex relationship was an embarrassment, "I was just like, when… the one person that you do care about, or especially for that situation, got something to say, you kind of just feel a little smacked." Emiline, after repeatedly informing her mother that she held pride in her lesbian identity and did not care if others knew she was a lesbian, agreed with her mother to not come out to her extended family. In spite of her mother's homophobic religious beliefs, she attributed her mother's disapproval of coming out as extended family protection, "I think the issue is her brother was gay… she heard how they talked about him… And I feel like part of her doesn't want them to say anything negative about me. Because, A. it's going to hurt my feelings and B. it is going to piss her off. She's going to have to defend me, and she doesn't want that kind of tension going on." Thus, it would be a mistake to blanket mothers' discouragement as solely rooted in homophobia.

Messages about Womanhood: Continued Complexities

Mothers' messages and instructions on appropriate womanhood present another slippery slope in distinguishing homophobia from protection. All women reportedly valued strength and linked strength, self-reliance, and independence to womanhood, particularly African American womanhood. The diversity in messages and beliefs on appropriate womanhood are illustrated in Table 2.1. Messages are consistent with Collins (1990) argument that the promotion of self-reliance and independence is a strategy African American mothers use to help daughters insulate themselves from marginalization. In the examination of African American mothers' role in helping their daughters obtain their future academic and career goals, Kerpelman, Shoffner, and Ross-Griffin (2002) found that daughters not only valued good relationships with their mothers, but academically successful daughters tended to have mothers who viewed them as strong,

competent young women. Lyric was the only participate who could not see her mother as a source of strength due to the decline in her mental health status. Responding to her mother's lack of strength and subsequent vulnerability, she emulated her father, "I just saw her real defeated all the time. Me and my dad are just alike, and he's very strong willed, strong personality, loud voice." Mothers' messages about womanhood also included messages about favoring heterosexuality and marriage.

Daughters often expressed feeling that their mothers wanted them to be in a heterosexual relationship (see Table 2.1for illustration of these beliefs). According to Stephens and Phillips (2005), African American mothers are essential for transmitting the values, attitudes, and knowledge needed to avoid internalizing negative messages from society. However, they explained that mothers' understanding of ideal Black womanhood is often grounded in a heterosexual framework that leads them to instruct daughters to endorse traditional gender ideology as an obligation to the race. Based on these results, it is not appropriate to consider these beliefs as simply rooted in homophobia. They could equally be mothers' attempts to protect daughters from societal homophobia. For instance, Jade explained that her mother's promotion of heterosexuality stemmed from her desire for her future happiness and in addition to challenges she felt she could encounter in openly identifying as lesbian, "That was her fear, that I wouldn't get married, or find happiness, or have kids. I plan to do all of that."

Daughters believed that mothers allowed space for their lesbian identity in spite of mothers' messages about religion, fear of homophobia, her own homophobia and/or ideal womanhood. According to Turnage (2004), it is important for African American mothers to support their daughters and give them space to individuate. Mothers often function as "refueling stations" for daughters and by drawing on her mothers' love and support, the daughter is better

enabled to individuate and create her own notions of self. Emiline revealed her mothers'

complex and inconsistent messages about appropriate womanhood, "[My mother] talked out of

both sides of her mouth a lot of the time. And it was very much like she wanted [my sister and I]

to be happy and to be in relationships, but she also didn't want us to be stupid, and she didn't

want us to fall into those same types of traps, because she was such a dynamic and independent

person before she got married." In addition, Rita stated that she knew she would be okay without

a man, "I thought you grew up, you got your career, you found your husband and you got

married and had kids. That's what I thought. I don't even want it to be that. And I don't have to.'

Now I'm realizing I can't not be with a woman."

Feelings about Coming Out to Mothers

Women did not have any regrets about coming out but instead reflected on best ways to

come out. Jade revealed her ideal coming out scenario, "My mother loves the gardens. I think I

would have taken her out to brunch at a garden… and actually talked to her." Rita, Jade, and

Emiline all agreed that direct and open conversation was the best method to come out to mothers.

Although this study focuses on mother-daughter relationships, relationships with fathers were

often significant in daughters coming out narratives. For instance, Jade came out to her father

before coming out to her mother, and both Jade's and Lyric's fathers affirmed their lesbian

identity.

In final reflections on successes and challenges in coming out, they believed that the

experience brought them closer to their mothers. This is consistent with Troiden (1988)

suggestion that coming out often serves to build intimacy in relationships. In addition, maternal

acceptance strengthens African American girls resolve to accept themselves and to expand their

definitions of themselves. Rita stated, "But I think that I have the approval that I needed. I was

scared of being disowned and to be disowned by the only person who took you in to begin with is what I felt like is crushing. But now I know that even if we disagree… I would not be disowned. And so I am ok." These results confirm the suggestion of Turnage (2004), Bell-Scott et al., (1993) and Green (1990a, b) that supportive relationships with their mothers may equip African American daughters to develop positive self-images as African American women

Conclusions

Researchers often ignore culturally relevant aspects of African American lesbians coming out in African American communities. Most researchers examine coming-out stories from White samples and find that coming out often causes tremendous emotional turmoil for gays and lesbians (Johnston & Jenkins, 2004). Theories and concepts most commonly used to inform and guide research questions rarely address the issue of daughters coming out to their families (for exceptions see Gomez & Smith 1990; Parks, 2001; Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2004). In this study, I add to the sparse but growing body of literature (see Gomez & Smith, 1990; Moore & Lockhart, 1997; Parks, 2001; Rosario, Schrimshaw & Hunter, 2004) that explicitly highlights the significance of the intersectionality of racism, sexism, and heterosexism on African American lesbians' decisions to come out and the identity affirming experience in coming out. Given the resilience demonstrated by many African American mothers in times of adversity, I conclude that lesbian daughters likely internalize these messages, and in turn demonstrate self-reliance and independence in order to achieve their goals in maintaining pride in their own marginalized identities.

This study was focused on the participants' construction of her coming out narrative. A qualitative study's generalizability to others can be problematic in the probabilistic sense (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). I do not claim that these findings represent the experiences of all

African American lesbians. Rather, the sample was purposive and homogeneous. No two personal biographies are the same because each consists of unique experiences, motivations, and emotions. Still, it is useful to obtain a deep understanding of African American women who are lesbians through their unique perceptions. Although I cannot generalize the experiences of the African American lesbians examined to the whole population of African American lesbians, it does provide a foundation for continued research and investigation.

Table 2.1. *Messages and Beliefs about Womanhood*

Participants	Messages and Beliefs about Womanhood Comments
Rita	From our conversations I feel like this is who [my mother] would want to have as a daughter. I think it is somebody who is ambitious. Who is willing to try things. Who isn't scared. Who's not going to allow herself to be held back. And I might be married with kids. That is about the only thing, maybe, maybe.
Jade	I just think that [my mother] didn't know how to handle it. She didn't know how to take that her little girl loves girls. Mothers have this image of what their daughters are going to be…She said I was a great debater… I think she wanted me to be a lawyer and get married and have all these kids. Like any other mother wants your child to be happy, successful and in love, with the opposite sex.
Emiline	[My mother's] life was mother and wife. When my parents split she became mother and provider…And I remember having lots of conversations about seeing the world, and having your own life, and it was always about being successful and excelling, 'you have to do better, you have to do good, and you have to be in stuff.'… I was always head strong and independent - I kind of think she expected me to do my thing, and to work and have that financial backing, and to be married and have children later in life.
Denise	[My mother's] thing was be smart. I will tell anybody, I wasn't raised pretty. I was raised smart… And I'll never forget this - the bus cost $1.25, and she goes, 'Denise, being pretty and a $1.25 will get you a ride on the bus.' So I remember that message.
Lyric	[My mother] didn't stand up for herself. And I was like, "what happened to the strong woman who would come home and nothing phased her, and was going to get through." I just saw her real defeated all the time. Me and my dad are just alike, and he's very strong willed, strong personality, loud voice.

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Rationale for Study 2

The primary purpose of this research project was to gain a deeper understanding of how African American lesbian daughters construct meaning associated with their coming-out stories to their mothers. The first paper presented in Chapter 1, entitled, *"Coming Out to Mother: Stories of African American Lesbians,"* is a chronicle of African American lesbian daughters coming-out stories to their mothers. This study fills a void in the literature by chronicling the coming out narratives of five young African American lesbians (26 to 30 years of age) to their mothers. Daughters believed that mothers allowed space for their lesbian identity in spite of mothers' messages about religion, fear of homophobia, personal homophobia beliefs, and/or ideal womanhood. Women did not seem to have any regrets about coming out but instead reflected on best approaches to come out. Although not the focus on the interview, all participants reflected on their relationships with extended family members.

Interestingly, participants' management of their lesbian identity with mothers differed from, and at times contradicted with, their lesbian identity management with extended family members. Every participant mentioned some aspect of *don't ask, don't tell* within extended families. This informal policy suggests that sexual minorities are accepted within African American families and communities as long as they do not label themselves or acknowledge publicly that they engage in same-sex or nonheteronormative relationships. This unexpected finding presented interesting questions for differentiating between lesbian identity development and lesbian identity management. This finding lead to the focus of the second paper, entitled, *"African American Lesbian Identity Development: The Complication of Don't Ask, Don't Tell,"* presented in Chapter 3.

CHAPTER 3

STUDY 2: AFRICAN AMERICAN LESBIAN IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT: THE

COMPLICATION OF *DON'T ASK, DON'T TELL*[2]

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[2] Miller, S. J. to be submitted to *Journal of Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*.

Abstract

Don't ask, don't tell is gaining attention in family studies literature as a cultural specific context to understand lesbian, gay and bisexual visibility in African American families and communities. This policy suggests that sexual minorities are accepted within African American families and communities as long as they do not label themselves or acknowledge publicly that they engage in same-sex relationships. The narratives of two African American lesbians (ages 26 and 27) are chronicled in the present study to reveal their lesbian identity development and how they define and navigate *don't ask, don't tell*. The implementation of this policy within their families proved to affect their lesbian identity development. They encountered challenges and successes in a quest to find communities that would embrace and affirm their multiple marginalized identities. Their stories are offered as a point of entry to further inquiry concerning African American lesbian visibility and identity proclamation within African American families and communities.

Introduction

Explanations for community influence on African American lesbians' coming out experiences vary. Some researchers have identified homophobia in African American communities as the primary barrier preventing lesbians from disclosing their sexual orientation; they have concluded that lesbians often refuse to come out in order to avoid disappointing their families and communities (Martinez & Sullivan, 1998; Savin-Williams & Cohen, 1998). Yet, in Cass (1979, 1984) stage theory of homosexual identity development, a classic way to examine lesbian identity formation (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996), she labels coming out an essential component of healthy identity development. Conclusions about the coming-out process are generally in agreement that coming out can be extremely challenging (Cass, 1979, 1984; Degges-White, Rice, & Myers, 2000; Gomez & Smith 1990; Herek & Capitanio, 1995; Martinez & Sullivan, 1998; Savin-Williams & Cohen 1996; Whitman, Cormier, & Boyd, 2000); however, many debate whether or not coming out truly represents a central marker of a healthy lesbian identity formation (Degges-White, Rice, & Myers, 2000; Gomez & Smith 1990; Whitman, Cormier, & Boyd, 2000).

Green (2000) argued that it is a mistake to consider people who choose to conceal their lesbian identity as immature or lacking differentiation or psychologically maladjusted, as is implied in Cass' identity development model. Whitman et al., (2000) recognized that coming out can help develop a lesbian identity, but also considered it problematic to describe women who openly acknowledge their lesbian identity as more developed than those who do not. Whitman et al., further argued that lesbians must make decisions about when to disclose their sexual identity in order to survive within a homophobic and heterosexist society. In support, Green (2000)

maintained that passing as straight can be a positive coping skill within homophobic environments.

In this paper, I have reported the lesbian identity development and coming-out processes of two African American lesbians. The following section highlights Cass' homosexual identity development theory, along with two major critiques. The next section contains a description of the *don't ask don't tell* policy, a culturally specific context used to examine lesbian coming out experiences within African American families and communities.

Homosexual Identity Developmental Theory and Major Critiques

Cass' homosexuality identity development theory is a classic model in exploring lesbian identity formation (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). It includes six stages (identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity synthesis), and in each stage refers to a challenge that must be resolved in order to avoid identity foreclosure and advance to the subsequent stage. For instance, the first stage, identity confusion, is marked by a conscious awareness that one's behavior and feelings could be defined as homosexual. The individual must then work through their stance on the question, "Could I be gay?" If their answer is yes, they then move to the second stage, identity comparison. If the person denies a gay identity, identity foreclosure occurs. The results section of this paper contains a detailed description of each stage.

Several critiques of Cass' theory of homosexual identity development can be found; however, in this paper, discussion is limited to two major critiques that are applicable to studying African American lesbian identity formation. Degges-White et al., (2000) first pointed out that Cass had only studied White gay male samples as a major drawback, and argued that this lack of diversity limits the generalizability of the developmental theory to other sexual and racial

minority populations. Degges-White et al., then tested Cass' model with an entirely lesbian sample and provided several recommendations for revision based on their findings. Their results supported stage one (*confusion*), and stage four (*acceptance*) as aspects of lesbian development; however, they advocated revising the model to account for variability within stages, that is, the nuances within individual cases. In addition, their findings did not support a stage model, as Cass had, in which each stage is experienced in a specific order. They pointed out that many of the women in their study achieved the final stage, *identity synthesis* without progressing through each preceding stage.

Whitman, Cormier, and Boyd (2000) challenged Cass' (1979) assertion that coming out marks the final stage of fully embracing a lesbian identity. Instead Whitman et al., cited a need for clarification between the notions of lesbian identity *development* and what they define as lesbian identity *management*. Unlike lesbian identity *development*, wherein lesbians resolve identity confusion and accept a lesbian identity, lesbian identity *management* involves whether or not one discloses sexual orientation. According to Whitman et al., lesbian identity *development* does not depend on a lesbian's decision to inform others of her lesbian identity. This distinction is particularly useful in studying coming out in the context of African American families and communities because of the challenges presented in *don't ask, don't tell*.

Don't Ask, Don't Tell: Lesbianism in African American Communities and Families

"*Don't ask, don't tell*" has become a cliché for formal and informal policies in specific cultural contexts. It is a clear, albeit informal policy, for lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) visibility in African American families and communities (see Greene, Herek, Klaus, & Laird, 1994; Jackson & Brown, 1996; Staples, 1973); that is, sexual minorities are accepted within African American families and communities as long as they do not label themselves or

acknowledge publicly that they engage in same-sex relationships. The notion of acceptance through *don't ask don't tell* appears in family literature as early as 1973, when Staples, a prominent Black family scholar, concluded that Black gays and lesbians were not separated from the Black community. In support, Greene, Herek, Klaus, and Laird (1994), argued that this policy particularly holds true for African American lesbians, and concluded that African American families tolerate their daughters as long as they do not label themselves as lesbians.

Jackson and Brown (1996) rejected the position that silence is a testament to lesbian or gay identity acceptance in African American communities. In response to supporters of *don't ask, don't tell*, like Staples (1973), Jackson and Brown argued that Staples did not realize that promoting tolerance rather than acceptance causes isolating experiences. They then concluded that the policy offered sexual minorities minimal feelings of acceptance and denied them opportunities to integrate their sexual identity into public discourses. This silence may also affect their lesbian identity development.

The Current Study

In this study, I have chronicled the coming out narratives of two African American lesbians (ages 26 and 27) that reveal their lesbian identity development and how they defined and navigated *don't ask, don't tell*. Consideration is given to Degges-White et al., (2000) and Whitman, Cormier, and Boyd's (2000) suggested modifications to Cass' homosexual identity development theory. Lesbian identity *development* is distinguished from lesbian identity *management*, and from the possibility of non-linear stages for African American lesbian identity formation is considered.

Methods

Participants

      The narratives of two young African American lesbians (ages 26 and 27) presented in the present study were selected from a larger study focused on the coming out experiences of five (ages 26 to 30) African American lesbians. They were selected for inclusion in this study because their narratives reflect how one was able to overcome the challenges presented in *don't ask, don't tell* while the other was not. Requirements of participation in the larger study included self-identification as an African American lesbian and disclosure of sexual orientation within the past 10 years. Participants were recruited through purposeful sampling, which allows the researcher to select subjects on the basis of the researcher's informed judgment of the most useful and representative respondents (Babbie, 1995). The study took place in a large metropolitan city located in southeastern region of the United States. It is a city that contains an active lesbian, gay, and bisexual community, and hosts annual gay pride and Black gay pride events. Participants were recruited through lesbian/bisexual Internet list-servs, organizations and events frequented by this population, and personal referrals. Interested participants contacted the researcher at which time the researcher confirmed that they met criteria for inclusion. During the initial contact interviews were scheduled.

Procedures

      Participants were asked to provide a pseudonym of their choosing. The unstructured individual interview followed narrative inquiry, where follow-up and probing questions are determined by participants' responses. Thus, interviews were based on a few questions that invite respondents to tell their stories, and all questions were open ended to maximize the amount of variability of data collected. Questions focused on both the challenging and identity affirming

aspects of the coming out experience, and also highlighted factors that influence a lesbian's decision to come out. This interview technique allowed participants to speak freely about their coming-out stories, and gave them the opportunity to identify the topics they considered most relevant to their coming out experience.

Prior to the interview, the investigator provided an overview of the study, explained the project's goals, and participants provided informed consent. Participants also completed a brief demographic questionnaire (i.e., date of birth, relationship status, educational background, salary, parent(s) educational level). In-depth interviews ranged from two to three hours. Through a follow-up interview, results were shared with each participant to check for narrative credibility. In turn, meanings of results were negotiated with participants as they were able to verify the authenticity of their story. Participants received a personal journal as a thank-you gift.

Narrative Analysis with Holistic-Content Focus

The narrative analysis was focused with a holistic-content as described by Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber (1998). In this approach, the individual's conceptualization of her life story is spotlighted as the focus of the research. The researcher analyzes each narrative as a data source that is comprehensive. This analytical technique is composed of a first-person participant interpretation of experience that comes together to form the account. In each interview, the researcher analyzed narrative data using the holistic-content analytic procedures adapted from (Lieblich et al., 1998) and outlined in Appendix F.

Application of narrative inquiry and analysis. Narrative inquiry and analysis particularly suits this study. As Marshall and Rossman (2006, p. 6) explained, "Narrative analysis seeks to describe the meaning of experiences for those who frequently are socially marginalized or oppressed, as they construct (narratives) about their lives." This methodological approach can

also have emancipatory outcomes for participants when exploring issues of social change, causality, and social identity (Elliott, 2005). This made narrative inquiry ideal for chronicling coming-out stories of African American lesbians.

Role of researcher in study. The researcher functions as the instrument in qualitative studies (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). The relationship between researcher and participant is an important component of narrative inquiry studies, as the researcher must maintain sensitivity and responsiveness to the participants' viewpoint (Flick, 1998). Leiblich et al. (1998) stated that the context affects the aim of the interview, the relationship formed between teller and listener, and the mood of the narrator. As the researcher, I provided a degree of participation throughout the interview, and disclosing my identity as an African American lesbian functioned as a bridge between participants and myself and was valuable in building trust.

Results

The following presents the narratives of Denise and Emiline as they retrospectively revealed their lesbian identity formation, coming out experiences, and continued challenges and successes navigating race, gender, and sexuality oppression. Results are organized using Cass' (1979) homosexual identity development model. Excerpts from Denise's and Emiline's narratives are interjected throughout.

Coming Out to Self: "Could I be gay?"

Stage One: Identity Confusion

Cass' stage theory begins with identity confusion, and is marked by a conscious awareness that one's behavior or feelings could be defined as gay (Cox & Galois, 1996). The awareness of relevance of homosexuality to self raises the question of whether or not one is gay, lesbian, or bisexual. This stage is characterized by inner turmoil and feelings of personal

alienation (Cass, 1979). Where a person answers yes to the question "Could I be gay?" they move to the second stage, identity comparison. Identity foreclosure occurs if the person denies a same-sex identity.

Identity confusion application. Denise and Emiline both experienced evidence of identity confusion. As high school students, they were first aware that their feelings could be defined as gay. Transitioning to college, they continued to struggle answering the question, "Could I be gay?" They both eventually answered yes to this question; however, they differed in their subsequent response to their identity awareness. Emiline originally dismissed her same-sex feelings as something that would pass and did not believe she would ever engage in a relationship with a woman. Denise struggled with her attractions for women and experienced inner turmoil, a classic characteristic of this stage.

> *Denise:* I just remember being very embarrassed, very ashamed. I go back and read my diary and I would write, 'I don't know what's wrong with me. Why do I like girls? I wish this would just go away?

> *Emiline:* I had a really good close best-friend. If you saw one, you saw the other. And it was the running joke in my family, 'Emiline is bringing her girlfriend home. They're gay; we always knew you were gay.' But we weren't. I was dating men. At this point I'm like, 'Ok, I may be bisexual; it's not that big a deal. I'm never going to find a woman that I like enough to be with.

Negotiating Identity within African American Families

Stage Two: Identity Comparison

A tentative commitment to a gay identity characterizes the identity comparison stage of forging a gay identity. Many gays and lesbians experience social alienation as they encounter

heterosexism. A heightened sense of self can lead them to become more aware of differences between themselves and others (Cass, 1979). Some respond to social alienation positively by accepting their homosexuality identity. Others alter their behaviors and avoid the appearance of homosexuality. Persons in the latter category may consider their current same-sex relationship as an exception to their normal behavior. They may feel that they can present themselves as heterosexual if they so chose. Self-hatred and increased risk of self-harm may occur if the person does not resolve this stage (Cass, 1979). Conversely, a person who manages to acknowledge their sexuality, by understanding what homosexuality means for them as individuals, makes it possible to move to stage three, identity tolerance.

Identity comparison application. Denise and Emiline experienced some evidence of identity comparison. Whereas, Denise experienced social alienation, Emiline garnered support from a Black lesbian community early in her coming-out process. Indeed, their identity marginalization increased their awareness of heterosexism, but this consciousness had negative, as well as positive consequences. Most importantly, Denise and Emiline's resolution of this stage was experienced in the context of *don't ask, don't tell.*

Don't Ask, Don't Tell in Stage Two

Denise and Emiline both came out to their immediate families, although they never disclosed their lesbian identity to the majority of their extended family members. Denise and Emiline witnessed heteronormativity, as extended family members treated gay relatives differently from straight relatives. Gay relatives did not resist participating in the policy, and consequently served as models for Denise in Emiline's subsequent participation in *don't ask, don't tell.* Both women expressed the belief that their families provided space for their lesbian identity. Interestingly, they also thought that there would be consequences if they told anyone

beyond their closest family members or behaved in a way that reflected a romantic relationship with another woman. Denise reported that her family would never welcome her relationships with women in the same way straight relationship were acknowledged and supported. Emiline concluded that such resistive behavior would be heavily punished, as evident in her extended family's treatment of her uncle. They described how they joined other gay relatives and behaved under the proper code of *don't ask, don't tell*.

> *Denise:* One of my cousins has a girlfriend, and we know because her girlfriend looks like a man. She dresses like a man. They started coming to dinner maybe two years ago. But they just come to dinner; nobody ever says anything… I think it's a taboo. I think that people would prefer to know and never say anything. I even think that my auntie and my cousin would rather I just start showing up with girls then say, 'I like women…' They called her my friend when I brought her home. I think it would be very interesting if I ever get married. My last girlfriend did ask me to marry her. I told my auntie about it, but they definitely didn't take it seriously. I remember being very hurt about that. They did not express the same type of excitement as if it had been a man. If I ever get married to a woman, I don't think that there would be all the hoopla going on about my best friend's wedding. I doubt they would even say I was married. I doubt that they would even refer to my wife as my wife. I bet they would still say my friend or my roommate.
>
> *Emiline:* I have a first cousin on my dad side that's gay. There are gay people everywhere. - Well not necessarily 'out' as in proclaiming from the roof tops that they were gay… [My Uncle Walter's] friend comes with him everywhere. He's at all the holiday gatherings, and my little cousins call him Uncle Thomas… [My mom's brother] was gay. He's dead now, but she heard how they talked about him. And how they made

fun of him, and how they called him all kinds of names… Tiffany [my girlfriend] made the rounds of my momma's family and my daddy's family as 'my friend.' And it's nothing because when I was in college I brought girls home all the time. So they think she's just another one of my friends. - One of my female cousins met Tiffany. She's like 'I love you and I like Tiffany.' So they met her, 'This is my friend Tiffany.' It was very non-confrontational... It took [my cousin] 30 minutes in the room to be like, 'Ya'll are dating, aren't you?' and it's nothing. Now we are very close, and we're much younger. But my cousin's parents, and my parents and our older family members, it was very much a, 'We're just not going to talk about it.' Now, it's not like, 'We're not going to talk about it to your face and then we're going to talk about you behind your back; or we're not going to show you love.' It's none of those things. They are still very loving.

Characteristic of stage two, identity comparison, Denise and Emiline's participation in *don't ask, don't tell* lead them to avoid the appearance of homosexuality. However, it would be premature to conclude that this behavior is a direct result of feeling isolated within their families. Indeed, they believed that their families were proud of them while they held a delicate balance to insure that their lesbianism did not separate them from their families. They recognized that they were "different" from their family, but inconsistent with stage two, identity comparison; their perceived differences did not lead to self-hatred, but instead to empowerment.

Denise: I think they are very proud of me. They think I'm weird. They think I'm different. It's like, 'Denise just isn't 26 years old with a perm, with a husband, having a baby, loving Jesus, loving her family. Denise is weird…' It's like they just know, and that's it. They aren't going to talk about it…I think I might find a little bit of comfort in being weird. It gives me a little bit of freedom. It's like 'well I'm weird so it is fine.' But

at the same time there are so many things about me separate me from other people that I don't want to put anymore space between me and other people when I do want that interaction. And I know that sexuality is one of those polarizing things.

Emiline: They expect greatness and weirdness from my branch of the family and especially me, because I'm the oldest… Not weird, extraordinary. I have all these big ideas of what I want to do, and going to graduate school, and entering a field, like my undergraduate degree is in philosophy, everyone was like, 'What is she going to do?'… Well I'm doing this values things… and over and over again having a sense of belonging, having a sense of community, having a sense of family and togetherness. So I know I would be devastated - it would hurt my feelings so bad to think that being who I am puts me outside that family circle and to think that I could be looked down upon or seen as an outsider because of that – yeah that would destroy me. I don't know how I would handle that.

Stage Two: Being "Weird"

Consistent with stage two, identity comparison, Denise and Emiline thought it was important to avoid appearing as lesbians to their extended families; however, inconsistent with identity comparison, this behavior did not reflect a lack of acceptance of their lesbian identity. Denise and Emiline both used the concept "weird" to indirectly link their family's pride for them to their lesbianism. In addition, they not only acknowledged their sexuality, but their sexual identity marginalization also heightened their insight into heteronormativity, particularly the construction of womanhood.

Denise: I think that there is something about being socially marginalized that makes you take your mind to a level because you don't have a choice. It's easier for them. To just

be, 'I'm pretty, and so I have a husband, and I have a baby' To me, it's easy for me to do that. I think that when you are on the outside, you have to find sometime else to define you, cause it won't be a man, and it won't even be a woman. You can marry Oprah and they are not going to give a shit about you being with Oprah. They're are going to think she's a dyke. So what it's Oprah. So if I marry Kobe Bryant, I'm the shit because I'm with Kobe Bryant, but that's not going to work with a woman. And I think a lot of the Black lesbians that I know, they are conscious, they are weirdoes, because we don't have a choice. We had to find something, and I think that that initial weirdo gets you to be comfortable saying goodbye to some of these other norms that everyone else accepts…I think its liberating but it's definitely harder.

Emiline: My mom's side of the family, a lot of the women are, 'You have to find a man.' Everything - life is about finding a husband, getting married and having kids. So even before I came out I was always like, 'I don't necessarily want to get married. I definitely don't want to have kids. This is not the kind of life I want for myself.

<div style="text-align:center">Forging Ahead: In Search of Community</div>

Stage Three: Identity Tolerance

A heightened sense of alienation that leads gays and lesbians to seek out other sexual minorities to alleviate feelings of seclusion is evidence of identity tolerance (Cox & Galois, 1996). The emotional outlet provided through contact with other gay, lesbian, or bisexual individuals (Cass, 1979) can foster favorable homosexual self-conceptions. It can also lead them to reevaluate negative societal perceptions of difference. Negative experiences; however, can increase self-loathing. The end of this stage is marked by identity foreclosure or a greater gay or lesbian identity commitment.

Identity tolerance application. Emiline and Denise both sought opportunities to develop

relationships and with other sexual minorities in order to alleviate feelings of isolation. Emiline

was able to establish a relationship with a group of sexual minority women.

>*Emiline:* Forever - for years I was the queen of posting 'looking for friends or more.'
>
>'dating men at the time,' But really 'looking for friends or more.' So one of [my friends]
>
>posted this ad, 'wanting to start a club.' She wanted a group of women that she could talk
>
>to and to go out and be friends with - because she is very academic. She's getting her
>
>doctorate right now. So she wanted to have those type of discussions about being
>
>lesbians, about literature, and about life… So I answered that ad, because I was looking
>
>for friends, and so I answered the ad.

Race strongly impacted Emiline's and Denise's quest for community. Emiline later revealed that

the group of women, emerging from her friend's post, was primarily Black. In contrast, Denise

could not integrate these multiple marginalized group memberships. There were two major

events that highlight Denise's attempts to establish community where she could integrate both

her lesbian and African American identities. First, she attended her college's gay, lesbian,

bisexual, and transgendered student organization. Unfortunately, she discovered that it was not a

healthy space for race minorities. Secondly, she pledged to a popular, historically African

American, sorority, which did affirm her lesbian identity. The pledge process led to an

interesting moment as Denise attempted to forge a relationship with another African American

lesbian. Unfortunately, this relationship only solidified the belief that she could not disclose her

lesbian identity in Black communities.

>*Denise:* I decided I was going to go to a [gay] Alliance meeting…. But everybody at the
>
>Alliance was an ally. Nobody was gay. I'll be honest; I was not looking for a community.

I was looking for a girlfriend. Everybody was White. And, I really wanted to date a Black

girl. So there weren't any Black girls at the Alliance meeting. They were all like quote

unquote, fag hags. You had your gay boy, friends that wanted to be around gay boys. But

it wasn't that many Black people at [my college] anyway. So that didn't work out.

Denise: [My friends and I] would see her with a girl all the time, and I knew that that

meant something. So, it was my sophomore year of college, and I tell my friends, 'I'm

going to call Angela to see if she will take me to a gay club. Are ya'll going to go with

me?' They were like, 'Yea, I'll go.' So, I called her up on the phone and was like, 'I want

to go out with you tonight.' By this time, Angela had fallen out of the loop of people who

were going to be picked up for the sorority. They weren't really communicating with her

anymore, but they were communicating with us, and she knew that. So when I called her

and told her I wanted to go, she thought that they were teasing. And I was like, 'No, they

don't have anything to do with this. As a matter of fact I don't want them to know. And

she's really spazing out; tearing up, 'Why are you doing this to me?' So the girlfriend

gets on the phone, and she's like, 'Please don't do this to her. She really wanted to be in

this sorority.' And I'm like, 'This is not about the sorority.' So now I'm breaking down,

'I really want to meet some girls, I just want to go.' So she's like, 'Ok give us 10

minutes.' 30 minutes later they call back and they like, 'Ok, meet us in the parking lot.'…

I was a straight woman on campus. Nobody knew I liked girls. This was a real down low,

men in black secret.

Identity tolerance unresolved. Denise was never able to resolve the challenges presented

in identity tolerance. In order to receive support from either community (African American

community or lesbian community), Denise had to deny important aspects of herself, supported

by one community and deemed as less important or unacceptable by the other. She could not find a community that fully integrated race, gender and sexuality. This triple oppression had a significant impact on her adjustment as evident in her tendency to avoid gay environments and simultaneously feeling uncomfortable in straight environments. At the time of our interview, Denise did not appear to be ready to move beyond stage three of lesbian identity, although some of her comments are relevant in exploring other sections.

> *Denise:* I never really feel like I belong anywhere - too gay and too straight for the gays. People don't think I'm gay, even in the gay community. It feels good sometimes because I'm like, 'yea, don't put me in the same category as some of those people.' But sometimes it feels like I don't have anywhere to belong… From my experience a lot of the negative stereotypes about gay people don't apply to me. So I think if I were going to be mega lesbian, I'll be a really good poster child for being mega lesbian. It's like being Black – like, 'well I'm the smart Black person. So Black people can be smart too.' That is kind of how I feel. I don't want to discredit that part of me and then the community looks bad because they don't think that you can go to college, be successful and be gay. So because I've done that I feel like, 'wouldn't that make the community proud.' This sounds kind of cocky now that I'm saying it. And I don't mean it that way.

Stage Four: Identity Acceptance

Identity acceptance stage, characterized by increased contact with gay and lesbian people and a sense of normalcy within gay circles, hinges on the strength of homosexual subculture. In this stage, relationships with other gays and lesbians become over time more important and more desired. The individual transitions to stage five as they confront the inconsistency of how they see themselves and how they perceive others view them (Cass, 1979).

Identity acceptance application. Emiline experienced the challenge of identity acceptance; Denise did not. In contrast to Denise, Emiline was able to develop healthy relationships with assertive Black sexual minority women. Notably, forging relationship with heterosexual Black women also informed her identity development, as she developed a greater sense of her race and sexual identity through the relationships with both Black lesbians and Black heterosexual women.

> *Emiline:* Tiffany is very militant. She is very pro-Black and pro being aware, and being proud of your race. And a lot of friends that I've met … and just being more aware of race, and thinking about how race can play into certain things and why diversity matters, and why its important to have lots of perspectives and people in the room, and why in a program where we are talking about diversity, or we're talking about social equity and things like that, why it is important that I talk about being poor and being Black, and dealing with those things, because if I don't say it, these White people don't know nothing about it... So, I'm just more aware of it, and I'm not going to say that it's an entirely good thing, because there are probably lots of instances of racism that went over my head and I attributed it to something else. Where now, I'm more likely to be like, 'that's racist' than I would have been... There are a couple of Black people who have been in my classes at school that are just more militant, if not more militant than Tiffany. So just having their perspectives and taking it in and thinking about it, it's broadening how I think about myself.'

Stage Five: Identity Pride

The acceptance of one's gay identity coupled with an awareness of the societal rejection of gay and lesbian people marks stage five, identity pride (Cass, 1979). A strong sense of gay

and lesbian group identity often results in activism and purposeful opposition to homophobia (Cass, 1979). In this stage, a person adopts homosexual identity as the primary identity that supersedes all other identities and aspects of one's life. Identity pride often leads people to disclose their gay or lesbian identity to more people. The responses one receives when coming out greatly influence future development. If peers respond negatively, some decide to avoid relationships with heterosexuals. If; however, heterosexuals respond favorably, the person must recognize that homophobia does not define all heterosexuals. If the latter occurs, transition to stage six is possible.

Identity pride application: Identity development or identity management. Identity pride is marked by disclosing lesbian identity to others. Emiline and Denise made decisions to come out only to immediate family members but not to disclose to extended family members. It is important to note that their participation in *don't ask, don't tell* does not necessarily demonstrate a lack of lesbian identity pride. In contrast to Cass' development theory, Whitman et al, (2000) argued that lesbian identity development and level of pride does not depend on a lesbian's decision to inform others of her lesbian identity. Denise and Emiline both practiced identity *management* in choosing to disclose to immediate but not to extended family. In order to understand their identity *development* and identity pride, it is important to understand the factors and beliefs informing their decisions not to come out. Denise struggled to decide if she would ever come out to her extended family, even though she expected and got tolerance from her immediate family. This perspective is consistent with that discussed in the previous section on identity tolerance. That is, her comments are more reflective of her lack of pride in her lesbian identity, while Emiline possessed and maintained lesbian identity pride even within the confines of *don't ask, don't tell*.

Denise: Thus far I know everything I've done my family would never disapprove of it. I know they wouldn't ever say anything to me about it. Do I think that they have some quiet discussions amongst themselves? Perhaps. Part of me is like, 'well I don't care. I have a girlfriend so what.' And then part of me goes 'well let me not say too much… I think the shame goes two ways. I'm embarrassed for them to be embarrassed, and they are embarrassed to talk to me about being embarrassed.

Emiline: I'm too outspoken to hide who I am - and especially as my cousins grow up, it's going to be less and less of a big deal… I feel like I want to say something… Because I'm feisty. But really just because I owe it to myself. I am who I am and you got two choices, get with it or don't. That's not going to change anything for me. If you have a problem with it, that's your problem not mine. And that just means you have to get over it because I'm good.

Identity pride application in conjunction with minority race identity. Emiline continues to demonstrate agency in deciding when and how to disclose her sexuality, and in some cases she decided not to disclose. This is particularly true in managing multiple marginalized identities. Whereas Emiline and Denise understood the challenges in managing multiple marginalized identities, identity pride was not reflected in Denise's identity management. In contrast, coming out in graduate school, Emiline begun to have an awareness of how her sexuality intersected with her race to shape her identity management. She explained a recent experience as an illustration for how she made decisions about when it is best for her to come out and when it is not.

Emiline: Classes were ending up, and as a group of six or seven of us, we were talking about renting a house and staying together. And I was feeling really bad because I was like, they don't know, I can't have them planning to have me in this house without them

knowing. So we were in the parking lot discussing three houses we'd seen together

earlier, and I was like, 'in an effort for full disclosure, I'm dating a woman.' They were

like, 'Ok, where was that on diversity day?' There is me and one other Black person in

my program. I was like, 'I don't want to be the Black gay girl; It's hard enough that

anytime anything minority comes up everybody looks at me. I wanted ya'll to know and

like me for who I was without having that extra.' And they were like, 'we understand,

and we don't care that you're dating a woman as long as she doesn't care that you've

living with six White people and a dog.' Well that was that… But granted we as a class,

the 30 of us, went to D.C. for fall break, and I stayed in a room and I shared a bed with a

girl, and I didn't feel like I needed to tell her that I was gay. It wasn't a huge deal. We

wanted a cheap room; it was cheaper to rent with four people instead of two or to have

singles. So it hasn't been an issue, but living with them, thinking of living with them for a

year, and knowing that Tiffany was going to be visiting me. I was like, 'I need them to

know up front what the deal is.

In conclusion, contrary to the characteristics of identity pride, neither Emiline nor Denise was

able to position their lesbian identity over and above their African American identity. In fact,

such attempts to distinguish between the two were damaging to their identity development (e.g.,

Denise's visit to her university's gay student organization consisting of solely White students

and her participation in the Black heterosexist sorority).

Stage Six: Identity Synthesis

A person reaches the final stage, identity synthesis, when gay or lesbian identity is

integrated with other aspects of self. In this stage a person does not conceive homosexuality as

the sole characteristic of identity (Cass, 1979). In this final stage gays and lesbians increase their contact with supportive heterosexuals and incorporate their personal and public sexual identities.

Identity synthesis application. It is apparent that Emiline has managed to incorporate her lesbian identity with other identities important to her.

> Emiline: I'm very comfortable with who I am, so I tell people all the time… I just think its me growing up and being more aware of who I am. I don't walk into a room and I'm not Black gay Emiline but it's liable in the course of the conversations where my blackness or my gayness is going to show and I've given myself permission to be just how I am. And if that means I get to be gay Emiline, or Black Emiline, or White valley girl Emiline, it's whatever; whatever comes here it's probably going to come out.

Discussion

In this study, the coming-out stories of two African American lesbians, Denise and Emiline (ages 26 and 27), were analyzed for evidence of lesbian identity development, and for how they defined and navigated *don't ask, don't tell*. Cass' (1979, 1984) stage theory of homosexual identity development is a classic way to examine lesbian identity formation; she labeled coming out an essential component of healthy identity development. However, others have questioned whether or not coming out truly represents the chief marker of healthy lesbian identity formation (see Degges-White, Rice, & Myers, 2000; Gomez & Smith 1990; Whitman, Cormier, & Boyd, 2000). Denise and Emiline both participated in *don't ask, don't tell*; however, an analysis of their lesbian identity development would be incomplete if their decisions not to come out to extended family served as a representation of an immature identity development. The Whitman et al., (2000) distinction between lesbian identity *development* versus lesbian identity *management* was important in understanding the role of their coming out decisions. Emiline possessed and

maintained lesbian identity pride even within the confines of *don't ask, don't tell*, whereas Denise did not.

Denise's narrative reveals the problem of not having a viable African American lesbian visibility to affirm her own marginalized identities. Cass (1979, 1984) suggested that lesbians must see positive representations of other gay and lesbian people in order to transition from stage four, identity acceptance, to stage five, identity pride. This call for positive affirmation continues as a lesbian seeks acceptance from heterosexuals as she shifts from stage five, identity pride, to the final stage, identity synthesis. In order to receive support from either community (African American community or lesbian community), Denise had to deny important aspects of herself, supported by one community and deemed as less important or unacceptable by the other. The consequences of racism and homophobia left her stuck in an internal battle for acceptance, a battle that extended to her extended family. Consequently, Denise's decision not to come out to her extended family is influenced by her struggle to embrace her lesbian identity, as evident in stage three.

In conclusion, Denise and Emiline's narratives revealed that attempts to separate sexuality from race is damaging to overall healthy African American lesbian identity formation. In fact, disentangling their race from sexuality was often impossible. Although the same findings cannot be generalized to the population of African American lesbians, it does provide a foundation for continued research and investigation.

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CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION

"Of course I am afraid, because the transformation of silence into language and action is an account of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger" (Lorde, 1984, p. 42).

Explanations for the influence of African American lesbians' social context and their coming out experiences in African American communities vary. Some researchers have concluded that widespread homophobia in African American families and communities' isolates lesbians; and in turn, feelings of isolation lead lesbian daughters to deny or avoid disclosing their homosexual identity (see Martinez & Sullivan, 1998; Savin-Williams & Cohen, 1996). These findings, however often fail to develop a comprehensive and culturally relevant analysis of lesbian identity development as it relates to African American mother-daughter bonds and *don't ask, don't tell* (an informal policy that sexual minorities are accepted within African American families and communities as long as they do not label themselves or acknowledge publicly that they engage in same-sex relationships). The current project is a chronicle of the coming-out stories of five young African American lesbians (26 to 30 years of age).

The first paper, entitled, *"Coming Out to Mother: Stories of African American Lesbians,"* contains the stories of African American lesbian daughters coming-out stories to their mothers. Lesbian daughters did not have any regrets about having come out but instead reflected on how they had come out and what they might have done differently. Appendix L contains my initial conclusions: the five best practices in coming out to mothers. Moreover, women believed that mothers allowed space for their lesbian identity in spite of mothers' messages about religion, fear

of homophobia, personal homophobia beliefs, and/or ideal womanhood. Indeed, African American mothers may indirectly promote their daughters' coming-out process by equipping them with self-reliance and independence. When the value of independence is transmitted through parental socialization, lesbian daughters, like all daughters are motivated towards self-actualization. Mothers provide daughters with avenues for self-actualization and self-definition even at the risk of contradicting their messages on appropriate African American womanhood. This process is illustrated in Emiline's comments about her mother:

> *Emiline:* She's [My mom's] like, '… I will always love you… I'm so proud of who you are and how you've made choices to be who you are authentically.' She's like, 'We're going to have to agree to disagree on the morality of it.' … I'm like, 'Whatever mom.'… I think the issue is her brother was gay… She heard how they talked about him. And I feel like part of her doesn't want them to say anything negative about me… I kind of think she expected me to do my thing, and to work and have that financial backing…It was kind of one of those reverse psychology where I knew I didn't want her life… My mother had to work almost from scratch to restart her career… She talked out of both sides of her mouth a lot of the time. And it was very much like she wanted us [my sister and I] to be happy and to be in relationships, but she also didn't want us to be stupid…

These findings are consistent with Turnage's (2004) assertion that it is important for African American mothers to support their daughters and give them space to individuate.

A comprehensive exploration of mother-daughter bonds must delve deeper than African American mothers' insistence that their lesbian daughters remain closeted in future research. More exploration is needed on the connection between mothers' routine encouragement for

African American daughters to develop skills to confront oppressive conditions despite the dangers inherent in such confrontation when daughters are lesbians.

The second paper, entitled, *"African American Lesbian Identity Development: The Complication of Don't Ask, Don't Tell,"* is an analysis of two African American lesbians (ages 26 and 27) stories about revealing their lesbian identity and how they define and navigate *don't ask, don't tell*. The implementation of this policy within their families proved to affect their lesbian identity development. These findings are consistent with Diamond and Savin-Williams (2000) and Hunter, Mallon, Greene, and Croom (2000) findings that lesbian youth of color experience stress in negotiating a life within homophonic environments, and their stress is magnified when they do not receive family support of their lesbian identity. Without the support of their families, Denise and Emiline encountered challenges in their quest to find communities that would embrace and affirm their multiple marginalized identities as Black, woman, and lesbian. Fortunately, Emiline found an African American lesbian community that provided positive affirmation of her identities and consequently maintained lesbian identity pride even within the confines of *don't ask, don't tell*. In contrast, Denise was trying to manage her identity by denying important aspects of herself supported by one community and deemed as less important or unacceptable by the other. She could not find a community that fully integrated race, gender and sexuality.

In this study, I concentrated on the participants' construction of her coming out narrative. Future research is needed on the effects of daughters coming out from the perspective of mother and family. Coming out to mothers and families in the face of widespread resistance may have a positive effect on the community that fosters collective empowerment. For instance, when interviewing heterosexuals about their attitudes towards gays and lesbians, respondents in Herek

and Capitanio (1995) reported more favorable attitudes if they had experienced personal contact with gay and lesbian people.

The richness of these narratives lenders so much information that is useful to thinking about issues that affects the well being of African American lesbians. Important areas for continued research include the combined effects of race, gender, and sexuality on African American lesbian women's experiences, particularly resilient responses to discrimination. Another important area is the influence of mothering on daughters' health, development, and well being. These future studies are needed to provide a foundational source for ongoing research on the nature of the experience of lesbians in their family and community.

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APPENDIX A

DETAILED STUDY METHODS

The manuscript format of the present dissertation does not allot for a methods chapter. However, the present section is a detailed method and rational for study design. I begin with the sampling techniques. Next, I discuss data collection and procedures for data analysis. The section concludes with an analysis of the study's reliability, validity, and generalizability.

Participants
The sample included five 26 to 30 year-old self-identified African American lesbians who disclosed their sexual orientation to their mothers within the past 10 years. Participants were recruited through purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling allows the researcher to select subjects on the basis of the researcher's informed judgment of the most useful and representative respondents (Babbie, 1995). The study was conducted in a large metropolitan city located in southeastern region of the United States. This city contains an active lesbian, gay, and bisexual community, and hosts annual gay pride and Black gay pride events. Selecting a specific region reduced the possible regional variations in cultural and social mores (Allen & James, 1998).

Criteria for inclusion included: (a) self-identification as an African American lesbian; (b) must be between the ages of 25-30; (c) hold at least a high school diploma; (d) be gainfully employed; (e) must have disclosed her sexual orientation to their mother within the past ten years; and (f) willingly participate in this study. I chose to include 25-30 year old African American lesbians because, according to the literature, lesbians tend to come out in their twenties, and Black lesbians usually come out to their families later than Whites (Golden, Savin-Williams, & Cohen, 1996; Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2004).

I chose the educational level and professional status to target individuals generally thought to be typical in the target population (Patton, 2002). Women between the ages 25 and 30 years normally have a high school diploma (Census, 2004), and most have jobs (U.S. Department of Labor, 2005). According to the U.S. Department of Labor (2007) fewer than 8% of Black women faced unemployment in 2008.

By setting a ten year time frame of coming out, I attempted to lessen the effects time has on a person's memory. Limiting the sample to those who chose to come out seeks to control this source of variability. For example, some lesbians may assume their mother's awareness of a lesbian sexual orientation because of their failure to involve themselves in romantic relationships with men. They also abide by the *don't-ask-don't-tell* policy highlighted in chapter two. Still other lesbians may have their sexual orientation disclosed without their permission. The experience of defining one's own sexuality differs from someone disclosing your sexual orientation without your permission.

The sample size was determined by the theoretical and conceptual framework, feasibility, and research design. A single researcher conducting qualitative based research guided by Black feminist and narrative inquiry cannot properly analyze a large sample. Qualitative research goes beyond quantitative statistics to explore individual participants' feelings, and impressions (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Sobal, 2001). It also provided the opportunity to collect rich and in-depth data (Creswell, 1998). This study focused on the participant's construction of her coming out narrative.

Design and Procedure

I used qualitative narrative analysis with a holistic-content focus to examine coming-out stories of young adult African American lesbians to their mothers. The exploratory and deep level analysis justifies the use of a qualitative research design. In addition, the present study was process driven rather than the outcome or product focused approach characteristic of quantitative research (Creswell, 1998).

Participant Recruitment

Participants were recruited through lesbian/bisexual Internet list-servs, organizations and events frequented by this population, and personal referrals. Interested participants contacted the researcher at which time the researcher determined whether they met criteria for inclusion. The interviews were scheduled in a private place that was acceptable to the participant. Participants were reminded of their interview appointment via email one week prior to the interview and again emailed and telephoned two days prior to the interview. Following the initial interview, I asked participants to suggest others who might be interested in participating in the study. I then contacted these individuals and scheduled an interview if they meet the criteria.

Data Collection

Participants were asked to provide a pseudonym for themselves. The unstructured individual interview began with a grand tour question, *"Tell me a story that describes your relationship with your mother. What was it like to come out to her."* The grand tour question (the opening question) follows the framework of narrative analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Sobal, 2001). Narrative inquiry follows respondents' comments. Thus, interviews were based on a few questions that invited respondents to tell their stories. Questions were developed to explore the mother-daughter relationship prior to and after lesbian daughters disclosed their sexual identities to mothers. All questions were open ended to maximize the amount of variability of data collected. The order of questions differed depending on the participants' responses. Questions focused on both the challenging and identity affirming aspects of the coming out experience. They also highlighted factors that influence a lesbian's decision to come out. This interview technique allowed participants to speak freely about their coming-out stories, and gave them the opportunity to identify the topics they considered most relevant to their coming out experience.

Prior to the interview, the investigator explained the goals of the project (see Appendix A) and during the beginning of the interview, obtained informed consent (see Appendix B). Participants also completed a brief demographic questionnaire (i.e., date of birth, relationship status, educational background, salary, parent(s) educational level). In-depth interviews ranged from two to three hours. Through a follow-up interview results were shared with each participant to check for credibility of my interpretation. In turn, meanings of results were negotiated with

participants as they were able to verify the authenticity of their story. Participants received a personal journal as a thank-you gift.

Narrative Analytical Technique

I used narrative inquiry and analysis to collect data for this study. Narrative inquiry and analysis particularly suited the present study. Marshall and Rossman (2006) explained, "Narrative analysis seeks to describe the meaning of experiences for those who frequently are socially marginalized or oppressed, as they construct (narratives) about their lives" (p. 6). This data analysis can also have emancipatory effects on its speaker when exploring issues of social change, causality, and social identity (Elliott, 2005). This made narrative inquiry ideal for exploring coming-out stories of African American lesbians to their mothers.

Narrative Analysis with a Holistic-Content Focus

The narrative analysis was focused with a holistic-content as described by Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber (1998). In this approach, the individual's conceptualization of her life story is spotlighted as the focus of the research. The researcher analyzes each narrative as a data source that is comprehensive. This analytical technique is composed of a first-person participant interpretation of experience that comes together to form the account. In each interview, the researcher analyzed narrative data using the holistic-content analytic procedures adapted from (Lieblich et al., 1998) as listed below.

Application of narrative inquiry and analysis. Narrative inquiry and analysis particularly suits this study. As Marshall and Rossman (2006, p. 6) explained, "Narrative analysis seeks to describe the meaning of experiences for those who frequently are socially marginalized or oppressed, as they construct (narratives) about their lives." This methodological approach can also have emancipatory outcomes for participants when exploring issues of social change, causality, and social identity (Elliott, 2005). This made narrative inquiry ideal for chronicling coming-out stories of African American lesbians to their mothers.

1. Field notes were written immediately following the interview. The researcher documented initial observations and impressions of the interview. The researcher included the following information in field notes as recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994): (a) the tone of the relationship with interviewee, (b) thoughts on the meaning of what participants "really" say during their story, (c) doubts about the accuracy of the participant's account, and (d) personal reactions to some of the participant's remarks or actions.
2. The researcher transcribed each narrative and read the transcripts several times to get a sense of themes and patterns. Special attention was given to material that related to the study's research questions.
3. The researcher recorded initial impressions of the interview. The researcher noted her general impression of the interview, as well as unusual features or contradictions of the narrative. Throughout the interview, the researcher paid special attention to parts of the narrative that seemed to disturb the teller.
4. The researcher decided the themes that pervaded a teller's narrative.
5. The researcher paid attention to the first and last appearance of major themes, the ways the teller transitioned between themes and the context for each theme as it relates to the whole. The interview was then divided into units according to the above criteria.
6. Units were reread and interpretative analytical notes were appended to each unit.
7. Initial results were shared with each participant to check for narrative accuracy. Thus the researcher discussed the meanings of results with each participant.

8. The researcher analyzed data for themes and patterns then summarized the findings by inductively comparing and contrasting patterns that pertained to the variables under consideration.

Role of researcher in study. The researcher functions as the instrument in qualitative studies (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). The relationship between researcher and participant is an important component of narrative inquiry studies, as the researcher must maintain sensitivity and responsiveness to the participants' viewpoint (Flick, 1998). Leiblich et al. (1998) stated that the context affects the aim of the interview, the relationship formed between teller and listener, and the mood of the narrator. As the researcher, I provided a degree of participation throughout the interview, and disclosing my identity as an African American lesbian functioned as a bridge between participants and myself and was valuable in building trust.

Reliability, Validity, Generalizability
Reliability. In qualitative research, reliability is an issue of trustworthiness. Qualitative research "emphasizes the uniqueness of the human situation, so that variation in experience rather than identical repetition is sought" (Krefting, 1991, p. 216). Components of qualitative design promote trustworthiness. For example, Flick (1998) explained that the quality of recording and documenting data becomes a central basis for assessing their reliability and that of the succeeding interpretations. In this study, three criteria for recording and documenting data were used: (a) field notes were documented immediately following interview; (b) interviews were transcribed within two weeks of completed interview; and (c) the researcher kept a journal of research experience.

Validity. Flick (1998) outlined three potential validity errors: type 1 error, to see a relation where one does not exist; type 2 error, to reject a relation when one is present; and type 3 error, to ask the wrong questions. Regarding type 1 and type 2 errors, initial results were shared with each participant to check for narrative credibility and the authenticity of their story. In turn, meanings of results were negotiated with participants. The study was valid in exploring the coming-out stories of African American lesbians because the methodology allowed the participants to construct their own stories. Black feminist theoretical principles were heavily applied as it maintains the importance of African American women proclaiming and defining their own story. The informal interview provides an atmosphere for the participant to construct her own story, and their story is not limited through the confines of a closed-ended questions. Thus participants had the decision to tell their own story in the ways they want to tell it.

Generalizability. A qualitative study's generalizability to others can be problematic in the probabilistic sense (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). I must affirm that I do not claim that my research represents the experiences of all African American lesbians. Rather the sample was purposive and homogeneous. No two personal biographies are the same because each consists of unique experiences, motivations, and emotions. Still, it is useful to study African American women who are lesbians because they share similar life experiences, and as a sample, may have more similar coming out experiences in their families than African American lesbians in general. Although the study cannot generalize the experiences of African American lesbians, it does provide a foundation for continued research and investigation.

APPENDIX B

RECRUITMENT ADVERTISEMENT

Did you tell your mama? If so, please share your story.

If you are a Black lesbian between 25-30 years-old and have come out to your mother within the last 5 years, you are invited to participate in my dissertation study. This study focuses on the coming-out stories of Black lesbians to their mothers. I hope you consider participating as this study will assist in the efforts to understand lesbian daughters' relationships with mothers in Black communities. My name is Shannon Miller; I am a Black lesbian doctoral student at the University of Georgia in the Department of Child and Family Development and Women's Studies, and feminist pedagogy guides my research. If you are considering sharing your story, I would love to hear from you. Please contact me, Shannon Miller at shannonm@uga.edu or 404.861.7941 for more information. This study is approved by the IRB of The University of Georgia.

did you tell **your mama**?

If so, please share your story

If you identify as a Black lesbian between 25-30 years-old and have come out to your mother within the last 5 years, you are invited to participate in my dissertation study. This study focuses on the coming out stories of Black lesbians to their mothers.

I hope you consider participating as this study will assist in the efforts to understand lesbian daughters' relationships with mothers in Black communities.

My name is Shannon Miller; I am a Black lesbian doctoral candidate at the University of Georgia in the Department of Child and Family Development & Women's Studies. Feminist pedagogy guides my research.

If you are considering sharing your story, I would love to hear from you. Please contact me, Shannon Miller at **shannonm@uga.edu** or **404.861.7941** for more information.

This study is approved by the IRB of The University of Georgia.

APPENDIX C

VERBAL INTRODUCTION AND SCREENING QUESTIONS

Hello: (Participant's Name)

I am a graduate student, Shannon Miller under the direction of Dr. Lynda Walters in the Department of Child and Family Development at The University of Georgia. I invite you to participate in a research study entitled "Black Lesbians Coming Out to Their Mothers." The purpose of this study is to examine the coming out narratives of young Black lesbians to their mothers. Specifically the study addresses factors that influence Black lesbians disclose their lesbian identity and the impact of coming out.

I want to ask you a few questions to check if you meet inclusion criteria.
1. What is your age?
2. How do you label your sexual identity?
3. What is your level of education?
4. Are you currently a student and/or gainfully employed?
5. Have you disclosed your sexual orientation to your mother? If so, when?
6. Did you reside in the same home as your mother? If so, from what age range did you reside with your mother?
7. Do you currently reside in metropolitan Atlanta, Georgia?

Checklist for Inclusion Criteria:
1. Self-identification as a Black lesbian;
2. 25-30 years old;
3. Hold a college degree;
4. Student and/or gainfully employed;
5. Have disclosed their sexual orientation to their mother within the past five years'
6. Resided with their mother from 7-17 years of age
7. Reside in metropolitan Atlanta, Georgia at time of interview

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(Inform potential participant whether or not they meet inclusion criteria. If so, continue screening process. If not, thank them for their interest in participating in study.)

Your participation will involve an interview with me where you share stories and experiences in disclosing your sexual orientation to your mother and should only take about 1 to 3 hours. You will be asked to participate in a follow-up interview within two weeks of the first interview. The follow-up interview will serve as an opportunity for me to confirm the themes from the first interview with you. You will have an opportunity to further elaborate or communicate anything you did not include in the first interview.

Your involvement in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or to stop at any time without giving any reason, and without or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled. The information you provide will remain confidential and will not be released in any individually identifiable form. Anonymity cannot be guaranteed. The results of the research study may be published, but your name will not be used. In fact, the published results will be presented in summary form only. Your identity will not be associated with your responses in any published format.

The findings from this project may provide information on aspects of lesbian identity. No social, legal, economical, physical or psychological risks are anticipated as a result of participation in this study. Some participants may feel some emotional discomfort. You make take a break from the interview or stop your participation at any time.

Do you have any additional question about this research project at this time? Also, please feel free to call me, Shannon at 404.861.7941 or send an email to shannonm@uga.edu. You may also contact my supervisor, Dr. Lynda Walters at lwalters@fcs.uga.edu at 706-542-4859. Questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant should be directed to The Chairperson, University of Georgia Institutional Review Board, 612 Boyd GSRC, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; telephone (706) 542-3199; email address irb@uga.edu.

Would you like to participate in this research project?

(Schedule interview if they agree to participation)

APPENDIX D

CONSENT FORM

I, _____ agree to participate in the research study titled, "YOUNG ADULT BLACK LESBIANS' COMING OUT TO THEIR MOTHERS" conducted by Shannon Miller, Child and Family Development Department, University of Georgia who can be reached at 404-861-7941 under the direction of Dr. Lynda Walters, Child and Family Development Department, University of Georgia who can be reached at 706-542-4859. I understand that my participation is voluntary and I can refuse to participate and can withdraw my consent at any time without giving any reason, and without penalty. I can ask to have information related me returned to me, removed from the research records, or destroyed.

- The purpose of this study is to examine the coming out narratives of young Black lesbians to their mothers. Specifically the study addresses factors that influence Black lesbians disclose their lesbian identity and the impact of coming out.

- If I elect to participate in this study, I will be asked to participate in a one to three hour interview with the researcher, and to share stories and experiences in disclosing my sexual orientation.

- I understand that the interview will be audio-recorded, and transcribed, with the tapes stored in the researchers secure office location. For purposes of confidentiality, I understand that my real name will not be recorded in the data or in the transcripts. I understand that all data transcription will occur by the researchers or a professional transcriber and that I will be allowed to review the transcripts upon my request.

- I understand that I will receive no monetary gift, but will receive a journal as a gift of appreciation from the researcher. I also understand that I may be asked to participate in a follow-up interview. The benefits for me are that I will have the opportunity to share stories of my life, with specific focus on my coming out story. Furthermore, I understand that this study adds to the limited body of literature on an important LGBTQ population. No risk is expected upon participation in this study.

- No information about me, or provided by me during the research, will be shared with others without my written permission. I understand that the information I provide will remain confidential and will not be released in any individually identifiable form, unless otherwise required by law. I also understand that anonymity cannot be guaranteed.

- The researchers will answer any questions about the research, now or during the course of the project, and can be reached by telephone at: 404-861-7941.

I understand that I am agreeing by my signature on this form to take part in this research project and understand that I will receive a signed copy of this consent form for my records.

_____   _____   _____
Name of Researcher   Signature   Date

Telephone: _____   Email: _____

_____   _____   _____
Name of Participant   Signature   Date

Please sign both copies, keep one and return one to the researcher.

Additional questions or problems regarding your child's rights as a research participant should be addressed to The Chairperson, Institutional Review Board, University of Georgia, 612 Boyd Graduate Studies Research Center, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; Telephone (706) 542-3199; E-Mail Address IRB@uga.edu

APPENDIX E

PARTICIPANT CONTACT FORM

Name: _____

Preferred Pseudonym: _____

Home phone: _____Other phone: _____

Mailing Address: _____

_____

APPENDIX F

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION FORM

Please take the opportunity to complete the following participant demographic questionnaire for this study. Thank you for your cooperation!

Black Lesbians Coming Out to their Mothers

1. Name: _____

2. Birth date: _____   Age: _____

3. Gender: _____

4. What is your place of Birth? _____

5. Contact Information: Mailing Address: _____

    _____

6. Home phone: _____   Other phone: _____

7. Would you be willing to participate in a study similar to this one?   Yes   No

8. Do you know anyone else who might be interesting in participating in this study?
    If yes, please provide their contact information.

    Name: _____

    Home phone: _____   Other phone: _____

    Name: _____

    Home phone: _____   Other phone: _____

    Name: _____

    Home phone: _____   Other phone: _____

Personal Background

1. Please describe your parent's or guardians' highest educational level.

Mother or other guardian (check one)	Father or other guardian (check one)
__ No diploma	__ No diploma
__ High school diploma/GED	__ High school diploma/GED
__ Some college	__ Some college
__ Associates' degree	__ Associates' degree
__ Bachelors degree	__ Bachelors degree
__ Graduate degree	__ Graduate degree
__ I don't know	__ I don't know

2. What was your household income as a child? (Please check the appropriate box.)

__ Less than $20,000	__ $40,000-49,000	__ $70,000-79,000
__ $20,000-29,000	__ $50,000-59,999	__ $80,000-89,999
__ $30,000-39,999	__ $60,000-69,999	__ $90,000 or more
		__ I don't know

3. What is your intimate relationship status? _____

4. Please list the number of children you have, if applicable. _____

Educational Background

5. Type of Undergraduate Major, if applicable.

   __ 4 year private

   __ 4 year public

   __ Historical Black College

   __ Predominately White Institution

6. Salary Range

__ Less than $20,000	__ $40,000-49,000	__ $70,000-79,000
__ $20,000-29,000	__ $50,000-59,999	__ $80,000-89,999
__ $30,000-39,999	__ $60,000-69,999	__ $90,000 or more

APPENDIX G

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Opening Statement
I am very interested in what happens to Black lesbians when they come out to their mothers. I would like to ask questions about your coming out experience. Please feel free to take your time in answering the questions. You should also feel free to refuse to answer any question. I want to learn your story to better understand lesbian identity within Black communities.

Interview Guide

Opening Question
1. What was it about the participant requirement advertisement that made you want to participate?
2. *Grand Tour Question:* Tell me a story that describes your relationship with your mother. What it was like to come out to her?

Research Question 1: How do Black lesbians describe their relationships with their mothers?
3. What is your memory of the first hard lesson your mother taught you about life. As a woman? As a Black woman? As a Black person?

Research Question 2: What factors lead Black lesbians to come out to their mothers?
4. Tell me about the events that lead up to your decision to coming out to your mother.
   If they stall…
   a. Who was your most important influence?
   b. Who or what were your negative influences in coming out?
   c. How did religion affect your decision to come out?
5. Walk me through the conversation between you and your mother.
   If they stall…
   a. Who was your support or confidant during this process?

Research Question 3: How does coming out affect the mother-daughter relationship?
6. How has your relationship like with your mother changed since you came out?

Research Question 4: How do coming out narratives of young, Black lesbians reveal a sense of personal identity transformation?
7. Can you tell me what your life has been like since coming out?
   If they stall…
   a. Share the significant positive and/or negative experiences of being out?
8. If you could do it over again, would you still decide to come out to your mother? Why or why not?
   a. How would you do it differently?
9. How would you explain the importance of coming out to other Black lesbians.

Closing Questions
10. Is there anything else that you would like to talk about that I have neglected to ask?
11. If you could write yourself a letter or an email to your former self before you came out to your mother, what would you say?

APPENDIX H

DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

Thank you for your participation in this study titled, "Black Lesbians Coming Out to their

Mothers." Your participation will help to better understand lesbian identity development and

mother-daughter relationships within Black communities. Please remember that the information

you provided will remain confidential and will not be released in any individually identifiable

form. We will meet for a follow-up interview, and I will give you an opportunity to verify the

interpretation of the major themes from the first interview. You may also contact me if you have

any questions about the research. I can be reached by email at shannonm@uga.edu or telephone

at: 404-861-7941. Thank you again for your participation!

APPENDIX I

NARRATIVE ANALYSIS HOLISTIC-CONTENT ANALYTIC PROCEDURES

Narrative Analysis Holistic-Content Analytic Procedures (adapted from Lieblich et al. (1998))

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1. Field notes were written immediately following the interview. The researcher documented initial observations and impressions of the interview. The researcher included the following information in field notes as recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994): (a) the tone of the relationship with interviewee, (b) thoughts on the meaning of what participants "really" say during their story, (c) doubts about the accuracy of the participant's account, and (d) personal reactions to some of the participant's remarks or actions.

2. The researcher transcribed each narrative and read the transcripts several times to get a sense of themes and patterns. Special attention will be given to material that relates to the study's research questions.

3. The researcher recorded initial impressions of the interview. The researcher noted her general impression of the interview, as well as unusual features or contradictions of the narrative. Throughout the interview, the researcher paid special attention to parts of the narrative that seemed to disturb the teller.

4. The researcher decided the themes that pervaded a teller's narrative.

5. The researcher paid attention to the first and last appearance of major themes, the ways the teller transitioned between themes and the context for each theme as it relates to the whole. The interview was then divided into units according to the above criteria.

6. Units were reread and interpretative analytical notes were appended to each unit.

7. Initial results were shared with each participant to check for narrative accuracy. Thus the researcher discussed the meanings of results with each participant.

APPENDIX J

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

Name	Sexual Identity	Age	Date of Birth	Relationship Status	Educational Background	Employment Status	Salary	Number of Children	Age Came Out to Mother
Rita	Lesbian	27	06/14/81	Single	Bachelors Degree Predominately White Public Institution	Employed Full-time	$20,000-29,000	0	20
Jade	Lesbian	27	08/16/80	Single	Current Graduate Student Bachelors Degree Attended Private HBCU and Public Institution	Employed Full-time	$80,000-$89,000	0	20
Emiline	Lesbian	26	12/13/81	In relationship	Current Graduate Student Bachelors Degree Predominately White Private Women's College	Employed Full-time	Current internship less than $20,000 Previous job $30,000-39,000	0	24
Denise	Lesbian	26	02/2/82	Single	Bachelors Degree Predominately White Public Institution	Employed Full-time	$40,000-$49,000	0	17 to Cousin 18 to Aunt
Lyric	Lesbian	30	04/2/78	In relationship	Bachelors Degree Private Historical Black College	Employed Full-time	$40,000-$49,000	0	20

APPENDIX K

PARTICIPANT FAMILY INFORMATION

Name	Place of Birth	Household Income as Child	Guardian 1 Education	Guardian 2 Education	Residential Life as Child
Rita	Brooklyn, NY	$30,000-39,000	Biological Mother Some College	Biological Father Bachelors Degree	Birth-4 biological mother 4-6 cousin 6-16 step-mother 16-18 shared care with adoptive mother and biological father
Jade	Baltimore, MD	$70,000-$79,000 (mom only)	Biological Mother Bachelors Degree	Biological Father Bachelors Degree	Birth-12 both biological parents 12-18 biological mother 18 college
Emiline	Greensboro, NC	$60,000-$69,000	Biological Mother Bachelors Degree	Biological Father High School Diploma	Birth – 15 both biological parents 15- 18 biological mother 18- college then sometime home with mother after college
Denise	Columbus, OH	$50,000-$59,000	Biological Mother Some College	G2 Cousin Bachelors Degree/ G3 Aunt High School Diploma/ G4 Biological Father Some College	Birth – 12 biological mother 12-18 cousin Some support from aunt, cousin's biological mother
Lyric	Boston, MA	$60,000-$69,000	Biological Mother Associates Degree	Biological Father Some College	Birth – 18 biological mother and father

APPENDIX L

5 BEST PRACTICES FOR COMING OUT TO MOTHER

You may have spent hours and maybe years deciding rather or not to verbally tell your mother that you are a lesbian. These are five things to consider in your coming-out process…

1. Evaluate your mothers sensitivity towards issues related to sexual identity. This can be done by inquiring about her relationships with gay friends and family members.

2. When you decide to have the talk, make sure you are in a comfortable and private environment.

3. Consider coming out while participating in an activity that you both enjoy.

4. Be willing to have a *conversation*. Reframe from, "Mom, I'm gay, talk to you later." Be willing to answer any questions she might have.

5. Finally, know that her initial reaction may not be her final reaction. Mothers may respond with shock, but they usually become more accepting overtime.