

Nine gay, lesbian, and queer adults who were raised in rural areas but now live in the city returned to their families and communities of origin to attend family weddings. The shift from urban to rural, nonfamily to family, everyday to ritual, was a shift by which they renegotiated their sense of self as different from their families and communities of origin. What it meant to be gay, lesbian, or queer (GLQ) depended upon specific interaction contexts. The negotiation of being different as GLQ occurred within dialectics of visibility/invisibility, closeness/distance, and comfort/discomfort during weddings. Results presented here emerged as significant within a larger study of heterosexism and family ritual. Data were collected in focus group interviews and analyzed inductively using a combination of family discourse and grounded theory methods.

Who Am I in Relation to Them?

Gay, Lesbian, and Queer People Leave the City to Attend Rural Family Weddings

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Gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer (GLBTQ) identities¹ and relationships are typically, and incorrectly, assumed to occur solely within an urban environment (Bell & Valentine, 1995). Recent work challenges this urban bias by exploring the impact that rural community dynamics have on gay and lesbian individuals. According to Lindhorst (1997), rural life is tightly organized around personal networks that value heterosexual kinship, religious conservatism, social conformity, and superficial privacy (superficial because on one hand, people are to keep their problems private; on the other hand, people gossip about each others' personal affairs behind closed doors). The threat of stigma and ostracism if one proves different in any way maintains social organization and contributes to the urban migration of many gay men and lesbians (D'Augelli & Hart, 1987). Lesbians and gay men who remain in rural areas are often concerned with safety as they negotiate the boundaries between who does and does not know about their sexual orientation (D'Augelli, 1988).

Those who migrate to urban areas are likely to maintain relationships with their families—moving to the city does not require severing oneself

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forever from rural life. The literature implies that rural families are hostile toward GLBTQ people, but this assumption has not been carefully examined. What happens when currently urban GLBTQ people who grew up on farms or in small towns return to their families and communities of origin? How do they experience the temporary shift from an urban to a rural environment? Does the transition from urban to rural lead to a renegotiation of self and relationships? This article reports on the experiences of 9 currently urban gay, lesbian, and queer (GLQ) people who returned to their rural families and communities to attend a family wedding. The results presented here were generated by a secondary analysis that was performed when rurality emerged as a significant category within a larger project addressing family ritual and heterosexism. The analysis is informed by identity, family, and ritual theories and was generated using an integration of grounded theory and family discourse methodologies.

IDENTITY

Research on gay and lesbian identity initially focused on stage theories of identity development and the emergence of a latent gay or lesbian self that was presented to others (e.g., Troiden, 1988). More recent work has challenged the notion of an essential self and explored ways in which one's sense of self as a GLBTQ person is co-constructed along with one's other identities and social statuses, such as ethnicity (e.g., Lee, 1996), class (e.g., Kennedy & Davis, 1993), generation (e.g., Boxer, Cook, & Herdt, 1991), disability (e.g., Zemsky, 1991), and gender (e.g., Lewin, 1996). Though Rust (1996) and others claim that identity changes as landscape/context changes, I take a more moderate view. Identity is neither totally fixed nor totally changeable. Rather, there is a control mechanism at work by which coherence is maintained while change is negotiated (Ridgeway & Smith-Lovin, 1999). Applying this dialectical perspective, we can theorize that moving from one context to another (urban to rural, nonfamily to family, nonritual to ritual) will lead to a reconfiguration of self-meanings in relation to others while an overall coherence regarding self-concept is maintained. The results presented in this article will document processes by which this occurs.

FAMILIES OF ORIGIN

Weston (1991) argued that American notions of kinship define gay and lesbian people as nonfamily members who threaten the institution of family by disrupting norms of heterosexual marriage and procreation within

heterosexual marriage. The assumption that families do not include gay or lesbian people is one explanation for why disclosing a gay or lesbian identity can disrupt and even sever family ties (Strommen, 1989). Although many family members can and do reorganize their relationships to include their gay and lesbian kin, the question—Who am I in relation to my family of origin?—remains salient for many if not most GLBTQ adults. Although this identity question may be salient for all adults, the heterosexist society in which we live renders it especially significant for GLBTQ people who do not have access to (and do not necessarily want) the heterosexual life-course scripts that make heteronormative identities and relationships both culturally and personally meaningful.

Most work on the family-of-origin relationships of lesbians and gay men has focused on parental reactions to disclosure rather than how a myriad of relationships are negotiated throughout adulthood (Savin-Williams, 1998). For example, research suggests that the fear of being rejected by one's parents can inhibit the disclosure of a gay or lesbian identity (Ben-Ari, 1995; D'Augelli, Hershberger, & Pickington, 1998; Hom, 1994; Newman & Muzzonigro, 1993; Savin-Williams, 1998; Waldner-Haugrud & Magruder, 1996). When disclosed to, parents may have to work very hard to unlearn heterosexist values and practices so that they can maintain a relationship with their child (Ben-Ari, 1995; Boxer et al., 1991; Hom, 1994; Strommen, 1989; Tremble, Schneider, & Appathurai, 1989).

Several exceptions to this parent-child emphasis can be found. For example, Oswald's (2000a) social network study sampled both family of origin and friends as part of the same social networks. A young woman's coming out as bisexual or lesbian altered communication content and patterns within her network, reconfigured relationship structure so that more supportive relationships were central (rejecting members were distanced from), and led network members to question their beliefs about self and others. Gagné and Tewksbury (1998) found similar results for the family relationships of masculine to feminine transgender people: A fear of rejection from family led transgender people to distance themselves before disclosure. If they were rejected postdisclosure, distancing increased, whereas if they were accepted, relationships grew closer. Finally, Crosbie-Burnett, Foster, Murray, and Bowen (1996) integrated the disclosure literature into a social-cognitive-behavioral model of heterosexual family members' adjustment to the disclosure of a gay or lesbian identity. Their model incorporates a range of relationship subsystems within the family as a whole, and looks at how beliefs, behaviors, and interactions have circular influence upon each other. Given these studies, and the Crosbie-Burnett et al. model, it appears that the disclosure of sexual orientation dif-

ference is a critical transition within families that can profoundly affect the ways that people relate to each other. However, what happens after disclosure takes place?

Looking beyond family member reactions to coming out, Weston's (1991) seminal ethnography described how gay men and lesbians construct both given and chosen family relationships and how each family world may remain distinct from the other. Caron and Ulin (1997) investigated the interaction between lesbian couples and their families of origin. They found that the quality of lesbian couple relationships was positively associated with having permission to openly express affection for one's partner in front of one's family of origin.

Other researchers have looked at the postdisclosure interaction between family of origin and family of procreation. For example, Patterson, Hurt, and Mason (1998) found that the children of lesbian mothers were more likely to have contact with the biological mother's family than the comother's family. Also, children who had more contact with either set of grandparents were less likely to have behavioral problems. Reimann (1998) found that having children increased lesbian mothers' contact with their own parents. The father couples in gay stepfamilies received more social support from gay friends than heterosexual relatives or friends, and their children received even less support from both friends and family, perhaps because children tended to be more closeted about being in a gay stepfamily than did their fathers (Crosbie-Burnett & Helmbrecht, 1993).

This literature suggests that sexual orientation continues to shape the family-of-origin relationships of GLBTQ people long after disclosure has occurred. GLBTQ people care about their families and want to be accepted by them, but heterosexist prejudices and assumptions seem to interfere with people's ability to get along. Studying GLBTQ people as family members is part of a "new frontier" in family research (Allen & Demo, 1995) and has the potential to generate new and more inclusive theory (Demo & Allen, 1996). The study presented here is one contribution toward further developing our knowledge of the ongoing relationships between GLBTQ adults and their families of origin.

RITUAL

In addition to the family and identity literatures, this article draws upon ritual theory. Family rituals can be sorted into three different types: Patterned interactions, family traditions, and family celebrations (Wolin & Bennett, 1984). Patterned interactions and family traditions are more fre-

quent, idiosyncratic, and changeable than are family celebrations (Wolin & Bennett, 1984). They are more concerned with the construction of family time and meaning than they are with aligning family members with social norms. Family celebrations, on the other hand, include holidays and life-course rituals that are specific to the larger culture in which they are practiced. These rituals thus establish a link between families and the communities to which they belong (Roberts, 1988). Within this cultural frame, family celebrations rely on symbols that are imbued with both family and social meaning. This does not mean that all family celebrations follow the exact same script. Rather, the ritual blueprint is negotiated as family members and others create a given ritual, and any perceived deviations from what is expected will be noted and even contested by participants and/or observers (Parkin, 1992). In addition, like all rituals, family celebrations are performed in reference to an outside group (Baumann, 1992). For example, Passover is partly meaningful because it differentiates Jews from Muslims, and attending one Seder but not another differentiates members of one family from another. Thus, family celebrations involve membership negotiations regarding family, community, and even society.

Weddings are family celebrations that link individuals, families, communities, and society. They align specific couples with the social imperative to heterosexually marry, bring family members together, and establish links between families and between families and communities. Also, weddings and related rituals reproduce traditional heterosexual gender roles (Currie, 1988), facilitate same-sex bonding among women who will need each other's help to thrive within sexist marriages (Cheal, 1988), and celebrate the primacy of marriage within our culture (Braithwaite & Baxter, 1995). From a normative heterosexual perspective, weddings are happy times: Though specific weddings may be challenging for a myriad of reasons, the institution itself is often not questioned. However, because weddings embody the legal, material, family, religious, and social benefits that our society denies GLBTQ people on the grounds that doing so defends or preserves family life (e.g., Defense of Marriage Act, 1996), weddings are deeply problematic for GLBTQ family members.

Any problems that GLBTQ people may have at weddings in general may be exacerbated at rural weddings due to the potential overlap between family and community. For example, whereas urban weddings may bring together people who do not know each other and who will never see each other again, rural weddings are likely to assemble a group of people who are at least acquainted and who run into each other at other weddings and community events. The front-stage (Goffman, 1959) pressure that this im-

plies may explain why rural families can take pride in having the biggest or best wedding in town. Having a good wedding may mean, however, hiding family secrets from public scrutiny. If rural communities are hostile to GLBTQ people, and if rural families are heavily invested in community approval and open to community scrutiny, then going home for a rural wedding may present a GLBTQ person with intense pressures to conform to social norms. The purpose of this study is to look at how one's sense of self in relation to others is negotiated by GLBTQ people when they return to their rural communities of origin to attend a family wedding.

METHOD

Rurality emerged as significant within a larger feminist critical science study of heterosexism and family ritual. Feminist critical science is a type of research that seeks to articulate the hidden knowledges or standpoints (Hill-Collins, 1991) of people who experience a particular kind of injustice and use that knowledge to promote social change (Comstock, 1982). The larger study was conceptualized as a community project to investigate the experiences of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) people at a ritual that symbolizes heterosexual family privilege and during a historical time in which GLBT people are publicly debated as threatening to family life. Through participation in focus groups, 45 GLBT adults living in Minneapolis/Saint Paul shared their experiences attending family weddings. Participants were recruited to attend one of nine focus groups through GLBT community media, social networks, and organizations (two gay men attended two focus groups at their request; everyone else attended one). Focus groups rather than other forms of data collection were used because the experience of injustice is related to one's membership in a marginalized group rather than purely individual circumstances and because group interviews facilitate the articulation of how one person's experience is the same or different from another's. Oswald (2000b) presents an analysis of how heterosexism was produced and resisted through interaction at various symbolic locations throughout weddings (from receiving/not receiving an invitation to socializing during the reception). An applied version of these results can be found at www.staff.uiuc.edu/~roswald. This Web site and a corresponding brochure were created at the request of participants who wanted some way of educating heterosexual people about how GLBT people would like to be treated during family events.

Rurality was never asked about in the focus group interviews, and yet 10 participants assigned meaning to their experiences by marking them as “rural.” Their accounts were striking because no one used “urban” or “suburban” to justify or explain what they had experienced. Given this observation, I decided to do a secondary analysis of the data that investigated rurality as a salient aspect of family wedding experience for these 10 participants. Though I had made this decision while living in Minneapolis/Saint Paul, the analysis became important to me personally when I moved from the Twin Cities to a university town in east central Illinois and, as an out lesbian in a largely rural community, began to experience things that were similar to what participants had described in focus group interviews. Considering rurality has also brought up for me a need to question my own experiences with my largely rural extended family of origin and to remember what it was like for me to spend a year working on a farm instead of attending college. Knowing how complicated and contradictory these experiences were for me allowed me to notice both the positive and negative dimensions of my data and not be lured into the “gay imaginary” (Weston, 1995) by which people assume that rural life is entirely negative for gay and lesbian people. I mention this personal information because it is important for the investigator to locate herself in the research process so the reader better understands how and why knowledge has been constructed (Lather, 1991). This is called reflexivity and it can play an important role in research by making the construction of knowledge more transparent and therefore more open to scrutiny (Allen, 2000). According to Allen (2000), “We can acknowledge and deal with our subjectivity without obscuring or overwhelming the goals of rigorous empiricism and theory construction” (p. 13).

All data are representations some degree removed from the experiences to which they refers (Reissman, 1993). Focus group interviews in particular make this issue of representation more obvious—no one would argue that it is not just experiences being conveyed in a group situation but that what is being said and how it is being said is inextricably embedded within the local culture (Gubrium & Holstein, 1993) of the group in which it is being offered. In addition to recognizing data as locally produced representations, feminist critical science conceptualizes dialogue as a process by which the experience of injustice is named and analyzed by participants (Comstock, 1982). Thus, there is a tension between accepting the words in a transcript as corresponding to a previous experience and paying attention to how people are using words within the context of the group. Data for this article were analyzed using both grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998) and family discourse (Gubrium & Holstein, 1990,

1993) methodologies. Together, these methods allowed me to address this tension.

Grounded theory is very good for identifying constructs and offers rigorous procedures for developing those constructs into categories with properties and dimensions, and linking categories to each other so that theory is built (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). This methodology enabled me to analyze what people said about weddings as representing their actual experience. Family discourse, on the other hand, is very useful for identifying how and why people say what they do and linking the production of meaning to both immediate interaction contexts and larger cultural systems of meaning (Gubrium & Holstein, 1990). Thus, family discourse allowed me to analyze how and why rurality emerged within discussions about family weddings.

My analytic process was as follows: First, all data offered by the 10 rural participants were selected and read. One of the 10 participants offered almost no specifics about her experience at weddings and was therefore dropped from the analysis, leaving me with data from 9 participants. I observed that participants assigned meaning to experience by telling about that experience and then offering an interpretation; for example, by telling a story about their partner not being introduced to family members and then saying that they felt excluded. Data were coded using the meaning-statements of participants. Strauss and Corbin (1998) refer to this as using in-vivo codes. Data corresponding to each code were developed into categories. Categories were conceptually defined and then diagrammed to articulate their properties and dimensions. Linkage between categories was established by paying attention to the links made by participants; for example, by talking about an experience of feeling close and then saying that it led one to feel comfortable. "Negotiating the self as different" emerged as the core category to which the other categories were linked. It was established as a core by testing its necessity: Without this core the other categories did not make sense, whereas without the noncore categories the analysis merely seemed incomplete. While writing up my analysis, I used a constant comparative process to ensure that the categories were supported by the data. I also looked at how rural data were embedded within the entire interview and included these observations in my analysis. Finally, I worked very hard to keep my analysis consistent with a social constructionist paradigm. This meant that I worked to show how participants were constructing themselves, either within the focus group or the conveyed experience, rather than presenting my analysis as the product of researcher-imposed categories.

RESULTS

First I will describe participants and discuss the significance of their largely German Catholic background. Then I will present the core category, negotiating the self as different, as linked to dynamics of visibility/invisibility, comfort/discomfort, and closeness/distance. Throughout this section I will present both the experiences reported and the ways in which the accounts of experience were shaped by the focus group context.

PARTICIPANTS

The 9 participants in this analysis ranged in age from 25 to 44, with an average age of 34 years. They all indicated that they are out as GLQ to their parents and siblings, and most are out to extended family as well. Participants were either students or human service professionals. Refer to Table 1 (in the appendix) for information on ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation. Carl and Jason came from lower-class backgrounds whereas the rest said that they were middle class. All names used in this article are pseudonyms.

Ethnicity. Everyone but Laura Bryce was raised in a largely German Catholic farming community (even if they were not German Catholic). I say largely because some communities also had Scandinavian and/or Lutheran populations. Carl Schultz is from a village in Germany; all other participants are American. Because his data were so consistent with everyone else's, I felt justified including him in this analysis. Participants implied that in mixed communities, Catholics were stigmatized and ostracized by Lutherans. Also, as a person of color Jason felt marked as "other" in his predominately White community of origin. Weddings were, for him, a time to be around other people of color.

The visible German Catholic culture described by participants in this study is highly specific to the upper Midwest and does not necessarily reflect the ethnic organization of most rural communities in the United States (Winawer & Wetzel, 1996). The communities from which participants come were likely formed during the first wave of immigration in the early 1800s. German and Scandinavian immigrants from Europe during this period tended to immigrate in groups rather than as individuals and commonly established rural communities similar to what they had experienced in Europe. These factors contributed to a sense of traditionalism and cultural continuity with their homeland that was not necessarily shared by

later immigrants, who were quickly pulled into the assimilationist stream of industrialization and American melting-pot ideals. Although of course ethnicity in these communities is complex and evolving, there remains a kind of traditionalism that may not be found in other rural communities (Winawer & Wetzel, 1996).

According to Winawer and Wetzel (1996), German culture is tightly structured, with gender segregation and clear hierarchies of male authority and power. Social warmth and conviviality are valued but personal disclosure is not. Germans are described as task oriented with a strong do-it-yourself ethic. Parents tend to be strict in their attempted control of children's schedules and behaviors and are likely to frame moral issues as either right or wrong. Families expect loyalty and conformity among members, and there is a high value placed on being fair. Compared to Protestant Germans, German Catholics are more traditional, more religious, and more concerned with following church authority (Winawer & Wetzel, 1996). Rural German Catholic communities tend to be centered on church authority and church activities, especially for women (Salamon, 1992).

This cultural picture is consistent with descriptions of German Catholic families and communities in this analysis. Any time specific wedding traditions were described, people marked them as originating in rural German Catholic culture. Many described traditions were identified as being for women only. A sense of being obligated to one's family was emphasized. Fairness was implied by participants' desire to be accepted as different, and 2 told stories about how their parents divided up inheritance and wedding expenses among siblings so that people would be treated "fairly." The pressure to conform at weddings was intense, especially for people who described their families as conservative and rigid. There was very little open communication mentioned in which being GLQ was negotiated. Rather, the negotiations were constructed as something performed by GLQ people in response to tacit knowledge.

Rurality. GLQ participants who were raised in rural areas and returned to them for family weddings marked their experiences as "rural." These participants also described an overlap between family, religion, and community that intensified their experience, and was not reported by urban participants. Given that participants with solely urban families did not mark their experiences as "urban," and given that focus groups were held in the city, I argue that rural participants were constructing themselves as different in relation to other focus group participants. Thus, geographical diversity within focus groups brought out an important dimension of wed-

ding experience that may have remained unmarked if everyone was solely urban or solely rural.

Variations of the phrase “I come from a small German Catholic town” were offered as explanations for what they had experienced. As an example of how participants used rural as an explanation within the groups, I offer the following quote from Karen Johnson:

I said before, I like the institution [of marriage] and all that. How people want to do that is fine with me. I think just traditions that are so heterosexist or really based on the whole history of marriage where women are chattel. Like the father giving over the daughter. Just some of those symbolic things that I think are pretty reducing to women in heterosexual marriages. And just other traditions, that I think, I don't know if these are traditions, I just grew up in a small Catholic town.

In addition to using rural as an explanatory device, GLQ family members contrasted their experiences at urban versus rural weddings. This overlapped with a contrast between friend and family weddings. Generally, participants agreed that urban/friend weddings were easier because they did not feel family or community pressures to hide (i.e., they felt accepted as GLQ) and because they did not fear the ignorance or hatred that could spark violence against them in a rural context.

GLQ PEOPLE AS DIFFERENT FROM THEIR FAMILIES/COMMUNITIES OF ORIGIN

In their urban lives, GLQ participants say that they are quite open and comfortable being GLQ. They participate in the GLBTQ community, are out at work and to their neighbors, and generally live in an environment that at least tolerates them. Going home for a wedding, however, was described as transitioning into a potentially hostile environment. For those with religiously liberal families and more open communities, for example, Laura Bryce, the issue was more about looking good to family and friends while fearing harm from strangers. For those with more conservative families and closed communities, for example, Dave Knaebel, the issue was “knowing what I'm going to be put through, in a sense, um, being forced to lie, being forced to hide a part of me [being gay] that I see as being a very positive thing in my life.”

GLQ family members constructed themselves as being different from their families because they are GLQ. All but Laura Bryce described themselves as having a gay culture in opposition to their family's rural or ethnic culture. In addition, Debbie Miller contrasted herself to her family's “het-

erosexual culture." At the same time, most also indicated ways in which they are like their families of origin. For example, Dave Knaebel talked about how his family rejects all outsiders, not just his partner. But similarity never outweighed difference in their accounts, such as when Dave continued by explaining that his partner was rejected totally whereas his siblings' partners were eventually welcomed.

All participants were out to at least their parents and siblings and said they wanted to be accepted as different by those to whom they were out. Some, like Danny Mazepa, took a more passive approach. After describing how his more openly gay brother was treated badly by their family, Danny said that, "for me, I never put it in anybody's face, if they asked I told them." Others were very upfront about asking their families for acceptance. For example, Debbie Miller told a story about how she negotiated with her mother so that a photograph of her and her partner would be displayed along with her sibling's wedding portraits on the mantel. Those from more conservative families had the hardest time being accepted as different. Joan Prutsman "can't say the word lesbian in my mother's house" and said that at weddings she "didn't dare bring out my difference. I mean, I was intimidated into not being even challenging."

Participants took pride in being different from family and/or community, even if their difference was not respected. Debbie Miller described gay and lesbian people as spiritual role models for people who are afraid to go against social norms. Picking up on a conversation thread started by Carl Schultz about growing apart from rural life, Dave Knaebel said,

There's so many things to look at. It's like, well, "is it just that because I don't fit in to this world of the small rural community any more?" And, "I just want so much more, this is boring to me?" It is because the expectations that I feel are surrounding me the whole time that I'm there? Um, so it is hard to really clarify what it is that's eating away at me when I am [at weddings]. Um, but I prefer to think that being gay is being enlightened [he laughs]. You know, that we're so much more enlightened than these [rural] people and that's why were so uncomfortable.

DYNAMICS THROUGH WHICH DIFFERENCE WAS NEGOTIATED AT WEDDINGS

Given that GLQ people construct themselves as different in relation to their rural families and communities of origin and feel that going home is a significant transition into a less supportive environment, how do they indicate negotiating their difference in the rural ritual context? The accounts

offered were far more complex than the rural literature would predict. Rather than uniform invisibility, discomfort, and distance, subtle shifts in positionality were described as participants moved from one interpersonal context to another during the ritual.

Visibility/invisibility. Participants used the words *visible* and *invisible* to describe their experiences. The terms were used to describe being seen or not seen, which is different from being out as GLQ. Though all were out to many, if not all, family members, weddings were a time when various forces, such as the glorification of heterosexuality, worked to pull the GLQ family member out of sight. For example, Debbie Miller is out to everyone in her hugely extended farm family, and yet she is

never more invisible as a lesbian in my family than at one of these celebrations of union of man and woman. I feel very left out. And it's not that I don't support my siblings, and procreation is great, it's all this family stuff. But it's personally painful because of the invisibility.

Whether they felt visible or invisible, GLQ family members were physically present at weddings. Visibility occurred when GLQ family members believed themselves to be observed, recognized, and/or named as GLQ by specific others. Invisibility occurred when they believed themselves to be hidden, unrecognized, and/or unnamed as GLQ by others at the ritual. Visibility and invisibility were sometimes described as static positions produced by family and/or ritual dynamics out of the GLQ person's control (e.g., Debbie Miller's above quote) but were more often constructed by participants as qualities of presence that they worked to achieve, resist, or subvert.

Participants moved between degrees of visibility and invisibility as they moved from one interactional context to another within the ritual. For example, pay attention in the following passage to how Danny Mazepa is visible to everyone around him but his work to be seen is undermined by his sister's demotion of Danny's partner to friend in front of the entire reception audience:

At one of my sisters' weddings, this actually was her second marriage, and it was grand beyond—But she wanted to introduce each of her siblings, and one of the maids of honor came down or one of the bridesmaids came down and said "How do you want to be introduced?" And I said, "What do you mean?" She said, "Well, do you want to be introduced by yourself, or with Jack?" "I'd like to be introduced with Jack." "Well, what should we say?"

And I said, "Well, he's my partner." "Oh. OK." And she said, "Do you think mom and dad will care?" . . . "I don't care if they care!" I said, "Well, we need to have some . . ." And she—this was one of my sisters, one of the bridesmaids. "Well, would you go ask dad?" I said, "No." So I went over to the next table and I said, "Dad, they're introducing family and we want to know if it's OK if they introduce Jack as my partner." And he said, "Well, of course." "Oh. OK." I just kind of nodded at my sister, and she went up and they started the introductions. "And this is my brother Danny, he's number 7, and his friend Jack." And I just wanted to walk out. I mean, I just—that just made me feel furious. And Jack and I had been together for almost 10 years.

In the above story, Danny described himself as moved from visibility to invisibility due to the actions of his sister. In the following exchange between several focus group members, pay attention to how Dave Knaebel moves himself from invisibility to partial visibility at his sister's wedding:

Beth: Do you have a partner?

Dave: Yeah. He wasn't there. Um—

Susan: Was he not invited?

Dave: He wasn't invited, I mean, he wasn't welcomed by my family, for sure, and they're still not welcoming him. Um, well my, my attendance there it really was a [he laughs] a heterosexual aura that filled the room. Um, suddenly everyone was trying to set me up. One particular cousin, one female cousin on his side, and, ah, I mean, I had people comin' up, "Oh, you're really good looking," "Oh, she thinks you're really cute," and, um, you know, "She has so many similarities from you," and they'd ask me questions and they'd just try to be as really heavy into this matchmaking. And I did, I wasn't comfortable, obviously, coming out to [the groom's] cousins [he laughs], and they had no right to any information from me for that matter, but, um, strangely enough, not strangely enough, I guess, but I submitted to the pressures to a certain extent, I danced with her and, um, by the end of the night I actually came out to her. Just because I thought, "How unfair to her," [the group laughs] really, it was like both of us were pressured into the situation, um, by other people, and although I thought she was a very nice person, and I actually thought, "Well, gosh, she'd be a great friend," she lives quite a ways away, um, everyone else's expectations were much different because [the groom's cousins] weren't aware that I was a gay male, and [if they had known] it would have been a more uncomfortable evening, just because its a small town type.

Carl Schultz shared an almost identical matchmaking story, except that he chose to leave the wedding reception rather than dance. Before leaving, however, he did render himself visible by coming out to cousins and other

extended kin of his own age and had a positive experience interacting with them. Carl described these instances of being visible as a relief, because most of the time at his brother's wedding he felt invisible and surrounded by hostile others.

Whereas most participants describe processes whereby they move from being visible to invisible and vice versa, there were several stories that suggested an ambiguous kind of visibility. In these stories, GLQ family members imply that their actions are subversive because they are using ethnic and class-based traditions that allow same-sex dancing while violating the presumption that those who engage in these activities are heterosexual. For example, in a discussion thread of how people resist the oppression that they feel at weddings, Joan Prutsman said that

At some of these polka weddings, I'll polka dance with the women. Because that's okay, they do that out there, some of the older women. I've seen younger women do it, too. So I get more mileage dancing with some of these women. Kind of an act of resistance for me to be bold enough to do that.

Jason Royball also described himself as subverting tradition:

There's always one thing that always comes up for me, and I don't know if it happens all over the place, but every wedding I've been to—two women can always dance together, you know, whether they're related or whatever, they can—you know? At weddings I've been in I've seen women dancing together all the time. And it's not, it's no big deal. And I always get pissed, because I'm never allowed to do that. If I do that, it has to be a joke, everybody has to be laughing. Otherwise it's just not right. So I get pissed about that when I watch people dancing. Because there's always other dances, you know. I mean, I always do—they have the dollar dance, we always have the dollar dance. And I have to stand in the line with the groom, that's where I stand. But it's always a joke, but it's never a joke for me. It's always like, "uhhh!" You know. It's great for me, that's where I want to be. But it's always a joke when I actually get up there. Because I don't make it a 2-second dance—they're dancing with me. I get my dollar's worth! [Laughs]

Unambiguous visibility was accomplished by hanging out with, and/or coming out to, supportive others. Like the pursuit of ambiguous visibility, these interactions were constructed as sites of resistance within an otherwise oppressive context. However, where ambiguous visibility was associated with risk and derogation, unambiguous visibility was associated with the GLQ family member feeling comfortable and close to specific others. For example, Debbie Miller told her focus group that she has

a sister who's a Catholic nun. And she has been supportive. She comes and gets me when they're doing the glasses [dinging water glasses so the newlyweds will kiss], and goes, "Maybe it's time we go out for a cigarette." That bond, not being lesbian because she doesn't call herself lesbian, but that bond because we're single.

Jason Royball and his chosen sister Dani "take those little smoke breaks and go outside and laugh about what's going on inside, you know. Or just, "Can you believe what they said? I mean, please!" you know?"

Thus, according to participant accounts, visibility and invisibility were both produced at weddings as GLQ family members interacted with other guests. Being different was accepted and/or affirmed when visible to supportive others. In the sections that follow, I will bring visibility and invisibility into the analysis to show how participants linked them with other dimensions of negotiating the self as different.

Comfort/discomfort. Participants used the words "comfort" and "comfortable" to describe their experiences. They were more likely, however, to use either "uncomfortable" or one of the following phrases implying discomfort: "yucky," "a sour taste in my mouth," "a weird feeling when I'm there," "feeling uneasy," "I don't feel right," "I'm out of sorts," "embarrassed," and there's something "eating away at me."

Comfort is a sense of ease associated with visibility in a supportive context. GLQ family members felt comfortable with their difference when their comfort was shared by others. For example, in the following quote, pay attention to how Laura Bryce articulates interplay between visibility and comfort that she experienced from others at her father's wedding. Her words were elicited by a question about who was an ally or support for her (and ally and support presume visibility, at least to a specific other).

My dad's comfort level . . . knowing how comfortable he was. And I almost—I think I went up to him and said, you know, "Are you comfortable with April and I dancing?" And he was like, "Go ahead." You know, "Of course." I'm not positive of that, but I think I did. It was like, okay, "I don't know [the bride's family] at all." And there were these relatives from our side, and "This is going to make a big scene." It's like my memory's foggy. I think I asked him, but I'm not positive. But just his comfort, and including April and everything, and introducing her, she's my partner. And it also helped having other family members who are pretty much the same, that took the lead in that. Yeah. Things like my grandmother being there, "Oh, good to see you!"

Discomfort is a sense of unease produced at weddings by obligations, traditions, and pressures that promote visibility and/or invisibility, in a hostile context. See, for example, the previous section's quotes regarding invisibility that articulate discomfort as a dimension of that experience. Also, in the below passage, see how Joan Prutsman links discomfort to invisibility and contrasts it with partial visibility and partial comfort produced by her participation in ethnic traditions. Observe also how she implies moving from difference (from heterosexuality) to sameness (of gender) and back to difference (from ethnicity). After explaining why weddings "make me feel invisible as who I am" she went on to describe her mother's wedding:

Well, there was a dance where the wedding party is expected to dance with their partners, whatever assigned partners. And, yeah, so there was one dance. And I think [the groom] was just as comfortable dancing with me as I was with him, but we made the most out of it. There's just a lot of 'shoulds' that you have to do, or that I had to do, that I didn't feel comfortable with. The funnest part was decorating the dance hall in the dining room because it was all women then. All the women did that. Kind of out in the country, very traditional. Just the polka band and the whole—but that's part of my German culture, but it's not part of my gay culture. I think all in all, it was a very uncomfortable experience, but I felt obligated, kind of, and I did it. I'm glad it's over with.

Like visibility/invisibility, comfort/discomfort were produced within social interactions at weddings. And, rather than being two totally separate aspects of wedding experience, participant accounts link these dimensions to each other as part of the negotiation of difference. In the below section, I will describe how degrees of closeness and distance are produced at weddings and link that production to visibility/invisibility and comfort/discomfort.

Closeness/distance. Participants used "close" and "distant" to describe their experiences, along with related terms such as "bond," "connection," "separate," and "displaced."

Closeness refers to both physical and psychological proximity. It invokes intimacy and a sense that whatever is close is important to one's self. Closeness in participant accounts was produced along with visibility and comfort. See, for example, in the following passage from Danny Mazepa how he positions himself as close to both his sister and her wedding as part of being both visible and comfortable. This information was offered by

Danny to contrast with his older sister's wedding, which for him was "traumatic" and "difficult."

And the last of my siblings to marry was my youngest sister who I'm probably closest to. I basically threw the party for her and helped her and her spouse put together their ceremony. And it was very, very different [from my oldest sister's wedding]. It was small, it was family, it was outside, not church. My partner made their invitations, and we were both very involved. It was really a wonderful time. I cried a lot. I think for me it was the wedding, I was throwing the wedding party that I knew I'd never have. Put out the best food, made the most fabulous cake. It was quite exceptional, and if it had been my wedding, I would have been happy with that.

Distance refers to both physical and psychological separation. It invokes a sense that one's identity is not relevant to the ritual. Distance in participant accounts was produced in relation to invisibility and discomfort. Notice in the following passage how Carl Schultz continually repositions himself as distant from both his family and community of origin at his brother's wedding, even when others try to bring him closer to the ritual. And notice how the reported attempts at closeness ("integration") assume that Carl is heterosexual, which contributes to his feeling invisible and uncomfortable.

Carl: Well, I felt very excluded at that wedding, that was my brother's wedding, and [he sighs] I mean I haven't seen most of my [he sighs] extended family, you know, in over 10 years. So, uh, that was quite interesting to see those, but, uh, all our communication and . . . were very superficial. And, uh, and, and I realize that I have changed, that I have grown *distant from* [said with emphasis] that rural southern German village I grew up in. So I felt, felt very displaced there, out of place, and I felt angry. I really felt angry for a while, yeah. Because, well, "Why do I have to be there?" You know? Well, "Why do I have to follow those rules?" "Yes, he, his, my brother, I like him, but, "Why do I have to be there?" "Why do I have to undergo all those rituals?" Yeah, which I, I don't stand behind. So, ah, at that wedding I was only trying to sort of separate myself from it so I didn't participate in a lot of that traditional stuff that they do there. Um, 'cause it just didn't feel that it was part of me—

Ramona: —What kinds of stuff do people do?

Carl: —Well—

Ramona: —that you separated yourself from?—

Carl: —Well, [he laughs] what they do is, um, the, they take the bride away—

[exchange between Carl and another participant regarding bride-stealing]

Carl: —So they take her away and, um, so he has to find her, usually she's in the next pub. And that's quite predictable, but then they come in and she's riding on a donkey, and, ah, in the meantime, the groom has to dance with the, with the broom, yeah [the group laughs]. So they do all that stuff and you tease him, and I just sat there and watched it. I didn't participate in anything. I didn't even want to dance. I felt so uneasy, and then I said, well, okay, "Aunt Jackie, I need to go home now" [he laughs]. It was a nice excuse.

Ramona: How did people react to you? Just sitting there.

Carl: Well, some of them tried to integrate me, yeah, "Oh, don't you want to dance with that woman or that girl?" and sooner or later I left. Ah, and "Where have you been?" Somehow they tried to, ah, at least a little bit, tried to treat me like anybody else straight in there but I just didn't want to play the game. Didn't want to. And, um, I just left, yeah.

DISCUSSION

Identity is necessarily relational, meaning who one is in a given context is shaped in part by who or what one is interacting with. This study shows how being GLQ may be continually negotiated within the context of specific and generalized relationships (see also Eliason, 1996; Oswald, 2000a, 2000b; Rust, 1996). Returning to a rural context was a shift that led participants to renegotiate their urban, nonfamily, nonwedding understandings of self. Participants located their sexuality in opposition to overlapping categories of ethnicity, heterosexuality, and rurality that were found in the wedding context. The constant interplay between visibility/invisibility, comfort/discomfort, and closeness/distance was a process by which participants defined and redefined themselves as different in relation to their families and communities of origin.

Attending to this process allows us to see how being different is not a unitary status. Rather, what the difference means depends upon the immediate context in which it is being negotiated. Visibility, comfort, and closeness were linked by participants and seemed most likely to occur in private or backstage (Goffman, 1959) situations where the GLQ person was alone with an ally or allies. These instances provided a social context in which the GLQ person was integrated as different. Internal and external meanings were aligned and created a space in which the GLQ person's difference was allowed to flourish momentarily. Though they occurred in instances rather than the entire ritual, and though they were more common when people had religiously liberal families with some ideological separation from their residential community, these results challenge the notion that rural families are uniformly hostile toward their GLQ members.

Invisibility, discomfort, and distance were also linked by participants and seemed most likely to occur in more public or front-stage (Goffman, 1959) situations where the GLQ person and/or their family members worked to contain information about the GLBT person's identity. In these instances, the GLQ person's desire to be accepted as different was subsumed by family, ritual, religious, and community pressures to inhibit acceptance. Though GLQ people were active participants in their accounts of these negotiations, they did construct themselves as accommodating prejudice in order to get along. Their willingness to participate despite discomfort and related dimensions suggests that GLQ people have a strong desire to get along with their families.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

Demo and Allen (1996) have challenged family scholars to critique and develop family theory so that it can better account for sexual orientation diversity within families. To engage their challenge, I will discuss the study presented here in light of family systems theory. My discussion begins by drawing a parallel between GLQ experience at weddings and racial ethnic mothering as analyzed by Patricia Hill-Collins (1994).

Hill-Collins argues that the public/private distinction commonly made by both feminist and nonfeminist social scientists fails to account for the experiences of racial ethnic mothers. According to Hill-Collins, when we take seriously the historical fact that racial ethnic women have always been employed and active in their communities, then we can see that the primary boundary being negotiated is not public versus private but rather racial ethnic versus White. She refers to this change in perspective as shifting the center and argues that attending to the redefined boundary allows us to see how racial ethnic mothering is constructed partly through a dialectic by which racial ethnic mothers enact a culture of resistance in relation to systems of oppression that work against their personal and collective interests.

Shifting the center is relevant here, though the specifics are unique to GLQ family-of-origin experience rather than racial ethnic mothering. Family systems theory posits that external boundary maintenance, the differentiation between who is and is not a family member, is a continuous activity that partly sustains family organization (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993). The enactment of weddings both symbolizes and reconstructs external boundaries by marking the entry of a new in-law and

the joining of two families. Also, the politics of inviting, seating, introducing, and photographing can bring out who is being included as a family member versus who is not (e.g., Oswald, 2000b). To the extent that these dynamics exclude GLBTQ people and their same-sex partners, they are reinforced by our current heterosexist legal practices that deny recognition of nonnormative families. Attending to external boundary negotiation can help us understand how GLBTQ people are excluded from the domain of family. However, if we remain focused on the accounts presented in this study, our attention shifts away from external boundaries and to the negotiation of safety *within* weddings. The primary boundary being experienced here is not whether GLQ individuals are members of their families of origin but rather how they negotiate being different as family members. This may be a function of rural and/or ethnic values that promote kinship obligations.

The regulation of closeness and distance is considered one of several “essential processes” within family systems (Hess & Handel, cited in Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993, p. 341). Clinically oriented theorists such as Olson, Russell, and Sprenkle (1983) argue that extremes of closeness and distance are dysfunctional: Too much closeness and family members are enmeshed, too much distance and family members are disengaged. Although there is a recognition within systems theory that families are shaped by their environment, explanations for dysfunction and health are often located within families without much attention to power relations or family-society interaction (Barrett, Trepper, & Fish, 1990). Critics have also argued that notions of dysfunction have been used to pathologize minority families for not mirroring the structure and process of White/middle-class families (Dilworth-Anderson, Burton, & Boulton-Johnson, 1993). They point out that family members with collectivist ethnic values are likely to experience a high degree of closeness as positive because it is consistent with their values, and as functional because it promotes survival in a hostile environment. Their critique, then, suggests that family members regulate internal distance in relation to external conditions. This suggestion has relevance for GLQ experience at weddings. Participants said that they moved from one valence to another depending upon how hostile or supportive they perceived their environment to be. Thus, although under a systems rubric distance regulation may be considered essential, it should not be understood as neutral with regards to power. Inequality exerts differential pushes and pulls as people seek closeness with those who accept and support them and distance from those who do not. The disclosure literature (see above) does address closeness and

distance but within the frame of adjusting to someone coming out. The study presented here is important because it shows how closeness and distance continue to be negotiated long after disclosure takes place.

This study is also important because it brings out the possibility that visibility and invisibility continue to be negotiated postdisclosure. This suggests that our notion of homeostasis and adjustment needs to be carefully examined. The family literature tends to conceptualize disclosure as an issue of adjustment: The disclosure that someone is gay or lesbian leads family members to reorganize in relation to each other so that the gay or lesbian person is included (e.g., Crosbie-Burnett et al., 1996). If family members are unable to adjust, then homeostasis is found by ejecting the gay or lesbian from the system (e.g., DeVine, 1984). A compromise homeostasis may be found in the form of don't-ask-don't-tell in which parents adjust by trying to keep their child's homosexuality from becoming salient even though they know it exists (e.g., Tremble et al., 1989). Whether intended or not, adjustment implies an endpoint by which time the person who has disclosed is reintegrated into their family-of-origin system. It also implies that GLQ identity is static once declared. As a concept, adjustment is unable to account for the experiences presented in this article. I think that we would have a more accurate understanding of how family relationships and identity are experienced by GLBTQ people if we deemphasized adjustment and instead used a more dialectical approach to family relationships that privileges change over balance (e.g., Montgomery, 1993). This would allow us to talk about how people negotiate a sense of themselves as GLQ over time without presuming outcome.

The Crosbie-Burnett et al. (1996) model conceptualizes cognitive/emotional aspects of relationships and links those aspects to behavior and social interaction. Their attention to this part of human experience is so important because it brings our attention to the gut-level pain and pleasure that can occur when people try to get along with people who do and do not know how to relate to them. The comfort/discomfort negotiations in this study speak to this experience.

Although Crosbie-Burnett et al.'s (1996) model is able to account for difference within families, most uses of systems theory emphasize the whole as if it were a shared reality. This is not a new critique (e.g., Barrett et al., 1990), and yet it bears repeating. Investigating the ways in which GLQ family members negotiate themselves as different in the context of family weddings brings out a lack of shared reality in families and links that difference to power relations both inside and outside the ritual. The question, "Who am I in relation to them?" thus has a very complicated answer.

APPENDIX

TABLE 1
**Focus Group (FG), Pseudonym, Ethnicity, Religion,
 and Sexual Orientation Information for Participants**

<i>FG</i>	<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>Religion</i>	<i>Sexual Orientation</i>
3	Joan Prutsman	German	Catholic	Lesbian
3	Debbie Miller	German	Catholic	Lesbian
1	Lucy Gibbons	German	Catholic turned Lutheran	Lesbian
5	Karen Johnson	Swedish	Lutheran	Lesbian
4	Laura Bryce	Yankee	Liberal Protestant	Lesbian
1	Dave Knaebel	German	Catholic	Gay
5	Danny Mazepa	German	Catholic	Gay
1	Carl Schultz	German	Catholic	Gay
8	Jason Royball	Mexican, Norwegian, Apache	Catholic and Lutheran but family not religious	Queer/femme/ two-spirit

NOTE

1. Rust (1993) argued that the diversity of nonheterosexual identities is masked in social science research when investigators sort their participants into the categories of gay or lesbian even when they know that participants identify as bisexual or otherwise nonheterosexual. Because the participants included in this analysis identified as gay, lesbian, and queer, I use the acronym GLQ when referring to the specifics of this study. Because the participants in this study are part of a larger project that also included bisexual and transgender people, I use the acronym GLBTQ (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer) when referring to that larger group. When reporting on research that specifically addresses gay or lesbian people only, I use the words gay or lesbian instead of the GLBTQ acronym.

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