



African American Families in Diversity: Gay Men and Lesbians as Participants in Family Networks*

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A growing body of research addresses the nature and determinants of social networks and assistance exchanges among African Americans, principally as they occur within the family (Chatters et al., 1989; Taylor et al., 1996). Profiles of African American family networks suggest that they are comprised of both immediate and extended family members, demonstrate high levels of contact and participation in supportive exchanges, and reflect strong affective bonds, including feelings of family solidarity and satisfaction (Jayakody et al., 1993). Evidence of significant variation in these network and family characteristics, with respect to sociodemographic (e.g., region, socioeconomic status) and family factors, demonstrates that African American families possess considerable diversity. Of particular note is an emerging literature documenting significant sociodemographic variation in support network characteristics and functioning (Taylor et al., 1990).

These findings reveal several general patterns. Marital status differences suggest that married persons are more likely to have larger support networks (Chatters et al., 1986) and to enlist kin to address their support needs, while unmarried persons rely on non-kin (Brown and Gary, 1985). Age differences observed within both elderly and general adult samples indicate that younger persons are more likely to have family members in their helper networks (Taylor et al., 1988) and to receive support from family (Taylor, 1986). Gender differences suggest that being female is associated with larger informal helper networks (Chatters et al., 1989). Despite relatively little directed research on this topic, geographic region is an important determinant of kin proximity (Taylor and Chatters, 1991), helper network size and diversity (Chatters et al., 1986). In general Southerners, as compared to African Americans in other regions of the country, are more likely to reside in close proximity to kin, have larger and more diverse helper networks (i.e., comprised of kin and non-kin), and possess an advantage with regard to support from family members.

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Finally, a number of studies suggest that although non-kin are important sources of assistance to African Americans, by and large, kin are more prevalent members of informal networks. Underscoring the centrality of kin, analyses of helper networks indicate that the presence of an adult child (principally daughters) is associated with larger support networks generally (Chatters et al., 1986; Chatters et al., 1989), as well as an increased likelihood of receiving aid from extended family (Taylor, 1986) and church support networks (Taylor and Chatters, 1986).

Traditionally, research on African American families has highlighted the existence of extended family units (Taylor et al., 1990) and the central position of women in both immediate and extended family and their critical role in providing support to the family's networks (Ladner, 1972). Characterizations of lower-status Black families, in particular, emphasize the central role of women, primarily mothers in the development and maintenance of assistance networks (Stack, 1974). However, these relationships are observed in middle-class families as well (McAdoo, 1980).

Profiles of Black family life emphasize the pervasiveness of extended family forms (Hill, 1972; Martin and Martin, 1978) and assistance patterns (Taylor et al., 1990) involving multiple generations. Demographic data for household living arrangements demonstrate that Blacks are more likely than Whites to reside in three generation and other types of extended family households (Angel and Tienda, 1982; Farley and Allen, 1987), even when controlling for socioeconomic status. Further, older Black adults are more likely than older Whites to reside with children and grandchildren (Freedman, 1991) and to take children and grandchildren into their households (Mitchell and Register, 1984).

Current research on African American families primarily focuses on the roles of extended family members and fictive kin (i.e., non-biological members) in contributing to the strength of the family (Taylor et al., 1990; Chatters et al., 1993). The participation of openly gay-identified men and women within African American family systems, for the most part, has not been addressed. This omission is regrettable for several reasons. Despite the lack of directed research on the topic, some gay/lesbian-identified individuals are active members of family networks and both participate and contribute emotionally, and financially, to the general functioning and well-being of African American families. Although estimates of the numbers of homosexuals in the populations are contested (i.e., 2 percent or 10 percent) (Laumann et al., 1994), some proportion of gay and lesbian individuals do participate in African American family life and are involved in central and instrumental family activities (e.g., caregiving, social support). The absence of information on these gay and lesbian family members limits our general understanding of African American family dynamics and functioning (e.g., social support), as well as how families may be specifically impacted by recognition of their gay and lesbian members.

Further, in recent years, more attention has focused on gay men and lesbians within families that are constructed by choice (Peplau et al., 1996; Weston, 1991). The concept of chosen families has interesting parallels to that of fictive kin within African American families. We know little about chosen families (e.g., how they are chosen) and their relationships to families of origin (e.g., network overlap). Recent legislative initiatives to

establish legal recognition of and protection for domestic partnerships (e.g., extension of spousal rights, adoption of minor children) suggest that the preeminence of blood ties is being contested. Moreover, relationships involving gay men and lesbians, their families of origin, and their chosen families are undergoing significant change in American society. Information about gay men and lesbians within their families of origin may assist our understanding of the nature and intersection of biological and chosen family networks as they attempt to integrate not only themselves but their partners and/or other members of their constructed family (Cochran et al., 1996; Peplau et al., 1996).

Much of the literature suggests that African American attitudes regarding homosexuality, largely based on religious conservativeness, are negative (Staples, 1981). Further, ethnic minority groups may view homosexuality as antithetical to issues of family, ethnic identity, and the preservation of minority communities (Mays et al., 1993; Morales, 1989). As a consequence, lesbian and gay children are often reluctant to disclose their sexual orientation within the traditional Black family (Cochran and Mays, 1988; Mays, 1989). Disclosure of sexual orientation to one's family of origin has both positive and negative aspects for the family and the individual. Although disclosure can potentially serve as a source of conflict between family members, non-disclosure requires withholding a part of one's self and one's resources (i.e., non-kin networks involving gay friends or lovers). The most significant risk of disclosure is rejection by one's family of origin and estrangement from the personal ties and resources within the family network. On the other hand, disclosure may deepen bonds of affection and family solidarity and increase contact, supportive exchanges and network assistance for either the biological family or the gay/lesbian member. Disclosure may also facilitate for the gay/lesbian member a sense of connectedness to their ethnic heritage, culture and family history which are often derived from participation in family events and holiday celebrations.

Despite the risks and potential for complications, many African American gay men and lesbians (some of whom openly identify as such) have maintained principal ties to their biological family (Mays et al., 1993). The current research hopes to contribute to research on lesbians and gay men within African American families. Our specific aim is to determine which categories of family members (e.g., mothers, brothers) African American lesbians and gay men select to disclose their sexual orientation. In addition, we hope to identify factors that predict whether or not families are aware of the sexual orientation of gay or lesbian members.

METHOD

Participants

The sample consisted of 506 African American women and 673 African American men who reported at least one previous homosexual experience and considered themselves gay, lesbian, or homosexual. The sample ranged in age from 18 to 70 years old (\bar{x} = 33.4 years, S.D. = 8.0). On average, respondents reported approximately 15 years of completed education (\bar{x} = 15.2 years, S.D. = 2.3). Average age for first awareness of same-sex sexual attraction was 13.2 years of age (S.D. = 6.3) with mean age at first same-sex sexual contact

being 16.8 years of age (S.D. = 6.5).

Questionnaires

Both men and women completed similar but gender-specific anonymous questionnaires. Both versions included items concerning demographic characteristics (i.e., age, sexual orientation, relationship status, annual income, years of education, living arrangements, reports of biological offspring, presence of children in the home). Participants were also asked how old they were when they first recognized their attraction to members of their own gender and the age at which they first had sex with a same-gender partner. Finally men, but not women, were asked their current HIV-infection status.

In addition, questionnaires included a section which assessed the extent to which various categories of family members (i.e., mother or stepmother, father or stepfather, sisters, brothers, other close relatives, distant relatives) were aware of the respondents' sexual orientation. Specifically, for each family-member category, respondents indicated whether: 1) no such person(s) existed; 2) the person(s) did not know or suspect the respondent's sexual orientation; 3) the person(s) probably knew or suspected; 4) the person(s) definitely knew, but the issue had never been talked about; or 5) the person(s) definitely knew and the issue had been discussed. For this analysis, a family member was considered aware if the respondent indicated the person(s) knew, whether or not the issue had been discussed (i.e., responses 4 and 5).

Procedures

African American gay men and lesbians were recruited from local and national gay organizations, press announcements in gay publications, and through the social networks of study participants to complete an anonymous questionnaire (for a fuller discussion, see Mays and Cochran, 1988). In all, 607 women and 865 men completed and returned questionnaires. Thirty-four returned questionnaires did not meet inclusion criteria (i.e., an African American of the same gender as the gender-specific questionnaire completed, reporting at least one same-sex sexual partner) or were dropped because respondents (95 women, 166 men) did not self-identify specifically as gay, lesbian, or homosexual—most indicated that they were bisexual—or failed to complete the disclosure section (5 responses).

Data Analysis

To examine possible demographic predictors of family network members' awareness of respondents' sexual orientation, we used logistic regression, as implemented in the BMDP statistical package. Predictor variables included age, educational attainment, relationship status, age at first sexual experience, and self-reported HIV infection. Both age and age since first same-sex sexual encounter reflect the duration of time during which family members could become aware of the respondent's sexual orientation. Other factors, such as the presence of a relationship partner, particularly a cohabiting partner, might influence disclosure by making sexual orientation a salient issue. In addition, because the presence of HIV infection is likely to spur disclosure of sexual orientation to family

members, we were interested in examining its possible consequences. Lesbians in general are less likely to be HIV-infected except through transmission routes unassociated with same-sex sexual contact; therefore, prevalence of HIV infection in lesbians, in general, remains low (Mays et al., 1996). All equations reported demonstrated adequate fit according to Hosmer-Lemeshow Goodness-of-Fit Tests. Comparisons of univariate gender differences were analyzed using Pearson Chi-square (χ^2).

RESULTS

Gender differences in Demographic Characteristics

Overall, women and men did not differ in age but were significantly different in all other demographic characteristics assessed (see Table 1). Specifically, levels of educational attainment, $\chi^2(4)=53.5$, $p<.001$, differed and men were slightly more likely to have completed three to four years of college, while women were likely to have had graduate education. Not surprisingly, women reported significantly lower annual incomes, $\chi^2(3)=45.1$, $p<.001$. Women were more likely to report that they were currently involved in a same-sex relationship and were more likely to be cohabiting with their partner, $\chi^2(2)=62.1$, $p<.001$. Women were also more likely to report having had children, $\chi^2(1)=83$, $p<.001$, and to indicate that their current household composition included children, $\chi^2(1)=158.5$, $p<.001$.

In terms of same-sex developmental milestones, men reported both earlier initial same-sex attraction, $\chi^2(4)=150.6$, $p<.001$, and sexual contact, $\chi^2(5)=156.5$, $p<.001$. Thus men and women, despite age similarities, differed in the length of time since initiating homosexual activity.

Prevalence of Disclosure to Family Networks

Overall, approximately 28 percent of respondents indicated that all categories of family members were aware of their sexual orientation. Comparatively fewer respondents (15 percent) indicated that none of the family members were informed (see Table 2). Mothers and sisters were most likely to know of respondents' sexual orientation, followed by brothers, fathers, other close relatives, and distant relatives. Approximately three quarters of respondents indicated that their mothers and sisters knew their sexual orientation. In contrast, only about 30 percent of respondents believed that distant relatives were aware.

TABLE 1

**Demographic Characteristics of Openly-Identified
African American Lesbians and Gay Men**

Characteristic	Women (N = 506)		Men (N = 673)	
	N	%	N	%
Age (in years)				
18 to 24	62	12.2%	77	11.4%
25 to 29	122	24.1%	161	23.8%
30 to 34	129	25.5%	189	27.9%
35 to 39	95	18.8%	119	17.6%
40 to 44	49	9.7%	70	10.3%
45 or older	49	9.7%	62	9.1%
Educational attainment*				
High school or less	62	12.4%	102	15.3%
1 to 2 years college	199	39.7%	228	34.3%
3 to 4 years college	110	22.0%	248	37.3%
1 to 2 years graduate work	85	17.0%	65	9.8%
3 or more years graduate work	45	9.0%	22	3.3%
Annual income*				
Less than \$13,000	167	33.3%	146	22.0%
\$13,000 to \$19,999	137	27.3%	129	19.4%
\$20,000 to \$29,999	119	23.7%	203	30.6%
\$30,000 or more	79	15.7%	186	28.0%
Reports one or more child*	169	33.4%	78	11.6%
Gay/lesbian relationship status*				
Single	169	33.4%	362	53.5%
In relationship/not cohabiting	155	30.6%	192	28.4%
Cohabiting with partner	182	36.0%	123	18.2%
Reports household includes children*	131	26.2%	12	1.8%
Age first same-sex attraction (in years)*				
Under 6	15	3.0%	72	10.9%
6 to 10	87	17.7%	218	33.0%
11 to 15	182	37.0%	273	41.4%
16 to 20	118	24.0%	82	12.4%
21 or older	90	18.3%	15	2.3%
Age first same-sex sexual experience (in years)*				
Under 11	43	8.6%	144	21.6%
11 to 14	70	14.1%	177	26.5%
15 to 19	164	32.9%	243	36.4%
20 to 24	123	24.7%	83	12.4%
25 to 29	52	10.4%	18	2.7%
30 or older	46	9.2%	3	0.4%
HIV-infected, by self-report ¹	—		206	30.4%

Note: Percentages based on non-missing data. Percentages do not sum to 100% due to rounding error.

¹ Question was not asked in women's questionnaire.

*p < .001.

TABLE 2

Prevalence of Family Members' Awareness of the Sexual Orientation of African American Lesbians and Gay Men by Self-Report of Participants

<u>Family member categories</u> : ²	N	%	95% CI ¹
Mother	826	76.3%	73.7%-78.8%
Father	526	58.6%	55.4%-61.8%
Sister(s)	681	74.9%	72.1%-77.7%
Brother(s)	620	68.4%	65.3%-71.4%
Other close relatives	494	48.8%	45.7%-51.9%
Distant relatives	309	30.9%	28.0%-33.8%
<u>Degree of disclosure to family member categories</u> : ³			
All represented categories unaware	176	14.9%	12.9%-17.0%
Less than 50% of categories aware	300	25.4%	23.0%-27.9%
50% or more of categories aware	379	32.2%	29.5%-34.8%
All represented categories aware	324	27.5%	24.9%-30.0%

¹ 95% Confidence intervals.

² For each category, denominator is total number of respondents who indicated presence of a family member in this category.

³ Calculated as number of categories indicated as knowing divided by total number of categories where respondents indicated the presence of a family member.

Predictors of Family Members' Awareness

Using logistic regression procedures, we evaluated demographic and same-sex developmental milestones as possible predictors of family members' awareness of respondents' sexual orientation. Significant predictors of mothers' awareness included an earlier age of first gay sexual contact, being female, HIV infection, and being older (see Table 3). However, educational attainment and relationship status did not significantly predict mothers' awareness. Similarly, fathers' knowledge of respondents' sexual orientation was associated with a younger age at first same-sex experience and older current age. There was a nonsignificant trend for HIV infection to be associated with disclosure. Other factors were not predictive.

TABLE 3

**Correlates of Disclosure to Kin: Results of Logistic Regressions,
Adjusted Odds Ratios and 95% Confidence Intervals (CI)**

Family Member Categories

Correlates	Mother		Father		Sister		Brother		Close Relatives		Distant Relatives	
	OR	95% CI	OR	95% CI	OR	95% CI	OR	95% CI	OR	95% CI	OR	95% CI
Age (older)	1.14	(1.02,1.27)*	1.16	(1.04, 1.29)*	1.24	(1.09, 1.40)*	1.14	(1.03, 1.27)*	1.16	(1.06, 1.27)*	1.28	(1.16,1.42)*
Gender (male)	.41	(.29,.58)*	.95	(.69,1.31)	.46	(.32,.67)*	.63	(.45,.89)*	.77	(.57,1.04)*	.89	(.64,1.23)
Years of education (greater)	.95	(.82,1.09)	.95	(.82,1.08)	.81	(.69,.95)*	.91	(.79,1.05)	.96	(.85, 1.09)	.85	(.74,.98)*
HIV infection (yes)	2.59	(1.56,4.28)*	1.47	(.97,2.23)*	1.79	(1.1, 2.89)*	1.83	(1.18, 2.84)*	1.23	(.85,1.79)	1.10	(.74,1.64)
Age first gay sex (older)	.60	(.53,.69)*	.74	(.66,.84)*	.70	(.61,.80)*	.72	(.63,.82)*	.73	(.66,.82)*	.78	(.69,.88)*
Gay/lesbian relation status ¹												
In relationship/ not cohabiting	.95	(.72, 1.55)	1.09	(.79,1.51)	1.10	(.76, 1.58)	1.12	(.79, 1.58)	1.22	(.90,1.66)	1.16	(.83, 1.63)
Cohabiting	1.06	(.82,1.09)	1.32	(.83,1.08)	1.46	(.95,2.22)*	1.32	(.91,1.91)	1.38	(.99, 1.90)*	1.26	(.89, 1.79)

Note: fit evaluated by Hosmer-Lemeshow Goodness-Of-Fit Tests, all ps>.05

¹ Referent is being single

*p < .05 *p < .10.

Reporting that a sister or sisters knew of respondents' sexual orientation was associated with younger age at first same-sexual contact and being female, older, less educated, and, HIV-infected. Reporting that a brother or brothers knew was predicted by respondents being younger at first gay sex, currently older, HIV-infected, and female. A nonsignificant trend existed linking living with a same-sex relationship partner with disclosure.

For the category of other close relatives, knowledge of respondents' sexual orientation was significantly associated with respondents reporting a younger age at first gay sex and an older current age. There were also nonsignificant trends involving two other factors: living with a same-sex relationship partner (as opposed to being single), and being female. Distant relatives' awareness of respondents' sexual orientation was significantly related to being older, reporting a younger age at first gay sex, and lower levels of education.

Although the association between demographic predictors and disclosure of sexual orientation was largely similar across all family-member categories, there were differences in the magnitude of effects. Respondents' age and length of time since first same-sex encounter were associated with greater odds of family awareness. HIV infection also appeared to predict awareness of sexual orientation within the nuclear family. Finally, women appeared more likely than men to disclose their sexual orientation to family, even after controlling for differences in education and same-sex behaviors.

DISCUSSION

Disclosure of one's sexual orientation to significant others is viewed as critical to the development of a positive homosexual identity (Icard, 1986; Wells and Kline, 1987). Family members are a likely group to whom gay men and lesbians would confide. However, because disclosing to family members carries certain tangible risks (e.g., scorn, outright rejection), the decisions to disclose one's sexual orientation and to whom are significant.

These data indicate a clear preference for disclosure to women (both mother and sister) in the immediate family. The findings parallel other work indicating that female relatives are preferred choices for informal helper networks among African Americans (Chatters et al., 1989). Gay men and lesbians may believe that female relatives are more understanding and supportive, while the reluctance to disclose to one's father or brother(s) possibly reflects an expectation that they will react more harshly (Strommen, 1989b). Further, confiding in selected members of the family network who are perceived to be sympathetic may help to mediate the repercussions of disclosure throughout the family network.

Social support research identifies several normative factors (e.g., reciprocity) that function to regulate the dynamics of support exchanges within families. Among African Americans, family factors (i.e., contact with family, emotional closeness) are important for determining the size and composition of helper networks, as well as their responsiveness in extending support (Chatters et al., 1986). For gay/lesbian-identified family members, the decision to confide in mothers and sisters (and perhaps other family members) may be a general indicator of the affective quality of these relationships. A strong and positive affective relationship with mother or sister(s) may increase the likelihood of confiding

sexual orientation. In addition, because confiding entails interpersonal trust and honesty, disclosure of sexual orientation could potentially reinforce and deepen these filial bonds. Given the pivotal role that women play in the development and maintenance of support networks within Black families, confiding in one's mother and sister(s) may serve the dual purpose of strengthening affective ties and assuring support.

Overall the findings indicate that, while most immediate family members are aware of their lesbian and gay members, relatives outside of close kin are generally less knowledgeable. The general pattern of results are similar to data from predominantly Anglo samples (Savin-Williams, 1990). Given the context of the African American population, however, the findings have relevance for the potential impact that disclosure may have on social networks and supportive relationships within the family. This is particularly the case given the oftentimes close involvement of extended family among African Americans.

The disclosure of a gay or lesbian sexual orientation can represent a significant challenge for the family of that individual. Upon disclosure, the family may struggle to understand and to accept the new identity. In some circumstances, because of the routine assumption that homosexuality and family roles are antithetical (Strommen, 1989a; Weston, 1991), the family may foreclose the process of constructing a new role and completely negate the validity of the previous family-role identity (e.g., brother, daughter, uncle, aunt). Under some circumstances, families may engage in a process of mourning for the lost role or identity of the gay/lesbian-identified family member, which results in the emergence of a new, more realistic and congruent role (DeVine, 1984). The inability of the family to accept this new role, however, potentially results in the rejection of not only the role itself, but also of the gay or lesbian family member. Research on African American families suggests that both the family and their gay/lesbian family member would suffer a potential loss with respect to supportive networks and exchanges if this were the outcome.

The dynamics of sexual orientation disclosure among gay men are further complicated by the potential for real physical loss of a gay son due to HIV/AIDS. Indeed, our findings suggest that among close family, HIV infection does generate more awareness of gay men's sexual orientation, although this does not extend beyond the nuclear family. The issue of HIV may affect family relationships even if the gay man is in fact HIV-negative. Families may believe that, because of gay men's connection with AIDS-related deaths, homosexual identity and HIV-positive status are synonymous. Due to these misconceptions, the family may anticipate the worst even if their son/brother/grandson is not infected.

In some instances, disclosure of homosexual orientation may coincide with disclosure of HIV-positive status. Under these circumstances, the gay male may be too sick to conceal his illness and may require both emotional and economic support from his family of origin. Given that the life expectancy of an infected individual is shortened, the family is compelled to deal with issues of sexual orientation and the premature death of a family member sometimes simultaneously. For some families, the difficulties in accepting their gay son's orientation have made family reconciliations quite difficult despite the son's need for help in managing his health care needs (Nelson, 1988). Toward the final stages of the disease,

the family may assume heavy financial burdens for medical expenses in addition to the emotional stressors associated with end-of-life caregiving and imminent death.

Acceptance of a gay or lesbian family member may be of particular significance for parents in their later years. Specifically, adult children play an integral role in providing support to aging parents. This is particularly true in the African American family where parents are more likely to reside in the home of immediate family—rather than a nursing facility—when unable to care for themselves. For older persons, the presence of an adult child also facilitates supportive exchanges both within the extended family and in non-family networks (i.e., churches). Older persons with an adult child have larger helper networks (Chatters et al., 1989) that are comprised of immediate family members (Chatters et al., 1986). Older persons with children are also more likely to receive assistance from their extended families (Taylor, 1986) and churches (Taylor and Chatters, 1986) than are those who are childless.

Recent work suggests that adult children are particularly important in facilitating the social integration of older adults in family networks (Taylor and Chatters, 1991). Older Black adults with children express more positive appraisals of family life and reside in closer proximity to relatives than do childless elderly persons. Popular wisdom and social science research confirm that the presence of an adult son or daughter for support and shared housing arrangements have a number of benefits for older persons. However, we do not know whether older adults are willing to reside in households headed by a gay or lesbian child (and their same-sex partner). A number of benefits may accrue to the family of origin in situations in which a gay family member is involved in a long-term, committed relationship. Specifically, acceptance of the same-sex partner could result in an expansion of instrumental and emotional support resources for the family (if the family chooses to accept).

Even in situations where a gay family member participates in the family network, we do not know to what extent long-term and committed gay or lesbian relationships (Peplau et al., 1996) may be merely tolerated, recognized, or validated within African American families and larger communities. As in heterosexual relationships, the family member's same-sex partner may experience strained relations with the family as a result of conflicting personalities, opinions, or belief systems. Morales (1989) suggests that some families may decide to accept the lifestyle of their gay or lesbian family member including their lover, but choose not to discuss the matter. Other families may reject the lover outright on the basis of their homosexuality alone. Family rejection of the partner (for any reason) may in fact function to render the family member's homosexuality invisible and therefore result in less overt conflict within the family.

Next, we turn our attention to support issues as they affect families of procreation for lesbians (and gay males to a lesser extent). A growing number of lesbian couples have expressed a desire to start their own families, either through adoption, artificial insemination, or assuming custody of a child/children from a previous marriage. Indeed, findings from this study indicate that roughly one-quarter of African American lesbians reside in households where children are present and for whom they may assume childrearing

responsibilities. As lesbian mothers and/or grandmothers, they are connected to family-based social networks and supportive relationships in which they provide assistance to younger generations of the family (i.e., children and grandchildren, nieces, nephews).

If the family of origin does not give credibility to their alternative family form, the lesbian couple and their child/children may experience restricted contact with the broader family network. Should the family reject the lesbian couple completely, the couple would then be faced with the challenge of raising children on their own without the benefit of the existing support and exchange systems present within the family. In addition, African American children who grow up with only limited contact with aunts, uncles, grandparents and cousins are deprived of an important source of encouragement, role models and emotional support, as well as a sense of family tradition and history.

Even if gay/lesbian-identified persons do not have children of their own, they may still participate in family-based supportive networks. Gay men and lesbians can assume a vital caretaking role in the lives of their siblings, cousins, nieces and nephews. Since most are raised within heterosexual families, it is clear that African American lesbians and gay men have had extensive experiences with heterosexual life and may also be able to play roles similar to their heterosexual siblings and others in their family network. However, given their openly gay identity, it is not clear whether these roles would be sanctioned by the family. Negative beliefs and misconceptions about homosexuality, including the myth that gay men and lesbians are pedophiles, and conservative religious beliefs condemning homosexuality will interfere with the acceptance of gay/lesbian identified family members as caretakers of younger family members.

This discussion has outlined several ways that African American lesbians and gay men may participate in their own family-based networks and supportive relationships, and the potential impact that disclosure of sexual orientation may have on their families of origin. We recognize that African American families and their distinctive attributes and processes (i.e., extended family forms, women's central position in family networks, and the organization of supportive exchanges) occur within the larger context of African American communities which embody varying levels of tolerance of homosexuality. Status group differences between individuals (i.e., gender, economic, marital and parental statuses), characteristics of the family network itself (e.g., proximity, affection, interaction), and family beliefs and attitudes regarding homosexuality will influence how and in what manner gay men and lesbians participate in family networks and support relationships.

In summary, it appears that a significant proportion of African American mothers and sisters and, to a lesser extent, other family members are aware of the sexual orientation of gay and lesbian family members. While there is a long history of research on African American families, very little work focuses on the roles that gay men and lesbians play within their families of origin or in the construction of alternative families of their own. African American family formation patterns have changed over the years, reflecting increases in never married and non-family households (Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan, 1995). Current social policy debates focusing on strategies to strengthen African American families and communities might benefit from a consideration of both the contributions to and barriers faced by African American lesbians and gay men in their roles within families.

Further, given substantial differences in the acceptance of homosexuality, some level of emotional and/or physical estrangement from family will occur for sizable numbers of gay men and lesbians (Strommen, 1989a). Rejection of the gay/lesbian-identified family member affects them as a personal loss. It is also clear, however, that it represents the loss of a valuable resource for the family, more generally. The extended structure of many African American families ensures that the repercussions for support dynamics and functions will likely be experienced beyond the immediate family.

Our efforts to conduct useful research and to develop sound social policy beneficial to African American families should be informed by current realities and definitions of family life. Research should be based on conceptualizations of families that encompass blended, nuclear, extended and chosen families and in which the contributions of all members are acknowledged and assessed.

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