

**PHOTOVOICE FAMILIES:  
LESBIAN FAMILIES CAPTURED IN PHOTOGRAPHS**

by

Melissa Brusoski

BA, Pennsylvania State University, 1999

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This thesis was presented

by

Melissa Brusoski

It was defended on

April 23, 2007

and approved by

**Thesis Advisor:** Carol McAllister, PhD, Associate Professor, Behavioral and Community  
Health Sciences, Graduate School of Public Health, University of Pittsburgh

Jessica Burke, PhD, Assistant Professor, Behavioral and Community Health Sciences,  
Graduate School of Public Health, University of Pittsburgh

Deborah Gould, PhD, Assistant Professor, Sociology, School of Arts and Sciences,  
University of Pittsburgh

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Melissa Brusoski, MPH

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Based on a social-ecological model of health, this thesis discusses the results of an exploratory, qualitative study, *Photovoice Families* that employed Photovoice and photo-elicitation methodology to examine how 12 lesbian women in the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania area defined and configured their families. Participants were given disposable cameras and asked to photograph the people that they considered to be a part of their family. This study explores the structure of family within the lesbian community and the meaning attached to the roles of individuals in lesbian women's lives. Previous research suggests that many lesbian and gay people create "families of choice" out of a network of friends, co-workers and others because of a lack of acceptance or understanding from their families of origin. Other studies contradict these findings and reveal that lesbian women do remain connected with families of origin and that these people have important roles in their lives. Participants in this study chose parents, siblings, nieces, nephews, surrogate families, friends, their community and many other people to photograph and to call family. More important than the concepts of families of origin or families of choice was the idea that families take care of and protect each other, regardless of whether they are related by biology or friendship. This study suggests that the creation of family is an active process in which women designate people whose relationships support and affirm them. A social-ecological model of health views all aspects of a person's environment including social, cultural and family backgrounds as important factors that impact health. Support and influence from others,

particularly close friends and family members, can have an impact on both a person's physical health as well as their sense of emotional well-being. By illuminating sources of social support in a population that is frequently marginalized and ignored, this study can make an important contribution to the design of public health programs and policies.

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

In a book about new ways of looking at gay and lesbian family relationships, Weeks et al. state that “something is clearly afoot in the politics of the family, and in particular in the lives of those historically excluded from family life in most western cultures. We are witnessing the development and public affirmation of ‘families of choice’” (2001: 9). “Family of choice” is a concept that is becoming increasingly important in the discussion of gay and lesbian families, a population that, until recently, has been ignored in both professional literature (Allen and Demo, 1995) and public discourse. Research about families of choice suggests that for lesbian and gay people, a definition of family may include not only those related by blood or marriage, but a larger community of friends who provide the supports and commitments that more traditional forms of family (or “families of origin”) are presumed to supply (see for example, Weeks et al., 2001; Weston, 1991; Nardi, 1992). This research often suggests that these types of families are created when gay and lesbian people are alienated from their families of origin, due to the families’ lack of acceptance of their sexual orientation.

There is little doubt that friends and non-biologically related people are a significant part of many gay and lesbian people’s families. However, much of the research that examines gay and lesbian families, and sources of social support for gay and lesbian people, presents conflicting findings about the nature of relationships with families of origin and families of choice. While some studies suggest that many gay and lesbian people create alternative families



because they are distanced from their families of origin, other research indicates that reports of gay and lesbian estrangement from families of origin are greatly over-exaggerated (Laird, 1996).

This paper will address some of the conflicts illuminated by previous research that examines gay and lesbian people's relationships with their families of origin and families of choice. It will enrich the literature of gay and lesbian families by contributing insights into the meaning of family and the sources of social support in lesbian women's lives. This paper will report the results of an exploratory, qualitative study, *Photovoice Families* that used Photovoice and photo-elicitation methodology to examine how 12 lesbian women in the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania area defined and configured their families. Specifically, this paper will discuss: 1) how lesbian women in this study define their family; 2) who are the individuals that these women consider to be family members; and 3) the function and meaning of different family members of these women's lives.

By illuminating sources of social support in a population that is frequently marginalized and ignored, this study will make an important contribution to public health programs and policies. While an estimated 2-10% of women in the United States are lesbians, there is a lack of knowledge about factors that contribute to their physical and mental health (Solarz, 1999). Research has suggested that lesbian women have higher rates of smoking and alcohol use than heterosexual women, and it is suspected that this may be due to greater levels of stress (O'Hanlan et al., 2004). The Institute of Medicine (IOM) reports that "lesbians, similar to other stigmatized individuals, are likely experience stress related to the difficulties of living in a homophobic society" (Solarz, 1999: 59). Lesbian women are more likely to report being depressed and the source of their depression is frequently associated with homophobia and lack of social support (O'Hanlan et al., 2004).

Support and influence from others, particularly close friends and family members, can have an impact on both a person's physical health as well as their sense of emotional well-being. Public health practitioners frequently implement interventions that are designed to improve the health of a community by focusing on an individual level. Individuals are encouraged to adopt behaviors that will benefit their health and well-being, while public health programs provide knowledge, support and resources to help them be successful. However, many of these programs fail to acknowledge that education and support from public health programs alone is rarely enough. These interventions need to take into account the complex ways in which a person is influenced by the world around them. A person's culture can have an impact on many factors related to health including food, behavior, belief systems and even the types of healthcare that are available. In addition, if family, friends and communities do not support a person's behavior changes, the adoption and maintenance of healthy activities becomes extremely difficult.

*Photovoice Families* is based on the social-ecological model of health that views all aspects of a person's environment including social, cultural and family backgrounds as important factors that impact health. It is critical that programs and interventions designed to improve the well-being of lesbian women consider the multiple levels of influence that affect their adoption and maintenance of healthy behaviors. It is evident from the IOM report that the availability of social support has a significant influence on lesbian health and there are disparities in this area, possibly leading to harmful behaviors such as increased alcohol and tobacco use. *Photovoice Families* will contribute to the effort to improve the physical and mental health of lesbian women by exploring the role of family, friends and communities in lesbian women's lives. By illuminating the multiple levels of influence that may impact the health of this population, this

study can help to improve the design of public health programs and policies, leading to an improved quality of life for many lesbian women.

This study is the first to use photography to examine how lesbian women define and construct their families. By encouraging lesbian women to visually capture the individuals that they consider to be a part of their family, it gives them a voice to represent their own lives. One woman explained that the process of photographing her family allowed her to demonstrate “people who I wanted to some way, officially acknowledge...that I would go and say ‘hey, I’m taking pictures of my family, I consider you my family.’ ”

It is important to make a note about the terminology used in this paper. “Non-heterosexual” people employ an assortment of terms to identify and describe their sexual orientation that vary based on backgrounds, gender and many other social and cultural factors (Young, 2005). There is no single phrase that is agreed upon or that adequately describes all non-heterosexual people and terminology varies in the academic literature as well. Most women in this study referred to themselves and their non-heterosexual friends and family as “lesbian,” “gay” or “queer” throughout our interviews and interactions. Therefore, for the purposes of this discussion, I will refer to this population as “lesbian and gay people” and simply “lesbian women” when describing the participants of this study.

In addition, it is also important to note that this study (and many of the studies of gay and lesbian people reviewed in this paper) does not weigh gay and lesbian people against their heterosexual counterparts in order to compare and contrast their lives. Nor does it make claims to exceptionalize the experiences of lesbian women or the women in this study. Instead, this study seeks to explore and describe the stories of lesbian women and to acknowledge that their experiences are as valid as those of the heterosexuals that are most commonly represented in

public health research. Lambert (2005) notes that “thick, rich descriptions of the experiences of gay and lesbian families may contribute to the reader’s ability to make self-other comparisons with this minority group, possibly resulting in increased understanding and acceptance” (50).

The results of this study indicate that lesbian women’s families are constructed from a variety of individuals including parents, siblings, nieces, nephews, surrogate families, friends, their community and many others. These people were meaningful for a multitude of roles that they played in the lives of the women in this study. Ultimately, this study suggests that regardless of whether lesbian women are related to the people that are important to them by blood or by friendship, lesbian’s families are families of choice.

## 2.0 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Analyses of kinship structures in the social sciences frequently seek to identify the meaning of “family” throughout the world. Historically, definitions of family center on people related by birth or through legal ties—the traditional nuclear structure of a father, mother and their children that sometimes includes other family members who are connected by blood or marriage (see for example, Radcliffe-Brown, 1952; Schneider, 1968; Levi-Strauss, 1977, Trautmann, 1987). In past several decades there has been a shift in the way that the social sciences view the family and an increasing interest in “alternative families” (Weeks, 1999). Research that critiques the traditional views of family has opened the discussion to suggest a variety of ways to view the function of kinship systems (see for example, Borneman, 1996; Yanagasaki and Collier, 1987).

While the notion of family in general has been expanded to include many family forms, much of the research of gay and lesbian families continues to support the traditional image of the family by focusing on the nuclear structure of a couple and their children (Weeks, 2001; Lambert 2005; Allen and Demo, 1995). In addition, Lambert (2005) Alan and Demo (1995) and Laird (2000) all note that many of these studies compare lesbian and gay families to their heterosexual counterparts, examining their similarities and differences. While this research has been important for the advancement of knowledge of gay and lesbian nuclear family relationships, the focus is directed at the ways in which gays and lesbians fit into the traditional heterosexual family structure. Lambert suggests that “further comparisons of gay and lesbian families to heterosexual

families does not serve a purpose in future research and, in fact, perpetuates heterocentrism and homophobia in our culture” (2005: 49).

Laird (1996) and Allen and Demo (1995) found that research on gay and lesbian families tends to focus on gays and lesbians as parents, the experiences of their children, or on relationships between same-sex couples. A recent search of the literature looking for the terms “gay and lesbian” and “family” also found that most studies of gay and lesbian families focus on the more traditional nuclear structure of a couple and their children (see, for example, Millbank, 2003 for a list of many of the studies of gay and lesbian families). Studies that examine alternative definitions of families outside of this nuclear structure are important for understanding the influences and sources of social support that many lesbian women experience.

## **2.1 FAMILIES OF CHOICE**

In the last two decades, research in the lesbian and gay communities (see for example, Weeks et al., 2001; Weston, 1991; Nardi, 1992) has revealed that an alternative definition of family may include a larger community of friends who provide the supports and commitments that kin related by blood and marriage are traditionally presumed to supply. Weston (1991) suggests that families of choice can embody a variety of forms that may include members of a person’s family of origin, friends, partners, lovers, children and many others. This important research has made an enormous contribution to the understanding of social support and the meaning of kinship among gay and lesbian people.

Most of the studies of families of choice focus on the importance of friends or other individuals outside of a gay or lesbian person’s family of origin. These studies suggest that many

lesbian and gay people create families out of their friendship networks because their families of origin do not accept or understand their sexual orientation (see for example, Weeks et al., 2001; Weston, 1991; Nardi, 1992,).

## **2.2 FAMILIES OF ORIGIN**

There have been few studies examining gay and lesbian's associations with their families of origin, and the little research that has been conducted presents many conflicting findings about the nature of these relationships. While some research has found that families of origin are sources of conflict and rejection for gay and lesbian people, other studies have noted that connections with biological relations can remain strong.

Much of the literature on families of choice suggests that these families are created because of a lack of acceptance or understanding from families of origin. LaSala (2000) cites numerous studies that suggest gay and lesbians can face an array of negative responses from their parents including shock, anger, embarrassment, rejection, and even more extreme reactions such as estrangement, violence and threats of murder. Green (2000) suggests that lesbian and gay people are continually aware that the process of coming out could cut them off from their family of origin and for this reason, they create families of choice outside of their biological family. He notes that the ability of gay and lesbian people to find social support in their families of choice diminishes the importance of coming out to and gaining the acceptance of their families of origin.

Several studies reinforce the view that support from families of origin is perhaps not as important to gay and lesbians as support from other relationships. Bryant and Demian's (1994)

national survey of lesbian and gay couples found that these couples reported receiving more social support from almost all other sources, including friends, co-workers, gay-oriented institutions and gay churches, than they did from their parents and other relatives. In addition to the lack of support, many couples in this study reported outright hostility from their families of origin. Other studies have maintained the finding that friends provide more social support (Kurdek, 1988, Smith and Brown 1997) and emotional support (Kurdek, 1987) than parents of gay and lesbian couples. Kurdek (1988) measured the psychological adjustment of 119 gay and lesbian couples and found that support from families of origin was unrelated to participants' psychological adjustment, while support from partners and friends was positively related.

Laird's (1996) examination of the clinical and psychological literature that depicted gay and lesbian people's experiences of coming out to their families of origin found that "the prevailing picture that emerges is often one of disappointment, rejection, compromise, loneliness, and physical and/or emotional cut-off" (97). She suggests that this is, in part, due to the fact that this type of literature is focused on examining "problem and pathology," rather than positive stories of family acceptance. Laird points out that, with the exception of coming-out stories, research about lesbian families that includes an examination of relationships with families of origin are practically non-existent. Further, Oswald (2002a) notes that studies examining gay and lesbian people's relationships with their family of origin tends to focus on the parent's reactions to their child's coming out, rather than on other aspects of their relationships.

Laird's (1996) study found that it was common for lesbian women to have a period of separation from their families of origin after coming out to them. However, gradually families tended to accept or at least tolerate the women's sexual orientation, and even included the women's partners in family rituals. Oswald (2002a) argues that while the literature suggests that



gay and lesbian people face hostility from their families of origin, there is little research to prove this. Her study of gay and lesbian inclusion in family of origin rituals found that most gay or lesbian people (and frequently their partners) were invited to and attended important family events and celebrations.

The National Lesbian Family Study found that only 4 women in 84 lesbian families were cut off from their families of origin. This study examined the experiences of lesbian women who were trying to get pregnant or were pregnant by donor insemination, and found that the majority of participants reported having regular contact with their families of origin and 86% phoned at least bi-weekly (Gartrell et al, 1996). Further, 78% of women in the study expected at least one member of their family of origin to accept their child. In a study of children with lesbian mothers, Patterson et al (1998) found that most children were in contact with their grandparents, and often with other members of the family of origin as well. In addition, Caron and Ulin's (1997) research found that members of the biological family were significant sources of social support to lesbian women. Their study found that lesbian couples who were open with and accepted by members of the family of origin had higher scores on scales measuring the quality of their relationship with their partner.

It is evident that more research is needed to understand the importance of gays' and lesbians' relationships with their families of origins and families of choice. While some studies suggest that friendships serve as more important sources of social support than biological ties, it is clear that connections with families of origin play an important role in many gay and lesbian people's lives.

### 2.3 FAMILY AND GENDER

Current research about families of choice tends to group lesbians and gay men together and discuss their experiences in terms of “non-heterosexuals” (Weeks et al., 2001; Weston, 1991). Allen and Demo note the lack of research considering “that the intersection of gender and sexual orientation have implications for varying structures and dynamics in the families of lesbians compared with families of gay men” (1995:114). Existing research on lesbian families in the context of gender tends to concentrate on issues of power and labor among cohabitating and co-parenting women (Gabb, 2005; Sullivan, 2004; Riley, 1988; Dunn, 1999). This research suggests that lesbian women expect equality in their relationships with their partners to a greater degree than women in heterosexual relationships. Lesbian couples in these studies also tended to experience a balanced division of labor and an egalitarian negotiation of roles in their partnerships.

Leading researchers in the field of psychology of women have presented research that suggests that men and women may differ in the ways that they form relationships (Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1976). Gilligan (1982) notes that women tend to be empathetic and to be concerned with other’s feelings and points of view. For this reason, she suggests that women may place a great deal of importance on relationships and in taking responsibility for the care of others. Miller’s (1976) work suggests that women’s identities can be formed in part by their relationships with others. Miller notes that:

Indeed, women’s sense of self becomes very much organized around being able to make and then maintain affiliations and relationships. Eventually, for many women the threat of disruption of an affiliation is perceived not just as a loss of a relationship but as something closer to a total loss of self (83).

This discussion of research examining the women in the context of relationships with others is not intended to suggest that all lesbian women, or women in general, are fundamentally nurturing or that they primarily formulate their identities based on their relationships with others. Nor does it intend to promote stereotypes of gay men that depict them as self-centered, promiscuous or in any way the opposite of nurturing and relationship-oriented. However, it is important to note that because lesbians are women, there may be differences in the way that they perceive social support and define themselves in context of their families as compared to men.

## **2.4 PHOTO-ELICITATION AND PHOTOVOICE**

This research study incorporated elements of photo-elicitation in its design and methods. Photo-elicitation is a research method that is based on the theory that “images evoke deeper elements of human consciousness than do words; exchanges based on words alone utilize less of the brain’s capacity than do exchanges in which the brain is processing images as well” (Harper, 2002: 13). The introduction of photographs or other visual images into a research interview can assist an investigator in reaching a subject on an emotional level that they might not otherwise have explored.

The elements of photo-elicitation are gaining wide acceptance in public health and social science research with a method called Photovoice. Photovoice is a participatory research tool that is based on the process of involving people in making decisions about the issues that they deem important within their community. This is accomplished by dispensing cameras to members of a community and asking them to capture images that reveal important aspects of their lives (Wang,

1999). The photographs are used as a basis for conducting interviews and revealing issues that are meaningful to the individual and their community. In her study of women in Belfast, Alice McIntyre used Photovoice to understand women's interpretation of the place where they live. She discovered that in their photographs, these women defined home not simply as a physical place but as something that encompassed their community, family and friends (2003). In this example, the photographs were used to discover themes that might not have been revealed in discussion or interviews, but could be communicated through visual images.

Research that utilizes Photovoice methods can make an important contribution to studies focusing on women's lives. Caroline Wang, a University of Michigan researcher who has developed Photovoice methodology, suggests that this technique can be used to support feminist theories that assert that research about women should be conducted by women (1994). This method offers women, rather than researchers, the opportunity to visually represent their own experiences. Studies using this technique emphasize the concept frequently asserted in community-development oriented approaches to public that suggests that people are the experts in their own lives and should be involved in making decisions that are important to them and their community.

## **3.0 METHODS**

### **3.1 RECRUITMENT**

This study was conducted in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and the surrounding area between the months of June 2006 through March 2007. Lesbian women were recruited into the study through a variety of recruitment methods: 1) Researchers attended events in the gay and lesbian communities such as the annual Pride Parade. Interested women at these events were invited to call or fill out a sign-up sheet if they were interested; 2) Women who participated in the ESTHER Project, a University of Pittsburgh study of heart disease risk in lesbian women, were randomly contacted and invited to participate; 3) Snowball sampling and “word of mouth” was employed in order to reach lesbian women in various organizations and friendship groups (for example, a flyer was sent to several women who attend different weekly or monthly lesbian dinner groups and these women passed it around to interested participants); 4) Participants were also asked to let their friends know about the study.

Interested women were asked to participate in a short phone interview to determine their eligibility. In order to ensure that the sample represented a diversity of race/ethnicity, age, relationship status and family life cycle, participants were asked to answer several questions that queried them on their demographic background, relationship status, number of children and the make up of their household. Prospective participants’ sexual orientation was determined by

querying women both about their own self-identification as well as their behavior.

### **3.2 DATA COLLECTION**

Each participant was provided with a single-use camera and asked to photograph her family. Because it was the goal of this study to encourage individuals to express their own interpretations of family, women were given minimal direction about the subjects of their photographs and the concepts of “family of choice” and “family of origin,” were not discussed in the initial meeting. Because families and friends do not always live in close proximity to each other, participants were also encouraged to take pictures of something that represents a person living far away or to send an existing photograph of that person when they mailed back their camera.

I initially met with each participant for an orientation that covered: 1) signing of informed consent documents; 2) discussion of the purpose of the study; 3) ethical issues including privacy and the rights of others and safety concerns when taking pictures; 4) specifics on how to operate the single-use camera.

After each participant was finished taking pictures of her family, I developed the photographs and met individually with each woman to discuss them. Each woman was given a set of her photographs and was asked to participate in a semi-structured interview that allowed her to tell the story of her family, using the photographs as a guide. Photographs were used as a form of visual data as well as a device for advancing discussion about the participants’ understanding, experience, and interpretation of their families.

Participants were invited to look through the photographs and to remove any that they did not like or wish to be included in the discussion. Reactions to the photographs were generally positive, many women laughed at funny pictures or commented on ones that they particularly liked. Women particularly enjoyed photographs that depicted their family members in situations or poses that they frequently associated with the person or people that they cared about. For example, one woman took a picture of her partner in a garden in front of a cottage that is owned by her parents. She said of her partner, “She loves her flowers and her garden. She’s always taking care of all of that, trying to make everything nice—my family and my parents up the cottage because they are getting older and have a tough time of taking care of the cottage now so we go up and help with it.” Another woman picked several of her favorite pictures out from the rest because the people in those particular photographs are “the people that mean the most to me.”

At the onset of the interview, I asked each participant to describe to me how she defined her family and discuss how she thought about who would be photographed. Each woman was then invited to go through her photographs and tell me about them. In general, participants showed me each photograph and discussed who was in the picture. Some women described what the person in the photograph was doing at the moment the picture was taken. Others told stories about the person in the photograph or discussed special memories that they had of the person. Most women told me why they chose that particular person for the photograph and the significance that person had in their life. If the answer did not come out in the participant’s discussion and story telling, I would ask her, “Why is this person your family?” and “Why did you choose to photograph this person?”

### 3.3 DATA ANALYSIS

Interviews were tape recorded and transcribed and data was organized and coded using Nud\*ist 6 (Non-Numerical, Unstructured, Data Indexing, Searching and Theorizing, or N6). N6 allowed me to organize and sort data into various themes that could easily be grouped together and viewed in one place by a few quick computer commands. Participants' responses were grouped in general categories, and then into specific or sub-categories. For example, a general category was "Descriptions of Family" and two of many sub-categories of this were "Shared History" and "Accepts that I am Gay." Other general categories included "Family Members" with sub-categories that listed the specific family members such as parents, siblings, and friends. Categories were employed both in order to describe family members, but also to categorize the reasons that these qualities were important from the perspective of the participant. Glaser and Strauss refer to these as "in-vivo codes" (Corbin and Strauss, 1967). With these tools, I was able to examine each category and sub-category to determine which family members were described as possessing particular qualities and to link these qualities to the meaning they represented to the participants.

After using the N6 qualitative data analysis software to code, organize and identify important themes in the data, I read through each interview and examined each photograph as the participant discussed it. This allowed me to step back and get a richer sense of how the photographs fit into the participants' responses and to study other themes that emerged.



## **4.0 RESULTS**

### **4.1 PARTICIPANTS**

Twenty participants were initially recruited to enroll in this study and participated in the orientation meeting. Of these twenty women, twelve returned their cameras and took part in an interview in time to be included in this analysis. Two women officially dropped out of the study, both stating that they did not have time to complete the photography and participate in the interview. I was unable to locate three other women, a couple whose phone was disconnected and one who did not answer or return my phone calls. The three remaining participants indicated that they are still interested in completing the photography and participating in an interview, but have not done so at this time. Four of the eight women who did not complete this study are African American, the other four are white. Ages for these women ranged from 20 to 71 years old.

Of the twelve women that completed the study, 25% are African American and 75% are white. This racial breakdown is consistent with the general racial breakdown of the city of Pittsburgh (US Census Bureau, 2002). Ages range from 20 to 61 years old. 25% of the participants have children, 58% have a partner, and two sets of women who participated are couples. All names are pseudonyms, including the names used to describe family members.

**Table 1: Participant Demographics**

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>	<i>Children</i>	<i>Partner</i>
Sarah Jones	20	White	No	Yes
Tess Winters	20	White	No	Yes
Sonya Wilson	22	African American	No	Yes
Leah Hurst	27	African American	No	Yes
Lindsay Roman	33	White	No	No
Gwyneth Hilty	37	White	No	No
Melinda Lewis	41	African American	Yes	No
Susan Carey	45	White	No	No
Barbara Cataldo	51	White	No	Yes
Michelle Ward	53	White	No	Yes
Sharon Saunders	60	White	Yes	Yes
Mary Peterson	61	White	Yes	No

## 4.2 WHAT IS FAMILY?

Consistent with a social-ecological perspective, the experiences and of women in this study are greatly shaped by the people, culture and influences of the society in which they live. This was especially evident in the way that their language and terminology varied based on their age, levels of education and connections with lesbian and gay communities. For example, in their descriptions of what family means to them, some women were familiar with the terminology of “family of origin” and “family of choice” and the diffusion of these concepts in the gay and lesbian communities contributed to the ways in which they viewed and defined families. Sharon Saunders told me:

Well, you said family as I define it, so my family as I define it is family of chance and family of choice. So I have two sons and a brother, my aunt whose article you have there, but then I have other people that I consider family, they are like family to me but we're not related so I wanted to include them as well.

Leah Hurst also discussed the concepts of biology and choice when defining her family:

The idea of taking pictures of family, it really did make me pause and think. It does make me think how I question and I've based most, actually all, of my pictures on biology. Biologically related to me as family and who has become part of my family of choice through my relationship with my partner and who we have included in our own little immediate family. That is really kind of how I put that together.

Other participants found defining their family to be an intuitive process and portrayed their families in a less conceptual and more emotional way. Sarah Jones stated, "It's just like a given, you don't sit around and think 'who's my family?...It's basically like, who you trust.'" Tess Winters told me, "I picked people that know me completely...I picked everyone who if I could only see so many people these are the people I would want to see and no one else."

As expected, the twelve women in the study offered twelve different definitions of family that reflected their own experiences, upbringing and current family configuration. However, the prevailing theme described in some way by all of the participants was the idea that families are people that protect and care for each other, regardless of how they are related. Mary Peterson had been separated from her siblings at a young age and then reunited with them as an adult. During this time, she had grown close to step-siblings and step-parents. Now, she and many of her siblings have adopted children that are considered to be as much a part of the family as biologically related children. Mary also has many lesbian friends who do not have children of their own and have grown close with her children. She looked for a common thread in her bond to all of these differently related people. Mary reflected, "I believe my first answer would be like a village kind of concept. People who have in common caring about and taking care of and

looking after others...I think that would be it. That in daily life there are things that people do to look out for one another.”

Melinda Lewis has struggled to keep her family together and to overcome five years that she spent in prison when her children were young. Since she left prison, Melinda has fought for custody of her own children, taken in and adopted her deceased sister’s daughter, and supported her grandchildren. Melinda’s sense of responsibility for keeping her family together and taking care of them despite the hardships that they have endured is reflected in her definition of family. She stated that family is “those that I love, not necessarily blood relatives, those that I am protective of and those that got my back too. I got them and they got me.”

Gwyneth Hilty’s description of family also echoed many women’s sentiments that being there for each other through good times and bad was the most significant element that made people family:

I guess for me relationships have always been really important to me and feeling connected to people and feeling like we could tolerate conflict, we could tolerate joy, we could have this sort of fullness of relationships and those are the people who I think of when I think of family. People who I’ve gone through things with and I know our relationship is tough enough that its going to be a long term sort of thing and those connections are really valuable and important to me. They’ve seen me through a lot of hard things and I think I’ve seen them through hard things too, and that’s part of what makes them so special.

Comments such as those described above are significant because they reveal that the concept of reciprocity is an important element of many women’s families. Prevalent in discussions of the definition of family was the idea that while women’s families protect and care for them, the women themselves are equally important for the protection and care that they offer their families. Women frequently discussed the ways in which they supported their families,

whether it was providing physical and material support for young children and elderly people, or emotional support to friends, siblings or others.

### **4.3 WHO IS FAMILY?**

As noted above, some participants broke down their family into distinct categories of family of origin and family of choice, while others simply described the people who are important to them. Descriptions of families of origin included “people who are related to me,” “my immediate family,” “biological family” or, like the woman above, “families of chance.” Groups of friends and non-biologically related individuals were sometimes described as “family of choice,” but were also referred to both as “like” a family member (“he always felt like an older brother”) or were actually given the title of someone biologically related (“we are sisters now”). Regardless of how family members were described or categorized, the family of every woman in the study included a combination of biological family members and non-biologically related individuals such as friends, co-workers or others.

#### **4.3.1 Family of origin**

At least one parent was photographed by every woman whose parents were not deceased, and frequently a second parent or a step-parent was included as well. Mothers were photographed more often and were discussed in greater detail than fathers. Several women were not in contact with their fathers or had grown up in single-parent households, while others simply had closer relationships with their mothers than their fathers. Some women explained that their mothers

were important to them because they served as role models for how they wanted to be, or because their mothers provided unconditional support and encouragement. Sarah Jones told me that she knows both her mother and father will always be there for her, but her father gets annoyed with her, while her mother never does. Of course, not all women had close relationships with their mothers, but in general, these conflicts seemed to stem from typical mother-daughter clashes, and were unrelated to issues of sexual orientation. For example, Michelle Ward told me that her mother is the only biological family that is still alive, but they have always had a difficult relationship because her mother is jealous of anyone that Michelle is close with. She explained:

My mom has a personality of her own and she, without going into a big ordeal, she only has ever wanted me for herself. Ever since I can remember even back in high school when I would have close friends something was always wrong with them, so “they are not a good person,” or “they did this,” or “I heard this,” always trying to not necessarily, I don’t even know how to say it; always trying to not support me in my friendships.

Michelle Ward’s mother’s jealousy was actually the catalyst that caused her to come out to her mother about her relationship with her partner, a situation that allowed her to gain insight into her mother’s jealousy that she had never had before. She told me:

Most of the encounters in telling my mom about Barbara have been out of anger because of the build up of my mom against making comments against Barbara or Barbara’s family or me being in the family or snide remarks or jealous remarks. And actually sitting down and saying “What is the problem, Mom?” “Why are you acting like this?” And finding out, finally that she actually said to me in the last year and a half or so “I don’t want you to love her more than me.” Which then, of course, your heart freakin’ breaks and, but then you say “You know what Mom, it’s different. Barbara is my partner for life, you are my mom why would I ever not love you?” She has become, and I’ve tried to show her my love for her has not changed has not diminished has not gotten bad its only gotten better and fine and we’re doing things and I think she’s more accepting of it now.

In addition to relationships with parents, women described the bonds that they felt with their siblings, and brothers and sisters were frequently photographed as important members of the women's families. While many women remained close with their siblings into adulthood, a shared history or shared childhood was a common theme that connected participants to their siblings. Many women explained that growing up in the same household with their siblings was an important element in their relationships with brothers and sisters. Particularly, women felt that having a person who understands their past helped to solidify their current connections with siblings. Tess Winters said of her sister: "We've gone through the same things together and I think she's the only person who could understand how my life has gone exactly because she's always been with me." Even if women were not particularly close with their siblings in adulthood, the element of growing up together persuaded many women to include their brothers or sisters in their photographs. Leah Hurst stated:

He is my biological brother. I can't say we've been the closest over the years, we have very dissimilar tastes and interests and goals in life and in fact, he gets on my nerves a lot, but I would have included him in there because of the biological connection that we share and because we did grow up together in the same household and we were close at one point.

For some women, childhood relationships with siblings were difficult, and more or less existed only because they were growing up in the same household as their sibling and were, essentially, stuck with them. Years later, their experiences as adults helped them to form deeper connections with their siblings that they didn't have as children. Gwyneth Hilty reflected on the evolution of her relationship with her sister from a strained childhood companion into a close friend:

My sister is a year and a half younger and we have had tough times. We've not always been close especially when we were just really different growing up. She was very much blonde popular high school kid and I was the fallen

dykie, not popular basketball player, and so we went through some stuff in college and we started to get close again and she is my best friend. We have been through so much and so important. As different as we are, to have someone who has known me pretty much my whole life and can see things similarly enough that you feel like she gets me, but also different enough that she teaches me things—especially the craziness of my family—so we just really have worked hard on our relationship and it's been beautiful.

As noted earlier, many women describe close friends as family members, and in particular, designate these people to be their siblings as a way of distinguishing them as above mere friendship. In the case of actual blood-related siblings, it seemed that the most deferential praise a woman could bestow was to describe her brother or sister as her friend. Susan Carey reflects on her relationship with her brother Ben:

We always played together. I was a tomboy I was right there with him the whole way. [Brother] Joey was reading and [sister] Susan was sewing so we were bonded at the hip many, many years ago but as adults we chose to be dear, dear friends. Ben is very inspiring and loving part of my life and his family is an extension of that.

Siblings' children were significant family members to many of the women in the study and most women who had nieces and nephews included them in their photographs. For some women, it was nieces and nephews that helped to connect them with their siblings, as was the case of Lindsay Roman who described her brother: "We fought horribly when we were children and then when I left the house we got to be close for a few years and then close for a few years after that and then now a little bit closer because of my niece." Gwyneth Hilty described how her nephews' birth impacted her relationship with her younger sister:

Gwyneth: Watching your little sister have a baby is an amazing. It changed everything.

Interviewer: How did it change everything?



Gwyneth: It was changing probably anyway but to watch her do that at some level she was still my little sister but to watch her have a baby and to watch her be such a great mom, my respect and admiration is different than when you think of your little sister.

Women frequently saw themselves as a mentor for their siblings' children and felt responsible for helping to raise and guide them. For some women, their niece or nephew represented a surrogate child, and evoked their desire to have children of their own. For example, Gwyneth Hilty said of her sister:

We're more friends but with this really great shared history that makes it very, very special. It makes her son really, really special to me too I see so much of my sister in him and its fun to watch. And as I said I'm not sure that I'll have children of my own so she will probably be the closest thing to that.

Leah Hurst described her relationship with her sibling's children:

I definitely take pride in my role as their aunt and what that means and what I can provide for them in terms of guidance and support and things like that...its kind of like an extension of my desire to parent at some point, so I feel like I'm responsible for molding these individuals into responsible moral adults the best I can.

In general, few women in the study reported a lack of acceptance from their families of origin, but there were exceptions. Melinda Lewis told me that her 13-year-old son does not like that she is a lesbian and Sonya Wilson stated that her grandmother hates that she is gay and she thinks that other family members probably feel the same way. Lindsay Roman told me about her mother and stepfather:

I am close to them but also it's in a strange way because they know I'm gay, they don't like to talk about it. They think it's a phase. They are super religious so we're close but it almost sometimes feels like it's on a superficial level. Even though I talk to my mom a couple times a week so we have this weird close but not close kind of relationship.

Like Lindsay, who still maintains a relationship with her mother and step-father, these women felt a connection to some of the people who were not accepting of their sexual

orientation. Melinda Lewis photographed her 13-year-old son, despite the fact that he had made life difficult for her and her partner because she said that he is still her child.

Lindsay Roman discussed her relationship with her extended family, who she visited during the course of the study:

Lindsay: Sometimes these are my not chosen family, the people I'm stuck with. I grew up in a really small town in southern West Virginia so it's a very rural community that is not always accepting of my life. I mean not accepting of me individually, than they are of like, the concepts that I'm gay. They just sort of ignore that, and it's a big part of my life. So that has definitely been a division mark and not just that I mean, just I wanted to move away. I wanted to live my life the way I thought was the most genuine and honest way I could and our qualities are very different. But in the course of the study these were the people I was really around and realized that even though I don't see them that often they are still family and we share a bond.

Interviewer: What do you think that bond is?

Lindsay: That they knew me when I was growing up that we have a shared history. That they also know people that are gone now, my grandfather, my father and my great grandmother so we have that in common and memories and being a kid and playing with all my cousins and going to my uncles house and taking vacations and even though we don't have a lot in common now they were definitely a part of my formative years and part of who I am today.

She says of her mother and stepfather: "I love them and I would absolutely consider them my family in any situation, but I wish we were closer in a real way."

#### **4.3.2 Families of choice**

Seven out of twelve women were in a committed relationship and all of them included their partner in their description of their family members. While relationships with partners are a choice that women make, for many participants in the study, partners represent the creation of a

new family. Women described their partners as “my wife” or as someone that they would marry if it were legal. For some participants, partners were the co-mothers of their children, while other couples had plans to have children together someday. Tess Winters said of her partner, “I have this family, and you know how when people get married they have another family, and I would want to marry her and have my own family with her.” Tess’s partner, Sarah Jones, reiterated the sentiment, stating that she and her partner are planning their lives together. Leah Hurst photographed the house that she purchased with her partner to symbolize her intention to create a family with her partner someday. She explains that the photographs of the house:

represent the ways that my partner and I are trying to establish our commitment towards each other as a family. Not just as partners but as a family. Because we can’t legally marry we try to do as many other things that we can to represent that commitment to ourselves and to the world, so I guess the house really isn’t my family but it represents the family.

Some women also depicted “surrogate parents” and “surrogate families” who were biologically related to their partners. The families of partners were described with equal importance as the women’s own families of origin. Partners’ families sometimes filled the role when a participant’s own family members were deceased, as was the case for Michelle Ward. In other instances, partner’s families of origin were photographed simply because they had a similar relationship with them that they had with their own families of origin. Leah Hurst stated that she photographed her partner’s parents because “they love and support her and I think over time they are going to love and support me.” Acceptance at traditional family and holiday celebrations was often described as evidence of a woman’s recognition in her partner’s family.

For partners Michelle Ward and Barbara Cataldo, their roles as daughters to Barbara’s parents were more important to them than the acceptance of their romantic relationship. They have been together for 30 years and own a house together. They are both extremely close with

Barbara's entire family and Michelle has been adopted by them because she has little family of her own. However, they both told me that Barbara's parents do not know that they are a couple.

Barbara reflected:

Barbara: They really love and care for my partner and their feelings are that she's my best friend.

Interviewer: They don't know she's your partner?

Barbara: No, not 100%. I think they realize that I love her but not in a way that they may see on Jerry Springer or something, cause that's what they think what gays are, or lesbians. How they accepted her... I'm glad obviously, she cared for my parents and my parents cared for her, because I think that has made the whole association of us much closer and increased the love amongst all of us.

Neither partner has a desire to tell Barbara's parents that they are more than just best friends, and feel that the knowledge would be destructive to the relationship. Michelle states:

We really think they don't get it and we don't care because actually, they have enough in their life to think about that they don't necessarily have to go through some big dealing with it. We are okay with them whatever they feel and think cause we live our life. They accept me as their adopted daughter, they've known me for 30 years, I would not like it if their opinion of me changed because of one thing. I would not like it if they became hurt and all disjointed because of one thing.

As stated earlier, every woman in the study photographed people outside of her family of origin, and most often, these pictures depicted friends. Some women photographed one particular friend who they considered to be a part of their family, while other women took photographs of groups of friends that served as a second or alternative family from their family of origin.

The element of shared history that was important in sibling relationships also applied to many friendships. Many friends were considered "like a brother or sister" because they had grown up with the participant or shared an important part of their past. Tess Winters photographed her friend Jennifer whom she had known since 6<sup>th</sup> grade. She stated that Jennifer is

more important than a friend and is considered family because of everything that they have been through together since their rebellious days in school. Experiencing the transition from childhood to adulthood with friends was also important for Lindsay Roman, who photographed friends that she had known since she was 18 years old. She explains that “we’re not actually related but through our lives these are the people I became adults with and have spent most of my life since I’ve been out of my parents house, which is about half of my life at this point.”

In addition to having a shared history, sharing a common experience was also a defining element in many of the relationships that the women depicted. After Susan Carey’s biological brother passed away, the experience strengthened her relationship with her friend David:

David lost his sister and I lost my brother so a long time ago over second or fifth tequila we go to each other ‘he is my brother and I am his sister.’ And but that’s an act, but it was also, there was intentionality in that and not because of that act, but we had been in each others lives for, I guess 15 years.

While common experiences helped to connect old friends, many newer relationships also progressed from friendship to family when people found an understanding of each other’s backgrounds and experiences. When Gwyneth Hilty left her family in New York and moved to Pittsburgh to take a job, she made a connection with her coworker who had also experienced hardships in recent years:

This move was very difficult for me and had a lot of really bad moments in it and some days I just couldn’t hide that and I work very closely with Deborah. It would have been fine if she had just, you know, I’m having a bad day sorry, but we had good conversations about those. She would ask questions and we would have moments when we could talk a little bit about it and she’s had some really bad moments in the last couple of years with deaths and transitions and stuff, so there is a level of engagement that is different.

While there were many diverse reasons why women felt connections with their friends, the shared experience of being a lesbian was an important factor in identifying friends as family

for many participants. Frequently, women stated that they could be open with their lesbian friends in a way that they could not be with their families. Barbara Cataldo reflected:

They are lesbians too, they are gay and so they're sometimes closer to me. I feel a little bit closer to them than possibly my own family to a certain extent. I mean to interact with them talk with them, relate to them. I guess truly my own family of parents and siblings are truly my family maybe because it was how I was brought up, I don't know really, but in addition, my very close friends. I have a love for them its different but similar to what I would say is a family...I don't know the true differences. It's like some things you just don't discuss and talk with your own family in comparison with what you talk with your friends that are your family.

Many women described the experience of being “known” as an important factor in identifying friends as family members. For some women, this meant that their chosen families accepted that they are a lesbian. Other women looked for an acknowledgement of their experiences and lifestyle choices. While most women's families of origin accepted the fact that they are lesbian, many women felt that these people could not truly grasp how their interactions in the world might be different than their heterosexual family members. Gwyneth Hilty describes feeling out of place in her family of origin, despite their acceptance of her:

Sometimes when I go home, like home to New York where I'm from, and I'm around my family, they are good people it's not about not accepting me it's not really about that at all. It's just heterosexuality is so big you know talking about their lives and their kids and their marriages and their two point five cars. And it's not just about marriages and stuff either. I guess it's just about the way they live, it's different, I live a little differently... Sometimes when I'm around them I feel a little lonely. It's not that they don't accept me it's just that it doesn't fit exactly and still after all these years [my being a lesbian is] a little confusing to most of the people I'm related to. They don't really see the way that I might feel left out.

Many women described the importance of having people in their life who completely understand and accept them. Lindsay Roman describes her friends: “They know me exactly who I am and still want to be my family. They don't pick and choose the parts of who I am and what they can

accept.” Sharon Saunders offers an explanation of why friendships are important to lesbian women, “I think we just have more close friends we feel are family because we are looking for people who are going to affirm us, whether they are straight or gay.”

Interactions in the lesbian community frequently allowed women to feel a sense of acceptance and understanding from other people with similar experiences as their own, and many women discussed feeling a sense of family with this community. There is no one definition of the lesbian community and women in this study identified it in a variety of different ways. For some women, the lesbian community was their own personal group of friends that they interacted with on a regular basis. Other women included lesbian acquaintances or “friends of friends” that they saw at events or parties. Some women viewed the lesbian community to be all lesbian women living in the area, while others viewed it as a global phenomenon that included all women who loved women. Sonya Wilson explained that she feels like she could go to pretty much any city and be accepted by other lesbian and gay people because of the shared experience of being a lesbian. Sonya reflected that even if people don’t know each other, they may consider each other family:

Another gay person, they’re like “there’s family over there.” Probably because when you accept each other and, like I know for my grandmother she hates [that I’m a lesbian] and is completely against it, so we all accept each other. So its like probably trying to find security or comfort within that gay community that you don’t have at your house especially if you’re raised Christian or you know, really religious. I actually think that’s why they do it.

For some participants, the lesbian community included an active group of lesbian women who got together specifically for the purpose of making connections with other lesbian women and being in an environment where they feel accepted. Lindsay Roman described the importance of

having a place where she doesn't have to censor what she says or to explain her sexual orientation. She reflected on her monthly dinner group:

There is nothing else like that in our daily lives. We are the minority, not as women, I mean, women are actually the majority but you wouldn't know it by the way society operates, but as gay women we're definitely the minority and so its nice to have spaces that are specifically reserved for us somewhere you can feel comfortable. You always think when you're younger you would come out and that is your big thing, but you come out everyday almost to people who the default is "you're straight" so you are consistently coming out over and over again.

Mary Peterson felt that at this point in her life she has very little connection with the broader lesbian community as it is described above, but her own family includes a "community of lesbians" that have formed a family that once again, reflects the definition that family are the people that take care of each other. She explains:

I don't know cause and effect lesbian stuff but the other thing about that is because of minority status and persecution that gay people face in our culture, many people have formed bonds that are like family among people who have the same sexuality and that's certainly been a part of my life and my children's lives too, so that they are surrounded by lesbian aunts who are very important in their life.

### **4.3.3 Children**

Children do not necessarily fit into the either category of family of origin or family of choice. While some lesbian women may be biologically related to their children, they often make the choice to conceive them. Other women may include their children in their families because of their biological bond, regardless of their relationship with them, as was the case of Melinda Lewis, whose son did not accept that she is a lesbian. For this reason, I have elected to include children as a separate category altogether.



One participant, Mary Peterson, had children with her partner. The children were planned and conceived by donor insemination. Mary's partner had carried the children and Mary had adopted them when they were born. Melinda Lewis and Sharon Saunders had been in heterosexual relationships before coming out as a lesbian, and had children from these relationships. Sharon Saunders' two sons were in their 30's and also had their own children. Whether biologically related or adopted, women spoke of their children as some of the most important people in their lives. Sharon stated:

I think first of all of my children of course, and my grandchildren. That just sort of goes without saying you love your children, you love your grandchildren, you don't think you could love anybody as much as you love your own but you do love your grandchildren just as much and it's a really wonderful relationship...the one thing I really enjoy watching is watching my boys with their children and how neat that is to see your kids with their kids.

The bulk of Melinda Lewis's photographs depicted her children and grandchildren and she spoke proudly about caring for her family. Melinda's stories primarily centered on her children and her role as a mother influenced not only the way that she defines family, but her own identity. She explained, "I would say it has a lot to do with kids. Men don't carry babies for nine months. You're always going to have that, and men have the ability to walk whenever they can...me, I take care of my family." Melinda's statement above illuminates the element of reciprocity that was revealed in many women's definitions of family. Participant's own children, like nieces, nephews and many others, encouraged women to view themselves as active participants in the family and to formulate their own identities as protectors and caregivers for the people they love.

## 5.0 DISCUSSION

*Photovoice Families* was not a study of how family is created in response to a lesbian women's distance or alienation from their families of origin, as is the direction of much of the literature about families of choice, but an exploration of the varying ways that women form connections with others. *Photovoice Families* acknowledges the research that reveals the many ways that families of choice provide support for lesbian women. However, this study also supports the work of Weston (1990), Laird (1996) and others that suggests that many lesbian women maintain close connections with members of their families of origin. Most women in this study live in the same city of their families of origin, or within close driving distance. Generally, the few women who live at a significant distance from their parents, siblings and others had moved away for a job or to attend school, but remained close with their families and spoke or visited with them regularly. Few women reported deliberately distancing themselves from their families of origin. In fact, the women whose families of origin are in the area overwhelmingly reported that they chose to live in Pittsburgh because they wanted to be close to their families.

Simultaneously, every woman in this study had close connections with friends, co-workers, families of partners or other non-biologically related people. In some cases, these people were chosen because they provided support or understanding that participants did not experience in their families of origin, due to their sexual orientation. However, in many other cases, non-biologically related people were important for similar reasons as their families of

origin. In contrast to much of the literature about gay and lesbian families of choice and studies examining social support for gay and lesbian people, families of choice did not replace families of origin in levels of social support. Families of choice did, however, enhance the lives of the women in this study and served a proportionate and important purpose in the types of social support that they offered many participants. Interestingly, participants frequently used the terms “brother and sister” to describe members of their family of choice and “friend” when describing siblings and occasionally other family members. This language was employed to elevate the level of significance of a person, or to describe an especially strong bond. The use of this terminology reveals that while family members and friends are traditionally associated with serving different purposes in people’s lives, in reality, these roles are fluid and can be changed and inverted.

Stronger than blood ties were the connections between people taking care of and protecting each other, and women revealed the importance of both giving and receiving support. These concepts were present in many different relationships with parents, siblings and other biologically related people, as well as members of families of choice. Participants chose to include particular family members in their photographs perhaps because, as Miller (1976) and Gilligan (1982) suggest in their research of psychology of women, relationships provide an affirmation of women’s identities. In some cases, the biological connection or the element of shared history was an affirmation of where women had come from and what they had been through to become the person that they are today. In other cases, women chose relationships that would acknowledge and ground them in their present identities. An important element of identity for many women was their sexual orientation and in many cases, lesbian friends and communities provided an understanding and support that biologically related families were

unwilling or unable to provide. However, this study reveals that sexual orientation is only one of many components of lesbian women's identities. Participants chose parents, siblings, nieces, nephews, surrogate families, friends, their community and many other people to photograph and to call family. I would argue that all lesbian families are families of choice, whether they are comprised of people biologically related to each other or communities where not all of the members have met. As the photographs and stories presented in this study reveal, the creation of family is an active process in which women designate people whose relationships support and affirm them as daughters, mothers, partners, lesbians, or in any other role that is meaningful to them.

Photovoice methodology was an especially effective tool for revealing women's definitions of family because it encouraged them to be active in the research process. Some women explained that the study inspired them to seek out people that they might not otherwise have seen in that time period, because it was important to them that those people be represented in the photographs. Other women revealed that the process of photographing their families gave them the opportunity to let the people that are special to them know that they are family. Michelle Ward explained by the act of taking pictures, she was "conveying my feelings for that person, 'you are a part of my family and I want to take your picture and I'm in this study and I consider you part of my family.'"

Leah Hurst stated that "I like the idea of being able to take a picture and tell a story with it." By offering lesbian women a forum to tell their stories, this study helps to give a voice to a population that is frequently ignored in the discussion of family in public discourse. From a social ecological viewpoint, it can influence public health programs and policy because it reveals

alternative perspectives to family, personal connections and social support that can impact a person's mental and physical health.

It is important to note that this study did not include the stories and perspectives of women who are unconnected to lesbian communities. As discussed earlier, women were primarily recruited at gay and lesbian events, through another study of lesbian health and by word of mouth. Therefore, lesbian women who are not "out," who do not identify as lesbians or who do not have connections with other lesbian women were likely not recruited. It is possible that these women have different experiences and definitions of family and these stories are not reflected in this study. In addition, there were very few women with children in this study, and future studies would likely benefit from the perspectives of a greater diversity of family life cycle.

There are many other directions for further research in the area of family among gay and lesbian people as well. A future study might consider the influence of gender by conducting an identical study among gay men. Another study might examine the significance of place on participants' responses to the subject of family. This study was conducted in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, a city that is well-known among its residents for having a difficult time attracting people who are not born and raised there, regardless of their sexual orientation. As noted earlier, many participants in this study chose to live in Pittsburgh because their families are nearby, but it is possible that they chose to live near their families because their families are at least somewhat accepting of their sexual orientation. It would be interesting to determine if definitions of family are different in cities that have a reputation for attracting non-native gay and lesbian people such as San Francisco, New York or Atlanta. It is likely that some gay and lesbian people have migrated to these cities in order to find a community that was more supportive as a response to a

lack of acceptance from their biological families, and these people may define family differently. A qualitative study that compared the responses of lesbian and/or gay residents in multiple cities might reveal greater nuances in the way that gay and lesbian people define family and the reasons that specific family members are significant to them.

The most significant lesson that I learned in the process of designing this study is that there is a need for research beyond an examination of sources of social support and definitions of family. It is critical that research of lesbian families explores the deep and complex relationships between lesbian women and the people that they are close to. *Photovoice Families* is an important first step; however, there are many opportunities for further development. Specifically, future studies would benefit from funding and resources that support more frequent and prolonged interactions with research subjects. This study involved personal discussions about connections with some of the most significant people in women's lives, which are naturally relationships that are immersed in a myriad of complex emotions, experiences and memories. It is possible that more frequent interactions with subjects may eventually result in richer discussions of family that reveal sides of the story that participants may not be comfortable disclosing in early conversations. In addition, the introduction of more ethnographic forms of research can also benefit future projects. Specifically, spending time with participants and observing them in their homes and among friends and family members may reveal exchanges that participants are unable to articulate, but that reflect their experiences of family and the world. Further research and dialogue with gay and lesbian people about their relationships and families is necessary to gain a greater understanding of the experiences of this population. These discussions can raise the awareness of health practitioners, policy makers and society, impacting

the design of public health programs and policies and improving the health of gay and lesbian people.

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