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SENSE OF SAFETY

AN EXPLORATION OF A GAY AND LESBIAN COMMUNITY

by

RICHARD BARRY

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in
Psychology in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy. The City University of New York

2003

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Psychology in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

SENSE OF SAFETY

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by

Richard Barry

Adviser: Michelle Fine

The role of gay and/or lesbian community was investigated. Using the rubrics of sense of community and community through place, in-depth interviews, participant observation, and a focus group were conducted to better understand community in the lives of 10 participants. The participants were four self-described lesbians and six self-described gay men ranging in age from 29 to 42. Their ethnicities were 7 white, 1 Filipino, 2 multi-ethnic (one Chippewa/Ojibwe, Sioux, French, and German, the other Haliwa-Siponi, African American, and Italian). Various themes emerged through the methodology, including the role of diaspora in gay and lesbian community, the importance of media to creating a sense of community, the roles of class, gender, and race in creating gay and lesbian community, the lack of family as a signifier for community, and the role of place in a sense of community. Primary among the themes uncovered was that of a Sense of Safety. This theme underlay each of the other themes. Unlike traditional conceptualizations of a sense of community, my participants each defined community through the potentiality of safety either in the physical locations of community or in the people intentionally chosen to comprise their communities. A primary position of safety within communities was not assumed. It had to be sought out or created. The importance of the role of a Sense of Safety in their conceptualizations of community even affected

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their interpretations of the events of September 11, 2001. The ability of a Sense of Safety to play an important conceptual role in other communities is also briefly discussed.

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Acknowledgements

This dissertation could not have been written without the help and support of my advisor, Michelle Fine, my committee members, Vita Rabinowitz and David Chapin, and my outside readers Helene Clark and Peter Hegarty. Special thanks goes to Vita Rabinowitz, whose never-ending support and encouragement motivated me to continue during my most difficult period in graduate school. Thanks must also be given to everyone who inspired, challenged, or moved me during the graduate school process, including, but not limited to, Judi Addleston, Corrine Bertram, Dave Cotting, Katie Cumiskey, Lorelai Evans, Matt Gladden, Julie Greenman, Elizabeth Haines, Jen Hoffman, Jude Kubran, Melissa Kuperman, Chandra Mason, Kim Mizrahi, Eleanor Peterson, Anne Reid, Tim Reynolds, Sharice Richardson, Nadeen Thomas, Jeff Valley, Suzanne Vickberg, and Maxine Wolfe. Special thanks to Michael Stirratt and to his family, Arlene, Jim, Dan, Tom, Heather, and David, who offered much appreciated love and support in the early years. I also want to thank Che Vaughn for the many hilarious emails that provided me with welcome distractions throughout the process. I especially want to thank my mother Faye Barry, my father Richard Barry, my sister Allison Garrett, and her family Todd, Amber, and Trevor for understanding my desire for a doctoral degree. I also give much gratitude to the ten people who opened their lives to me as participants so that this dissertation could be completed.

The most heartfelt appreciation and gratitude goes to my partner Josiah Evans and my daughter Abigail Julian, both of whom were there through the good times and the bad and never stopped loving, supporting, and encouraging me. Without their unending patience and sacrifices this dissertation would never have been completed.

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Chapter One

Exploring Gay Community

> You know, when you think about community or when I think of community initially, I think of all these all these streets like at the beginning of *Edward Scissorhands* where all the houses look the same and the very tight enclave, I guess. And I think that what that really represents to me is places where you feel safe and secure.
>
> – Elyse

At the intersection of gay and lesbian psychology and community psychology lays the untapped potential for important work about the power of community in gay and lesbian lives. The preponderance of the word "community" in gay and lesbian studies suggests that it is an important concept, yet it is seriously under theorized as it relates to gay, lesbian, and bisexual people. This occurs in spite of evidence that membership in a gay, lesbian, and/or bisexual community helps to relieve the stresses of being in a non-privileged group (Waldo, Hesson-McInnis, & D'Augelli, 1998). There is much more scholarly focus on the *individual* struggle of coming out, and what that means to the gay and lesbian person (e.g. Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982: Rust, 1994; Sophie, 1985-86; Troiden, 1979), than there is to the more communal gathering of gay men and lesbians once coming out has occurred. Therefore a serious look at what community means to gay and lesbian people is in order.

To investigate gay and lesbian community, two logical starting points present themselves – community psychology and gay and lesbian psychology. In spite of logical connections, the two disciplines have little crossover. From the standpoint of community psychology, community is viewed through two lenses – a psychological sense of

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community and community created through place. As such, community psychology has focused mainly on the community available through either birth (family, culture) or geography (neighborhoods). This presents a problem for many gay, lesbian, and bisexual people. Gay and lesbian people are born into heterosexual families and neighborhoods that in many ways exclude them. The family does not provide a safe environment from which to explore connections to others. In fact, families can be extraordinarily unsafe places for gay and lesbian people (Field, 1995). The original exclusion from a familial community means that searching is always a part of community life for gay men and lesbians. Because community is not readily available in the home or family of gay and lesbian people, they must therefore seek out a separate one to which they can attach themselves. This means that community is first conceptualized as being elsewhere. It is something that needs to be sought. Part of that search is a search for an environment in which gay and lesbian people can be safe from the effects of homophobia and heterosexism. As Elyse stated in the opening quotation, community is a place in which you feel safe and secure. Gay and lesbian community therefore often constitutes a purposeful, thoughtful, and active search for a sense of safety by gay people in order to fortify them against the negative effects of living in a homophobic environment.

Although gay and lesbian community is often fundamentally different from the usual conceptualization of community, place and sense of community are still important in its development. In fact, place has been the traditional lens through which community is conceptualized in gay and lesbian psychology. Yet the reverse is not always true. It is not necessarily through the lens of "community" that gay and lesbian psychology views

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place. Instead it is through the notion that gay and lesbian places (i.e. bars, bathhouses, coffee shops) offer (often individual) relief from the oppressive heterosexist norms of the outside world. These places in which gay, lesbian, and bisexual people gather function to relieve the burden of societal pressure to conform to heterosexual behavior. In essence, they provide safety. This escape from societal heterosexism helps to foster what is known in community psychology as a psychological sense of community. This relationship between safety and community as it relates to gay and lesbian people remains largely unexplored.

It is the previously unexplored intersection of safety and community as it relates to gay and lesbian people that is the focus of this dissertation. Therefore, the main research question for this dissertation is "*How does community function for gay and lesbian people?*" The answer that will become apparent is that community functions as location of safety for gay and lesbian people. This located safety can be both conceptual and physical, but is mainly conceptual. In other words, community is formed when gay and lesbian people feel that they have created an environment that offers a sense of safety. So important is this sense of safety that it drives community no matter how "safe" and traditional are the lives led by gay and lesbian people.

Community Defined Through Gay and Lesbian Studies

In order to fully understand the importance of safety, it is first necessary to understand how both gay and lesbian psychology and community psychology view each other. In spite of apparent overlaps, the two traditions virtually ignore each other. For example, although community is mentioned often in gay, lesbian, and bisexual research,

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gay and lesbian psychology does not pay much scholarly attention to the concept of community. In fact, when community is studied in gay and lesbian psychology, the focus is often on the barriers to its existence. So prevalent is this notion that community is blocked for gay and lesbian people that some researchers prefer not to use the word "community" at all, preferring words like *enclave* that denote a small group of people living inside a hostile dominant heterosexual community (Rainone, 1987).

One of the main barriers in studying the communal concept of gay and lesbian existence is the individual focus of Western psychology in general. In a review of the role of culture in social psychology, Markus, Kitayama, and Heiman (1996) report that the cognitive systems of some cultural groups, "particularly European American, appear to show a distinct preference for explaining behavior in terms of personal attributes and dispositions (p. 857)." The individual level of analysis has been the main level of analysis of Western psychology, even among such group endeavors as social psychology. Often this individual level of analysis focuses on the concept of identity, a notion which receives much scholarly attention among gay and lesbian researchers, particularly when considering the formation of identity and the coming out process (e.g. Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Rust, 1994; Sophie, 1985-86; Troiden, 1979). The individual struggle of coming out therefore seems more interesting to a Western mind than the search for community that takes place once a of gay or lesbian identity is formed.

In spite of this, social psychology, and to a lesser extent psychology in general, recognizes that people have a need to group themselves together; yet even this grouping is usually conceptualized through the lens of the individual. Based on social categories

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that are readily available, an individual person comes to feel that she or he is a member of a larger group. This connects that individual to some larger social, rather than personal, identity (Deaux, 1996). From this point of view, identities exist out in the world for an individual to take, or to consume, into the self in order to be a part of a larger whole (Padgug, 1989).

This notion of identity consumption privileges certain individuals over others and works best if a person is already a member of a privileged group and is seeking some way to bond with people. In the U.S., if a person is heterosexual, white, male, or moneyed, then adopting an identity as an intellectual, or broker, or family man may be akin to choosing an identity from a readily available list for consumption. In this way, these social identities still take on a very individualized component. Social identities are ways in which people can further define themselves, a way for people to make friends, and friendship becomes an important aspect of social identity.

Many theorists view friendship in the West to be about having fun – interacting in a way that boosts self-esteem and social activities (Wellman, 1990). This is not true of friendships in all groups, however, especially those with less social power. For example, Stack (1974), in researching the kinship structures in poor African American communities, found that friendships take on additional roles that are not usually found in the dominant affluent white culture. Instead of friends' being people with whom one can do a social activity, friends become necessary for political and survival reasons. Friendships with other African Americans help African Americans survive in a world in which they are not part of the majority. In fact, kinship becomes redefined to include

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both genetic heritage and friendship. Friendships among gay, lesbian, and bisexual people have also been found to take on a similar supportive kinship function (Weston, 1991). In non-privileged groups therefore, friendships, group membership, and the identities entailed within that membership take on a more important role – a political role, a role that incorporates a method of surviving against the dominant culture. Safety and support therefore become the main focus of group identification.

This model of kinship does not fully work for gay, lesbian, and bisexual people, however. Unlike African American, Latino, Asian American, or Native American children who are born into a group very much like them, gay, lesbian, and bisexual children are almost always the children of heterosexuals. They therefore do not have the built in community that other non-privileged groups do. In recalling their identity formation, many gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals report at first feeling completely alone, as if they were the only gay man or lesbian on the face of the earth (e.g. Heron, 1983; Heron, 1994). Because of this, the formation of a gay or lesbian identity often feels like a completely individual struggle. Community becomes lost to the isolation of individualistic coming out experiences. They do not have a support network in place from birth as other minority groups do.

The closest that any other non-privileged group comes to the experience of gays, lesbians, and bisexual are people who have a biracial identity. Bi(or multi)-racial children also often experience social isolation that is somewhat similar to gay, lesbian, and bisexual children (Benedetto & Olisky, 2001). There have been cultural and legal sanctions against biracial marriages and their subsequent offspring just as there have been

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cultural and legal sanctions against homosexuality and bisexuality. In fact, until 1967 when the Supreme Court struck down antimiscegenation laws, it was illegal in many states for people of different racial backgrounds to marry and produce children (The Multiracial Activist, 1998). Like gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth, biracial children are usually different from their parents (unless their parents are also biracial) and must seek out an identity that may not be readily available to them in the home (Poston, 1990). Unlike gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth, however, the parents of biracial children are aware of their biracial status prenatally and are usually supportive of the blended identities of their children. Even if the parents of biracial children ignore their child's biracial status, and conversations about race become shut down, ignored, or aborted (Basu, 2000), they at least have the *opportunity* to be supportive of their children from the beginning of their lives. Parents can help biracial people in their identity adoption by making sure that they stress the positives of being a biracial individual. Biracial children, therefore, often have the support of their parents, and if not of their parents, of their siblings (Basu, 2000). In contrast, the parents of gay, lesbian, and bisexual children are *not* aware of their child's sexual orientation from conception and often assume that the only sexual orientation available is a heterosexual one. These parents are therefore unlikely to stress the positives of being gay, lesbian, or bisexual to the developing child. This adds another layer of isolation felt by the gay, lesbian, and bisexual individual, making them feel as if they are truly the only one in the world, effectively creating a barrier to community.

This focus on being the only one in the world is a problem acutely felt by many

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gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals. As a result of this isolation, gay and lesbian psychology focuses on the individual level of analysis at the expense of the more communal level. Because of the unique individualistic process of coming out, the individual level of analysis is difficult to divorce entirely from the gay and lesbian experience. But attention should also be focused on a communal level of analysis for gay men and lesbians. The individual and communal need not be divorced from each other. Some theorize collectivism and individualism are not the ends of one continuum, but instead two separate continua on which one could be high on both (Deaux, 1996). Additionally, personal identity and social (communal) identity are difficult to separate entirely since they are both located in the individual and dependent on social comparisons in order to exist.

The fact that gay, lesbian, and bisexual psychology is in large part the psychology of individuals is not lost on gay, lesbian, and bisexual researchers. Recall that when gay and lesbian theorists study community, it is the barriers to community that take center stage. D'Augelli and Garnet (1995) in reviewing lesbian and gay[1] community building list three main barriers for creating (and studying) these communities – 1) "the gay and lesbian community" itself is a fictive concept, 2) gay and lesbian children are raised in a

---

[1]Many theorists refer only to "gay and lesbian" and omit the term bisexual. This omission is due in part to a social construction of bisexuality as a transitory and unstable identity existing between an original heterosexual orientation and an eventual homosexual one (Kitzinger, 1995; Rust 1994). This has changed in more recent years and often "gay, lesbian, and bisexual" or even "glb" is used. This dissertation concerns community building among nonheterosexual people and bisexuals are conceptually included. Transgender individuals may also be included if they have a nonheterosexual orientation. Since the primary concern of transgender people is gender, they can have either a heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual orientation. Although inclusion of transgender individuals in political action is important, only those with nonheterosexual orientations can be considered included. None of the participants identified themselves as bisexual or transgender, however.

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heterosexual community, and 3) there is no awareness among gay and lesbian people of a collective history. Each of these concerns is addressed below.

First they note that the gay, lesbian, and bisexual "community" is in reality no such thing. It is diverse with regard to gender, race, politics, identity, parenthood status, disability, class, health status, and many other differences that divide the public at large. Each of these differences can be potentially divisive. For example, gay and lesbian researchers of color have noted the possibility for divisiveness based on racism (e.g. Chan, 1989; Espin, 1987; Loiacano, 1989). Not only can the public at large subject gays and lesbians of color to homophobia, but also white gay and lesbian people can subject them to racism. This racism on the part of white gay men and lesbians serves to fracture community not to build it. Additionally, it would be erroneous to assume just because someone shares a race, or even ethnicity, that they would therefore have no cultural differences in experience. For example, among Latino cultures, the experience of lesbians and gay men is different depending on their country of origin. The experiences of gay and lesbian people from Puerto Rico (Hidalgo & Christensen, 1976-7) are different from those from Cuba (Arguelles & Rich, 1984) or Mexico (Carrier, 1989) or any number of other countries. Even sharing a country of origin does not mean there are not differences due to region, spirituality, acculturation, or other aspects of individual identity (Zamora-Hernández & Patterson, 1996).

Similarly, there are many who say that the grouping of gay men and lesbians together is an artificial grouping. As Adrienne Rich (1993) has stated

> Lesbians have historically been deprived of a political existence through "inclusion" as female versions of male homosexuality. To equate lesbian

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> existence with male homosexuality because each is stigmatized is to erase female reality once again. Part of the history of lesbian existence is, obviously, to be found where lesbians, lacking a coherent female community, have shared a kind of social life and common cause with homosexual men. But there are differences: women's lack of economic and cultural privilege relative to men; qualitative differences in female and male relationships . . . I perceive lesbian experience as being, like motherhood, a profoundly *female* [emphasis hers] experience, with particular oppressions, meanings, and potentialities we cannot comprehend as long as we simply bracket it with other sexually stigmatized existences. (p. 238)

Some activists and researchers assert that lesbians have more in common with heterosexual women than they do with gay men because both are victims of oppression associated with male patriarchy. This has led to the formation of lesbian communities based on the notion of lesbian separatism, a separation of women from all areas of male dominance. This separation is based on the will of women and not on the will of men (Frye, 1993). In fact, being lesbian in itself is seen by some to be an act of separation because it denies men access to women's bodies. According to this view, men have historically had a parasitic relationship with women's bodies. Men use women for nurturance, for pleasure, for sex, for violence, and for bolstering of their own egos, with no reciprocal support. Gay and lesbians coalitions, especially those concerned with AIDS, which affects gay men more than lesbians, sometimes reflect this parasitic relationship, with gay men benefiting from the action of lesbians, but lesbians getting little or nothing in return (Paul, Hays, & Coats, 1995).

All of this serves as potential fracturing points for community. As Janis Bohan (1996) stated in her analysis of the role of community in the gay, lesbian, and bisexual experience

> Indeed, some have critiqued the very notion of "community," suggesting that it has served to disguise fault lines within the LGB population and to glorify those

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> individuals and groups with the power and visibility to define the public agenda of this fictive community. The very concept of an LGB community presumes the existence of a somewhat homogenous collective comprised of individuals who identify with each other and with the collective. In the case of the LGB community, this presumption has focused on shared sexual orientation and on the oppression experienced by virtue of nonheterosexual orientation. However, it is crucial to recognize that this depiction of community is not without its problems (p. 215).

In spite of these difficulties, gay, lesbian and bisexual people do gather together and form what they would call communities based in part on what Bohan calls "the focus on a shared sexual orientation and on the oppression experienced by virtue of a nonheterosexual orientation (p. 215)." This is not meant to imply that they do not then segregate themselves according to gender, race, class, ethnicity, ability, age, or any other part of their individual identities. All communities, including heterosexual ones, are fictive because the people inhabiting them are multifaceted and non-static. Their identities shift and change and are not monolithic. This simply means that these differences are not a complete barrier to community among gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals.

This critiquing of gay and lesbian communities may be related to the second barrier D'Augelli and Garnets outlined – the fact that most gay men and lesbians are the children of heterosexuals. Recognizing that a "heterosexual community" would be just as fictive and fractious as a gay and lesbian community, gay and lesbian people are born into a community that, by definition, does not include them. This means that in order to join a gay or lesbian community, a person has to reject the old heterosexual familial one. Gay and lesbian people's first experience of community has therefore been as an outsider to heterosexual communities. It therefore stands to reason that when people are raised as

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outsiders within a community, it should not be unexpected that they would have critiques of the subsequent communities they join. Their experience may lead them to once again position themselves as outsiders, even once inside a gay or lesbian community where it would seemthey had found a group in which acceptance would be expected.

The communities that gay and lesbian people join have been called "families of choice" (Weston, 1991). Families of choice provide small tightly knit communities created by gay and lesbian people in opposition to the families of origin into which they were born (Bohan, 1996; D'Augelli & Garnets, 1995). They are composed of peers who give gay men and lesbians the support they cannot get from families of origin, no matter how supportive those families of origin are. The notion of families of choice is not aproblematic, however. It presumes that being gay is the only minority status that people have. Some gay and lesbian people of color feel it is not always possible to make a complete split from their families of origin because these families remain one of the bastions they have against societal racism (Bohan, 1996: Weston, 1991). This may mean that even if people are part of gay and lesbian communities, there are other communities that may play extremely important roles in their lives.

Just as the first barrier noted by D'Augelli and Garnets is tied to the second, the second barrier is intimately tied to the third and final problem – an unawareness of a collective history. History is vitally important to many conceptualizations of community. McMillan and Chavis (1986) in outlining the concept of sense of community note that having a collective history is important in creating a sustained sense of community, no matter who comprises the community. Evans and Boyte (1991) also recognize the

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importance of reconnecting with memories and the past in creating a free space, or a place in which oppressed people can gather to bring about democratic change. Gay men and lesbians, however, have no built in link to historical community. For many people still in the closet or without access to any sort of gay and lesbian community, knowing that other gay people exist is difficult enough; knowing about collective history is nearly impossible. Without historical examples on which to base community, gay and lesbian people constantly have to re-create it.

Although the barriers to creating community are multiple, D'Augelli and Garnets (1995) have recognized that gay men and lesbians do create communities. In recognition of this, they attempted to list the ways that gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals accomplish this. The strategies they listed for the creation of community were

> (1) empowerment strategies aimed at gaining control over their own lives and influencing norms through personal disclosure of sexual orientation at both individual and collective levels; (2) identification with and integration into larger lesbian/gay social networks and communities; (3) changing systemic conditions that perpetuate injustice, discrimination, and violence, and (4) promotion of public and organizational policies that provide equal status and legal protection against discrimination (p. 312-313).

This list suffers from a tautological difficulty. With the exception of the first strategy, all of them posit that community is created through being a part of a community. The second strategy simply states outright that community is created through the joining of a community. The third and fourth strategies rely on collective action of community in order to make way for new communities. The only strategy that does not rely on community to build community is the first one – that of coming out. It would make sense that being out would be a necessary precursor for creating community. Although some

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young gay men and lesbians join a gay and lesbian group under the rubric of being a friend or supporter of gay and lesbian people, then use that space to come out (Barry, 1997), most come out individually (see Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Troiden, 1979). But this leaves us in the place that psychology often leaves us in regards to gay and lesbian people – on the individual level. This list is therefore unhelpful in elucidating what draws people to their subsequent nonheterosexual communities.

The draw for creating community is related to the barriers that D'Augelli and Garnets outline. Each of these main barriers comes from the same source. Gay and lesbian people are originally positioned as outsiders to (heterosexual and familial) community. They have no link to the past or to each other. Their very status as outsiders makes the communities into which they were born unsafe. When searching for a new community, it is therefore necessary to find a place that provides the safety that the original community did not provide. This is the entire idea behind "families of choice." They give a gay or lesbian person what the original community could not provide – safety and support.

Community Defined Through Community Psychology

Gay and lesbian psychology for the most part ignores community or lists barriers to its creation. In order to understand the ways in which community is defined, it is therefore necessary to explore community psychology. The primary goal of community psychology has been to move the focus from the individual level to the community level of analysis. In reviewing the origins of community psychology, Trickett (1996) described the original aims and intentions of the discipline. From its beginnings,

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community psychology focused on social intervention and prevention programs that could help to improve mental health not only in the individual, but also in the collective communities in which individuals reside. This has often been accomplished by the creation or evaluation of community based programs.

Some theorists, however, have stated that in its aims to move away from the individual to the collective, community psychology has lost sight of the people who comprise the community in community psychology. For example, Riger (2001) notes that community psychologists often study programs of intervention. Research in a community setting therefore becomes focused not on the multiple concerns of the people in the community, which may or may not involve intervention programs, but instead on the programs themselves[2]. Community psychology has tried to solve this dilemma by shifting focus away from simple intervention programs and focusing more on the people inside the communities. This shift in focus acknowledges the different contexts of the lives of the people who make a community and includes analyses of such topics as race, gender, and class.

Unfortunately, sexuality is rarely acknowledged as part of the context of the people who make up community. When sexuality is mentioned, it is often simply tacked on at the end of a list of identities/cultural signifiers with no further analysis of its role. It

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[2]This is a dialectic that is strongly felt by researchers in the discipline, and it is one with which community psychologists are actively working. Both Riger and Trickett agree that community psychology has made active steps in trying to incorporate a contextual analysis to the lives that people lead in community settings. By looking at community events in a sociohistorical context, it would be difficult to ignore either the individual or the community in which the individual is set. Community psychology has embraced and is continuing to embrace methodological pluralism, contextualistic analyses, and a focus on human diversity and multiculturalism (Trickett, 2001). This embracing of multiculturalistic views has led to an analysis that includes race, class, and gender in community.

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therefore becomes *and sexual orientation*, denoting a lesser place in the hierarchy of study. Simply being a word in a long list implicitly acknowledges that sexual orientation is not considered to be as important as issues such as gender, race, and class, which receive more in-depth analyses. In fact, D'Augelli twice has addressed the lack of emphasis on gay, lesbian, and bisexual people in community psychology, once alone and once with Garnets (D'Augelli, 1989; Garnets & D'Augelli, 1994). Since then, sexual orientation has been addressed more often, but usually in relation to AIDS/HIV, a topic which more directly relates to gay men and bisexuals, leaving lesbians out of the analysis altogether (e.g. Miller, Klotz, & Eckholdt, 1998; Peterson, Folkman, & Bakeman, 1996; Siegel, Raveis, & Karus, 1997; Stewart & Weinstein, 1997; Turner & Catania, 1997). The few other studies published in two main journals in the discipline (*American Journal of Community Psychology* and *The Journal of Community Psychology*), have involved a focus on some sort of victimization, whether it be homophobia on a college campus (Waldo, 1998; Waldo, Hesson, & D'Augelli, 1998) or the mental health issues surrounding the stresses of the coming out process (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Rosario, Hunter, Maguen, Gwadz, & Smith, 2001). Only one published study specifically considered community as it is affected by multiple areas of identities, a study of gay related stress in people of Black or Hispanic background (Rosario, Rotheram-Borus, & Reid, 1996). This emphasis on victimization and AIDS is likely the result of the prevention/intervention focus of community psychology as a whole, but it also points to the importance of a need for safety in gay and lesbian lives.

One of the reasons that gay, lesbian, and bisexual people receive little attention in

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community psychology may be that the way that community is conceptualized within the discipline. As outlined above, gay men and lesbian are often located as outsiders in their original communities and these communities therefore become unsafe places. Community for gay and lesbian people thus consists of searching for or creating places in which they feel safe from heterosexist and homophobic society. For heterosexual people, safety is not always as important an issue. Instead, the focus is on common interests and the places people gather.

Although there are various ways that the word *community* has been used in community psychology, two notions of community take central prominence. The first notion is the creation of group of people joined together through their affiliations and interests. Those common interests create what is known as a psychological sense of community, thus transforming the group into a community (Sarason, 1974). The second notion is the creation of group of people bound together through some common locality. Of the two, gay and lesbian community is often conceptualized through place (i.e. gay bars, the Castro, etc.) For this reason, community through place will be explored first.

Community through place.

Place has been an important component in the conceptualization of community. The continual emphasis on neighborhoods is just one example of this. The importance of place, however, is usually conceptualized through the lens of what physical places means to the people that inhabit them. James Gibson (1979) called this *affordances*.

> The affordances of the environment are what it *offers* the animal, what it *provides* or *furnishes*, either for good or for ill. The verb afford is in the dictionary, but the noun affordance is not. I have made it up. I mean by it something that refers to both the environment and the animal in a way that no existing term does. It

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> implies the complementarity of the animal and the environment. (p. 127) [All emphasis Gibson's]

The environment can therefore afford the observer (or participant) shelter, comfort, a warm place for gathering, or it can offer barriers, hostility, and a sense of being unsafe.

Place has also been important to lesbians and gay men. In fact, unlike heterosexuals who have every space defined as theirs by default, gay men and lesbians have had to seek out and create spaces to call their own, spaces separate from those owned by heterosexuals, spaces in which it is safe to be lesbian or gay. This separation and creation meant that space has become important to the self-concept of gay men and lesbians. The places we inhabit can be as important to our identity as being gay is.

Self-identity, in fact, can be seen as working alongside place identity. As Proshansky, Fabian, and Kaminoff (1983) state, "While there has been more attention paid by psychologists to the impact of the social on the development of self-identity, we put forward the hypothesis that the places and spaces a child grows up in, those that he or she comes to know, prefer, and seek out or avoid also contribute significantly to the self-identity (p. 74)." For gay men and lesbians and the development of community, the places that they come to know, whether a city like New York, a neighborhood like the Castro, or a gay or lesbian bar, are extremely important for self-concept. Without these places to gather with similar others, the individual identity of "gay" or "lesbian" might carry very little meaning.

It is this social relationship to identity that Lynne Manzo (1993) explores in her own work with place identity. In interviewing people about their attachment to place, Manzo noted that one of the problems with place identity as it is usually conceptualized

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is that it focuses on the concept of "home" as the primary place of attachment and place identity formation. This is in spite of Proshansky's original conceptualization of place identity as being attached not only to home, but also to those places that people grow into. Focusing primarily on home, whether a childhood home or the adult residence of a person, neglects the changing aspects of people's lives, important relationships to non-residential places, and the fact that for many, "home" itself is a dangerous and unsafe place. This emphasis on home and family comes from a utopian notion of families as safe, warm, caring places. For many children, however, families can be harsh, dangerous places (Field, 1995). This is especially true for gay, lesbian, and bisexual young people due to their sometimes dangerous position as an outsider.

For Manzo, place in relationship to the self is determined by the ever-changing emotional relationships that people have to differing localities – restrooms, libraries, bars, or wherever. Not only are these places important from the view of the individual, but also through social interactions with others, interactions that build and foster community. "From people's accounts of places where they go to be with others, it became evident that people built pockets of social and physical communities around themselves, which sustained and reinforced their identities. This can be considered a form of place identity developed through social interactions (p.133)." From these social interactions with similar others, place becomes a means towards creating community.

For gay and lesbian people, those places in which they grew up often afford them hostility and a lack of safety. The home environment informs gay, lesbian, or bisexual individuals that they "don't belong in this place" and need to seek out another place more

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congruent with their identity. Stories of coming out and of growing up gay and lesbian often emphasize this feeling of "not belonging" (e.g. Fellows, 1996). This feeling of not belonging can be quite complex. For example, a gay, lesbian, or bisexual person of color could feel very much like they belong in the family group since it provides a place of safety against racism. But even in families of color, the heterosexual spaces in which gay children live can seem extraordinarily unsafe due to their sexuality no matter how inclusive they may seem based on race. When the only familial model seen is a heterosexual one, the child may get the message that if they are going to be gay, then they have to leave regardless of any other connections they may have with their families. Therefore, from the beginning, gay and lesbian community is conceptualized as being elsewhere. It is not at home. Once again, community is conceptualized as a search for some other place, a place that meets the need to be valued and safe.

Because of the emphasis on safety, gay and lesbian communal places may most closely resemble Evans and Boyte's (1992) conceptualization of a free space. According to them, a free space serves the purpose of providing a relatively safe location for oppressed peoples to gather, and in doing so, opening up the democratic process for change. There is a slippery problem with the notion of community created through these spaces as it relates to gay and lesbian people, however. To form a free space, a pre-existing community often gathers inside a physical space, thus the community pre-dates the space in which they gather. In spite of this, Evans and Boyte often use "community" to denote physical localities, such as neighborhoods. They are aware of this and provide a footnote towards the end of the book to open up the conceptualization of community.

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In the footnote they explain

> Throughout *Free Spaces* "community" is intended as a concept suggesting density and texture of relationship. Thus, though community in this sense most often has a spatial dimension – a "neighborhood" implication – such a dimension is not part of the definition; rather communal ties depend on a complex set of social relationships that overlap and reinforce each other. (187).

Thus it is important to realize that for Evans and Boyte, the physical space is only a locality that serves to bolster emotional relationships between people. Even though the physical space is necessary for the creation of a free space, the community that grows within it depends on the associations that people have. Evans and Boyte stress the *voluntary*[3] nature of the associations that lead to the creation of free spaces. It cannot be simply a matter of physical closeness that creates community. Free spaces are created only when people make voluntary associations by reconnecting to their shared beliefs, histories, and memories, in spite of the differences in race, gender, age, or any number of other differences of the people in the community.

The free spaces used by gay men and lesbians have historically not been necessarily spaces of safety, however. For example, bars have long been regarded as a place for building gay community. In the past, politicians have used raids on these spaces as examples of coming down hard on vice and crime (Bérubé, 1996). Gay people have been historically used as scapegoats for the problems of communities,

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[3] Evans and Boyte note that any place where people can voluntarily gather can serve as a place for unionization, for discussions of oppression. Yet there are limits to the ways in which people can voluntarily gather. For example, former New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani attempted to limit the number of people who can gather without a permit in Central Park to 25, using a little known law from the 19th century. Other parks in New York City, such as Tompkin Square, have been completely shut down and redesigned to limit the number of people who can gather inside of them. In doing this, politicians can keep control over the populace, and usually control over groups whom they do not adequately represent – the people disenfranchised from the political system.

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municipalities, and even the country as a whole. One of the watershed moments of gay liberation, the uprising at the Stonewall Inn in New York City (Bianco, 1999), was the result of the city's frequent attempts to close down places where gay men and lesbians sought community. Often the places that gay men and lesbians gather serve, consciously or unconsciously, as places to practice resistance to oppression. In spite of this, the places we gather are also embedded in heterosexual spaces, and like the home before them can be unsafe. Heterosexuals sometimes carry the idea that all spaces are theirs, even gay and lesbian spaces. If we have a space of our own, it is only because tolerant heterosexuals have "allowed" us to be there. In fact, violence against gay people is often higher in so-called gay areas than in non-gay areas.

In view of this, lesbian, gay, and bisexual lives must be seen as being ones of leaving the "homeland" of the family to find or create a safe new home with similar others. In this way, community is almost never passive for gay and lesbian people. It involves an active and purposeful search for others who share a similar history of oppression. This search is almost completely ignored not only in gay and lesbian psychology, but also in community psychology. To look at gay, lesbian, and bisexual community one must look at this active and purposeful search for safety. I have posited that safety, both emotional and physical, is one of the defining characteristics of the communities in which gay, lesbian, and bisexual people gather. The places in which they gather must reflect this search for a sense of safety.

Sense of community.

Place is important to community only in that it serves as a nexus for a sense of

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community, and it is that sense which is most important in the development and sustainment of community. In spite of the focus on place as the nexus for community in gay and lesbian literature, it is often sense of community that is more important to the community itself. For gay men and lesbians, modern notions of community are usually defined in relationship to interests, affiliation, and skills (D'Augelli & Garnets, 1995; Watson, 1997). Therefore every gay, lesbian, and bisexual person belongs to the gay community, and community itself becomes a nebulous commodity, not an actual physical one. Instead of physical place's being the focal point for community, a psychological sense of connectedness among the group members serves as the focal point. This sense of connectedness has been called a psychological sense of community.

The concept of a sense of community has become very important in recent years. In fact, Sagy, Stern, and Kravor (1996) report that it has "assumed a central role (p. 657)" in community psychology. Seymour Sarason (1974) a central figure in the development of community psychology originally coined the term "sense of community." Since then, McMillan and Chavis (1986) have theoretically refined it. Although there have been many attempts at defining a sense of community (for instance Davidson and Cotter (1991) describe it as the strong personal bond between people and the communities in which they function while Lambert and Hopkins (1995) stress the reciprocal relationship between the individual and larger group), the framework used by McMillan and Chavis continues to be one that is used with little reclarification (Sagy, Stern, & Kravor 1996).

Seymour Sarason (1974) first defined sense of community in a book detailing the development of community psychology. For Sarason, community psychology grew from

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the turbulent times of the 60s in which people across the country bemoaned a loss of community[4]. According to Sarason, towns, suburbs, and cities went through growth in the 60s, so it could not be the physical space of which people were lamenting the loss. It was instead some *sense* that people were missing. It was this *sense*, this emotional, cognitive, and meaning-filled feeling that interested Sarason. Sarason was aware of the amorphous nature and the lack of definite boundaries to his concept that could make some people uneasy.

> The concept "psychological sense of community" is not a familiar one in psychology, however old it may be in man's [*sic*] history. It does not sound precise, it obviously reflects a value judgment, and does not sound compatible with "hard" science. It is a phrase which is associated in the minds of many psychologists with a kind of maudlin togetherness, a tear-soaked emotional drippiness that misguided do-gooders seek to experience. *And yet there is no psychologist who has any doubt whatsoever about when he is experiencing the presence or absence of the psychological sense of community [emphasis Sarason's]* (pp. 156-7).

In spite of this negative perception, Sarason urged psychologists to embrace the at-that-time newly created discipline of community psychology. It was not simply a "sense of community" that Sarason was proposing, but community itself.

> [A] community is more than a political or geographic area. It contains a variety of institutions which may be formally or informally related to each other – or not related at all. It is made up of myriads of groups, transient or permanent, which may have similar or different purposes and vary in size, power, and composition. It possesses resources and vehicles for their disbursement. Its groups and institutions vary considerably in size, purposes, and the power they possess or seek. And a community has a distinct history which, although it may no longer be relevant in a psychological sense, is crucial for understanding some of it present qualities and social, political, religious, or economic characteristics. A community has changed, is changing, and will change again. (p. 131)

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[4] This sense of loss continues to be an important concept in community psychology. Mahyar Arefi (1999) has stated that non-place and placelessness have emerged as concepts because of the alienation that many people now feel from place. This alienation is often described in narratives of loss.

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In spite of being "more than a . . . geographic region," Sarason saw community as being intimately tied with the physical space of a city, town, or village. Even though he acknowledged that a "psychological sense of community can have many referents, ranging from a family or a gang to a professional organization with members across the nation (p. 153)," he maintained that all of these were the "figure" embedded in the "ground" of the physical "legal-political-administrative entity" (p. 153) of the place in which people lived. The two could not be separated. If this were applied to gay men and lesbians, it would mean that even though the "community" of gay men and lesbians can reach across the country, it is still embedded in a physical place – not unlike those physical places to which gay men and lesbians historically escaped, like New York and San Francisco. It could be the sheer size, the anonymity of the large cities, that heterosexual people bemoaned that provided the social-legal-political-administrative climate necessary for the construction of a gay community. They would be safe in the crowd.

Sarason defined the sense of community by maintaining that its ingredients include "[t]he perception of similarity to others, an acknowledged interdependence with others, a willingness to maintain this interdependence by giving to or doing for others what one expects from them, the feeling that one is part of a larger dependable and stable structure (p. 157)." This definition can be applicable to gay men and lesbians, yet there are ways in which Sarason's conceptualizations are at odds with gay and lesbian experience. One limitation is that Sarason intimately tied the notion of communities to places in which heterosexual families could embed themselves, especially the

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neighborhood.

The primary importance of neighborhoods in providing a sense of community remains a strong undercurrent in community psychology. When Lambert and Hopkins (1995) wished to investigate a sense of community and the workplace, they were at a loss to find any measure of sense of community that did not in some way relate to living in a neighborhood. Because of its overemphasis on the neighborhoods in which heterosexual families embed themselves, it is here where classical theory about community must diverge from the reality of the gay and lesbian community. Sarason did not concern himself with sexuality. Race was the big issue of his day. Though communities based on race and those based on shared sexual orientation share a history of oppression, race-based minority communities established outside of the mainstream are not necessarily serviceable models for comparison to the communities built by gay men and lesbians. There are Black towns or locations like Harlem which are predominantly Black, but even places like the Castro in San Francisco or Park Slope in Brooklyn are not truly entirely or even predominantly gay or lesbian. These locations are parts of communities made by and for heterosexual people. Any gay and lesbian community that is created inside these locations is established within this larger heterosexual majority yet remains outside of it at the same time. Once again the concept of outsider is important to gay and lesbian community, even once "inside" places that are supposed to be theirs. Because of this, a sense of community devoid of neighborhood embeddedness is more important than the physical community itself.

In spite of its usefulness, Sarason's definition is still somewhat nebulous. As

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such, it is difficult to pin down, as Sarason himself noted. The concept has since been updated and more rigid boundaries have been placed around it. Whether or not this makes the concept better is debatable. It does, however, make it more measurable. The now classic definition comes from McMillan and Chavis (1986). They define sense of community as "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together (p. 9)."

According to McMillan and Chavis, sense of community has four subcomponents. The first is membership or a sense of belonging. The second is influence or sense of making some kind of difference to the group. The third is integration and fulfillment of needs. The fourth is a shared emotional connection which includes a shared history, common places, shared times and similar experiences. Even though McMillan and Chavis were not concerned with sexuality, each of these subcomponents relates to gay and lesbian community in some way.

The first subcomponent is membership. Of all of the subcomponents, this is the most important for gay and lesbian people. As such, it deserves a more in-depth analysis. I will therefore return to membership after quickly going through the other three subcomponents as they relate to gay and lesbian people. The second subcomponent is influence. Whether or not people feel any sense of influence in the gay community at large is open to debate. The latter part of the 20th century has been characterized as an isolationist time (Arefi, 1999) and this is true of gay and lesbian people as well. If, as D'Augelli and Garnets (1995) have asserted, the gay community is seen as nebulous with

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unclear boundaries and vague constituents, it is difficult to imagine having any influence over the group. Because of this nebulous quality, people who "join" the community may feel pressure to conform to any perceived consensus in the community, further lessening a sense of influence. But pressure to conform may not necessarily be a bad thing. McMillan and Chavis report that there is a positive relationship between group cohesiveness and pressure to conform. According to McMillan and Chavis' review of the literature "[t]he pressure for conformity and uniformity comes from the needs of the individual and the community for consensual validation. Thus, conformity serves as a force for closeness as well as an indicator of cohesiveness (p. 12)." In other words, conformity can be seen as a good influence on people. Membership in gay and lesbian groups, however, is predicated on the lack of conformity to straight notions of propriety. The individuals within the group are therefore defined as nonconformist to begin with. That could make nonconformity a valuable part of the identity. In other words, if gay and lesbian people are reared as outsiders, we may still feel the urge to distance ourselves from a community once we get "inside" it.

The third subcomponent is the fulfillment of needs. This subcomponent speaks for itself and perhaps needs the least amount of elaboration. Of course, belonging to a gay, lesbian, or bisexual community fulfills certain needs in gay, lesbian, and bisexual people, specifically the need not to be alone and isolated. According to McMillan and Chavis, fulfillment of needs is based on the status of being a member of the group. If the group has low status, it will not provide as many positive benefits associated with it. Historically, membership in gay, lesbian, and bisexual communities has not been

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prestigious. Even those this has changed somewhat recently, in the vast majority of the U.S. being out can be unsafe and dangerous. One of the primary needs for gay and lesbian people then becomes the need for safety.

The fourth subcomponent, shared emotional connection is definitely a strong point of gay and lesbian communities[5]. One only needs to review coming out stories (e.g. Heron, 1983; Heron, 1994) to see this. This is due to what McMillan and Chavis have called "shared valent event hypothesis: The more important the shared event is to those involved, the greater the community bond. For example, there appears to be a tremendous bonding among people who experience a crisis together. (p. 14)." Coming out can be seen as a crisis in some people's lives. Similarly, those in the gay community that have combated AIDS often speak of coming through a crisis. In fact, one of the first and largest AIDS organizations in the country is named the Gay Men's Health *Crisis*.

Let us return now to the first subcomponent, that of membership. All of the other components are related to membership in some way. Influence, emotional connection, or fulfillment of needs can only occur if membership is assured. Membership to a group is dependent on a feeling of a right to belong. Often, this feeling depends on the dictate that there are others who cannot belong and do not share the members' right. Opotow (1990) has defined this as a moral community built through the exclusion of the "other." For

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[5] Part of this shared emotional connection, however, is a spiritual connection. Traditional Western spirituality and gay and lesbian people have been at odds since the formation of these organized religion. Most Western religions (including Christianity, Islam, and Judaism) reject gay, lesbian, and bisexual people. Because of this many who have come out have rejected organized religion, although some continue to be a part of these organized religions. For some gay and lesbian people, especially African American and Latino gays and lesbians, religion provides an important cultural tie to other people who share their ethnicity. Still other gay and lesbian people look to other religions that are considered "non-traditional" in the eyes of the Western world.

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gay, lesbians, and bisexual communities, however, inclusion in the community is based on previous moral exclusion from the majority heterosexual one. The gay and lesbian community is therefore already defined in opposition to another. In other words, a more privileged heterosexual other has, in part, created the gay and lesbian community. This does not mean that the gay and lesbian community itself does not partake of its own moral exclusion. One needs only to look at the constant debates with the singular "community" to realize that we fight among ourselves to see who really belongs, and who does not belong, who has access and who does not (Bohan, 1996). As stated previously, this infighting may result from the very fact that inclusion in "the gay community" was originally predicated from exclusion from another one. It may be difficult to obtain any real sense of belonging when inclusion in this community is almost entirely based on previous exclusion from heterosexual ones (like those of the family).

This does not mean belongingness is entirely negative. A sense of belonging often entails positive results. McMillan and Chavis' further divide membership into additional subsections such as emotional safety, sense of belonging and identification, personal investment, and a common symbol system. Each of these plays into the other and provide positive reinforcement to gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals when they connect to a community. Being involved with others who share similar experiences and desires can provide emotional safety for the first time in a gay, lesbian, or bisexual person's life. This provides a sense of identity and belongingness that in turn provides an investment in keeping the community alive. Finally, a common symbol system has been vastly important to gay, lesbian, and bisexual people. From pink triangles to rainbow

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flags to labyrises and multiple variations on clothing styles, a common symbol system allows gay, lesbian, and bisexual people to identify similar others no matter where they travel in the United States.

Of all of the subsections of belongingness, it is important to take a deeper look into safety. According to McMillan and Chavis, emotional safety is a subsection of a subcomponent of a sense of community. In many ways, it is buried, unimportantly, in the definition. They define emotional safety in this way.

> *Emotional safety* may be considered as part of the broader notion of *security*. Boundaries established by membership criteria provide the structure and security that protect group intimacy. Such security may be more than emotional; gangs, for example, provide physical security and collectives enhance economic security [all emphasis McMillan and Chavis] (p. 10).

In view of this definition, only *emotional* safety is important, and it is only "necessary for needs and feeling to be exposed and intimacy to develop" (p. 9). In other words, emotional safety allows people to feel close to others in their group. They then open up and let their feelings be known. Safety therefore goes no deeper than allowing people to tell secrets and learn about their friends. It does not include such concepts as emotional safety from being excluded, harassed, assaulted, or discriminated against, all of which are important for gay men and lesbians. In fact, emotional safety as defined by McMillan and Chavis is really the same thing as emotional connectedness, the fourth subcomponent. As such, it adds nothing to the conceptualization.

Physical safety is not important to McMillan and Chavis' conceptualization of community at all. They mention it only once, in a paragraph about the common symbols of what they call "youth gangs," or groups made of alienated individuals who have a

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"shared sense of estrangement from traditional social systems and on the security (emotional and physical) that membership provides" (p. 17). In this paragraph they say that physical safety "may" occur along with emotional safety in these "youth gangs." Yet it is not from "traditional social systems" that "youth gang" members need protection. It is from other the members of other "youth gangs." It is interesting to note that gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals (who are unmentioned by McMillan and Chavis) are most similar to youth gangs in their conceptualization of community. Alienation from social systems accurately describes what many gay and lesbian people feel. Unlike youth gangs, however, it is not physical safety from other youth gangs that is important; it is safety from the traditional heterosexual communities that reject them. Note also that McMillan and Chavis call these groups "*youth* gangs". By associating gangs with youth, they imply that alienation is something that people can leave behind as they get older. Gay men and lesbians often continue to feel this alienation throughout their lives. Safety therefore continues to be important to them.

For gay and lesbian people, both emotional and physical safety is vitally important in the creation of community. McMillan and Chavis conceptualize community as being almost homogenized – everyone is the same, and location (usually a neighborhood) provides the nexus for creating the four subcomponents of community. McMillan and Chavis call those that are different from these homogenized groups deviants.

> "[W]hile it is clear that groups use deviants as scapegoats in order to create solid boundaries, little is said about the persons who *volunteer* [emphasis mine] for the role of deviant by breaking a rule or speaking out against the group consensus in order to obtain attention. We think that the deviants often use groups, just as

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groups use them in the creation of group boundaries" (pp. 9-10).

Applying this notion of deviance to gay community, gay and lesbian people "volunteer" to be excluded from heterosexual communities based on sexual orientation. This conceptualization is problematic in that it "blames" gay people for their deviation from the boundaries of community. Gay and lesbian exclusion is based on the action of heterosexual people. We are excluded by everything from being ignored and invalidated to being physically assaulted based on our perceived "deviance" from heterosexual norms. In fact, it is common to hear the phrase "that's so gay" in association with actions that are deemed inappropriate, embarrassing, or stupid. *Gay* is one of the most common "slurs" heard on in schoolyards. It is not just children who use the word *gay* as an insult: adults go so far as to sue others for libel or slander when they are called *gay*. And gay people continue to be murdered for being gay. No matter how seemingly "tolerant" society has become, the message continues to be clear – it is not safe to be gay.

When gay, lesbian, and bisexual people create their own communities, physical safety becomes an extremely important quality in establishing a sense of community. Additionally, emotional safety becomes more important as well. It is not simply a way in which to connect to people. It is a way in which people can feel strong, validated, and safe in their very existence. Safety therefore must be considered to be far more important in gay and lesbian communities than in the types of communities that McMillan and Chavis explored. It is not simply a subsection of a subcomponent.

A Sense of Safety

Community for gay and lesbian people therefore differs from the general

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conceptualizations in two key ways. First, in order to have a sense of community, gay and lesbian people must also have a sense of safety. This sense of safety runs through all aspects of community, from with whom people chose to create community with to where they chose to locate their communities. This sense of safety is necessary because of the alienation that many gay and lesbian people continue to feel from heterosexual norms and societal institutions, especially the family. Growing up, the community of the family and the home can be an unsafe place, and gay and lesbian people are often alone in their sexuality; the communities gay and lesbian people seek out must therefore be places in which their difference can be safely expressed among other people who are like them.

The fact that the home is usually an unsafe place is tied to the second difference of gay and lesbian community to the ways in which communities are conceptualized. Because they are often strangers in their own homes so to speak, community for gay and lesbian people is often diasporic. Growing up, community is often seen to be any place but here. Because of this, the literature is rife with stories of people leaving their homes and going elsewhere – San Francisco, New York – someplace that would be safe to be gay.

Therefore gay and lesbian community must be thought of in terms of an active and purposeful searching for a sense of safety as a defense from the possible negative effects of living in a heterosexist and homophobic environment. Both of these components, the active search and the safety, should be important themes for gay and lesbian people when creating a community. These themes should be important no matter who the gay and lesbian people are. In fact, even gay and lesbian people who seem to

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have many of the trappings of conventional heterosexual community – partnerships, children, homes – should still be influenced by the importance of a search for safety in their lives. In order to investigate these notions, I explored the importance of community in a group of gay and lesbian people through participant observation, a focus group, and interviews. For this group of gay and lesbian people, a search for safety was often the driving force behind their entire conceptualizations of community, even when it seemed they led relatively safe, and happy lives.

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Chapter Two

Analyzing Community

Participants

The participants were 10 people, 4 women and 6 men, ranging in age from 29 to 42. Each of the participants was in a coupled relationship/partnership, and when both partners were participants, they were interviewed together. In keeping with the premise of investigating the communal areas of people's lives and not the individuals themselves, no one was interviewed alone. No one refused to be interviewed.

The self-described ethnicities of the participants were 7 white, 1 Filipino, 2 multi-ethnic. Of the two multi-ethnic participants, one was Chippewa/Ojibwe and Sioux from his maternal side and French and German from his paternal side. The other was Haliwa-Saponi[6] (a Native American triracial isolate group composed of Native American, African American, and Scots/Irish American) from her father's side and African American and Italian from her mother's side. Of the seven white participants, one was Italian and Irish; one was Jewish; one was Swedish, Norwegian, and Scottish; one was Irish and Welsh; one was half British; and the others described themselves as simply white. Two of the participants lived in Brooklyn, New York and two of the participants lived in Queens, New York. One lived in the Pocono Mountains in Pennsylvania. The remaining five participants lived in Suburban New Jersey, three of them in Highland

[6] The Haliwa-Saponi are comprised of the descendants of three different Native American people, the Saponi, the Tuscarora, and Nansemond. The Haliwa refers to the counties in which they live in North Carolina, Halifax and Warren. The Saponi was added in 1979 in order to recognize the large component of Saponi heritage in the group (Society of Native American Culture: North Carolina State University, n.d.). The word "Saponi" is evidently a corruption of Monasiccapano or Monasukapanough. These terms were probably derived in part from a native term "moni-seep" meaning "shallow water." The Saponi belong to the Siouan linguistic family. (Swanton, n.d.)

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Park, and two of them in New Brunswick. All of the participants who lived outside of New York owned houses. All of the ones living in New York rented apartments.

The ethnicity labels used above are the ones used by the participants when I asked how they described their ethnicity. Each of the terms above can be complicated as they carry with them different histories of power inequities, subjugation, and cultural norms. For example, although the Native American participants used the terms Chippewa/Ojibwe and Haliwa-Saponi, many Native American people do not and did not call themselves the names commonly attributed to them today, names given to them by European explorers. Many of the terms that are used for Native American peoples are actually derogatory[7] (Loewen, 1999). Although some participants just gave a quick answer, i.e. "white", others offered resistance to such labeling. One participant told me "race is so constructed . . . because no one is really just one." She described herself as multi-racial, multi-ethnic.

Each of the participants was given a pseudonym, as is customary in research. It must be noted, however, that the use of a pseudonym takes on an unexpected dimension

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[7] Chippewa and Ojibwe are European misunderstandings of Native American names and are two different words for the same group of people. The Ojibwe in Minnesota are usually referred to as Chippewa whereas Ojibwe in other areas of North America are not. The Chippewa/Ojibwe call themselves Anishinabe, which means, "of the people." It is thought that the names Chippewa and Ojibwe are actually the same word heard in two different ways and come from the Anishinabe word for *pucker*. Some have attributed the use of the name *pucker* for the Anishinabe to stories told to Europeans by the Sioux, the traditional enemies of the Anishinabe. According to European accounts of the stories the Sioux told them, the Anishinabe would roast their enemies until they puckered, hence the names. Others think the name originates from the fact that the shoes of the Anishinabe were made in such a way that they tended to pucker. Either way, the name is not flattering. (Turtle Island, n.d.). The term Sioux is actually a word from their traditional rivals, the Ojibwe. It is actually the shortened form of nadouessioux which means "little snakes." The Sioux prefer to go by the names Dakota, Nakota, or Lakota according to their language groups. The Sioux are a confederation of several different Native American people. (South Dakota travelsd.com, n.d.).

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in work dealing with gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals[8]. Gay, lesbian, and bisexual people have a unique history with having to hide their identities. This history of hiding comes as the result of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people's being forced to closet themselves from the larger heterosexual community in which they live due to fear of possible homophobic reactions from that community. The importance of this relationship with hiding is especially apparent when considering that a large portion of gay and lesbian research is committed to understanding the process of developing a gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity and then "coming out" or announcing one's sexual orientation to the communities in which one lives (e.g. Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982: Rust, 1994; Sophie, 1985-86; Troiden, 1979). These works have traditionally been conceptualized as an individual struggle, but an underlying component of this individual struggle is that societal forces shape a person's sexual coming out through societal heterosexist pressures (Cox & Gallois, 1996). Hiding one's true sexual orientation has been a force of oppression in the lives of many gay, lesbian, and bisexual people. For that reason, giving my participants a pseudonym in some ways reifies this relationship by signifying that being gay, lesbian, or bisexual is something to hide. Additionally, names are a powerful cultural thing. People become very attached or annoyed at the names that have been

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[8] The male participants all described themselves as gay. The female participants used both lesbian and gay in their description of themselves. For this reason, the word "queer" has not been used in connection with this study. In spite of being used by some activists, the world is primarily an academic one and is most widely used in academic circles. Although queer can be a useful academic concept, it often bears little relationship to the lived experience of many gay and lesbian people. Even though several of the participants had an academic background a few were well versed in queer theory, none of them used the word to describe themselves or their friends. The word *queer* actually occurred only twice during the interviews – once in reference to the show "Queer as Folk" and once in reference to derogatory names a participant was called while growing up.

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assigned to them. By assigning pseudonyms I would in effect be assigning a new identity to people by renaming them.

Because of these issues, I debated whether or not to assign people pseudonyms at all. I asked my participants what their preference was. In most cases, people did not mind having their real names used, but some did. Out of respect for those who did not want their real names used, I have assigned pseudonyms to all of the participants because of the relationships between them. I justify this by noting that although the closet has been an oppressive force in the lives of gay men, lesbians, and bisexual, there are valid reasons for remaining closeted. Primary among these valid reasons are possible discrimination or harm that could befall them due to societal homophobia and heterosexism. Not all of the participants were out to all of their coworkers, although all were out in their private lives. In some cases, being out on the job can lead to discrimination. As of 2002, there is no federal protection from being fired because a person is gay, lesbian, or bisexual (Human Rights Campaign, n.d.). Even though I used pseudonyms, I decided to ask people if they wanted to rename themselves. Some did, some did not. For those participants that renamed themselves, I have used the names that they have given to me. In other cases, I have tried to rename people with names that are close in origin and meaning to their original names.

The participants are listed in alphabetical order below along with a short description.

Billy described himself as 32 years old, gay, Chippewa/Ojibwe and Sioux from his maternal side and French and German from his paternal side. He was born in North

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Dakota and lived near Minneapolis, Minnesota before moving to Brooklyn in 1999 to be with Matt whom he describes as his partner. They rent an apartment in Brooklyn and plan to get married in the summer of 2002 on the fourth anniversary of when they met. Billy has always worked in upscale retail stores and lost his retail position in Manhattan as a result of the lowered economy following the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center. After being unemployed for several months, he recently attained a new job working in fabric design. Among the participants, Billy includes Matt and Zach as members of his immediate community. He met Matt in Minnesota at a gay bar. Zach's current partner is one of Matt's ex-boyfriends. Billy is loud, assertive, and some might say flamboyant. He readily sticks up for himself and is quick to point out and try to correct situations in which he feels he is being discriminated against in some way. He also laughs a lot, finding humor in any situation. He is also an extraordinarily talented decorator and comes from a large family. Billy and Zach met through Matt.

Elyse describes herself as 31 years old, white, half British. She uses both lesbian and gay to describe her sexuality. She was born in Connecticut and lived in Providence, Rhode Island before moving to New Jersey several years ago where she met her partner, Simone. The two of them met just over three years ago in a bar and shared no mutual friends before then. Before meeting Simone, many of the people in Elyse's communities were men, mainly heterosexual. Elyse and Simone married during the course of the data collection and their ceremony served as one focus of participant observation. The two of them live in New Brunswick in a town house that they jointly own. Being able to own their house is very important to the two of them given their class background and gender.

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as women usually earn less than men. Elyse can be cynical, sarcastic, and deeply analytical. For example, when asked how she refers to Simone she felt that labels were confining and that the question was unrelated to community. She therefore told me she uses "partner" but that was "depending on to whom I am speaking. Sometimes I use the term slam piece." She has a Masters in Social Work and is a social work coordinator for a pediatric AIDS program. Of the participants, she considers Simone and Zach as the most integral parts of her community. During the course of the data collection, she was establishing closer communal ties to Pam and Miriam due to their common experiences of being lesbians who were trying to have a baby. She met Zach through Pam and Miriam. She met Pam and Miriam through Simone who once dated Miriam.

Jaime is a 42 years old gay man who describes his ethnicity as Filipino. He was born in Hawaii, has spent much time in the Philippines, and has lived most of his adult life in New York City where he met Paul, whom he refers to as either his boyfriend or his friend. He and Paul have been together for 12 years and live in a rented apartment in Queens. Jaime works as a party organizer and considers most of his closest community ties to be with heterosexual Filipinos, though he is trying to establish more ties to gay men. Of the participants, he considers Paul and Will to be closest to his community. He met Will through Paul – Will and Paul had been friends for years. He did not say how he met Paul. Both he and Paul considered their relationship and their bond with each other to have been cemented when Paul was hospitalized and Jaime took care of him. Jaime spoke English as a second language and his sentences could sometimes be halting as a result. He was less likely to speak up during the interview process, although he spoke

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often during the participant observation sections. Of all the participants, I spent the least amount of time with Jaime and Paul, reflecting their self-described insular nature. The two of them were going through financial difficulties at the time and said that their primary concern was getting on their feet again, and interaction with other people suffered as a result.

Matt is a 31 years old, white, Norwegian, Swedish, and Scottish gay man and a partner to Billy whom he met in a gay bar while visiting his family in Minnesota. Matt grew up in Minnesota and moved to New York to go to school. He and Billy rent an apartment in Park Slope, Brooklyn, and plan to get married next summer on the fourth anniversary of when they met. He considers Billy and Zach to be his closest communal ties among the participants for reasons outlined in Billy's profile. He works as a project manager for a New York hospital based program for people with HIV and AIDS. Matt is extraordinarily even handed and often has the ability to see all sides of an argument. He is also responsible, quick-witted, deeply analytical and very well educated, having a Master's degree and pursuing a Ph.D. He also can be silly and zany, breaking up his responsible demeanor. Matt comes from perhaps the most affluent background of the participants. All of the other participants are on a class trajectory from working class to middle class. Matt's parents were upper middle class, yet because Matt values self-sufficiency and because of the disconnect that many gay people have with their families, Matt lives off the money that he makes, not his parents.

Miriam, is a 30 years old, white, Jewish woman. Miriam was born in New Jersey and has lived there her entire life. It was in New Jersey that she met Pam, whom she

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eventually married at a mass ceremony during the March on Washington with hundreds of other couples. Miriam describes herself as lesbian because she feels that her experiences as a gay person are intricately tied to her being a woman, but she says,

> I occasionally consciously refer to myself as gay instead of lesbian when I think people won't "get it" though. Lesbian seems to be a more charged word than gay and seems to make people more uncomfortable. Again, probably the politics of being a woman because lesbians are perceived as not *needing* men and that makes people nervous [emphasis Miriam's].

She refers to Pam as her partner "99% of the time, but occasionally as wife or spouse, but never girlfriend or lover." Miriam and Pam have a son, Isaac, to whom Miriam gave birth and Pam recently adopted. She met Pam through an ex-girlfriend who was taking a class with Pam. Miriam and Pam knew each other for about three or four years before they began dating and they have been together for five and a half years. They live in Highland Park, New Jersey, in a house they both own. The house was paid for by an inheritance that Miriam received. The inheritance was enough for the house itself and nothing more, and the two of them live off of Pam's salary. Since Isaac was born, Miriam no longer works outside of the home. Her work is now as a stay-at-home mom, but she plans to return to work as a caseworker. Among the participants, the people with whom she feels communal ties are Pam, Zach, Elyse, and Simone, all of whom live within a few miles of her. She met Zach through an ex-girlfriend who knew Zach was moving to Highland Park and therefore introduced him to Miriam and Pam so he would know other gay or lesbian people in the area. Miriam once dated Simone who she met in college. She met Elyse through Simone. Miriam is very straightforward, sometimes abrupt, and has a no-nonsense attitude. She is quick to point out injustices and

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inadequacies and originally only considered radical feminist lesbians to be part of her community. As she grows older, however, she feels that it is more important for people to be nice and thoughtful than to share all of her politics.

Pam is a 42 years old, white, Southern woman. Pam was born in Mississippi and has lived in New Jersey for several years. She moved to New Jersey to become a nanny for some friends. While in New Jersey, she met Miriam whom she married at a mass ceremony during the March on Washington. They have a son, Isaac, who Pam recently adopted and Miriam gave birth to. They live in Highland Park, New Jersey in a house they both own. She uses both lesbian and gay when referring to her sexual orientation, citing her perceived level of safety when choosing the term. "I prefer lesbian on a more intimate level, with people who know me already, etc. I am inclined to prefer gay in uncertain situations. Gay *seems* [emphasis hers] to include a larger number of people, therefore garnering for myself a sense of safety in numbers." She refers to Miriam as her partner "almost always" but also cites safety in this as well. "There have been some instances when I felt uncomfortable and left a description out." The two of them met five and half years ago through Miriam's girlfriend of that time. She has a degree in English and works for a large University in New Jersey as a mid-level administrative assistant dealing primarily with planning, spending and allocating a 20 million dollar annual budget. A secondary level of her job is in human resource asset management. The people with whom she has closest communal connections among the participants are Miriam, Zach, Simone, and Elyse for reasons outlined in Miriam's profile. Pam's Southerness is also an important part of her identity, and she often speaks in the lyrical

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metaphor-rich structures of the South. She is much more quiet than Miriam, but she also has a deeply analytical mind and a quick sense of humor.

Paul describes himself as a 39 year-old, white gay man who has lived in Queens his entire life. He and Jaime have been together for 12 years and live in a rented apartment in Queens. He refers to Jaime as his boyfriend. Unlike Jaime, Paul is a talker, his sentences sometimes punctuated by laughter. He had a relatively high paying job on Wall Street, but was laid off of work in 2000. He has since been unable to gain work because his position was the result of internal promotions and therefore he does not have a degree in his work-related area. He has said that he cannot think much about community ties at the moment because of all his concentration is on finding employment, but he counts Jaime and Will as his closest community for reasons outlined in Jaime's profile. Alone of all the participants, Paul expressed more of a "place at the table" type of attitude towards gay people and gay community. His goal was for gay people to be able to fit into straight life and for us to be accepted by heterosexuals. The other participants felt much more at ease having separate gay communities that need not depend on heterosexual approval.

Simone describes herself as 31 years old, multi-racial woman who has lived in New Jersey her entire life and refers to her sexual orientation as either lesbian or gay. She resists labels, however. As she put it

> I guess I prefer to be called a lesbian. I just like the way it roles off my tongue. I think when I first started using the word I was in my hyper-feminist stage in undergrad. I thought it was more woman centered. Whatever! I am so over that. Labels are a funny thing. They don't really say much about us – who we are, the types of relationships we have. All lesbian really says is that I am a woman who sleeps with women. Gay is a more inclusive terms but I always think of Margaret

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> Cho whenever someone says it – "Are you a gay?" I just feel that I have a hard time with labels, but forced to choose, it would be lesbian.[9]

Simone has similar distrust of labels concerning ethnicity. As she said, "no one is just one." She also feels that race is a constructed category. When forced to choose, she notes that she is African American and Italian on her mother's side and on her father's side is Haliwa-Saponi, a Native American tri-racial isolate group of the composed of African American, Native American, and Scots/Irish. She is partner and recently married to Elyse, whom she met in a straight bar, and the two of them have been together for just over three years. They live in New Brunswick in a town house that they own. She currently works as a lecturer and as the coordinator of student records in a large New Jersey university. She is working towards a Masters Degree in Women's Studies. Among the participants, she counts Elyse, Zach, Pam, and Miriam among her community for reasons outlined above. She also is a deeply analytical thinker who organizes her thoughts before speaking. As such, her quotations are often amazingly clear and precise, whereas Elyse uses talking as a way to think, often following different tangents in the middle of a sentence. Simone also has a deep appreciation of Disco and show tunes, something that she says allows her to connect to gay men.

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[9] A note should be made as to the quotations included as data inside the chapters. The quotations are based on my transcriptions of the conversations that took place during the in depth interviews and in the focus group. I have preserved the original sentence constructions of the participants as much as possible. In cases where I have made changes for clarification, I have placed the words that are not those that the participants used inside brackets. Also included inside brackets are notations of pauses and laughter (i.e. *[Elyse, Simone, and Richard laugh]*.) The other symbols included in the transcripts are Em dashes (–) and ellipses (. . .). Em dashes are used to denote an abrupt change in the flow of a sentence or an interruption of an idea. They are used instead of parentheses in order to avoid confusion as to whether it was the participant or me who inserted the remarks. Ellipses are used to denote an omission of part of the quote. Portions of quotations were only deleted when the quote ran very long, when another unrelated topic was discussed in the middle of a quote, or when a point was repeated. They are not used to change the context of the quote itself.

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Will is a 35 year-old, half Italian, half Irish gay man. Will was born in Queens and just recently moved to Pennsylvania and the Poconos where he lives in a house that he owns. Will dates Parker off and on and calls him his boyfriend when they are together. Parker lives in Queens in a rented apartment. At the end of the data collection, they had started dating again and were planning to get a house together on Long Island. Will plans to keep the house in the Poconos even if he and Parker buy another one on Long Island. Among the participants, he counts Zach, Jaime, and Paul among his community. His ties to Jaime and Paul are described above. He met Zach at a large testing firm where they are both employed. Will has worked with this firm for several years being promoted from within. Among all the participants, Will counts the largest number of people as part of his community. It is important to him to constantly have many gay people around him. This has caused friction with Parker, who prefers more intimate situations between the two of them. Like Paul, Will also professes to prefer a situation in which gay people were more integrated with heterosexual people. Unlike Paul however, he constantly keeps company almost entirely with gay men and expresses little desire to go to places that are predominantly heterosexual.

Finally, there is Zach. Zach is 29 years old, white, Irish and Welsh and defines himself as gay. He was born in South Carolina and moved to New Jersey five years ago. He and his partner live in Highland Park in a house that they own and have an adopted teenaged daughter. He is currently working in a large testing firm and is pursuing a Ph.D. in statistics and testing. Among the participants, Zach counts Elyse, Simone, Miriam, Pam, Will, Matt, and Billy as part of his community. Emphasizing the fact that

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people actually live in multiple communities, Zach has different communal relationship with each of the participants. He is closest to Elyse, Simone, Miriam, and Pam, all of who live within a few miles of him and all of who either have children or are in the process of having children. A second, but also important communal connection is with Billy and Matt. Zach's partner once dated Matt and Matt was one of the first people he met upon moving to the North. Finally, Zach also considers Will to be part of his community, although not as close as the others. They were much closer when Zach worked in the same office as Will. Zach is now in a separate city in a newly opened location in the company. Like Elyse, Zach uses his speech as a thought process and often says whatever comes to his mind. Because of this, people find him to be very funny. Additionally, he is extraordinarily hard working, deeply analytical, and very firm in his beliefs. He also has the singular ability to completely cut people out of his life without looking back if they do not accept him and his new family. Because of this, of all the participants, he has the most tenuous ties with his family of origin.

Although ten people were interviewed for this dissertation, there were in fact, eleven participants in the process. I am the eleventh participant, and as such, I must create a brief description of myself using the criteria set up above. I am a 32 year old gay man who lives in Highland Park, New Jersey with my partner and my daughter. I lived in Georgia, at first in a small town and then in Atlanta, before moving to New York to pursue my Ph.D. I have known some of the participants, such as Zach and Matt, for many years, whereas others, like Paul and Jaime, I met through this dissertation process. I include myself as participant for two reasons. One, I attended many events as a

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participant observer. As such, I should be listed as a participant in the dissertation itself. The second reason is more important, however. This dissertation looks at gay and lesbian community, and as a gay man, I can be counted as member of gay community. My relationships with the participants grew throughout the dissertation process, and I include many of the participants as a part of my own local community[10]. Some of them I included as part of my community before the research began. For others, the research helped to strengthen communal bonds between us.

Procedures

Three methods were used for this study – in depth interviews with the informants, participant observation, and a focus group. Each one is described below.

In depth interviews.

Because this study was based in part on an investigation of community, I began by taking one person, Zach, and using that person as the springboard to create a snowball sample for the exploration of community in a group of gay and lesbian people in the Northeastern United States. People considered to be part of Zach's various communities, either directly or through knowing someone who Zach knew, were interviewed. For this reason, people both living in a large urban area (New York City) and people living in smaller suburban areas participated. If another participant had been chosen, different communities would have emerged, yet there would still be considerable overlap in the people represented in this study. Zach was chosen as the starting point for no other reason than he was the first person I contacted.

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[10] I avoid specific mention of how I relate to many of the participants through their own requests. Details of their connections to me would compromise anonymity.

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Because I was interested in communal relationships and not individual accounts of community, at least two people participated in each of the interviews. At no point was anyone interviewed alone. If interviews were conducted one on one, the temptation would exist to turn the story into an individual one. For that reason, the fewest number of people present for an interview was two (or three if you count me as the interviewer). The maximum number of people present for an interview was five.

The interviews were semi-structured. In addition to basic demographic questions (i.e. how old are you? How do you describe your ethnicity? How do you describe your sexuality? etc), I had a preset list of questions that I wanted to be answered based on the theorization of gay and lesbian community (see Appendix A). These questions were based on analytic themes that I expected to be present from the literature. They include the relationship of history and community, the relationship of other identities and community, and relationship of place to community, the relationship of families to community, fracturing points of community, and formation of community. Although there were themes that I thought were important, I also left an open structure so that other themes could emerge from the interviews themselves. The participants would bring up issues that they felt were important and we would follow it. In this way, the participants also led the direction of the questions. One of the most constant themes, and one that emerged entirely from the data, was that of the relationship of safety to community.

Before the interviews, each of the participants signed a consent form informing them of their rights as a participant and giving me permission to use the data and record the interviews. The interviews varied in length from one and a half to two hours. I

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transcribed each of the audio recordings in order to completely familiarize myself with their content. From the notes I gathered on the focus groups and from the transcriptions of the interviews and focus groups, I then organized information according to themes that were presented. Some of these themes came from my own research into current notions of community (i.e. history, place, sense of belonging) and others emerged from the interviews and events themselves (i.e. safety). A more in-depth description of the method of analyzing the themes follows in the section on *Analysis Plan.*

Participant observations.

There is sometimes a tendency in ethnography and qualitative research to rely on the spoken word as the only legitimate places for analysis (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1998). To counter this tendency and attempt to signify other important places for the study of community, I attended several events over a six-month period in 2001 (May through October). Each of these events was designed to be community affirming. The use of participant observation[11] allowed me to encounter community through lived experience and not as the spoken recall of informants. The community events at which I was a participant observer were as follows: a weekend in the mountains of Pennsylvania

[11] The role of the participant observer has been somewhat controversial. There is a tendency to either dichotomize an observer either as a participant or nonparticipant observer. It has been argued however that all social research involves some sort of participation because we cannot remove ourselves from the social world in order to study it (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1998). There have also been attempts to distinguish just how much of a participant the observer is, whether the person is observer as participant or participant as observer for instance. In each of the cases of my participant observation, the people with whom I attended the functions knew of my role as researcher as all of them also participated in the interviews. However, not everyone present at the functions knew of my role. For instance, several hundred other people, almost all of who were unknown to me, also attended the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender festival that I attended in New Jersey. For logistical and practical reasons I did not announce to everyone present that I was attending both as a gay man who wanted to know more about community in New Jersey and as a researcher.

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that included a night out at a gay mountain resort; a baby shower for a lesbian couple that was held at the house of a gay male couple; a summer bar-be-que held at the house of a gay male couple; a *brit milah* for the son of a lesbian couple; a night out in New York City that included an act by a drag queen; a gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender festival in New Jersey; and a lesbian commitment ceremony.

The participants chose many of the events for the participant observations. For example, Will suggested going to the gay resort when I came to his home for the interviews. He felt that the resort and the nightclub were very important for community in his area and would be appropriate for my research. Matt similarly suggested that we "do something gay" when I came to Brooklyn to interview him and Billy. The event he settled upon was the drag show in New York City. Miriam suggested the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender festival since part of its goal was to provide access to community for people living in New Jersey. Additionally, the weekend in the Poconos, the *brit milah*, the baby shower, and the bar-be-que were held at the homes of different participants, and each was community affirming. Four of the events, the baby shower, the brit milah, the commitment ceremony, and the bar-be-que, included non-gay and lesbian people whom the participants included inside of their communities, and allowed insight into the different ways in which the participants related to gay and non-gay people in their communities. The participants were therefore active in helping to decide which events they associated with community.

For each of the participant observations, I took notes on the ways in which community was fostered (or in some cases disrupted) in these events. Notes were

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sometimes taken during the events themselves, but were usually recorded immediately after the event took place. I often did not take notes during the events because I was a participant and did not want either to appear to be "removed" from the events or to remove myself inadvertently from the action by focusing on a notepad. In addition to my own observations, some of the participants referred directly to the events during the interview sessions.

Focus group.

The interviews and the participant observation took place over a six-month period beginning in May of 2001 and ending in October of 2001. During this time period, an event occurred that affected many people's notions of community and safety in the United States – the September 11th attack on the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, D. C. Because of the importance of this event in the conceptualization in community, I asked several of the people whom I had previously interviewed if they would consent to being interviewed once again, both to process the events that had happened and to speak to how, if at all, the events altered their notions of community. Five of them agreed. They were Elyse, Miriam, Pam, Simone, and Zach. The six of us sat down at my house a few weeks after the attacks and the conversation that ensued made up the focus group. Like the in depth interviews, the focus group was audio recorded. After the focus group was completed, I transcribed and analyzed the transcription. It lasted slightly longer than two hours.

The focus group differed in tone from the original in-depth interviews in two ways. First, everyone present at the focus group had been interviewed at least one time

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previously. This was not true of the in depth interviews. Second, the focus group was intent on elucidating only one major theme – how did the events of September 11th affect the participants' conceptualizations of community? Embedded in this question were ways to further elucidate questions asked in the in depth interviews. For example, in the in depth interviews, I asked participants who they considered to be a part of their community. In the focus group, I was able to ask people they first called after the attacks. These two questions were thematically related. The people they first called demonstrated important members of their communities. After first seeing if people that they knew that worked in the area were safe, all of them called gay or lesbian people for support.

Analysis plan.

Once the data were collected, the transcripts were then coded according to the analytic themes preselected before data collection began. In addition to this, the transcripts were analyzed for themes that may not have been present in the original conceptualization. In this way new, grounded themes emerged from the data itself. These grounded themes included such concepts like community as constant change. Primary among these grounded themes, however, was the concept of a sense of safety. This sense of safety provided the fifth major theme of this study. These preselected and emerging analytic themes were also applied to the notes that I took from the participant observations.

To analyse the themes, I used the selective or highlighting approach (van Meter, 1990). In this approach, I read the text of the transcripts several times and excerpts that appeared to be revealing about the analytical themes were highlighted (or coded

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according to theme). These analytical themes consisted of both pre-selected themes (i.e. history which is conceptually important to community due to the literature) and grounded themes that emerged from the data itself (i.e. a sense of safety which interlaced and supported all the other themes. According to the literature, this should have been a minor subcomponent at best.) I then grouped each of these highlighted excerpts together by theme in order to try to capture as fully as possible the meaning of the material. I looked for linkages between themes and contradiction both between and among the individual themes. In doing this, I tried to fully understand the ways in which the participants understood the concept of community and the components that supported (or prevented) it.

I will illustrate the process used on one of the themes. I will take the theme of history, which based on the literature should have been important for the formation of community. At first I used what has been called an immersion/crystallization approach to qualitative data analysis (Miller & Crabtree, 1998). An immersion/crystallization technique is often more preferable when there is little existing data on a topic, the unit of analysis is an in-depth interview, or the goal of the research is to explore the experience of others. In this approach, connections within the data are made through becoming immersed within the text of the data itself. Not only did I do all of the interviews and the transcriptions, but also I reread transcripts and re-listened to the tapes a number of times to thoroughly familiarize myself with the data. Through this immersion, the core steps of data analysis – developing an organizing system, segmenting the data, and making connections – are collapsed into one and linkages emerge through extended familiarity.

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Immersion/crystallization keeps the analyst's relationship with the text more open and intimate. While immersing myself in the data, I also read through each of the transcripts specifically searching for any passages that related to the themes that I had preselected and for ones that emerged from the immersion. After immersion in the data, I used the highlighting approach outlined above to code and separate the themes.

One such pre-selected theme was history. When asked if history was important to their communities, the respondents usually answered that it was not. This would imply that history had no bearing on their sense of community. However, in reading through the transcripts, it became apparent that history could take on several meanings. Although each denied a connection to history, the participants shared an investment in popular culture as a tool of creating a sense of community. Popular culture was therefore an emerging theme. Many of these popular referents came from the past (i.e. the appearance of gay characters on shows like *Dynasty* and *Soap*, or the coming out of entertainers like Ellen DeGeneres and Melissa Etheridge). I expected the theme of the Internet to be important, but it was not. Instead television and movies were much more salient to this particular group of participants.

Through this immersion in the data, I realized that popular culture had become the historical referent for community for this group of participants. History often provides guideposts or referent points for shared contemporary events (the events at Stonewall often act in this way). Pop culture resonated in ways in which events like Stonewall did not. For this group of respondents, events in popular culture took the role of those guideposts. The events became so fundamental to their own sense of community that

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some respondents used words like "betrayal" when they felt that gay or lesbian people in popular culture had acted in a way counter to their communities – both the gay and lesbian community at large and the respondents own personal communities. The theme of history therefore had linkages to the emerging theme of popular culture. It also was related to a sense of safety in that people felt some of these shows gave them referent points for coming out and identity formation. In fact, one participant said that if something made him gay, it was the movie *Beastmaster*, and another chose her pseudonym based on a character in *Family Ties*. In this way, history was important to the gay and lesbian people that I interviewed, but not in a way that would be readily apparent from the literature.

History was one of five major themes that presented themselves based on the data. Four of these five themes were ones which I had chosen before collection of data began based on the literature review. Those themes were history, family (including families of origin and the so-called families of choice), place (both physical as in bars and neighborhoods and liminal as in the Internet), and diversity. In addition to these major analytic themes were other minor themes as well. These additional themes included inclusion, exclusion, fracture points of community, and symbols of community among others, many of which were the major points that emerged from McMillan and Chavis' (1986) notion of community. These themes became, in essence, minor themes. Some of them could be subsumed under the five major themes used to divide the dissertation into chapters.

After grouping the themes in five major categories, I wrote an original draft of the

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dissertation with chapters divided according to these themes. I then met with my committee members and we discussed the ways in which these five themes overlapped, fit into, and complimented each other. Through these discussions, these themes became less rigid and more interwoven. Using this new collective interpretation of the themes presented in the data, I reworked the data and the dissertation to reflect this. This method of collaboration with my committee members reflects the communal aspect of this dissertation. In other words, it is not simply my interpretation, but a collective interpretation as well.

Keeping with this theme of collaboration, I also kept in contact with several of the participants throughout the writing process, telling them what I thought had emerged from the analysis, asking them their opinions, and incorporating their suggestions into the text. Each of them agreed that safety was the important theme for community, even though some of them had not consciously thought of community in that way before participating. One participant told me that he actually thought of community in a different way once we had discussed this project, and gave this story as an example. He was leaving New York City to go to an event in the Adirondacks. Once he was away from New York City, his being gay became much more salient to him because he began to feel more unsafe. This sense of being unsafe was heightened when a group of people staying in the hotel room next to him starting talking about how much they hated "faggots" and how they should all be killed or wiped off the face of the earth. Having his partner with him, another gay person, gave him a sense of safety that he otherwise would not have felt.

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Strengths and limitations

Several aspects of the methodology that I used allowed for a rich and nuanced understanding of the way that my participants conceptualized community. First, by combining several methods of inquiry over an extended period of time, I had access to a rich interpretation that would not been available had I used only one method or one interaction. This multiple methodology allowed me to see people not only theorizing community, but also actively engaging in it, altering it, and experiencing it in a variety of different settings and situations. Second, interviewing people in groups allowed for a negotiation between the participants in deciding upon definitions of community. Because community was the focus of the inquiry, these communal interactions were important conceptually to my investigation. And third, the methodology allowed for flexibility and change in light of what was happening not only in the research, but also in the world at large.

Each of these aspects allowed a depth to my understanding of the phenomenon that I was investigating. Had I relied only on one method, I would have missed some of the facets that became apparent through the use of multiple methods. For instance, if I relied solely on interviews, I would not have been privy to some of the contradictions, complications, and nuances in the way that people live community versus the way they talk community. For example, most of the participants said that bars were not important in their conceptualization of community, yet two of the events chosen by the participants for observation – the Pocono resort and the drag show in New York City – featured bars as places of communal gathering. Had I relied only on the transcripts, I would have

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missed an opportunity to see that the way that people verbalize and theorize community is not always the way in which they live it.

Another of the advantages to using a variety of methods was the flexibility that it afforded the participants and me while we formulated our conceptions of community. By following people over a six-month period in different settings, the participants had the opportunity to have multiple interpretations of community. Additionally, the participants were never alone when contemplating community, and the definitions they gave reflected the communal push towards interpretation. Over the time span of the data collection, the participants both agreed and disagreed with the definitions given by other participants. Additionally, they contradicted and disagreed with their own definitions. This did not mean the participants were dishonest or unthinking in their theorizing. In fact, the contrary was true. They gave considered definitions, but allowed themselves the opportunity to revise and reflect on what they had said. For instance, Elyse characterized family as being both places of protection and trust and as places of alienation and distrust. When I discovered this contradiction upon reading the transcripts, I called her and read to her the definition she had given. She was extremely surprised at the way she had characterized her family. She even asked me "I really said that?" Through further discussion and reflection, we were able to clarify the apparent contradictions. The methodology therefore allowed for respecting community not just as a concept, but also as a process of negotiation. The shifts in the ways the participants negotiated and renegotiated theirs and others' conceptualizations of community allowed a richness and depth to my understanding.

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Finally, because the participants were followed over a span of time, the method allowed for not only for flexibility in the participants' conceptualization, but also flexibility in the research process. For example, I had originally planned only to do interviews and participant observation. I had not planned to conduct a focus group about the participants' conceptualization of community. After the events of September 11th, I noticed that much of the media coverage focused on how people were realizing for the first time that as a community, they could be unsafe. This seemed antithetical to what I had discovered about safety and community as conceptualized by my participants. Additionally, several of the participants and I had noticed that gay and lesbian people were not always considered to be part of the American community presented in the media. We therefore decided to do a focus group in which September 11th was viewed through the lens of gay and lesbian community. This allowed for further conceptualization by my participants, and it allowed me the opportunity to address a real world situation that was theoretically important to my investigation. The focus group also gave a group of gay and lesbian people an opportunity to discuss and process an important world event. This was valuable on a personal level to each of them regardless of its importance to my research.

The strengths of my methodology are therefore numerous, yet there are limitations to it was well. This dissertation is qualitative in nature and therefore it makes no claims about generalization. In addition, there are "only" 10 participants who were directly interviewed for the dissertation and they were not randomly selected or assigned to any group, making generalization impossible. However, these are "limitations" only if

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one is interested in presenting data from a traditional quantitative "read" of investigation, and even this traditional read is open to interpretation and debate (Rabinowitz & Weseen, 2001). Qualitative research is at its heart an interpretive discipline (Burman, 2001). It is an interpretation of community by a specific group of gay and lesbian people that this dissertation seeks to uncover. No claim is made that it is an interpretation of all gay and lesbian communities or even other similar gay and lesbian groups of people. There should be themes present in this particular community that will resonate with other communities, however.

Keeping in mind that qualitative research is interpretive, it must also be acknowledged that there exists the possibility of alternative interpretations of the data that I have collected. Denzin and Lincoln (1998) in their "Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry" acknowledge that "There is no single interpretive truth . . . there are multiple interpretive communities" (p. 30). The interpretation that is presented in qualitative research can be considered valid if the interpretation is credible (Janesick, 1998). Discussing my conclusions with the participants and my committee members heightens the level of credibility of the interpretation.

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Chapter Three

Defining Community

Because the primary goal of this dissertation was to ascertain what community means for a group of gay and lesbian people, the first question that I asked my participants was "What does community mean to you?" The definitions they gave me readily revealed that a sense of community was vitally important to their conceptualization. Though a sense of community was important, McMillan and Chavis' (1986) definition was lacking. McMillan and Chavis' conceptualization was not completely divorced from the participants' conceptualizations, however. In fact, the participants' definitions of community often contained themes related to their subcomponents. For example, a sense of belonging was vitally important in many of the participants' definitions.

In spite of this, something was missing. To quickly review McMillan and Chavis' conceptualization, sense of community has four subcomponents. The first is membership or a sense of belonging. The second is influence or a sense of making some kind of difference to the group. The third is integration and fulfillment of needs. The fourth is a shared emotional connection which includes a shared history, common places, shared times, and similar experiences. Conspicuously absent from that list of components as it relates to gay and lesbian people is a sense of safety. Although McMillan and Chavis included *emotional* safety as a subsection of the first subcomponent, they considered it relatively unimportant to the overall concept. For them, emotional safety only meant providing a space in which people felt they could be emotionally close enough to the

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others in the group to reveal something about themselves. In essence it was the same as subcomponent four, shared emotional connections. For my respondents, community was more than just being able to share personal information. In order to feel a sense of belonging, it was necessary to feel safe.

This safety was, of course, complicated. The word in itself could imply a weakness on the part of the participants, but it is not meant to do so. In fact, navigating a homophobic environment by oneself, as each of the participants did before finding gay community, requires fortitude and strength. When the participants sought out their gay communities, they were not running frightened to escape the world. Instead they were active, purposeful, and thoughtful in finding or creating their communities and in establishing a sense of safety inside those communities. This sense of safety allowed them to bolster the strength they already had, and it helped them to navigate possible dangerous areas. It was a *feeling* that they carried throughout their lives, a feeling of fortification, a feeling of the potential opportunities for protection and strength. This is why I am calling it a *sense* of safety. Being around other gay and lesbian people bolstered their feelings of being safe and strong by providing them added opportunities to protect themselves from the violence and discrimination that can occur while living within homophobic and heterosexist environments. Although the participants came into their communities with strength already present, these additional opportunities may not have been available if the participants had to face these environments on their own.

Although part of the sense of safety they sought concerned protection from physical harm, violence alone did not account for the creation of the sense of safety that

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the participants discussed. In fact, none of the participants recounted stories of physical violence directed towards them due to their being gay or lesbian. In spite of this, they did talk about the *potential* of physical harm due to their sexual orientation. That potential is an everyday spectre for many gay and lesbian people. Additionally, the participants did report incidents of stress, discrimination, and verbal abuse. In this vein, the participants used words like haven and refuge as synonyms for community. They therefore constructed communities that could help to protect them from and alleviate many of the negative consequences of living in a homophobic environment.

This protection could take several forms. It could be informational protection. Several of the participants recounted turning to other gay and lesbian people for information about what to do if they faced discrimination or abuse. The protection could also be numeric. Stories of dangerous-seeming places or situations made less dangerous by the safety provided in numbers were also recounted. Finally, the protection could be in the form of emotional support. In fact, the idea of support was extremely important to many of the participants. Many of the participants felt that living in a homophobic environment was a constant stressor. The severity of the stress waxed and waned from day to day, but the knowledge that other gay and lesbian people were nearby to support them in a time of need helped alleviate some of the stress. This in turn made the participants feel safer. This emotional safety went beyond McMillan and Chavis' simple ability to share secrets. In many ways, a sense of safety inside community allowed the participants a form of insurance. They may or may not ever need the additional protection and security that their communities provided, but they rested safe in the

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knowledge that it was there if needed. Their communities gave them an added level of safety and security, not matter how safe or unsafe their environments actually were. A *sense* of safety, and not the actual safety itself, was therefore a vital component of community.

Of course, a sense of safety was not the only component of community for my participants. In some ways, McMillan and Chavis' definition of a sense of community was on target. Of all the subcomponents, a sense of belonging was the most important and most relevant. Next was a fulfillment of needs. Shared emotional connection and a sense of influence were last. Yet running through all of these is the underlying importance of a sense of safety. Although the participants did not always use the word "safe," they often referred to conceptually similar ideas such as support, haven, and refuge. In order to explore the conceptualizations of community by my participants, I now turn to the definitions that they gave. The definitions are presented in the order that they were given to me, starting first with Paul and ending with Elyse.

A Rose is Still a Rose (or Definitions of Community)

> Paul: Helping each other. A little bit about gay rights. Gay community. Gay acknowledgment. Establish ourselves into the life of you know, heterosexuals and gays being together. Um, Gay community is, not to say the fact that it is for gays only, but to try to make our own little section of life and try to be part of the world in the future without the criticism.

For Paul, community was about integration of gay people into mainstream society, a concept he visited repeatedly throughout the interview. His definition related not so much to what community was about, but what it could do. In that way, Paul's definition of community related to McMillan and Chavis' fulfillment of needs. Paul's

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primary needs were acknowledgement and being accepted by heterosexual society. More than any other participant, Paul stressed a need to be able to integrate his life fully with heterosexuals. Repeatedly he talked of trying "not to overshow, but to blend in." His goals for community were long ranging – to establish gay rights to make it safe for him to live in a straight world. This goal would take time. In the meantime, Paul felt the need to constantly compartmentalize community. Part of community was integration, but part of it was also making "our own little section of life" apart from heterosexuals.

This separation was necessary for Paul. Because he felt unsafe in heterosexual society, he constantly monitored his actions. For example, he said that when he and his partner Jaime were around heterosexuals "We don't kiss and hug, and we don't flaunt our gay lives like that, but the thing is they know we are together, and out of respect to people like that, you don't do the wrong things in front of them. You kind of show them that you do care for each other, that you are there for each other." Although Paul did not show any affection in front of heterosexual people, he did not apply the same sort of rules to them, and heterosexuals could display affection in front of him. His affection, however, was "the wrong thing" as he put it. Because Paul needed a place in which he felt that he was able to show affection to Jaime, Paul held gay community separate from heterosexual community. Throughout the weekend, when only gay men surrounded him, he and Jaime were very affectionate. Paul's need for heterosexual approval was tied to a sense of belonging. Paul and Jaime wanted to feel safe *inside* heterosexual society and were willing to bend their actions to do so. The other participants wanted to be safe *from* the negative aspects of heterosexual society. They therefore sought community with

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other lesbian and gay people or with heterosexual people with whom they did not have to alter their actions.

Integration with or separation from heterosexuals was a theme other participants visited as well. Although the participants sought out gay and lesbian people for their communities, several included heterosexuals in their communities. The distinction could not be made that they were safe with gay people and unsafe with heterosexuals, but they all agreed there was more *potential* to be unsafe around heterosexuals. Jaime elucidates this below. He agreed with Paul's assessment of gay community. When asked for his own definition, he said it was the same as Paul's, but he added and an addendum.

> Jaime: Being with gay people is different than being in straight places. It is this scary part there where the gay person is supposed to be in a straight area.
>
> Zach: Like an area is a very sort of aggressive, sort of machismo.
>
> Jaime: Yeah.

For Jaime, being in places that were heterosexual was very "scary." There was the potential for harm. Zach supplied the term "aggressive" with which Jaime readily agreed. Being in a gay community meant being in a place that was not quite as aggressive. Choosing the people to inhabit his community was complicated for Jaime, however. Because of their shared ethnic heritage, Jaime's primary community was heterosexual Filipino men. Although these men understood his being Filipino in the United States, they did not understand what it was like to be a gay Filipino in the United States. Because of this, Jaime was actively looking to expand his contacts with other gay people. Although he had met two other gay, Filipino men, many of the gay men he was meeting were white, like his boyfriend Paul. In terms of his sexuality, Jaime felt safer

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being around gay people, even ones who did not share his ethnicity, than being around heterosexual people who did.

When giving his definition of gay community, Will picked up the thread provided by Jaime's struggle between community around ethnicity and community around sexuality. Although Will was white, this gave him a useful analogy to him when describing gay community.

> Will: I think it's a little more of people who are gay finding each other and bonding with each other sort of like minorities tend to do that.
>
> Zach: Like when Miss Guillaume [a gay male co-worker from Haiti] was trying to find out if I was gay at work.
>
> Will: Mm hm.
>
> Zach: I was glad when I found out that Will was gay because I thought nobody was.
>
> Will: . . . It is like a security, just having people that you know who are also gay.

Like Paul and Jaime, Will felt the need of approval from heterosexuals, but unlike them, he was not willing to alter his actions. In spite of saying that he wanted integration, he purposefully surrounded himself almost entirely with gay men. Will's finding and bonding with other gay men was similar in his eyes to the bonding that people of color do inside of the United States. Unlike Jaime, Will did not feel a pull between being gay in a homophobic world and being a person of color in a racist world. Yet he likened the experiences of gay people with other minorities in the United States. Just as being around other people of color helped fight the effects of racism, Will felt that being around other gay men helped to fight the effects of homophobia and heterosexism. Other gay people gave him a "security." His definition, therefore, included a fulfillment of needs, a

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need to be safe. But unlike other minorities, inherent in these needs was a need of belonging, of feeling like he was not alone in being gay. Often people of color have their families to turn to for a sense of belonging. Gay people do not have that ready-made place of security in belonging together.

Of the first four people, Zach's definition most straightforwardly addressed a sense of safety.

> Zach: Your community is the place in which you feel comfortable to be yourself and therefore in which you feel safe and accepted.

Like the others, Zach felt that a sense of belonging (being "accepted" in his terminology) and a sense of safety (being "comfortable" and "safe") were the vital components in community. Zach's definition crystallized the concepts running through the other's definitions – community was about belonging, and you belonged once you felt safe.

A sense of belonging was important in the definitions that everyone gave. This makes sense conceptually from McMillan and Chavis' definition. They rank sense of belonging as the first subcomponent of a sense of community. If one does not feel like one belongs, then there can be no sense of community. A sense of belonging has an added component for gay and lesbian communities, however. Gay and lesbian people are alone in the fact that they do not have any ready-made place to go for their community. They have to search it out, looking for cues and clues as to where they can find other people like them. These cues often take the form of shared symbols, a subcomponent of McMillan and Chavis' sense of belonging.

For gay and lesbian people, however, these shared symbols were not only a way to easily identify other members of their community, but also the symbols helped

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participants identify places in which it was safe for them to be. Looking for gay flags, rainbow stickers, and other gay symbols was often important. These symbols let the participants know there were other gay people in the area and implied that the area had the potential to be safe, no matter how safe it actually was. Zach said that he would not have moved to Highland Park if he had not seen rainbow flags or gay stickers on cars. Similarly, Miriam said "I guess it does make me feel safer to know that there are other gay people in my town." She knew this by the symbols that were visible. She even has a rainbow symbol around her license plate and on her son's baby stroller. All of this heightened their sense of belonging. And belonging in part relies on feeling safe.

Pam and Miriam expressed their definition of community though belongingness as tied to safety.

> Pam: To me community is just understanding and tolerating people the way they are. You can be a part of a community, or it is a community if you have no fear of being um, harmed or rejected or um you know banned from a group or space or place or network or whatever. It doesn't have to be within a place but just a network of people who accept each other. To be a part of gay community is to be a part of a group of people who understand you, and accept you. You don't have to love each other *[all laugh]*. You don't have any real fear or rejection for you being the way you are.
>
> Richard: Right. *[to Miriam]* Do you have similar definitions?
>
> Miriam: Yeah, similar, I think with gay it's just about support, but I think with gay community versus the larger community it's an added dimension, which is similar to family and I don't think that's present as much in larger community. In the gay community it serves another purpose.
>
> Richard: What is the other purpose?
>
> Miriam: To serve as family. I think that um, *[sigh, pause]* obviously not everybody who is gay can be part of this community. I think for myself I'd like, I've have this in the past, and it's where I'd like to go now, is to build this close network of people that are like family. And I think that

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> part of that comes around because we don't get certain things from our family, even if they are very supportive in certain other ways. They don't know what it is like to be gay. And so if you're part of another group, if you are person of color, you have your family there to help you um to build your identity to be there to support you, but you don't have that if you're gay, so you get that from your community.

Pam's definition very much focuses on the concept of belongingness through safety. She uses words and phrases such as "no fear" of being "harmed" or "banned." She even refers to no fear of rejection twice. Her community was made up of people who accept her. In spite of this acceptance, Pam, Alone of everyone, noted that you do not have to "love" everyone in your community. This is part of an expression I heard often in the South. "You don't gotta love 'em, you just have to get along." Pam's invocation of this implied that you and your community may not always get along or see eye to eye, but the expectation is there that they will be there for you if needed, and they will work with you on a common goal. They will back you up. They will make you safe. Like Will's notion of security, Pam's definition comes closest to exemplifying the concept of insurance in community. If you need your community, it will be there for you.

Along these lines, Miriam uses the term "support" in her definition. Notice that she sums up Pam's definition of as being about support. This support can be either emotional or physical as long as it helps alleviate the difficulties associated with being a gay or lesbian person in a heterosexist and homophobic world. Miriam sees the support received in gay and lesbian community as entailing something extra than the support you would receive in any other community and uses the metaphor of family to express this extra something. In invoking family, Miriam uses the same analogy Will does – people of color use other people of color, often their family, as support against racism. Just like

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families of color support each other against racism, gay and lesbian people support each other against homophobia. Miriam had an added insight into this process of family as support for minority identities. She is Jewish, and she later analyzed the differences in her experience with the two identities. Whereas she had support from her family against anti-Semitism, she had no such similar support against homophobia.

Billy's definition picks up Miriam's notion of support.

Billy: Hmm. Support.

Richard: Support?

Billy: Yeah, like when you are coming out. I mean if I didn't have a sense of community, I don't know what I would do. I mean even in Fargo I had a sense of community.

Richard: Tell me a little bit more about that sense of community in Fargo.

Billy: A very small group *[all laugh]*. Like five or six people. I'm just kidding. I met somebody who I was friends with in high school and I knew he was gay and he was open, but other than that, I didn't know anybody who was gay until I came out and graduated.

Richard: Was he open before you came out?

Billy: Yeah.

Richard: What do you think led to him being able to be out in a community like Fargo?

Billy: He just didn't care. He was bold and very strong and decided that he wasn't going to let people's opinions influence him. Which I thought that gave me a lot of courage.

Richard: Was he, just him, was he your community for a while?

Billy: Yeah. And then I met more people. That's my sense of community. I think support.

The boldness of Billy's supportive friend gave him the strength to come out. It gave him

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an added sense of safety. Note that Billy says that if he did not have a sense of community, he would not know what he would do. This implies a sense of uncertainty and threat without the additional strength provide by a community. To put it in McMillan and Chavis' terminology, the need in him that was fulfilled was a sense of strength. For him, being out is characterized by boldness and strength. What gave him that strength, that ability to feel safe, was being surrounded by strong gay people. As a result, almost all of Billy's friends are gay.

Billy's partner Matt also used safety metaphors in his definition.

> Matt: But it strikes me. . . the thing that I kind of learned from visiting [Fargo]. I feel like there's these – like when I think of community I think of almost like a refuge. From like the outside world and prejudice. And it seems to me that even in a comparatively small town like Fargo, it's kind of a haven for people to come from all around to that one bar, and you know, escape the situations they have at home. And it's the same thing in Minneapolis on a larger scale and then on an even bigger scale New York. You know. So you kind of bind together in a little center.

"Refuge." "Haven." A sense of belonging by "binding together." The connections to a sense of safety are apparent in Matt's definition. Note that Matt implies that part of the safety that is needed is an "escape" from the "situations they have at home." For him, the family metaphor is one that is lacking. Matt's definition directly addresses the themes that are present in other people's conceptualizations.

The last two participants, Simone and Elyse, also include belongingness and safety in their definitions. Unlike the others, however, Simone adds shared emotional connection and making a difference to the group, two components of McMillan and Chavis' definition of a sense of community the others overlooked. In fact, Simone's definition reads as if she were very familiar with McMillan and Chavis' definition, but

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she assured me she was not. She is, however, completing a Master's degree in Women's Studies, and therefore has access to a vocabulary that would overlap such notions.

> Simone: My definition of community has to do with being in a safe and supportive space where you share common goals with people and you're basically looking at creating bonds around similarity of interest.

Elyse's metaphor for community, that of an *Edward Scissorhands* type of close-knit community, also ties in with the notion of a sense of belongingness, but has with it the notion of keeping others out. By keeping others out, she keeps out the homophobia and heterosexism that could be stressors in her life. Community is not simply about who belongs to your group, who makes you safe, it is also about who you keep out and who makes you feel unsafe.

> Elyse: You know, when you think about community or when I think of community initially, I think of all these all these streets like at the beginning of *Edward Scissorhands* where all the houses look the same and the very tight enclave, I guess. And I think that what that really represents to me is places where you feel safe and secure.

Safety. Support. Helping. A refuge. Enclave. Aggressive and scary straight places. Even the problematic metaphor of family – all of these speak to gay community's being somewhere where you could feel safe. In other words, the participants feel more secure, stronger, and ultimately safer when they are connected to a community of gay and lesbian people. It is this that separates gay community, or any community made of people in a non-privileged group, from the usual definitions of community. Therefore, in gay and lesbian psychology, there is a need to look further than a simple sense of community. It is necessary to add to the equation a sense of safety.

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State of the Union (or Gay and Lesbian Interpretations of 911)

Because a sense of safety plays such an important role in the definitions provided by my participants, an investigation must take place into the way in which safety is different for these communities than it is for others. In order to do that, it may be helpful to look at an event in which safety played an important conceptual role. During the course of my dissertation, just such an event occurred. That event was the attacks of the Pentagon and the World Trade Center Twin Towers on September 11, 2001. This event dramatically showed how the public at large and my participants conceptualized safety in different ways. The media construed the events of September 11th as a loss of safety. For the gay and lesbian participants, there was no loss of safety because they were accustomed to being unsafe in the first place.

The events of September 11th provided me with a chance to investigate community in action. I could see to whom my participants turned in the face of tragedy and for what reasons they sought out the people they did. In order to do this, I decided to conduct a focus group to see how the events of that day had affected my participants' notions of community. Keep in mind that all of the original definitions of community that I collected from the participants occurred before that date. Of the original ten participants, five – Elyse, Miriam, Pam, Simone, and Zach – were free to participate in the focus group.

The main question of the focus group was how September 11th affected the participants as gay and lesbian people. I wanted to know what meaning did their being gay or lesbian give the events. One way that I assessed this was by asking them "Was

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being gay or lesbian on your minds that day?" For most of the participants, being gay or lesbian was not immediately important. Instead they reported feeling like they were Americans, and that we all had experienced a collective loss. Very soon, however, their personal and collective identities as gay and lesbian people could not be ignored. Zach put it this way.

> Well, I think for me personally, it was a tremendous shock, the first day. I didn't know what was going on for like a week, and I think I was kind of clued out, but after the first like maybe five days I felt like, um, that I didn't really think about being gay during that time period any more than you just would every day just doing your stuff, but I think I always just thought about like this is important and as Americans we have to get behind this thing and stop these kind of things from happening. Of course, you know, and I began to gradually learn that it is, of course, a more complicated picture than that – like the U.S. funded Osama Bin Laden and all that kind of stuff – but at the same time I think I thought that [being gay] was important, but I didn't go to the gay sites and look at the gay news like I usually do. I was looking at like, CNN, to see what was going on. Being around gay people wasn't as important as just being around people of like minds about this situation.

Zach and other participants felt ambivalence around the events of that day and its aftermath. For instance, Zach said that he did not think of being gay as being important, yet later said that he thought that it was important. This contradiction is in part explained by Zach's statement that that being gay did not intrude upon his thought processes "any more than you just would every day just doing your stuff." In other words, being gay was still present in his mind – in fact, it was always present – but in that moment, it was not at the forefront. Soon, however, it came to the forefront, yet in a way that was not of Zach's choosing. The reaction of heterosexuals around him caused him to realize just how important being gay was at that moment. Zach continued

> There were also a number of things happening immediately, like we were told go out and give blood, and gay men can't give blood, and it's that where there were

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> sort of these intrusions of being a part of gay community into being part of a big American community, which was saying, "You are not part of this community. You are part of different one because you aren't allowed to give blood."

Zach had been excluded. In fact, his very blood was "un-American" and dangerous. His being gay made him be apart from the other "Americans" experiencing the events.

One of the functions of gay community is to provide information to other members, both about ways in which we can fight discrimination and ways in which we are discriminated against. In the days following the attack, the people in the focus group and I engaged in this informational function. We exchanged information about the tragedy and the ways in which we as gay people were excluded from the larger "American" community, a community that was supposed to be brought together after the attacks. One of the reasons gay and lesbian people sometimes feel unsafe is that we are aware that we are excluded, that the vast majority of the people in this country see us as not belonging to their own moral community. The participants in the focus groups directly referred to many of the following ways in which we, as gay and lesbian people, were separate from the larger American community in the aftermath of September 11th.

One of the first and most egregious examples of exclusion came from Christian leaders Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson. They placed the blame for the attacks on gay and lesbian people, feminists, the ACLU, and abortion rights activists. Fortunately, many people, including George W. Bush whom Falwell and Robertson supported during his election, condemned their statements (Harris, Sept 14, 2001). Falwell later apologized for the remarks (Musbach, September 14, 2001), yet his statements show that even in a supposedly tolerant and accepting time, gay men and lesbians are used as scapegoats for

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wrongdoing, highlighting our vulnerable and unsafe position in American culture. It is important to note that although Falwell cited the ACLU, feminists, and abortion rights advocates along with gay people as the cause of the tragedy, his apology addressed only gay people.

Although these remarks received much media attention, most of the stories related to gay and lesbian people in the wake of the attacks did not[12]. During the reports of loved ones lost, the focus was inevitably among lost family members[13]. No mention was ever made of people's sexual orientation and thus, the underlying assumption in a heterosexist society is that everyone was heterosexual. For example, there was repeated national media coverage of the actions of Mark Bingham, a public relations executive from San Francisco, and the role he played in helping stop the hijackers on Flight 93, yet the vast majority of those reports neglected to mention that Bingham was openly gay. The gay press reported on Bingham's sexuality and its role in his actions that day, noting that he had a history of fighting off attackers, having successfully fended off muggers previously (Musbach, Sept. 12, 2001). The non-report of Bingham's sexual orientation meant that people were denied the opportunity to see that gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals not only were affected by the tragedy, but also played a part in the preventing of further death and

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[12] This exclusion of gay people in the press included Al-Fatiha, a large gay Muslim group, which joined many other Muslim groups in denouncing the attacks. (Planet Out, September 12, 2001).

[13] In all the talk of families, there was no mention of the fact that Ronald Gamboa, his partner of 14 years Dan Brandhorst, and their adopted 3-year old son, David were on board the second plane that crashed into the World Trade Center. There was also no mention of the sexual orientation of openly gay copilot David Charlesboi or any of the other gay and lesbian people who lost their lives that day. Additionally, the New York Fire Department Chaplain, Mychal Judge, who died while helping victims of the attacks, was also gay, a fact neglected in the popular press and a fact that was kept from the Pope when he was given the hat of the chaplain.

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destruction.

Zach referred to what was perhaps the most exclusionary practice following the attacks – the inability of gay men to donate. The media told us that giving blood was something that everyone could do to help those affected by the tragedy, but gay men were excluded from that "everyone." Since 1985, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has banned all donations of blood from any man who has had sex with another man since 1977, and it has banned donations of blood from women who within the last year had sex with a man who had sex with another man since 1977 (Dotinga, Sept 13 2001). Other excluded groups (i.e. people who have been to Britain due to fears of Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy, or mad cow disease) usually have a period of only one year in which they cannot give blood, but as of 2002, for gay men, it is a period of 25 years. These regulations send the message that not only are gay men not part of the "America" that was affected by these attacks, but also our blood is unsafe and even dangerous to the rescue efforts.

In all of these ways, gay and lesbian people were excluded from joining with the larger community of "Americans" after the tragedy of September 11th. The message was clear, we did not belong, we were not part of the group, and even our blood was poisonous. All of this was apparent to the participants. These and other events allowed them to note how separate we were from larger mainstream society, no matter how integrated into it we thought we were.

Some of the other participants experienced reactions similar to Zach's. For example, Miriam first was thinking of being an American, a person in the United States

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who had experienced a large collective loss. Soon that would be eclipsed by being Jewish, by being a lesbian, and by being a mother. She talks about her realization that we as gay and lesbian people were not included in this national event.

> Miriam: I felt very similarly to that and the shocker to me was when [Richard] sent us the picture of the bomb that had the word "fags" on it. It was like, oh yeah; we are really not part of the larger group like I originally felt. And it made me realize this is a time of war and during times of war, that is when things like homophobia and other "isms" come out, and this could be a potentially, um, particularly scary time for us as gays. And I wasn't thinking about that originally. Originally I was thinking "Wow. I'm an American." And I would never have considered putting up a flag before, and I went and filled up with gas and they gave me a little decal and I was like "Wow! An American flag!" And I was like, "Where is this reaction coming from?"
>
> Zach: Whereas before you would have just thrown it in the trash.
>
> Miriam: Right. *[Miriam, Pam, Simone, Elyse, Zach and I laugh]*. It was like "Cool. You want this for your truck?" *[all laugh again]*. But then it started coming back to me about what happens to [gays and lesbians] in a time of war and patriotism and how dangerous that is and how this may not be a good time for us.

Miriam was in fact surprised at how powerful the event was to her. It had turned what had been a previously hostile symbol, that of the American flag, into one that she considered displaying. The American flag, the ever-present symbol during the aftermath of September 11th, was being used as a way to signify community to everyone in the United States. It had become a rallying point for a sense of belonging. Miriam soon realized two things – she was not included in this rallying and in order to rally around the flag, she was expected to rally against something else. In this case the something else was the nebulous "terrorists," defined by many to be people of Arab descent. In times of war, however, prejudice rarely stops with one group. Falwell had already blamed gay

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people for the attacks, and although his statements were quickly discounted, a photograph printed in a newspaper showed that he was not alone in his assessment. The picture to which Miriam referred was one that had run without comment in many newspapers. It was of a soldier standing next to a jet that had a bomb with "Highjack this fags!" written on its side. The hostile word "fags" emblazoned on an instrument of death made Miriam question her being a part of the "American" whole[14]. The writing on the bomb implied that "fags" were the enemy the United States was fighting.

Simone's reaction was similar to Zach and Miriam's. At first she was worried about her mother and stepfather, both of whom work for the federal government. The last time something like this happened in the United States, at the Federal Building in Oklahoma City, the targets were federal employees. It was not unreasonable to assume that the targets once again would be federal employees. As soon as Simone discovered her parents were safe, she found that she and her partner Elyse were spending more and more time with gay and lesbian people, people who viewed the events in a similar way, people who realized patriotism could lead to harmful exclusionary practices like sexism, racism, and homophobia. Like Miriam, Simone saw the ways in which she was excluded from the American whole, in part by being a lesbian, and in part by being a woman of color. She recounted the events this way.

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[14] This display was not the only example of anti-gay prejudice by the military following the attacks. Shortly after the attacks, a "stop-loss" directive was issued stopping all discharges from the military. It was left to the discretion of the individual branches to decide whether or not this applied to "Don't ask, don't tell." In effect, for the first time during heightened military attack, a stop-loss order became a stop-loss suggestion. The navy quickly decided that it would continue to discharge gay and lesbian people in spite of a need to keep people in the military for future military action (Musbach, Sept 19, 2001). For the other branches, a temporary stop-loss was enacted. Personnel would not be discharged for being gay during campaign, but they would be discharged once the campaign was completed. In the meantime, they could not even speak about being gay or lesbian.

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> You know it's like in the immediate moments following it, it had nothing to do with me being gay. It had everything to do with my parents working for the government. Since that time, it's kind of been like, you know, we've been spending more time with gay people in general. Um. But. It was just kind of like when we regrouped. For a while we didn't spend any time with any one, and then we started spending more time with gay people and it was, it wasn't even like when we were spending time, it wasn't even about being gay, it was over being American and sharing feelings about how we felt about being in a war. And partly it was like, well, I had this initial reaction of patriotism, it lasted about a day and a half because it scared the hell out of me because the sentiment of patriotism is the same sentiment where homophobia comes from, sexism comes from, racism comes from, and the second day I started hearing people say these really racist things. And I started to think, "I'm not safe."
>
> And then all of a sudden, people are starting to send out e-mails about all this legislation they are trying to pass about gay families and saying that only unions that are legitimate as a man and a woman [can get any of the money collected for the charities]. I mean here I am. Elyse and I just got married you know. So now it is just not only am I not safe because I'm a person of color, now I'm not safe because I'm gay, you know, the comments that were being made by people were all very, just very violent.

As Simone points out, there were other things on her mind besides just being a lesbian in this time. She also thought about being a woman of color in a time when people of color began to be the focus of heightened violence in the United States. Almost immediately after the attacks, non-Arab people within the United States started to attack people who to them "looked" like a person of Arab descent. Simone's issues of safety were compacted by being in both groups, being a woman of color and being a lesbian. Although these identities were always vulnerable to attack, September 11th gave a focus to people to justify their racism and homophobia, exposing the negative side of community – the exclusion of others. The "war" that the United States engaged in after September 11th has been conceptualized as "the free world against terrorism" by George Bush and as "Christians against Muslims," by some Muslims. In either case, it is "us versus them."

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Like Simone, Miriam felt similar tensions and moments of unsafeness with the multiplicities of her identities. Not only was she concerned about being a lesbian and a mother; she was also concerned about the implications this had for her Jewish identity.

Miriam: I just wanted to interject that more than feeling gay or even more than feeling American at this time, it is really standing out that I'm a Jew at this time. And whenever there is talk about the Arabs, there is talk about being Jewish. And I was home alone that day, and I was hugging my baby, my baby boy, and thinking my baby boy might be going to war some day, and here is my Jewish baby boy who might be attacked one day, and everyone is talking about Israel and it's Israel's fault [that this is happening] and should we stand behind Israel or not stand behind Israel? That was a big factor for me too. And terrorism is always particularly terrifying for me because when I was growing up it was always, "You need to be careful when you get on a plane because if there are terrorists, they will pick a plane that has Jewish names on the roster." And so a lot of Jews will use different names when they go on an airplane. And here are these highjackers and Arabs and Jews and all this crazy stuff. And initially that was a lot more frightening, and being gay was not an issue at the beginning. But being Jewish definitely was.

Richard: Do you think that people who are not Arab or Jews, do you think they are more likely now to have anti-Semitism come into play or would it be anti-Arab sentiment saying the Jews must be good since they are fighting the Arabs?

Miriam: You would think, but I think it also goes to "If it wasn't for the Jews"

Richard: For the Jews *[said at same time]*.

Miriam: If it weren't for Israel, this might not be happening.

Zach: And as a matter of fact, a secretary at Rutgers actually said that to two friends of mine who are Israeli [and heterosexual], Nava and Rina. Well, Rina, naturally, jumped down her throat. Nava held back at first and then she also jumped into the fray.

Miriam: You would think it would be the other way. You would think people would see how other people live with this all the time, but it's not for some reason. Because it is not a logical thing. Like racism and homophobia. It's not logical. It doesn't make any sense so you can't make any sense of it, and so it is very, very scary.

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The concerns vocalized by both Miriam and Simone represent the main way in which gay and lesbian people's experience of the September 11th attacks differed from the media representation of the events of that day. Many of the comments in the media in the aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were framed in a concept of the "loss of safety." Everything from the blatant "Attack on America" to the "Now everything is different" encompassed this feeling that once we were safe, and now we no longer are safe. That conceptualization was not true for everyone. Some of us were not safe long before the attacks.

Safety Dance (or Looking at Safety from the Other Side)

The idea of a loss of safety comes from a decidedly privileged position, a position of initial safety. Miriam's comments about "people who live with this all the time" speak to the fact that not everyone enjoyed that oblivious, safe position in the first place. In this particular case, she was talking about Jewish people who live with terrorism as a possibility in their day-to-day lives. Similarly many people in the United States experienced "terrorism" or the potential of "terrorism" in their day-to-day lives long before September 11th. This is particularly true for gay and lesbian people. Areas that are traditionally assumed to be places of safety for individuals can be extraordinarily unsafe for us. For example, the family is in many ways unsafe for gay, lesbians, and bisexual people (Field, 1995). Even our neighborhoods, a cornerstone of community development (Sarason, 1974; McMillan & Chavis, 1988; Evans & Boyte, 1992) can prove to be unsafe. It is to this that Zach was referring when he said that he did not think about being gay "any more than you just would every day just doing your stuff." The

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possibility of violence is a potential part of the process of being out in a heterosexual world.

The potential[15] of violence is on the minds of many gay and lesbian people, even in areas that are thought to be relatively safe. For example, in a recent report by the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation (2001), conducted with 405 gay, lesbian, and bisexual adults in 15 metropolitan areas[16] over the period covered from February 7 to September 4, 2000, 55% of lesbians, 40% of gay men and 30% of bisexuals think there is more violence towards lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals today than there was ten years ago, and 59% of lesbians, 40% of gay men and 22% of bisexuals are worried about being physically attacked. In addition to this fear, 75% of the people report having been the victim of verbal attack due to their sexual orientation, with gay men (at 82%) and lesbians (at 79%) more likely than bisexuals (52%). Additionally, 32% of the people surveyed had been physically attack because they were gay, lesbian, or bisexual. This study also looked at the attitudes of heterosexuals (sample size 2283) toward gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals. Although 66% of heterosexuals think that being gay or lesbian is

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[15] This potential violence can become actual violence even relatively "safe" or tolerant locations. For example, in one study of gay and lesbian people done at Pennsylvania State University long before the events of September 11th, 77% of the students had been verbally harassed for being lesbian or gay, 31% had been chased or followed, and nearly 20% said they had been physically assaulted (D'Augelli, 1992). In a report on the prevalence of homophobia in the nation's colleges, universities, and high schools, Andrew Walters and David Hayes (1998) found that homophobia is practically built into the informal curriculum in many ways. As a result of this, separate schools for gay and lesbian people have been established in New York and Los Angeles. The goal of these schools was to insure the opportunity for education for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender students who cannot learn in a traditional heterosexual setting as a result of physical or psychological attacks (Martin & Hedrick, 1998; Uribe & Harbeck, 1992).

[16] These reports of fear were collected from people who live in major metropolitan areas, places that are supposed to be relatively safe for gay, lesbian, and bisexual people in general. Given that urban areas are perceived to be relatively safe for gay men and lesbians, it is likely that the numbers would be higher in suburban and rural areas and that more fear would be found.

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a normal part of someone's sexuality, 51% think that it is morally wrong. This can only add to the perception of unsafety that gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals experience. Fighting for moral righteousness has been used as an excuse for violence from the Crusades to the McCarthy era hearings on "homosexuals" and communists.

Because this violation of a sense of safety is an everyday occurrence for many gay and lesbian people, the events of September 11th did not really change the way that the participants perceived the world. Elyse put it this way

> You know [our straight friends] just really couldn't hear [any kind of critique of this whole situation]. They were all about protecting themselves. And one of our friends, someone who I consider to be a really compassionate person, who I care a great deal about, said to me, "Well, you have to understand the American people are feeling for the first time what it is like to be hit at home and they are feeling scared about that." And I said, "Fine, but when we bought our house, I thought we didn't know what these people are going to say about a lesbian couple, and are we going to have people throwing things into our car? And are we going to have people writing on our lawns? What is going to happen?"
>
> I mean gay people live every day with that concern about protection of their [gay] family and protection of your home and what does that means. And who can say? What if you live openly and people walk by and start to figure out what's going on. What is their reaction going to be? And here our straight friends for the most part take that same line and they are like, "Yeah, we think it is bad that gay people are oppressed," and they all came to our ceremony and they have all been very supportive and they have all bought us very expensive gifts and they have all whatever, but those same people who always talk very liberally about racism and whatever, when it comes down to it, can't think outside of [Americans knowing fear for the first time]. You see what they really believe.
>
> For someone to say, "Americans don't know what fear is about." Let's even take the gay issue out of it. What is it like being a Black person living in a white community? What's it like being a Jewish woman living in pretty much an all non-Jewish area, and a lot of Americans feel these things all the time, and just because it blows up on your TV screen doesn't mean that this is something new. And it made me think more about the communities that I do belong to, and it just really said to me, "You are separate from the rest of this deal." It reinforced that.

In the above passage, Elyse sums up what she perceives to be the major difference between heterosexual people and her gay and lesbian friends. Notice that each of the

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examples that Elyse used – people writing things on their lawns, throwing things in the car, having a negative reaction on the street – are all hypothetical situations. She does not say that any of those things have yet happened to her, Simone, or anyone else that she knows. Yet each of these things is always a possibility. Her (white) heterosexual friends did not live with the same sense of a possibility of danger before September 11th. They perceived themselves to be safe based on who they are. Yet now, for the first time, they lived with the possibility of being harmed simply because they were "American." Being attacked because of who you are is a possibility that gay and lesbian people live with all the time. That is why Simone said that she noticed that she was hanging out with gay and lesbian people more and more after September 11th. She wanted to be with people who understood the possibility of danger always existed.

Zach further elucidates this possibility. Recall that he had earlier stated that he did not think of being gay "any more than you just would every day just doing your stuff." This next statement helps to elucidate what he meant by that.

> Gay people have felt unsafe for quite a while and now suddenly America has become unsafe, and when I was speaking to [my Israeli friend] Nava a week and a half ago, she was like, "Now Americans know at least somewhat what it feels like to be Israeli and to be constantly feeling like you are going to be blown up," and blah blah blah. Of course it is a little more complicated. So I said that's great. But as soon as I hung up I thought, well, it's actually the same thing. Now the rest of America knows what it feels like to be gay because just because of who you are or where you are or whatever, boom, you're gone. Now you have more of that feeling . . . of what it's like to feel unsafe everyday doing every day tasks.

This possibility of danger doing everyday tasks affected the ways in which people immediately responded to September 11th. Elyse was the only person in the group who said that from the beginning, her identity as a lesbian was at the forefront of her

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conceptualizations about the attacks. She was at work when she first heard about the World Trade Center. Although she works in a pediatric AIDS care center, she is not out to half of the staff. More than once she has lamented the fact that she works at the only homophobic AIDS charity in the county. Vocalizing her concern about the safety of Simone's family meant having to confront the issue of her being in a committed lesbian relationship in a situation that could have negative consequences on her continued employment. Elyse recounted her initial reaction this way

> I think the idea of being a lesbian in the world was there for me from the beginning because in my office I'm out to about 50 percent of the people there, and one of the things that happened right after the Trade Centers had been hit. Simone called me and said, "We don't know what is going on, and somebody had said that they were doing something in Newark, and I don't know where my dad is." So I was pretty upset and shook up, and upset anyway because I was just so anti-violence and so the idea that somebody had destroyed the Twin Towers. I knew immediately what that meant, and I was pretty upset about it. And people were asking questions and talking and stuff, and there were just things that I didn't say to certain people because I just don't tell them. Not so much because I'm afraid of what they'll do, but more because it has come to a point where I just don't like them, and you know there are things that I just wasn't saying. Because to say that would mean to explain that this person was someone I considered to be my father-in-law and I'm gay blah blah blah blah blah. And so I mean it was always there for me.

Elyse says that she did not tell certain people about what was upsetting her "not because I was afraid of what they'll do." By this, she meant physical violence on her person. Physical violence is not the only consequence of being out, however. Elyse's workplace is affiliated with the Catholic Church, which has a long history of anti-gay and lesbian discrimination. It was possible that she could be fired if certain people in her office discovered that she was a lesbian. Things that heterosexual people took for granted in the tragedy, such as the simple statement "I'm worried about my father-in-

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law," were extremely difficult for Elyse.

Fear of discrimination negatively impacts community in so far as it causes people to remain in the closet. Remaining in the closet decreases the potential number of people with whom a person could turn for support when faced with discrimination. Zach and Will both said their workplace seemed less hostile once they had discovered the other one was gay. Discrimination can be a very real threat to gay and lesbian people. It can lead to losing one's home or job, and that can have consequences as dire as being physically assaulted. In the survey by the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation (2001), 74% of the respondents said they had experienced discrimination based on their sexual orientation, with lesbians (85%) and gay men (76%) significantly more likely than bisexuals (60%). In addition to this, 76% of the people said they knew another gay man, lesbian, or bisexual who had experienced discrimination in one of the following areas: applying to a college, university or other school; applying for and keeping a job; renting an apartment or buying a house; getting health care or health insurance; or joining or serving in the U.S. military.

In fact, Miriam and Pam experienced discrimination when they were purchasing their home. When they were in the process of buying a house, Miriam's mother was also buying one for herself. After the realtor met with Miriam and Pam, she immediately called Miriam's mother and told her that she should not worry about Miriam. When Miriam's mother asked the realtor what she was talking about, the realtor went on to explain that it was obvious that Pam was a lesbian, but that Miriam was just going through a phase and would soon be normal again when she got away from Pam.

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Miriam's mother was shocked and immediately told Miriam and Pam what happened. When confronted, the realtor apologized, but in her apology, she whispered the word lesbian. When asked why, she said her children were in the room and she did not want to expose them to that lifestyle. Miriam and her mother filed a complaint with the realty company and the Better Business Bureau about the actions of the woman. The most incredible aspect of this story is the woman honestly thought she was doing Miriam's mother a favor. Each of us, including me, could recount similar stories of discrimination we had faced.

Safety, therefore, could be conceptualized in many different ways. For the participants in the focus group, September 11th did not represent "a loss of safety." It was a continuation of an unsafe existence. Miriam and Pam talked about this continuation while recounting the experience that they, their son, my daughter, and I had at the New Jersey Gay and Lesbian cultural festival.

> Miriam: And actually it was also wonderful that the gay cultural festival went on and it was particularly poignant that we were there when the bombing [of Afghanistan in retaliation for the September 11th attacks] began.
>
> Richard: Yeah.
>
> Miriam: I don't even know what to say about that. It was so scary. In a way it felt good to be part of a community when that was happening, even though it was like that community was kind of ignoring that it was happening and just kind of went on. But in the back of my mind I was thinking, there is bombing going on over there, but we could be bombed here for being gay.
>
> Elyse, Simone, Pam, Zach, and Richard *[at once]:* Right.
>
> Miriam: By people in our own country. Americans. You know. I had more of a fear of that than being attacked from without. And before we left to go to the festival, I told my brother that we were going and we were bringing the baby, and he asked if it was safe, and he wasn't referring to the Twin

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Towers or to terrorists from without.

Elyse: Right.

Miriam: He was thinking was it safe for the baby because there might be some jerk who might beat us up for being gay.

Richard: Mm hm.

Miriam: So all of that tied together that day. And it definitely put a damper on the festivities. *[all laugh].* We left not long after.

Pam: Yeah, but I have to admit that I had just a brief moment of anxiety at the festival when we put the [rainbow] sticker on the baby stroller because I felt like we were pasting a big target on there. For just a moment, but it passed. Of course, I've been out a lot less, a shorter amount of time than Miriam has, and things still get disturbed every now and then. And even though we're at the gay and lesbian festival, I felt like we're targeting ourselves as lesbians. You have to think about [the danger], but then do [what you were doing] any way.

Elyse: Right, and the thing is that straight people who more often than not, and maybe not straight people who are not white, but straight people can most of the time can go through life without going to a festival where a little piece of you is like, "Well there is a possibility of danger," because pretty much everything you do if you choose to allow to let people know that you are gay, you are opening up a slight possibility of danger.

This above passage shows many things. For one, the people at the festival continued to enjoy themselves when they heard about the bombings. This underscores the ways in which gay and lesbian people continued their existence seemingly unaffected in the face of this apparent new danger. It also shows how Miriam and her heterosexual brother worried about their safety in a situation that had nothing to do with September 11th. They and their baby could be unsafe in a seemingly safe environment. Pam's reaction to placing a rainbow sticker (a gay symbol) on the baby stroller dramatically emphasizes this point. Even in a place that was supposed to be "ours" and therefore safe,

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she questioned their safety.

This fear that Pam experienced is not groundless. Gay bashers often come to gay locations or events in order to more easily find someone to bash. For example, Matthew Shepard was taken from a gay bar before he was killed. Stonewall happened because the police continually came into a gay bar in order to harass and arrest gay people[17]. Because of this, even our "safe spaces" are sometimes fraught with the possibility of danger.

Therefore, safety is an issue that is at once legal, physical, emotional and omnipresent. Because we have always lived with the possibility of being unsafe and because our own county continues to discriminate against us, the people in the focus group were suspicious of almost everything that we were being told September 11th. Although recognizing the death toll was truly tragic, the participants noted that the American response to September 11th was far different from the response to previous terrorist events. They referred more than once to the events of Oklahoma City, where the media told us that Arab terrorists were responsible, but in reality, a white supremacist was. They also referred to the bombing of Atlanta lesbian nightclub, the Other Side. In each of those cases, the government did not attack the perpetrators as zealously as the

[17] More than 30 years after Stonewall, we continue to be in danger from the law. Puerto Rico, the U.S. military and sixteen states (Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Idaho, Kansas, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Texas, Utah, and Virginia), have laws against sodomy (Sodomy Laws, October 14, 2001). In Arkansas, Kansas, Missouri, Oklahoma, and Texas, the sodomy laws apply only to "homosexuals." Alabama's sodomy law does not apply to married couples. This exemption is noteworthy because no state recognizes gay marriages, and thirty-five states do not recognize same-sex marriages issued in other states. Even though sodomy is legal in Ohio, a man asking another man to have sex is a First Degree Misdemeanor and carries a six to seven month prison sentence (State Sodomy Laws, July 3, 2001). The majority of states with sodomy laws are in the South, but more liberal areas of the country still have sodomy laws on the books. Massachusetts, for example, has a felony "crime against nature" law (applicable only to anal intercourse) that carries a 20-year imprisonment penalty, and Minnesota waited until 2001 to remove its sodomy laws.

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response to September 11th has been.

Zach: As soon as I recovered from the initial shock of "oh-my-god. I can't believe someone has attacked our institutions here in America." which is problematic any way, I thought of the gay bomb in Atlanta where someone just put a shrapnel bomb in the middle of a lesbian bar – which is nuts. Like the people at work saying it's got to be the Arabs, when in fact, Oklahoma City was just a lunatic American.

Richard: And apparently the guy who did the [bombing at the Atlanta lesbian bar The] Other Side was just some white guy who ran off and hid in the mountains when the FBI went after him.

Zach: And the Unabomber [was a white guy who terrorized the mail before Anthrax].

Elyse: *[sarcastically]* How unusual that it was some white guy.

Richard: They are saying also that attacks on abortion clinics and Planned Parenthood have gone way up.

Simone: Mm hm. What better time to hide your activities because they are going after non-white people right now, so you know, they don't have time to be bothered. They can harass every Arabic looking person who walks through the airport regardless of what their affiliations are, but they can't be bothered to look at domestic terrorism. I mean I got into more fights with people over the fact that well, you know, we're going to go and we're going to attack everyone who has everything to do with supporting Osama bin Laden and this group that bombed the World Trade Center, but when Tim McVeigh bombed the Oklahoma City Federal Building, we didn't go and look for the enclaves of white supremacists who supported him and gave him monetary backing to do these things. And we didn't go bombing people's homes.

The fact that we, as gay and lesbian people, live with a threat of violence every day meant that after the initial shock, there was not that much a difference in the way in which we led our lives after September 11th. Many of the participants made decisions immediately to go on with their lives. Simone and Elyse had their wedding scheduled for eleven days after the attacks and did not cancel the event. Afterwards, they had planned

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to fly to Arizona for their honeymoon, which meant boarding a plane soon after planes had been used as weapons of mass destruction. When I asked them if this was a concern, they both said that it was not.

Elyse: This is a big thing for us and um, and I just, I am just a big believer in sort of like karma, fate issues, and like I think if it is your time, your gonna get hit. That it will find you wherever the hell you are, whether you be in the air or whatever, it's no big deal. But the interesting thing is that while we were going there again more of an issue, was not so much "oh my god, there are these strange people who are going to come and bomb the plane," but it was that we were in fucking Dallas and we're two gay people in Dallas and we could get our ass kicked at any second.

Richard: Mm hm. *[Miriam laughs].*

Elyse: Same as with Phoenix. There were no people of color; the only people of color were Mexican people who were your busboys. We saw three Black men who were holding signs in a 104-degree heat without any shade and we saw Navajos working on this reservation rest stop, but for the most part everybody was white. They would ignore Simone completely.

Simone: *[laughs]* It was really strange.

Elyse: It would be like we would be at the restaurant and they would say to me "What would you like to eat?" and I would say "Pancakes," and then they would say "And what would you like to eat?" And they would be looking at me still! *[all laugh]*

Simone: They would be looking at her still! And I would be like "Hey, I'm over here!" *[all laugh]*

Pam: You should have said, "Give me some grits and ham." *[laugh]*

Elyse: "I want ham hocks and collard greens." *[laugh]*

Simone: "You got some watermelons?"

Zach: "Fried chicken."

Simone *[laughing]*: "Get me two fried chickens and a coke."

Zach: "RC Cola!"

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Elyse: That was more of an issue than anything. I mean it turned out more of a concern were the same issues that we live with every day. Being gay and being a biracial couple. That was more of an issue that some crazy Arab people or whomever coming and bombing the plane.

Simone: I think that is one of the benefits of being gay. You are so used to having threats on a daily basis that we're just like well screw it, we're just going to go ahead and go on with our lives because what choice do we really have?

As Simone states, as gay and lesbian people we are accustomed to living with the possibility of danger. This possibility informs all of our decisions about community. Her response shows something else as well. Although a sense of safety is vitally important to community for us, this need for a sense of safety does not imply weakness, cowering, or hiding from life. In fact, the sense of safety gives us strength and fortitude. As Simone put it, if you are accustomed to living with the possibility of danger, you might as well face that danger every day and live your life. Miriam and Elyse made similar comments in regard to the gay and lesbian festival and the dangers associated with being out.

That we live with the possibility of danger highlights the fact that our need for a sense of safety within community separates our definitions about community from the definitions supported by the literature. Even though the participants were strong, outgoing, and sure of themselves in many ways, the concept of safety was still important to them. As the definitions at the beginning of the chapter showed, safety runs through all of the conceptualizations the participants had about community. This attention to safety defines not only the definitions of community, but also the people with whom we choose to form community and the places we choose to have community. We stay with the people who add to our sense of strength, security, and safety. We go to the places in

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which we feel less likely to be attacked or discriminated against, recognizing that even inside those places, we have the continued possibility of danger. The next chapters focus on the issues of who inhabits our communities and where we locate our communities in more detail.

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Chapter Four

Embodying Community

When discussing community in abstract terms, it is often easy to forget that the most important component of any community is the people who inhabit it. It is necessary therefore to look at the choices people make when comprising their gay and lesbians communities. Definitions of community often rely on commonalities among its participants, and therefore sameness is important in community formation and cohesiveness. Given this, and given that numerous researchers have shown that differences inside a community can cause friction (e.g. Paul, Hays, & Coates, 1995; Rich, 1993) it would seem that similarity would foster strong communities. Some of the participants agreed with this assessment.

> Richard: Do you feel like your communities are diverse?
>
> Will: Not too diverse, I think. You tend to be with people who are more like you and have the same ideas.

If a need for sameness is important to community, perhaps it is necessary to try to more fully understand what underlies this need. It is entirely possible that, especially with gay and lesbian communities, the need for sameness is partially a need for safety. The negative results of heterosexism and homophobia are well documented and theorized (i.e. Herek, 1995). Gays and lesbians are often perceived as being outside the moral community of the heterosexual majority. When this occurs, heterosexuals (and some closeted gay men and lesbians) engage in what Opotow (1990) has called moral exclusion. She describes it this way "Moral exclusion occurs when individuals or groups are perceived as *outside the boundary in which moral values, rules, and consideration of*

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fairness apply [emphasis Opotow's]. Those who are morally excluded are perceived as nonentities, expendable, or undeserving; consequently harming them appears acceptable, appropriate, or just" (p. 1). Because of homophobia as a result of moral exclusion, gay men and lesbians are often concerned with their safety. As a result, when gay men and lesbians form communities, one aspect that is either in the forefront of their thoughts or in the back of their minds is the issue of safety. It follows then that the desire for sameness in gay and lesbian community comes from a desire to be with similar people who have experienced and successfully navigated the same sorts of oppression from societal bigotry. Therefore one of the components of the desire for sameness is a desire for safety and protection.

In spite of this, it is difficult to have communities in which everyone is the same. D'Augelli and Garnets (1995) list the "fictive" nature of an all-encompassing unilateral community as one of the main barriers to creating gay and lesbian community. A community based on only one aspect of a person's identity means that other aspects can become less salient, secondary, ignored, or abused. Every community is therefore fictive, whether that community is based on sexual orientation, gender, race, ethnicity, health status, or even of something like comic book fandom.

In spite of this, if all potential points of difference were eliminated, it would be very difficult to form any sort of community. To try to build a community in this manner would mean creating a community based entirely on people who were carbon copies of one's self. In addition to having an incredibly boring community, a person who tried to accomplish this would have an extraordinarily small one as well. Taking one participant

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for example, in order to have a community of sameness, Miriam would have to find other Jewish, lesbian, home-owning mothers (of one son) in their early thirties who have never lived any where except New Jersey and who are in love with a woman from the South who, although more than 10 years her senior, has been out for many fewer years. They would also have to share her radical lesbian feminist past, her education level, the fact that she has siblings and stepsiblings, and many of the other aspects of her identity that make her who she is. In the face of this daunting task, communities are often built on *perceived* sameness, no matter how similar or dissimilar the people in the community truly are. If the people in the community were perceived to be similar to them, they were perceived to be safe.

For example, Will noted that sameness was important to him in forming a community, but this drive for sameness did not necessarily carry out in the communities that he experienced. With him when he expressed this desire were several men ranging in age from late twenties to mid forties. Although many of the men were white, one was Filipino. Additionally, there were people whom Will included in his community who were not present that day. For example, although only men were present at the time, Will included many lesbians in his community. Will's best friend and closest point of community in Pennsylvania was Guillaume, a Black gay man from Haiti. There was obviously diversity in Will's community, but he saw the people whom he chose to include in his community as being very similar to each other, with little diversity[18]. In

[18] I experienced similar reactions from participants in another study (Barry, 2000) in which students in an ethnically diverse working class gay and lesbian group continued to turn conversations around to class, a point of commonality for them all, whenever I tried to get them to discuss the differences within their communities.

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spite of points of difference, he chose to perceive his community as very similar people. In the end, it was not the sameness, so much as the perception of it that drove people to choose others to include in their communities.

Although the perception of safety through similarity is important in building and maintaining communities, what the participants constituted as safe changed over time. In fact, one of the constant themes that emerged from the participants was that communities were not set in stone. They were dynamic and they changed as the participant changed.

Richard: So safety was a big thing in both of what y'all were saying. Do you feel like have places like that that are very safe for you?

Elyse: Yeah. I think that what, that safety has changed over time, but yeah.

Simone: Yeah, I think that what I require for feeling safe is different over time based upon how secure I feel about myself, and then at different points in time, I've been looking for safety based on being a gay person, other times I've been looking for safety based on being a person of color or being a woman or being a student or whatever portion of my identity I was trying to feel safe within, so when I talk about feeling safe within a community, it is very much contingent upon what part of myself I'm trying to protect at that point in time.

Richard: Is it easy to find places where you feel protected in multiple communities like as a woman of color who is a lesbian? Is that easy to find or more difficult? Do you have to focus on one or more? And what I just did is a bad example of how to ask questions. Give you many questions and let you choose. *[Simone, Elyse, and I laugh]*

Simone: Well actually over time my, the way in which I search for that safety has changed. That has a lot to do with how comfortable I feel. The more out I was the less I felt that I needed a safe space to be gay. Because every place that I had come out in, in which I had a positive experience, ended up being some place that I could feel safe, being gay. And now I feel more, I feel as though the communities that I create now allow me to feel safe in all of those ways. The people who I surround myself with are people who support me in all of those areas. You know whereas previously it was just, "I'm gay so I'm going to hang out with gay people and be part of the gay community."

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Although safety is ever present, what makes a person feel safe is not a static concept. Simone feels that when someone is first coming out, their need of safety is often more pronounced than it is later when they are parts of active and dynamic gay and lesbian communities that allow for more diversity. Additionally, Simone reminds us that being gay and lesbian is not always the only non-privileged status a person can have. Often a sense of safety plays a vital part in forming other non-privileged communities as well. The concept of a sense of safety therefore is not one that applies solely to gay men, lesbian, and bisexuals. It can also apply to any community that is made of a non-privileged status.

Different for Girls (Or Gender Segregation in Gay and Lesbian Community)

Because a perception of sameness is often a precursor to community, it is not unsurprising that gay and lesbian community often splits among gender lines. Although there could be many reasons for this – sexism amongst gay men, feelings of being unsafe around the other gender – many participants offered a surprising yet practical reason for such a gender split.

> Will: And I notice a lot of community's based on – a lot of little cliques and groups of friends is based on the fact that they have all dated each other or have dated someone else.
>
> Zach: Especially with lesbians. *[I laugh]* They've all dated each other. They go to a party and they can't talk to her because they've slept with her. But it is the same with boys too.
>
> Will: Yeah. Sex.
>
> Richard: Sex?
>
> Will: Yeah. It's based on sex. Especially male relationships.

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In this exchange, Zach and Will state the main reasons that they feel that there are few cross gender communities in gay and lesbian groups – community forms among the previously dated. Since the dating partners of gay men and lesbians tend to be of the same gender as the person, the result is to have fewer cross gender friendships/communities. Others independently agreed with Will's supposition. For instance, Simone said that her community was "Primarily women and it didn't help that I was always dating women from [a women's] college, because all their friends were women." Matt had this to say

> Matt: I've had sex with a lot of my friends. I mean once you get over the awkwardness. I mean I don't think that sex builds community but, for example even Emilio who was supposed to be here today, but got sick. I started out dating him for six weeks and now he's a friend of mine, and there is a thing among gay men and lesbians that a lot of former partners become friends and you sort of build a community out of your exes.

The reason that community tends to be based on past partners is due in part to the difficulty in meeting other gay and lesbian people. Unlike heterosexuals who often assume that everyone they meet is heterosexual, gay and lesbian people do not assume that everyone they meet is a gay or lesbian. When they meet someone, they must first determine the person's sexuality. Knowing that someone is gay or lesbian is made easier when two people have dated each other. Dating, of course, can mean anything from a long-term relationship to someone you had sex with once or twice. Dating partners therefore become the building blocks of community.

Since dating partners become the building blocks of community, it is often very important to find someone to date. This is not always easy. To help finding dating

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partners, many gay people move to places with large gay communities, like New York City. This had unexpected results, however. Some participants who live or lived in New York City found that the City served as a barrier to community that crossed gender lines.

> Matt: I think part of it is connected to the city. In smaller places like Fargo or Minneapolis there is more mixing. There is less gay outlets in terms of bars and centers or whatever and everyone has to come together in one place and in the City every body can segregate and go off into their little corners and there is the lesbian bars and gay bars. And part of it is the city and the ability to separate into their own groups. . .So I guess as time has gone on, I feel more separate and apart from lesbians.
>
> Richard: I did too until I moved back to the suburbs. All my friends in Georgia were lesbians and then I came to New York City. I mean, I still had a lot of lesbian friends in the city, but it wasn't the same as it was in Atlanta.
>
> Matt: Interesting.
>
> Zach: Same thing for me. In the South, all lesbians and gay men. When I lived in New York, more gay men. Now that I live back in the burbs, more lesbians.

In New York City, unlike in suburban areas or smaller cities like Minneapolis, Fargo, and Atlanta, the places in which people meet their dating partners tend to be very gender segregated. Because New York has the ability to have clubs and bars to cater to every specific whim, gay and lesbian people can choose to go only to a gay male leather bar or gay male piano bar or a lesbian dance club. In other areas of the country where space is less available, there tends to be clubs that cater to both gay men and lesbians, increasing the chance of gender diversity among community simply because there is a higher chance of meeting people of other genders.

Dating partners are not the only avenues to the creation of community, however. The participants also gave other roads, but some of these tended toward gender

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segregation as well. Miriam's first communities were based not on whom she had sex with, but with people she felt most like her. Sameness was vitally important in her original community formation, and her first communities had to have a very specific make-up. Everyone had to be a lesbian feminist radical. Although her communities were not separatist in the truest sense, they were separatist in that only lesbians were considered members. Miriam explains her progression of community.

> Richard: Is more important to be around more gay women or gay people in general?
>
> Miriam: *[Laughs]* That is a very interesting question for me, because in the past, i was much more woman-focused.
>
> Richard: Mm hm.
>
> Miriam: And it had to be a *lesbian* community *[emphasis Miriam's]*. A lesbian feminist community, and everyone had to be a lesbian feminist radical.
>
> Richard: Right.

Miriam's choice of a type of lesbian separatism mirrors similar choices made by many lesbians. The formation of lesbian separatist communities is based on the creation of spaces that separate women from all areas of male dominance. Unlike the patriarchal world at large where the exclusion of women is based on men's desire to subjugate women, the exclusion that results from lesbian separatism is based not on the will of men, but instead on the will of women[19] (Frye, 1993). In other words some women feel safer

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[19] Some lesbian separatists see separatism as the ultimate rejection of male power because it denies men all access to women's bodies. In creating separation, men are denied the traditional uses they have for women's bodies – nurturance, pleasure, sex, violence, support, bolstering male egos. In traditional relationships, women received little in return. The relationship can therefore be characterized as parasitic and not symbiotic. Critics of some gay male and lesbians coalitions believe that these coalitions have a tendency to mirror this relationship. For example coalitions based on AIDS, which affects gay men far more than it does lesbians, can result in gay men benefiting from the action of lesbians, but lesbians getting little or nothing in return (Paul, Hays, & Coats, 1995).

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and draw strength from being in women-only environments.

Although a desire for sameness is a large driving force in the creation of community, sameness does not necessarily mean stability. After all, people do change. For example, coming out of the closet is a huge transition, but it is not the only one and it is not the last one. Therefore, sameness is a nearly impossible goal, as Miriam shows when talking about the moments when her needs for community changed.

> Miriam: But those things – not that those things aren't important to me any more – but my priorities have changed, and I'm really looking for kind people *[laugh]* and nice people.
>
> Richard: Yeah.
>
> Miriam: It's come to a point where I recognize that there are some men who could be that way, and that I could be that way to, so I changed a lot, um. It's quality versus quantity too – now versus when I was younger. When I was younger, I wanted a lot of people around me and wanted my community to be large and that's not so important now. I mean I'm really happy that I've had Roxie in my life for a long time and we're *really* happy that we met you guys through her.
>
> Richard: We are too.
>
> Miriam: It's really – It's been great. The numbers of people isn't so important. So no. Men too [are now accepted in my communities.]

If a person does not evolve with the community, they can get left behind, or they can choose to go elsewhere. Miriam's own shift from a radical lesbian feminist separatism to a more inclusive stance is not unknown even amongst theorists who have experienced lesbian separatism[20] (Rudy, 2001). This does not mean that Miriam left her

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[20] Kathy Rudy (2001) noted that a separatist stance could become increasingly difficult to maintain over time due to the limiting nature that it sometimes holds. According to her, separatism is often based on one aspect of identity, such as the case of being a lesbian. Yet identities are situationally, culturally, and historically based. Often focusing on only one aspect of one's identity ignores the multifaceted nature of people's existence. Rudy cites as an example the radical feminist movements (both lesbian and

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ideals behind. The radical lesbian feminist ideals that she espoused in her previous communities are still very important to her, but now she applies what she learned there to the other communities to which she has become a part. Her definitions of community were not rigid. She adapted and her communities adapted with her.

Just as Miriam's groups changed to include men, gender segregation is not the norm for all gay and lesbian communities. Although a need for a sense of safety sometimes drives separation, it can also foster cross-gender community. The desire for safety actually outweighed the desire for gender sameness in some participants. For example, Pam, Zach, and Elyse sought their original gay community amongst people of the other gender. At times Simone, Paul, Matt, and I attached ourselves to groups of the other gender as well. When first coming out, some participants did not feel entirely safe, or comfortable, with people of their same gender, for a variety of reasons. For example, although Pam and Miriam were partners, their experience of original community was very different. Whereas radical feminist lesbians were very comforting to Miriam, they made Pam very uncomfortable. Unlike Miriam, Pam sought out community among gay men, not among lesbians. She recounts her experiences in finding community among gay men in this way.

> Pam: In fact I was almost the opposite [of Miriam]. I was intimidated by a strong group of lesbians who were *radical [emphasis Pam's. Pam, Miriam, and Richard laugh]* and I was intimidated because I wasn't radical. I didn't feel like I was on their level. I was more comfortable around people that I didn't have to try to be one of. And I didn't have to try to be a gay man *[Pam, Miriam, and Richard laugh]* So I was more comfortable.

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heterosexual) of the 1980s that were based on the experience of living in a patriarchal society in which women held a subordinate position. These groups sometimes fell apart because they concentrated on their status of women while ignoring the other statuses that they have.

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Richard: Did you feel a lot of pressure to conform while you were around strong lesbians?

Pam: I don't so much now, but at first, when I first came out and decided I'm gonna be open and whatever and *wasn't* going to be afraid, I *was* afraid *[emphasis Pam's. Pam, Richard, and Miriam laugh]*. And I was intimidated by strong opinions and things like that and before trying to join in I would hold back. I don't feel that way any more. [I might sometimes still hold back], but I don't think I feel that way any more.

Similarly Elyse and Simone have traditionally looked in various places for community, sometimes with gay men, sometimes with lesbians. Each of them, however, has had progression of communities over time. In the beginning, both of them formed community around gay men, but very different types of gay men. Simone's gay community was with Latino gay men who expressed their gender in a more stereotypically feminine way, thus making them less threatening. She quickly moved on to a community based entirely on women. Elyse had formed community with gay men who did not necessarily express their gender atypically because she has always felt more comfortable around men, whether gay or straight. Her progression to a more woman-centered community took much longer, but by the time of the interview she said, "I think you guys are our only gay male friends." Yet even then, Elyse's community was not as woman-centered, in a political way, as Simone's, and she maintains many of her friendships with heterosexual men.

Whoever was being excluded or included was based in large part on feelings of safety. This was not limited to just Simone and Elyse. Safety was pivotal to all of the respondents and their creation of community. Simone expressed it this way.

Simone: And I had that support in the gay community. That's where I felt like I was supported and felt like I was normal. I didn't feel like I had to get

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> straight people to accept me as long as I got the gay community to accept me, then I could stay there and I could feel like that was my haven and I was perfectly willing to separate myself from any straight people who were not willing to accept me. At that point in time, I had very few straight friends.

The people with whom Simone felt safe – notice that she used the word "haven" – were different at different points in her life. Recall that even though Simone quickly progressed to having community based entirely on women, her original point of entry into gay community was through gay men, partly because she felt safe around them. During much of her youth, Simone's father lived with a male partner as an openly gay man. Therefore her first association with gay community was through the gender atypical gay male friends of her father's. Elyse often commented on the fact that Simone is sometimes a gay man trapped in a lesbian's body based on her affiliations for gay male things. In spite of this, Simone had issues surrounding safety and men due to sexual abuse that she had experienced as a child. Simone explained her original draw to gay male community and the issues of safety surrounding it in this way.

> Simone: When I first came out at [college], I had a lot of gay male friends. Not real close friends, but guys I hung out with all the time. Most of them were Latina, well, Latino, well, Latina really. They were all queens, pretty much and I mean we just had a real connection a real bond.
>
> Richard: Did you feel more of a connection with them because they were more womanly?
>
> Simone: More feminine? Absolutely. And so I think that as I started to deal with the issues of sexual abuse when I was in college, I separated myself from men. And I really didn't have very many men in my life at all.
>
> Richard: Even the Latina queens?
>
> Simone: They had all actually left the university at that point. So I didn't have that little enclave any more and so most of the men in my life . . . were

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> straight men who had I had met because we were either next door neighbors or we became roommates off campus or they were friends of my roommates. Um, but other than that, I really didn't have very many men in my life. Primarily women and it didn't help that I was always dating women from [a women's] college, because all their friends were women.

Richard: So the separation from men was it partly about being a lesbian, or was it about the abuse that you went through?

Simone: It was partly about being a lesbian, but it was more about the abuse that I had gone through because I perceived all men as dangerous. At that point as I was beginning to deal with my own issues, it was really a matter that I was combative with every man that I came in contact with and so they really didn't want to be around me. *[Elyse and I laugh]*. I separated myself from men and I would purposely pick fights with them.

Although Simone felt a comfort in her Latino (or in her and their term Latina) male gay men, she still had discomfort around men in general due to safety issues. Part of this was due to her abuse by a male relative when she was young. Men were less safe to her and she therefore eventually sought the company of women. Yet part of her separation was also due to being a lesbian. Unlike heterosexual women who feel unsafe around men, lesbians who feel unsafe can cut men out of their lives completely. Heterosexual women who perceive men to be dangerous may eventually want to interact with them due to sexual attraction. Lesbians who perceive men as dangerous can more easily choose not to interact with them.

Of course, it is not always so easy either socially or biologically to delineate who is a man and who is a woman. Transgender individuals have come to be accepted into many gay, lesbian, and bisexual political groups based on the notion that gender is a socially constructed label and that the true diversity of gender expression is multi-faceted and ever changing. In spite of Simone's feeling that men were dangerous, she still

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formed her original gay and lesbian community with gay men, but only a certain type of gay men – those who expressed gender in more traditionally female ways. They were therefore safer than more traditionally "male" acting gay men would have been. Simone played with the fluidity of the male/female dichotomy by calling her friends both Latino and Latina. Transgender individuals played an important part in Simone's life in other ways as well. In spite of having relatively few male friends, one of Simone's best friends was born a woman but is now a man.

This construction of what is acceptable for men and women added another facet into why there is sometimes a separation between gay men and lesbians. Several of the gay men in this study thought that it was actually much easier to be a lesbian in United States society than it was to be a gay man. This perception mirrored the perceptions of a group of younger gay men whom I interviewed of a previous study (Barry, 1997). They too believed that it was easier to be a lesbian than to be a gay man because it was safer for women to show love to each other.

These perceptions are contrary to the findings of large study of gay men and lesbians conducted by the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation in 2001. In this study, gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals across the country recounted their experiences being gay, lesbian, or bisexual. The results obtained indicated that it was not, in fact, easier to be a lesbian than to be a gay man. For example, lesbians were more likely than gay men to experience discrimination based on their sexual orientation (85% of the lesbians surveyed compared to 76% of the gay men). Additionally more lesbians than gay men believed that violence against gay and lesbians had increased in the last 10 years (55% compared

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to 40%) and were more likely to be afraid of physical attack (59% compared to 40%). The only place in which gay men experienced more abuse was in the case of verbal attack based on sexual orientation, but the difference was minimal (82% of gay men experienced verbal attacks versus 79% of lesbians). In all cases, gay men and lesbians were more likely than bisexuals to be the victims of discrimination and to feel that they had the possibility of being the victims of discrimination.

If a national survey reports that lesbians do not, in fact, have it easier than gay men fitting into modern society, then what accounts for this difference in perception? The answer lies in the relative privileges of men and women in society and what is socially acceptable behavior for each of them. The following exchange elucidates this further:

> Will: Lesbians have it a lot easier.
>
> Paul: I don't think so.
>
> Will: If you see two women walking down the street holding hands people think it's cute, you know.
>
> Paul: Well, they used to think that, well women do communicate easier with each other, especially out in open life. Whereas a [straight] man would think [negatively] should I hold [Jaime's] hand . . . like in the Wall Street area, but like I think, like I said that hiding it is bad. You should be open more. . . And the more that people see that like maybe a little hug here or something like that and let guys and other people see that you are doing that so that people won't be looking the other way and thinking oh my god, I can't believe that people did that in front of us, especially if they have their kids out or their family out, I think it would help for the gay life to expand.
>
> Richard: So, Will, you were saying that you think it is easier for lesbians?
>
> Will: Yeah.

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Richard: How so?

Will: It's more acceptable. It's easier for them to have kids and it's more acceptable to be out there.

Zach: Well, to me. I mean I'm just throwing in my two cents. I think one of the reasons that it is more acceptable is that sexism makes women's place in society automatically lower so it's more acceptable because men don't give a damn what they do anyway. I mean not us, like me and you, but other men. Straight men.

Paul: That's true.

Zach: They are already in a derogated position. So if they are already in that lower position and if we don't really care what they do – I mean *we [emphasis Zach's]* obviously care what they do, but – it's probably easier for them because it's already harder for them. It's already worse for them so it becomes easier. Lesbians in particular.

Richard: Do y'all agree with that?

Zach: I mean you don't have to agree.

Paul: Yeah.

Zach: I mean it's hard for any gay people, male or female.

Jaime: I also think that straight people, and I'm talk about men, straight men, they don't really accept men holding hands in public or whatever. So that's why, but the ladies, straight ladies they can accept that because they might hold hands with their sisters or whatever, but in the men, it is unusual to hold hands.

Paul: It doesn't look masculine. You are supposed to be the stronger sex and you are giving away the fact that you can be just as soft as women and they don't like it. They try to be like butch, don't hug each other like that, slap each other around, go fight or whatever. They see it that way.

The issue of some gay men's perceptions is complicated. While it may be true that it is more socially acceptable for women to hold hands and show affection in public than it is for men, women also, as Zach pointed out, hold a less privileged position in

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society as a whole. But, as the study done by the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundations shows, there is more to worry about than the simple ability to hold hands in public. Of course, Will's position is still tied to the relative safety of being able to express affection in a public area. He fears that if he showed affection, he would suffer physically. Although he was not thinking of the lower earning power of lesbians or the lower social power of women in society, he was thinking about safety. In my previous study mentioned earlier, the young gay men were also thinking about the safety of being able to express affection. Because of social roles concerning appropriate gender behavior, several of the gay men in the study thought it was "easier" (i.e. safer) for women than for men to publicly express affection to each other. The trade off, however, is less social power and a higher probability of experiencing violence in other areas of their lives.

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner? (Or Race in Gay and Lesbian Communities)

The socially constructed categories of male and female were not the only categories of interest in forming community. In addition to asking participants about community and gender, I also asked them about community and race and ethnicity. Many of them expressed a desire for their communities to be racially diverse yet experienced different levels of success in achieving this diversity. Matt was one of the more successful. Although white, his current partner is Billy who is half-white, half Native American. Before Billy, Matt dated Emilio, who was Latino, and before Emilio, his boyfriend Charles was Black. Matt discusses the issues around ethnic diversity and gay community this way

> Matt: Well, I guess I kind of like that and a certain value has been attached to diversity now, and it is, well, the thing is. I think about where I live,

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> though. Living in New York by definition you would have a diverse – well, not necessarily. You wouldn't necessarily have a diverse set of contacts. You could very much live within your own envoy and talk with and deal with white friends and stuff, and I guess most of my friends are white, but then again in the city, there is such a mix of people so you are more likely to meet, hang out with, date, and have sex with people of all kinds of races and ethnicities. . . .I think that there's – well, community is complicated and it's not monolithic and there are many parts to it and, for example, I think that there is a Black gay community which is very distinct from a larger white gay community. And I think that's it's a different kind of culture and a different set of issues and it's one of the reasons that I think HIV is spreading at different rates in these different communities. It's not that they don't connect, but I think that there are separate spaces.

Matt felt that even though white people and people of color may share a sexual orientation, there exists a possibility of a disconnect due to differences in culture. A need for sameness arises that is similar to the one experienced by people over gender. Just as an all female group can give lesbians strength around sexism and homophobia, an all gay or lesbian community of color can help fight racism and homophobia.

There is a perception that the overarching gay community, as represented by national political groups and glossy gay and lesbian magazines, is primarily white. The point of entry into gay community for many people of color, therefore, is among white gay and lesbian people. Emphasizing this tension, Ryan, Longres, and Hoffman (1996), in a study of African-, Latin- and European-American gay men with AIDS reported that African-American and Latin-American gay men are significantly more likely than European-American gay men to be partnered with or in a friendship circle with people from a different ethnic background. In fact, some African American gay men in their study reported only one or no other African American gay person among their friendship circle. This highlights a very real dilemma for gay and lesbian people of color. They

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sometimes face a choice of whether to align communally with other people of color who could help them be protected against societal racism or align themselves with other gay and lesbian people who could help protect them from societal homophobia and heterosexism. Each choice can have negative consequences.

This was a dilemma faced by Jaime who was Filipino American. Although born in Hawaii, he had spent much of his life in the Philippines. As a result of American colonial expansion during the Spanish American War, the Philippines were an American colony for over 50 years. Because of this, Filipinos have a complicated relationship with the United States. On the one hand, they share strong Western influence and ties due to the colonialism, and on the other, the United States often views the Philippines as being somehow less advanced based on this same colonialism (Rodriguez, 1996).

This colonial influence shows itself in the different ways in which homosexuality is viewed by Filipinos in the Philippines and by Filipino Americans. *Baklas*[21] (or Filipino men assuming a female role) and gay men are viewed with relative tolerance and openness in the Philippines, but they are viewed with relative intolerance in Filipino-American communities. Pre-colonial Philippines held women in an important and egalitarian role in society. Therefore "switching" from one gender to the other, as is the presumed case in *baklas*, held relatively little demotion in status. Women did not hold this egalitarian role in the Western cultures (Spanish and then American) that colonized

[21] Traditionally, there are three types of homosexuality experienced in males in the Phillippines (Rodriquez, 1996). One is the *bakla*. The *bakla* is a man who has taken on the role of a woman in sexual and cultural matters. He is usually the receptive partner in sexual activities. The second is the call-boy and the heterosexual men who trade their sexuality for money or favors. They do not usually consider themselves homosexual and take the more active role. Finally there is the homosexual union in which the men see themselves as egalitarian and equal, with no one person taking the active partner status. Jaime was in the third category. This category is much more Western in influence.

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the Philippines. In both cultures at the time of colonization, women were seen to be of less social importance and have less social status than men. The more Westernized the culture became, the less status being a woman held. Therefore more and more stigmatization was associated with gay men due to their being equated with women.

Jaime experienced such tension around his ethnicity and homophobia. He was reluctant at first to come out to his family because he thought they would reject him. His family was important to him because of their shared heritage and his cultural tradition of valuing a communal rather than individual outlook on life. Once he came out to them, at the Statue of Liberty, they fully accepted him and his relationship with Paul. In fact, Jaime is now out to his entire family, all of his friends, and to the people he works with. His partner, Paul, who is white, was not out to many people in his life. As a result of this, much of Jaime and Paul's circle was based on Jaime's community. Jaime's circle of friends and his community were entirely Filipino and almost entirely heterosexual. Because of this, Jaime's primary source of community was not necessarily gay people, but instead Filipino people. The decision can be based, in part, on which community seems safest. Paul and Jaime explain.

Richard: What is your community, then?

Paul: Right now? Ourselves. And a lot of his Filipino friends. Financially if we get established and get a home like Will, then we can know more about what is going on in the gay community and what's going into it. Then we can be more a part of the gay community.

Richard: Then it seems like part of your community is the Filipino community, and I assume they are not all gay.

Paul: They are all straight.

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Jaime: Most of my friends are straight. I don't why.

Paul: Most of our friends are Filipino period. We're comfortable with them.

Richard: Do you wish you had gay Filipino friends?

Jaime: Yeah.

Richard: Do you know any other gay Filipino people besides yourself?

Jaime: I know two. I have two gay Filipino friends. I'm still working out how to mix them with gay life. One wants me to go out with him and show him the gay life, and he wants to meet other nationalities, because he always hangs out with the straight Filipino community and he says "I'm sick and tired of it. I want to see gay people." That's why I was telling him, I have Will with me, and he's looking for someone. *[Jaime, Paul, Will, and I laugh].*

Jaime expressed a struggle that exists for many gay and lesbian people of color. On the one hand, he wanted to be with his ethnic community and have a communal connection to Filipinos. On the other hand, he also wanted a connection to the gay community, a community seen by many as being primarily white. Jaime wanted more gay Filipino friends, but most of the gay people that he met were not Filipino, and most of the Filipino people he knew were not gay. He even suggested that his gay Filipino friend date Will, also white. Paul too saw that as a struggle. He valued the friendship and community of the Filipino community to which he had attached himself through Jaime, but he also wanted to be involved with more gay people, and almost all the gay people that he knew were white.

Paul: They are very nice to us and they respect us and all of his friends know we are gay. I don't want straight community right now, I want more gay life. If we aren't going to push into the gay life, I don't want the heterosexual life to be there constantly like that. Let us be free for a little bit. He just doesn't get away from his friends.

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At this point in the conversation, Jaime's cell phone rang. He spoke on the phone briefly and we waited for him to get off the phone before resuming the interview.

Jaime: That was some of my Filipino friends, actually. They are coming to our place to get something.

Paul: See, we aren't even there and they are going to our place. *[Jaime, Paul, and I laugh]*

Of course, the options are not limited to either white gay people or straight people of color. Gay people of color have been very active in forming groups based on being both of color and gay or lesbian. Jaime, however, did not know very many Filipino gay people and wanted to know more. In that way, his community would be with people who were experiencing the same things he was, homophobia and heterosexism in a heterosexual environment as well as racism in a white dominated society.

Other participants expressed similar concerns. For instance, Billy was half-Native American and half white. He felt that it was very important to have a diverse group of gay and lesbian friends, as he emphatically and quickly affirmed when asked the following question.

Richard: How important is it to you for your community to be diverse as it relates to ethnicity?

Billy: Very important.

Part of this importance was due to the fact that Billy felt cut off from his own culture. Unlike Jaime, Billy's communal group was with gay people and not necessarily with Native Americans. Although many of the gay people that he knew were ethnically diverse, none were Native American (Billy had never met Simone). This was due in part to there being relatively few Native American people with whom he could make contact

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in New York. The United States has a long history of trying physically and culturally to eradicate Native Americans from the environs of the country. One only has to look to such actions as smallpox infested blankets, the Trail of Tears, and the use of Native Americans as mascots for ball teams to see in what little regard white America has held Native Americans[22]. Even though Billy's grandmother lived on the reservation, in many ways he felt cut off from his own heritage because of this history of degradation. Part of Billy's emphasis on diversity was due to feeling cut off from his heritage.

> Billy: I didn't really dig into my Native American roots until I got a little bit older, and when I lived in Minneapolis, I met this very wise woman named Morgan and she really helped me, and she – you – I went to a couple of pow wows with her and went to the reservation. I mean, I had been to the reservation because I went to the dentist there because we didn't have insurance and we lived close enough that I could go to the reservation and get it there. And my grandmother lived on the reservation for a long time. But I didn't really dig for Native American culture until I was older, and now that I have learned more. I haven't sought it as much here in New York but I did march with the gay men of color.
>
> Richard: In what?
>
> Billy: In Minneapolis pride. I mean it is important to me to a point, but it's not something that defines me completely.

Although part of Billy's tensions around his Native American heritage comes from feeling cut off from the history of his people, another part comes from his being biracial. He was both white and Native American. As has been mentioned previously, biracial children often feel the same type of isolation that many gay and lesbian children feel. They are a part of yet separated from their family and larger community. Because

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[22] Even the term most commonly associated with Native American same-gender sexuality, *berdache*, is not a Native American word. It is instead a corruption of an out of date Mid-east term meaning male sex slave. It completely ignores the terminology of different Native peoples and the multi-gender ideology of the

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Billy was relatively light skinned, people often made the assumption that he was white. His own family played up their whiteness and played down their Native American heritage in order to fit in better with the almost completely white community that surrounded them in North Dakota. This led to tensions around acculturation and assimilation that often plague people from different cultures when trying to fit in to the dominant American culture. The belief is that the more assimilation a person experiences into a culture, the less rejection and racism experienced by the assimilated person. This is often not the case, however. Dominant American culture only allows assimilation up to a certain point, always viewing the assimilated person as being different from and not really a part of mainstream America (Rodriguez, 1996). This is especially true of Native Americans. The Trail of Tears itself was centered primarily on groups such as the Cherokee, who of all Native American peoples most fluently assimilated into white mainstream culture, even up to inventing their own alphabet, adopting Western forms of dress, and creating Western schools and newspapers. Yet no matter how assimilated they believed themselves to be, the United States still assumed "foreignness" or "otherness." Just as Billy embraced being gay in a straight world, he was also coming to embrace his Native American heritage in a family that sometimes denied or down played this same heritage.

Being a person of mutli-ethnic heritage often allows a critique of the category of race, just as being a gay or lesbian person can allow a critique of heterosexuality. Billy and Simone were multi-racial. Whereas Billy's family down played its multi-racial

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words – like *nadleeh*, or the Crow's *bote*, or the Lakota's *winkte* – that it replaced, and is therefore falling out of favor with many Native American scholars (Tafoya & Wirth, 1996).

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heritage. Simone's family had diverse views about theirs. Simone's mother stringently tried to deny that she came from different ethnic and racial backgrounds, but other members of Simone's family did not deny their heritage. Simone's mother was half Italian, half African American. Simone's father was Haliwa-saponi, a Native American triracial isolate group, part African American, part Native American, and part Scots-Irish. Because of her being from several multi-racial groups, Simone had this to say about to say about race and its salience in her formation of community.

Simone: Because I am from mixed race background, multi-racial background really, I've always struggled with what my racial identity was. And I felt like I really didn't belong in any one community. I didn't belong in the white community, even though I'm Italian. I didn't belong in the Black community even though I'm African American and I didn't belong in the Native American community even though I'm Native. Um, so I really never had a community I considered my own. And in a lot of ways, I still don't have that community and I've come to see that sense of community almost as a false one.

Richard: How do you mean?

Simone: Because race is so constructed, and because no one is really just one. Well, first of all race is a made up category, but even ethnicity, another made category, but at least geographically based.

Richard: Right. *[laugh]*

Simone: Not that geographic boundaries are not also made up but someone had to start somewhere, damn it. *[Simone, Elyse, and I laugh]*. No one is one ethnicity. No one is from one single background. You know. And that goes for Black, white, beige, green, it doesn't matter, you have some sort of mix of ethnicity in your background. I've met very few people who both of their parents are from the same exact ethnic background. And I know that's just part of my coping mechanism. I want to see race as not a salient category. It can't be. Because for me I don't fit in any of them. It is something I don't want to work. So I know I have a stake in claiming that.

In terms of my own identity, I've gone through different periods when I have tried to associate more or less with one particular community

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> in order to develop or establish that tie. Or to *[pause]* give my identity some shape. In terms of my Italian ethnicity. It's like that is sort of built into my family structure because that is half of what my mother is, although my mother identifies as African American, she's still half Italian, and so the only real tie we have is food, but that is very important in my family. You know how to cook Italian food. And that is a marker of your belonging in that community, the ability to be able to reproduce the dishes. But other than that, we don't have any other tie because my grandmother was kicked out of her family for having married a Black man.

Simone's struggle with race as a category of community formation highlights how race is a constructed category, albeit one with much power in the United States. Much of her own struggles about which community to align herself made lie of the easy dichotomy that a person has only two choices – either they go with the community of color and face homophobia or they go with the gay community and face racism. For Simone, there was no easy racial group to put herself into. The same was true for Billy.

The struggle for whom to align themselves communally was not limited to the participants of color. Pam and Zach felt struggles around being Southerners in a Northern society; Miriam felt struggles around her Jewish and lesbian identities. In fact, there are choices that are always made around the composition of community, and many of them have to do with who provides you with the safest place at the moment. Even sexuality did not always provide an easy avenue for community. All of the participants stated or intimated that they did not feel safe with all gay or lesbian people. Often the safest place was with people who shared similar ideals and ideology, not necessarily gender or race (even though ideologies can be race or gender-based). For the participants, often those ideals were ones of multiculturalism and diversity.

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A Touch of Class (Or Class Based Community and Sexual Orientation)

Class also played an important part in the formation of my participants' communities. The majority of the participants were fairly well educated – nearly all had a Bachelor's, and at least three had Master's degrees (although one did not finish high school and eventually got a GED). For many of them, education was part of a class trajectory. Many participants (but not all) started out working class or poor and were trying to work their way to middle class or upper middle class. This trajectory could be seen in many of the choices and opportunities available to them – owning homes, having children, seeking out stable and relatively well paying employment. Part of this came from what they were taught growing up. These things offered security and stability. They offered safety and protection from poverty.

Yet there were other types of safety middle class trajectories offered as well. For instance, Zach felt that although middle class educated white people were just as racist and homophobic as the working class people that he grew up with, they, especially those in academia, had a culture of silence around these issues. They knew they were not supposed to talk ill of people with ethnicities or sexualities that were different from their own, even if they thought that these differences were indicative of some deficiency. In other words, they may be racist and homophobic, but they knew when to be quiet about it.

> Zach: I grew up pretty working class and my parents moved to this area of North Carolina when I was a teenager, and it was basically either all poor people [or] a university community. My mom always wanted to move us in the direction in the "high" class. You know, "You've got to have more education, better cars, better clothes." She didn't really want to be part of the poor people because that was "bad." And when I moved there it was a

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> ready made group of people based on their academic proclivities and they just lumped me in with those people because they didn't know what to do with me because I was from a small school in South Carolina. And I found they were more accepting than I was accustomed to hearing about. I didn't know how people actually were, but I remember growing up with "Fag" and racial epithets and that was a lot of working class. But these [middle class academic] people said that was "wrong," and they were educated and had read all the books, and it was "wrong." And you weren't supposed to do that; you weren't supposed to talk about that. "You have to let people be what they wanted to be." And every one of them had therapist and all of them had whatever, and I was working class, but nobody knew that because we were in a company house in a nice neighborhood. And every thing changed and I had this whole different view of white people, because they were all white, every damn one of them, but they were very different from the white people I grew up with. So I found this sort of upper middle class, educated group of white people was very different. And so I gravitated right towards them. I was like they don't care if I'm a little weird and a little gay and whatever else.

Elyse: A little gay?

Zach: Well, I wasn't out then. And ever since then in that quote "community" – I guess if you can call it a community – and in there people don't say racial things. Not to say all of them aren't racist in some way or homophobic.

Zach gravitated to this community because it *seemed* safer to him, in part because the people in it would not call him "fag," even if they really thought it. Zach points out that in a more "middle class" academic community, he was instructed not to say racist or homophobic things, but he makes the important distinction that the middle class people he was around were not necessarily non-racist and non-homophobic. They simply knew how to hide it behind language. Zach's ability to move into this class was based on two things – the people in the town did not know he was working class, and he had the grades necessary to move in academic circles. Therefore he moved into a middle class group (even though it meant having to hide his working class background) through academia. Moving into an academic community meant adopting the cultural values of academia.

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and those values are highly classed. Academics, after all, are "middle class," if not in money, at least in aspirations.

Zach's choice, however, highlights an aspect that has been important throughout this dissertation. He chose to go to a place that seemed safe, even if were not completely a safe environment. Although less so now, academia in the past has been hostile not only to gay people, but also to women, people of color, and to the working class and poor. Each of these groups has a healthy suspicion of academia as a result. The delineation however is not so clean. There are, of course, academics who, like Zach, come from working class backgrounds. Yet this is often hidden because working class people trade their position as objects of study for studier only once they have adopted the class values of academia (Kadi, 1994). Additionally, academia is a culture of words,[23] and often it "hides behind words" to lay blame for societal problems at the feet of less powerful groups. An example of this is the idea that the working class and the poor are responsible homophobia (Elliot, 1994b). This not only is not true,[24] but also hides the fact that many gay and lesbian people are from working class and poor backgrounds. For instance,

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[23] Language is another way of distinguishing between classes. The words of power in this country are associated with Middle class and wealthy people. In keeping with this theme the very word "vulgar" means "common." In other words, vulgar language is the language of the common people, and therefore not appropriate. Elliot (1994a) a lesbian theorist from a working class background further elucidates this point "Whenever a dyke asks me why I think there hasn't been a really good anthology about class and classism (the kind of dyke I'm thinking about would probably use the word "definitive"), I want to turn to her and not say a thing and see if she gets it. (p. 337)"

[24] In relation to sexuality, academics and the general public alike present working class white people as responsible for racism, sexism, and homophobia. Although working class people of color are not presented as being responsible for racism, they are often presented as being partly responsible for sexism and homophobia. This hides the fact that it is the rich that set up the racist, sexist, and homophobic policies in the first place. Often these policies put working class and poor people, both white and of color, in competition for the same limited resources. Therefore, the anger between them grows as a result of this competition. This allows the upper Classes to put the blame of the ills of society on the poor, both poor people of color and poor white people (Elliot, 1994b).

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Zach, Pam, Billy, Will, Paul, and Simone all commented on their own working class or poor backgrounds.

There may be another underlying reason that Zach gravitated towards Middle Class Academics as a perceived area of safety. Murray Healy (1996) wrote extensively on the association between class and sexuality. According to Healy, the stereotype of gay men is one of wealth and effeteness. The notion of the gay man as rich and effete meant that he had to be from upper classes. The working class was seen to be rough, rude, nearly barbaric, and therefore no gay person could be from the working class. The relationship among lesbians and class worked in the opposite way. Whereas gay men were perceived to be rich, lesbians were perceived to be rough and tumble, so the stereotype worked in reverse. Lesbians were like rough men; rough men were working class; therefore lesbians must be working class. Working class people do not matter therefore lesbians do not matter. The attention of the "gay community" therefore becomes the wealthy or elite gay men. Gay men and lesbians are subtly told if they want to be "gay" (as opposed to lesbian with its working class connotations) they have to accept Middle Class values, including the language and manners used by them.

The following exchange between Billy, Zach, Matt, and me elucidates the trickiness of that class-line crossing to be "gay." Matt's background was upper Middle class, but he now worked in an AIDS research center and did not have access to the wealth of his formative years. Even though Matt now had much less money than his parents did, for him becoming gay was not a matter of crossing class lines. For Zach and Billy, it was. Billy, like Zach grew up working class. Unlike Zach, however, he did not

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have access to the middle classes through academia. Because of this, Billy placed much emphasis on the perceived "gay" stereotype of rich, well-dressed, fabulous men. He aspired to be that, yet because of his background and lack of access, he could not afford to be part of that group.

> Billy: I think that in the gay community a lot of people are separated by the way that you dress and the way you look and you did say that about that. I think it is very true and people judge and gay people are very quick to judge. I think that . . . if you don't keep up with the trends in the gay world, then you're just [nothing] and that's just wrong.
>
> Zach: But that's definitely more true in the city. All cities, but specifically this city. Probably San Francisco and L.A. too.
>
> Billy: We just got a new floating manager and he's gay and he's got a partner and everything and I know they are probably paying him very well. But you should see how he dresses every day. Prada shoes, Armani pants, Prada shirts.
>
> Matt: And that's how he got his job.
>
> Billy: Definitely. Because he looked the part. I have no idea what his partner does, but he must spend all his money on his image. He has to. I mean wearing four or five hundred dollar shoes every day. To me that's just ridiculous. Even if I did have that money, I don't think I would.
>
> Richard: Yes you would. Don't even lie.
>
> Billy: *[laugh]* I guess I shouldn't say for any body else, but I'm a materialistic bitch also. I like nice things and I like labels. And now I feel like I'm in competition at work. *[Billy, Matt, Zach, and I laugh].* I was the best-dressed one before! Why did he have to come along? He's ruining every thing.

Billy felt that his inability to have wealthy trappings was a barrier to his ability to completely fit in with the overall gay community. Lack of access to these trappings can also be a barrier to the ability of gay men and lesbians to form a community together. Women have less earning power than men, and in a lesbian household, that inequality can

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be magnified. In that same conversation in which Billy expressed his frustrations at not fitting into the middle class gay idea of what it meant to be gay, Zach and Matt talked about the class as a barrier to gay and lesbian community.

> Matt: A couple of lesbian friends have kind of adopted a very, it's a stereotype, but in this particular case it's true, but a very political, very serious, kind of nothing can be funny attitude where they look at us and they think that we are being frivolous and materialistic.
>
> Zach: I also wonder if it hasn't become sort of a cultural stereotype about the seriousness of lesbians, but I wonder if that is also because of the reduced earning power of lesbians, they can't be materialistic, because as women and lesbians their earning power is lower than gay men. I mean this is all theoretical.
>
> Matt: I think that is absolutely true.
>
> Zach: So they can't have more stuff than we do, but what they can do is be smarter than we are. More important than we are. In some cases, but I know other people who are not like that. It seems to depend on the people and where they are. It seems like definitely in New York, it's almost like a cultural phenomenon based on location, because in New York in general, it is worse for that kind of thing period.

In his discussion, Zach shows how class can lead gay men and lesbians to form different communities. With less earning power, many lesbians often are in a different economic class than many gay men.

In spite of this, it is often difficult to neatly categorize people based on these conceptualizations. Just as gender and class are often related, race and class are often related as well. For example, although the people in Zach's town were not overtly racist, they still lived in a practically all white enclave. Although the white middle class people that Zach went to school with would not say anything "racist," they had no problem in saying things that were overtly "classist." They would talk, as his mother did, about how

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bad it was to be poor, about how "low class" "those" poor people were. If it were acceptable to make classist comments, then it becomes acceptable to make racist comments as long as the comments are aimed towards working class or poor people of color. This attack is made easier because African Americans earn much less money than do white people in the United States. Therefore classist and racist comments often come from the same place. This is in no way denying race as a powerful and dominant category in the United States today. It is possible to be a wealthy person of color and still encounter virulent and hostile racism from white people in this country, but it is also impossible to completely separate race from class. Simone expanded upon this when talking about her family.

Richard: And then your other side of the family?

Simone: Native American, but they are from what is considered a tri-racial isolate group. Um. They consider themselves to be Native American, but their actual blood background is Native, African American and Scottish. Scots-Irish. So I have a fair amount of blending in me *[Elyse and I laugh]* making it difficult to identify with anyone racial community. However I have been able to latch on, as I was starting to, say for instance the, African American community in order to better understand that part of myself, or the experience of my mother or grandfather. And recognizing it is part of my own family's history and that I share a lot of things with other people who are African American, but I share those things out of poverty, not necessarily having the same tradition.

Richard: Mm hm.

Simone: A lot of the traditions born out of poverty, I also share with poor white people, but that's over a short lifetime that I've had that I've been able to meet other people and make those associations. Um. But I've never fully fit in. . .So I really never had race as a category of community, but I've always sought out communities in which I would be safe as a multi-racial person, multi-ethnic person, who would not only accept me for what I was, but who would allow me to be all of those things and not make me choose one over the others. And most often that has been in white

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communities.

Richard: Oh really?

Simone: Mm hm. More so than in any others.

Simone acknowledges the similarities experienced by poor white people and poor people of color that link them based on poverty (Higginbotham & Weber, 1996). Remember, however, that Simone adds another layer to this conceptualization of the enmeshing of these identity categories. It is often difficult to experience one in a "pure" and separated way. For example, it may seem that Simone's experience of safety would be higher among people of color, yet she felt safest in white communities. This because the white communities in which Simone embedded herself were affected by middle class academic values. Race and class were therefore experienced simultaneously. Simone's ethnic background was multi-racial, and she did not see race as a clean category with easy delineations. The same can be said of the categories of class, gender, and sexuality. Part of the reason for this non-simplistic delineation is that all of these are interrelated, yet when conceptualized they are often separated.

Race, class, gender, and sexuality can become so enmeshed and the boundaries so blurred, in fact, that being in a more privileged group affects the negative of being in a less privileged one. For example, Elyse and Simone found that crossing class lines helped their own families to overcome lingering homophobia around their union together. Since middle class is seen as "good" Elyse and Simone's struggle to move toward more stereotypically middle class living caused Simone's mother to become less and less reluctant to accept them as a couple. Elyse recounts her and Simone's struggles with

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acceptability in Simone's family.

> Elyse: I mean, her family is very, very poor for most of her childhood, so they worked very hard to become middle class and establish themselves as middle class through different means. Some people have pursued education and some people have pursued monetary whatever and have also used religion as a way of substantiating themselves as middle class. And also are dealing with the fact that they are bi-racial and that is really difficult for them, and dealing with race and where they fit into the world based on what their ethnicity is and what their biological make-up is versus what people see when they look at them. You know.
>
> So they have taken that and watched us become more and more solidly middle class in spite of the fact that we are lesbian, um, and in some cases, almost because we are lesbians. I mean, we could not have individually bought houses, coming together and combining our finances gives us the opportunity to buy a house, and that is what translated into middle class, and whatever *[Elyse, Simone, and I laugh]*
>
> We bought a house together and we are working towards this ceremony and they are watching us become more stable while meanwhile their own lives are less stable. They are most of them dealing with some sort of instability and I think that they in dealing with their own struggles and watching us sort of struggling but at the same time pulling together as we move forward is making them recognize what is happening. People who have been very vocal and hurtful initially are really, really trying to be supportive and really trying to put aside what they have always used as justification as condemning us.

The struggles that Elyse and Simone have experienced, as well as the struggles around race and gender portrayed in this chapter have all pointed to the ways in which sexuality, race, class, and gender are all interconnected and interwoven and enmeshed. The fact that race and class can be used as proxies of each other points to a problem in how race, class, and gender are often theorized. West and Fenstermaker (1996) have noted that often when conceptualizing race, class, and gender mathematical models are used. Each is acknowledged as a mechanism of producing social inequality, but the ways in which they relate to one another is less well defined. Partly based on a Western notion of individualized and compartmentalized identities, each system is seen as standing apart

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from each other. Metaphors for understanding the ways in which each of these (separate) systems work together are often seen as additive or multiplicative (i.e. the more of each that you experience, the more, or less, oppressed you are depending on the valence of identity – i.e. white wealthy men are less oppressed by these systems than are poor women of color). Each of the other categories is simply added on to acknowledge that they are also important systems of oppression. Noting the inherent problems in this model, others have sought to think of the system as interlocking chains that are always together, working as a system of social oppression. The categories are then said to be interlocking and never separate and the image becomes more a more dynamic one than the additive notions. West and Fenstermaker note, however, that even if the categories are seen as interlocking pieces of a change, they are still conceived as being separate from each other. They argue that you cannot separate the three. "No person can experience gender *without simultaneously* experiencing race and class. (p. 363, emphasis West & Fenstermaker's)." Even the very definition of what it means to be a "woman" is affected by the race, class, and I will add, sexuality, of the person being defined as a woman.

In other words, race, class, and gender will always affect you, not as separate add-ons, but as one system of oppression. Often when theorists consider race, class, and gender they leave out sexuality completely. Whether oversight or genuine exclusion, sexuality must also be consider part of this triumvirate (as, of course, could a host of other identities that play into this social system of oppression). The participants in my study were very much aware of the enmeshed nature of these categories. Remember,

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Miriam said, "Well they are so interactive, I mean always. I mean, I'm a woman; I'm a lesbian; I'm a Jew. They are always connected." Simone noted the ways in which class cannot be divorced from race. She told me, "I share a lot of things with other people who are African American, but I share those things out of poverty, not necessarily having the same tradition. A lot of the traditions born out of poverty, I also share with poor white people."

As West and Fenstermaker said, you cannot experience one without simultaneously experiencing the others. To their three categories of race, class, and gender, I add the category of sexuality. Each of them is interconnected to the others. Because of the interconnections of each of these, it is difficult to form a community based solely on only one. This intermeshing meant that participants could perceive sameness amongst the members of their communities even if the communities themselves were diverse. It is this perception of sameness that drove the choice of who would be in the participants' communities at different times in their lives. Sometimes the participants compartmentalized their identities, for instance, they chose to focus on different aspects of their personhood at different times when searching for community. Miriam and Pam once were part of all lesbian communities. Zach, Matt, and I once had our community based on lesbians. Elyse and Will had community based mainly among gay men. Jaime, Simone, and Billy all, at different times, struggled with acceptance in their different communities based on ethnicities and sexuality. Paul and Jaime had their community among heterosexuals. Many of them crossed class lines either by joining a gay or academic community or both. In spite of this, even in these seemingly monolithic

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groups, there was diversity.

While it is certainly true that such things as race, class, and gender can serve to break communities wide open, it is also true that it is difficult to separate each of these out into "pure" categories. The people in this study formed communities at different times in their lives based on what gave them the best sense of security at that moment. What gave them security or purpose changed as they changed. Yet the things that gave them security is what led them to form community around different sets of people at different times in their lives. They were drawn to the people with whom they could feel most secure, most safe, the people who could bolster their reserves of strength. In talking about the town in which Zach grew up, Elyse perfectly sums up the draw that leads people to form community around each other.

Elyse: But if they are all white then they are racist. They segregated themselves.

Zach: There were probably fifteen Black people in the whole town, and I was drawn to them also. One person I dated was half-Black, half Vietnamese.

Elyse: But that's still self-segregation. It's not just like the ground just grows white people. *[Zach, Simone, Elyse, and I laugh]*
People choose to go where they think they are going to get what they are looking for.

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Chapter Five

Locating Community

In spite of repeated emphasis on community's being "more than a . . . geographic region," (Sarason, 1974, p. 131), place has always been important in its conceptualization. Even Sarason (1974) held the neighborhood, the city, or the physical location in which people actually live at the heart of a sense of community. When McMillan and Chavis (1986) expanded Sarason's original definition, place continued to be a focal point. Traditionally community has some sort of geographical reference to tie "sense" to "concrete location."

The importance of place is also firmly established in the conceptualization of community by gay and lesbian psychology. In spite of a lack of an in-depth theoretical exploration, community is a word that is used quite often in gay and lesbian psychology, usually in the nebulous sense of "the gay and lesbian community" which encompasses every gay and lesbian person on the planet. When a more focused analysis of community is attempted, place serves as a main nexus – places such as bars, bathhouses, YMCAs, coffee shops, and bookstores. As Bérubé (1996) writes

> Before there were any openly gay or lesbian leaders political clubs, books, films, newspapers, businesses, neighborhoods, churches, or legally recognized gay rights, several generations of pioneers spontaneously created gay bathhouses and lesbian and gay bars. These men and women risked arrest, jail sentences, loss of families, loss of jobs, beatings, murders, and the humiliation that could lead to suicide in order to transform public bars and bathhouses into safety zones where it was safe to be gay. In a nation which has for generations mobilized its institutions toward making gay people invisible, illegal, isolated, ignorant, and silent, gay baths and bars became the fist stages of a civil rights movement for gay people in the United States. (p. 188)

Place has become embedded in the rhetoric of recognition that has surrounded

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many gay rights movements, from the more conservative elements of Bruce Bower's (1993) metaphor of "a place at the table" to the more radical implications of the chants of ACT UP activists "We're here! We're queer! Get used to it!" Each of these demand that we have some space which is ours, and in the case of ACT UP, if you will not give it to us, we will take it. Place is so important to the conceptualization of gay and lesbian community that a place – the Stonewall Inn – is prominent in the story of gay and lesbian liberation (Bianco, 1999). The importance of that moment is tied to the uprising caused by (presumably) heterosexual police officers invading a gay space. When the patrons, many of them drag queens, fought back, they were making a statement that the place was theirs, and no one was going to take it away from them.

The participants with whom I interacted also felt that place was an important aspect of community. For instance, Simone said "My definition of community has to do with being in a safe and supportive *space* [emphasis mine] where you share common goals with people and you're basically looking at creating bonds around similarity of interest." Yet, the interesting aspect about her use of "space" was that it was not necessarily tied to a physical locality. Being in a "space" could mean a psychological non-geographical space. Simone was not alone in her proclamations that space did not have to be rigidly physically bound. Pam, in fact, was quite explicit about this. In her definition she said, "[Community] doesn't have to be within a place but just a network of people who accept each other."

When the participants referred to this non-physical sense of space, there was an underlying notion of safety. For example, Elyse's definition was "I think that what that

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really represents to me is places where you feel safe and secure." Simone looked for a "safe and supportive space." Pam looked for a place or situation in which "you have no fear of being harmed or rejected or you know banned from a group or space or place or network or whatever." For Paul it was "to try to make our own little section of life and try to be part of the world in the future without the criticism." Matt saw it as a "refuge." For Zach it was "the place in which you feel comfortable to be yourself and therefore in which you feel safe and accepted."

In fact, even though it is not always explicit, safety permeates the traditional gay and lesbian psychological conceptualizations of the spaces used for community. The physical places in which gay people gather do offer, in Matt's terms, a refuge, or in Evans and Boyte's (1992) terms, a free space. Recall that even Bérubé referred to gay places as "safety zones" (1996, p. 188). Although these terms are not completely aproblematic, they hint at the core of what space provides for gay and lesbian people. In functioning as a refuge, these places provide the basis for a psychological sense of community. Often with gay and lesbian people, the places in which they gather offer what Matt called a refuge. They are places of safety.

Sex and the City (or The Place of the City in Gay and Lesbian Community)

Of course, even if the places of safety that the participants referenced were conceptual, they had to be physically located somewhere. A prevailing notion in gay and lesbian literature, psychology, and the popular press is that in order to be safe, gay and lesbian people must move to a big city. Even as far back as the 1930s, San Francisco and New York City had reputations as places where people could go to be gay (Bérubé,

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1996). The sheer size and the anonymity of such large cities could provide what Sarason (1974) called the legal-political-administrative climate necessary for the construction of a gay community. Yet as presented in the literature, this notion is somewhat problematic. It is not simply a story of leaving small towns for larger cities; the story as usually told is one of diaspora. Gay people start off in places that seem gay hostile and move to places that seem more gay friendly. The story told was not one of simply running away from the family, however. It was a story of going toward a place or a group of people who would value all aspects of their identity. In these places, people could live their lives with less interruption from the homophobia that accosted them in the heterosexual world. It was a story of purposefully searching for a place or a situation in which they could find the potential of safety and added strength. The participants were therefore active agents in taking bad situations and finding or creating better ones.

It is also a story of perception, however. The places in which the participants grew up seemed unfriendly to them, even if they were in a large city that was supposed to be relatively gay positive. The participants therefore actively searched for places that seemed safe to them or had the potential to be safe, and these places were perceived to be elsewhere. No matter where the participants grew up, they perceived other places to be more gay friendly. Often this was a large city – for Matt, it was Minneapolis; for Zach it was Atlanta – but this was not always the case. For instance, Billy said, "Actually I knew people who moved from Jamestown, North Dakota to Fargo because it was a bigger city. So I guess people do move to larger cities, but how pathetic *[laugh]*." Wherever the participants were, the gay places were someplace else, even if they lived in New York.

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Almost every single one of the participants moved somewhere else to be gay. Only Paul never moved from his original hometown or neighborhood. The following remark from Pam shows the power that these "other" places held for the participants.

> Pam: I was just overjoyed with what I found here after where I came from *[Pam, Miriam, and I laugh]*. Because I had only ever met, you know, my whole life at home in rural Mississippi, I had only ever met 3 or 4 other [gay] people in my whole entire life which is, which is pretty sad, and you get to feeling pretty lonely when you get to thinking there's not anybody you can talk to or *anybody* who understands and you wouldn't even bring it up because of fear because every other joke is aimed at gay people and it builds a real fear, and when I came up here – first of all there was so many more people that it was obvious right away that nobody's gonna have time to notice things like that *[all laugh]*.
>
> You know, all these different things, and then also it removed – it removed the fear of anybody I knew seeing me or finding out. I didn't have to deal with it. Not that I was afraid. It just wasn't something I had to deal with because nobody knew me here except for just a small handful of people and we didn't have to discuss it until it became necessary. *[all laugh]*. You know, but they were polite enough to ask how come I didn't date *[all laugh]*.

In the above passage, Pam shows the reason for the diaspora experienced by gay and lesbian people. In her rural home, Pam said that she knew only three or four people who were gay or lesbian, but that was only part of the reason that she left. The other part has to do with the homophobia she experienced in her hometown – both overt as in the jokes about gay people and covert as in the heterosexist assumption that she should be dating and marrying men. In fact, Pam had married a man early in her life due to the heterosexists and homophobic pressures she had experienced. It was not until later in life that she divorced and moved to an area of the country in which she could be more fully out. Part of what she was leaving was the heterosexist expectations of her family and hometown community. The family, far from fostering a sense of community, actually

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fostered a sense of alienation that led to Pam's leaving[25].

This press to leave and find a better situation was powerful. Although alienated due to her sexual orientation, Pam had built a community in the South based on her Southerness. When she decided to move to a more liberal area of the country, it also meant leaving the South, something that Pam was somewhat reluctant to do, but the opportunity was too great to pass up.

> Pam: Well if there hadn't been some sort of attraction like [liberal attitudes], I never would have [moved here]. That was a major plus. Actually just a friend asked me to come up here and work for them and take care of their kids and stuff, but it was like a dream come true almost, you know just to go to school at an "important school" *[did finger quotes]* or whatever. Or things I'd read or heard of all my life. I don't know if I would have just come on my own. It was a, was a – although I went other places on my own, I don't know if I ever would have, because there was also a large Yankee type stigma and stuff.
>
> Richard: Right.
>
> Pam: And so I don't think it is something I ever would have done if not for because it was along about the time that I was giving up on trying to be, maybe trying to deny that I was gay, and, and, and trying to – I was ready to come out. And I was ready to come out and ready to stop all the denial and stuff so it was very attractive to come to a liberal community.

To a person not from the South, it may be difficult to understand what Pam's choice meant. There is a palpable suspicion and disdain of the North in the South. Many people in the South regard Northerners as rude and overbearing. Additionally, a Southerner moving north has to contend with regionalist ideas from Northerners. An assumption of stupidity, inbredness, and (for white people) racism often accompanies a Southern accent. For these reasons, whenever a person leaves the South, the assumption

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[25] Family relationships are explored further in the next chapter, but alienation is typical of the relationship.

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is that they will return, especially if one moves to the North. Pam and Zach both commented on this "Yankee stigma" as Pam called it, and both left the South permanently. In effect, they became Southern ex-patriots in order to be in area that they perceived to be more gay friendly. This also highlights how the diaspora is simply not a story of running away. There were reasons for Pam to stay in the South. She had a community there, but not a community of gay people. Pam weighed her choices and actively decided to seek other places for community that would acknowledge her being a lesbian. She continues to return to the South to visit her family and friends there, but when she does return, she returns as an out lesbian, with a partner and with a family.

Pam and others moved based on a *perception* of gay friendliness (or in line with the rest of this dissertation – safety). Many regard San Francisco and New York as the two most gay friendly cities in the United States. Jaime said that New York had this reputation worldwide.

> Jaime: Yes, it is known in a lot of different countries. New York, they think that New York is all gay openness and they, especially in European countries, they say that New York gays are really open and its sticks in their mind that New York is a town where all the gay people in the entire world can come.

People born in New York, however, may have a different perception of the city. In fact, when listing gay friendly places in the U.S., Paul (a Queens native) cited Atlanta, a Southern city, as one of the most gay friendly. New York City did not make his list. Part of Paul's reasons for this relates the diaspora idea. Both Paul and Will, who were born in New York City, did not realize until they were adults that New York was gay friendly. Will related it this way, "I didn't come out until my twenties, so I didn't even know there

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were gay bars until I was 21. I kind of like blocked the whole thing from my mind, and I didn't know where anything gay was in the city." In fact, Will moved away from New York City to the Poconos, belying the usual stereotype of gay men who leave small towns and come to New York City to be gay. It could be that no matter where a person was born, that place represented heterosexual oppression to them and was therefore not very gay friendly. They would have to move elsewhere to enjoy being openly gay. Paul, who was also born in New York, agreed with Will's assessment.

> Paul: To tell you the truth, I didn't know about the gay life until I came out and started going to the Village myself. I mean I knew about it when I was a teenager, but I didn't know it was so expansive, like being everywhere. I just see it everywhere now. I mean maybe just the Village when I was younger, but now in every section, even Forest Hills, Jackson Heights, Astoria, everywhere.

Even though the people who had not grown up in New York mentioned the entire city as being gay friendly, Paul compartmentalized the city as a series of neighborhoods, some friendly, some not. Some theorists claim that it is not cities that form places for gay people to flourish, but rather neighborhoods within cities[26] (Castells, 1983). Growing up in Queens, Paul perceived the Village as being a safe place for gay people. Queens was not. Yet now that he had been out for quite some time, he was surprised to see that places in Queens, in effect his hometown, had large gay communities. The gay neighborhoods he mentioned – Jackson Heights, Forest Hills, and Astoria – are all

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[26] In many ways Castells' conceptualization of a gay neighborhood is similar to Evans and Boyte's free space. Castells' neighborhoods allowed gay people to "organize themselves spatially to transform their oppression into the organizational setting of political power (p.157)." By organizing inside a neighborhood, gay people could experience "the transition from the bars to the streets, from nighttime to daytime, from 'sexual deviance' to alternative lifestyle (p.141)." In other words, neighborhoods have historically provided space for political action and political change.

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located in Queens. Queens had not been safe for him as a child, but now it had become more safe as an adult.

For some of the participants not born in New York (Billy, Jaime, Matt, and Zach), the entire City was cited as their perceived gay haven. Once they arrived in the City, they found the story of relocation to be one that they shared with the gay people that they met.

> Zach: That's what I thought was unusual about moving to New York. I would meet people and they would say, "Oh, I'm gay and I live in the Village." "Where are you from?" "North Carolina." "Where are you from?" "Texas." A lot of the gay people that I meet here are not from New York at all. I know very few people from New York. Well, there's Will, but he moved away from New York.

Several of the participants found that New York did not quite meet with their expectations. Many theorists have bemoaned large cities as being soulless places in which community is extraordinarily difficult (Oldenberg, 1989). This can be somewhat true of New York. In spite of its reputation for gay friendliness, New York also has a general reputation of being unfriendly.

> Zach: [I thought] if you go to New York, then you're gonna have a lot of people who are gay who are easy to find. But I haven't actually found it to be so much easier than it was in the South. I don't think finding people that you like, it's not really that much easier in New York. Partly because New Yorkers are like "Screw You," until they get to know you.

Zach brings up a dilemma often faced by people coming from a small town to a big city of New York. It may be true that there are many gay people in the area, but it is not necessarily easier to meet people in New York than it is in other parts of the country. There are more gay people, but they are not necessarily more accessible. In spite of this, several of the participants said that they could never move back to the small towns from which they came.

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Richard: Could you ever move back there and live there now?

Billy: No.

Richard: Why not?

Billy: Well. *[Billy, Matt, Zach, and I laugh].* Because I'd rather slit my wrist *[all laugh again].* I just couldn't. I think it would be miserably unhappy. Could you ever move to Kirkston, Minnesota, honey?

Matt: No. *[said quickly and with much emphasis. Matt, Billy, Zach, and I laugh]* The smallest town I could move back to would be Minneapolis. I mean it's not New York, but it's . . .

Billy: Yeah a million people.

In spite of feeling that they could never move back to such a small town, a tension existed. Billy and Matt wanted both the benefits of small town living and big city living. Others felt this tension as well. Pam and Zach moved to suburban New Jersey because it was a compromise between small town life from which they came and the large city that was New York. Only four of my participants lived in New York City, and none of them lived in Manhattan; two lived in Brooklyn, and two in Queens. Even though Brooklyn and Queens offered some of the benefits of living in a smaller town, they still had much of the crowded, constant barragement associated with New York City. Because of this, there was still a tension about being in the city.

Richard: Do you ever think about leaving New York?

Billy: Yes.

Richard: Would you rather leave New York?

Billy: Yes. I would like to have a house and a yard and a garden and a porch. Simple things.

Matt: And since we're not billionaires, that's not possible in the city.

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Richard: If it could be possible in the city would you stay in the city?

Billy: Oh, yeah.

Matt: Yes. If we could have a penthouse with a gorgeous view, oh yeah.

Billy: And a rooftop garden. Hell yeah.

Matt and Billy sum up the problems with living in the city. Relatively easy access to gay community comes with a price – lack of space, high prices, unfriendly people. Because of this, Pam, Miriam, Elyse, Simone, Zach, and Will specifically chose not to live in the City itself. All of them lived in smaller suburban communities, albeit ones relatively close to New York City. There was something attractive about suburban life that drew them to it.

In spite of the fact that millions of gay people choose not to live in a large city, suburban gay, lesbian, and bisexual existence is almost completely ignored in the literature. When suburbia is studied, it is often seen as an isolating, nearly soul-crushing place, both for heterosexual people (Oldenberg, 1989) and for gay men and lesbians (Lynch, 1987). In 1987, Lynch conducted one of the few studies done on suburban gay people by following a group of suburban gay men and found that although some benefits could be gained by living in suburban environments, those benefits came with a price – forfeiture of a strong gay community. Lynch states "Suburban homosexuals [sic] were, indeed, more circumspect, more fearful of exposure, anticipated more intolerance and discrimination, had fewer homosexual relations, less homosexual sex, less social involvement with homosexuals, and more involvement with heterosexuals (p. 39)"

Lynch noted that one of the reasons for this failure to thrive was that suburban

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areas have less diversity of gay economics, groups, and people than do urban areas. Oldenberg (1989) found similar things lacking in suburbs. In fact, both heterosexual and gay and lesbian theorists posit that suburbs are antithetical to community life. In spite of this, many people thrive in suburban areas and not all of them are heterosexual. That these gay and lesbian people elect to stay in the suburbs and create a community emphasizes the ability of gay communities to take root in places that historically have been hostile to them[27].

One of the main problems facing the men in Lynch's study was isolation. The role of isolation is important to the conceptualization of suburbia in general. One of Oldenberg's contentions was that suburbs were severely isolating and as result, ' community was forfeited. However, for many people, suburbs may be enticing *because* of the fact that they serve to isolate. People who do not want their neighbors investigating their home lives often flock to suburbs. For this reason, some gay men and lesbians might see suburbs as a perfect place to live. If their neighbors do not get involved, they can be free to be gay without overt persecution. Unfortunately, middle class gay men and lesbians who flock to the suburbs experience a trade-off according to gay and lesbian psychology. They gain freedom, but the isolation they get in return can be doubly devastating.

Yet some participants found New York isolating as well.

Will: You would think New York would be the easiest place to meet somebody, but it's not.

[27] Focus on thriving suburban or rural gay community is not unknown in the literature. Kennedy and Davis (1993) highlight one such local community by examining lesbian bar culture from the 1930s to the 1960s. They present a group of women who created their own social rules and then fought for a public space in which to enjoy these rules.

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Zach: I was still surprised about that.

If both the suburbs and the large cities can be potentially isolating, then it stands to reason that some gay men and lesbians may chose not to go to large cities. This is not reflected in the literature. Almost universally it is accepted that cities draw gay men and lesbians to them and that suburbs repel them away. If both can serve to be isolating, then the community connections become most important in fending off feelings of loneliness. It may not even be true that cities offer gay men and lesbians more opportunities for connection to community, especially now with the recent explosion of the Internet (Fries, 1998). The Internet allows people in suburbs to connect to each other in ways not even dreamed of 15 years ago. With more avenues of connection available, the suburbs may not be as potentially dangerous and isolating as they once seemed. While the story of gay people and locality may still be one of movement (i.e. all but one participant left their "hometowns" for a gayer place), the movement may not always be from small communities to larger ones.

In fact, some participants' idea of community was antithetical to large cities. Elyse's very definition of community fit in with the idea of small suburban life.

> Elyse: You know, when you think about community or when I think of community initially, I think of all these all these streets like at the beginning of "Edward Scissorhands" where all the houses look the same and the very tight enclave, I guess. And I think that what that really represents to me is places where you feel safe and secure. . .So in our quest to find gay community in that fits more like I said before with all the houses on the street sort of cul-de-sac sort of way and we came to meet you guys because you are living much of a sort of a suburban cul-de-sac kind of life but without having 50 pink flamingos in your back yard and wearing your pink bathrobe to go pick up your newspaper in the morning.

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Miriam, too, was drawn to smaller town existence. Her ideal gay town, in fact, was not New York. It was Highland Park, a town with a total population of 13,999 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001).

> Miriam: For me it's Highland Park, specifically, which is where we live, um. Because I came out right before going to Rutgers, which is right next door, so through all the, gosh, idyllic years, and this always seemed like this idyllic place. You know this was the town where the gay people all lived and the liberal people lived when you graduated and the professors lived. You know, some day *maybe [emphasis hers]* we could buy a house in Highland Park, and now, here we are. Here I am and I'm an adult and I bought a house in Highland Park and I'm looking for that community that was supposed to just magically be there. To me, this is just a really great place for me to live. It's real important for me to stay here.

Miriam's partner Pam also idealized smaller towns. In fact, when asked what place seemed most gay or lesbian to her, she chose a town even smaller than Highland Park – Provincetown, Massachusetts (population 3431). Provincetown has a reputation of being a very welcoming place for gay men and lesbians[28]. Pam kept referring to the places that were welcoming as being nearly "mythical" in her experience. She sometimes had difficulty imagining such places existed. For her, two places seemed most gay. One was Washington D.C. but only because she and Miriam had gone to the March on Washington and participated in the mass wedding of gay and lesbian people. The other was Provincetown, Massachusetts.

> Pam: And the other is Provincetown. That was our first vacation last year. We went during women's week and it was just so – to me this was like all the dreams I ever had about being free and being able to just *be* yourself and nobody cares and that's Provincetown *[emphasis Pam's]*.

> Miriam: Right! I can't believe that left my mind because that was Pam's first time in Provincetown and I've been up there many times, and I love it up

[28] In fact, the U.S. Census classifies 8.6% of the households in Provincetown as unmarried partner, more percentagewise than New York and San Francisco combined (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001)

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> there. And that's true. If you have to think of a place. I guess. Then that would be lesbian heaven *[Miriam, Pam, and I laugh]*. If we could afford to buy a house and you know and not work and open a bed and breakfast, that's the one place I would move for. In a second. In a second.

Even the argument that there are more gay people living in big cities than in smaller towns and suburbs may not necessarily be true. For the first time since the U.S. Census began, there are indications of the number of gay and lesbian couples living in the United States. Gay and lesbian couples were measured through a category called "unmarried partner." Even though it is possible that some of the people designating "unmarried partner" could be heterosexual, gay and lesbian people used the categorization to establish some sort of representation on the U.S. Census. It was the designation that many of the participants, my partner Josiah, and I used when we filled out the Census forms. Even if some of the people filling out "unmarried partner" were heterosexual, the actual number of gay and lesbian people is still likely to be higher than the estimates since the Census completely ignores gay and lesbian people who did not list themselves in this category, whether single or partnered.

The following table contains the number of unmarried partners in each of the cities or towns in which the participants have lived in their lives. The table gives graphic representation of two things – one, that no matter what the location, the number of unmarried partners hovers at 2% of the population. In fact, the number of unmarried partners in the total population of the United States is 1.9%. It is also worth noting that at least two of the towns actually do better percentage wise for number of unmarried partners than San Francisco, and seven are listed higher than Manhattan. In fact, New York City as a whole ranks fairly far down on the list. The other things shown by the

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table is the large number of different localities in which the ten participants have lived. Even though they did not necessarily move from small town to large cities, the participants were extremely mobile.

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City	Total Population	Unmarried partners	Percent in population
Provincetown, MA	3431	295	8.6
Minneapolis, MN	382,618	12,585	3.3
San Francisco, CA	776,773	24,563	3.2
Denver, CO	554,636	15,737	2.8
White Earth Reservation, MN	9192	254	2.8
East Orange, NJ	69,824	1903	2.7
Atlanta, GA	416,474	11,402	2.7
Manhattan NY	1,537,195	41,670	2.7
Plainfield, NJ	47,829	1255	2.6
Fargo, ND	90,599	2334	2.6
Rock Hill, SC	49,765	1180	2.4
Highland Park, NJ	13,999	322	2.3
Plainville, CT	17,328	389	2.2
North Plainfield, NJ	21,103	450	2.1
New Brunswick, NJ	48,573	972	2
Bloomington, MN	85,172	1665	2
United States	281,421,906	5,475,768	1.9
New York, NY	8,008,278	155,721	1.9
Hawaii	1,211,537	23,516	1.9
Chester County, SC	34,068	660	1.9
East Stroudsburg, PA	9888	191	1.9
Perry, GA	9602	181	1.9
Brooklyn, NY	2,465,326	44,166	1.8
Moorhead, MN	32,177	562	1.7
Queens, NY	2,229,379	33,504	1.5
Utica, MS	966	14	1.4

Table 1. Locations of importance to the participants, the total population and population of unmarried partners in the area. Italicized locations represent the places the participants currently live.

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Once again it is necessary to point out that this table does not reflect the number of single gay and lesbian people in any location, only those who are partnered. Even with this in mind, it is easy to see that no matter where a person lives in the United States, other gay and lesbian people are living there as well. It is therefore possible to find other gay and lesbian people with whom to establish community in whatever town, city, or location a person lives within the United States.

Cheers (or Anchors of Community)

Once inside these localities, it is usually through an anchor of place that a sense of community is formed (Ingram, Bouthillette, & Retter, 1997). Bars have historically been conceptualized as these anchors for gay men and lesbians (Bérubé, 1996; D'Augelli & Garnett, 1995; Davis & Kennedy, 1989; Wolfe, 1997). Gay or lesbian bars often serve as refuges from the prejudices and homophobia of the larger heterosexual society. They also serve as free spaces simply by alerting gay and lesbian people in the surrounding area that other gay men and lesbians are in the area. This occurs even if the atmosphere inside is too loud for conversation, which some theorists claim is necessary for a sense of community (Oldenberg, 1989). The mere *presence* of the bar means that gay and lesbian people no longer have to be isolated. The people inside can gather with others and feel safe in their difference from the heterosexual norm. In this way, place and sense of community are interlinked with safety.

Since bars held such an important place in gay and lesbian community literature, it was fitting to examine the importance of bars to the participants. Unsurprisingly, the participants mentioned bars as gathering places for community, yet surprisingly their

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importance waned over time. For example, when Billy was younger and in the Fargo/Moorhead region of Minnesota and North Dakota, a bar was vital to the creation of his community. He and several local gay people had tried several venues for meetings and dances, yet had failed due to the homophobia in the surrounding area. It was not until they had a bar that they succeeded in having a long-term place to gather.

> Billy: We didn't have anywhere to go, and now they've had those dances for years, but then, we couldn't have them at [two popular local establishments] because people were complaining because it was a gay party, but now they actually have a bar and they are doing really well.
>
> Richard: Oh. Are there any other bars in the area or is that the only one?
>
> Billy: No. That's the only one. The only one. Years and years and years ago, they had another bar and they closed it because Fargo's too conservative, but now the new bar is in Moorhead because Minnesota has different laws than North Dakota. And it's a nice bar. Isn't it?
>
> Matt: Yeah, we had fun when we went there. It has a dance club. It's a big space really.

For the people in the Fargo/Moorhead region, a gay bar meant they had a place in which they could legitimately meet. When they tried to rent spaces in town, they were met with resistance from the heterosexual community. It was not until a bar was formed that they had a place in which they could do what they wanted in relative safety[29]. It is also interesting to note that when Matt and Billy went back to the area to visit Billy's relatives, they went to the bar to hang out with other gay people. Often when visiting

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[29] The safety of gay and lesbian places can be somewhat illusory. Although gay and lesbian bars offer places for gay, lesbian, and bisexual people to gather to meet, they also provide targets for people who hate gay, lesbian, and bisexual people. On February 21, 1997, a bar in Atlanta, the Otherside Lounge, was attacked with a homemade bomb (Newsplanet Staff, Feb 24, 1997). The man charged with the bombings was also responsible for bombing women's clinics in Birmingham, Alabama. His actions inspired another similar bombing in London in a gay pub, the Admiral Duncan, killing some of the patrons (Newsplanet Staff, June 5, 2000). Similarly, when Matthew Shepard was killed, he was taken from a gay bar (Newsplanet Staff, Oct. 13, 1998).

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their hometowns or other small towns, the participants said that they could feel an oppressiveness starting to gather in the air. They described the oppressiveness as just that – a feeling.

> Will: I mean there are some other communities where you just feel the anti-gay, like the Jersey Shore. I don't know if you've ever been. You can actually feel the – you get that feeling.
>
> Zach: I get that driving to the South. I'm like, okay, now I hit the line. And you are like "uh oh." You got to act a certain way; you got be reasonable about it; you can't be too overt.

Often to escape that feeling, the participants said they would look for the "gayest" thing around them so that they could once again feel safe and not isolated. Often that gay place was a bar.

In spite of the historical importance of bars and in spite of Billy's own stories of a bar being the focus of community, bars were not the primary focus of community for most of the participants in this study. Different reasons were offered for this. Simone said that she thought that part of the traditional reliance on bars depended on what else was available in the area to serve as a linking point for community. This was similar in tone to Billy's story.

> Simone: I mean. I've lived in New Jersey my whole life and I've never lived anywhere else. I went to school here. I'm like a plague. You can't get rid of me, but the people that I've met who've been other places or lived other places, have talked about community in a very different way. I mean, Delta [a friend of mine] talks about having lived in Connecticut. She talks a lot about the bars and how important the bars are to gay community there because everyone is so spread out and you don't really meet that many people, whereas if you are here at the university for undergraduates, a lot of times the community is what is going on on campus.

Will also agreed that bars were important when other avenues were not available.

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Will lived in a very sparsely populated area of Pennsylvania. The nearest gay place was a resort called Rainbow Mountain. For the people who lived in the area and did not stay at the resort, the largest attraction of Rainbow Mountain was the bar and nightclub. Will spent much of his time at this bar because there were precious few other gay venues in the area. When I went to interview Will, he wanted to show me the gay community around the area. In order to do this, he took me to dinner at the resort and then to the nightclub/bar afterwards. Another person who lived in the area told me that even with all its problems – problems that plague all small town areas such as people getting into everyone else's business, seeing the same people over and over again – every gay person within miles flocked to that bar because, it was in her words, "The only game in town." This was a common assessment of the importance of the bars among the participants.

> Matt: I can remember once being given this advice by [a lesbian teacher of mine] who said the best thing you can do, she was talking to a group of gay and lesbian students, the best thing you can do is to find a bar and stick to it. Wherever you go, find a bar, and that's gonna be your connection to the community, and, you know, she's right. She's absolutely right. I wouldn't want to go any place that did not have at least one gay bar. I mean there's places that have a community center and programs and stuff like that. But like, even in Fargo, I mean Fargo doesn't have a gay community center, but it does have a bar.

Another reason given for a lessened reliance on bars for community was that every participant was in a coupled relationship. Many of the participants saw one of the primary functions of bars as being places to meet other gay people in order to have sex. Although sex itself can be an important way to create community, once a person was no longer interested in meeting people to have sex, bars became less and less important.

> Matt: I think the main reason to go to a bar is to hook up with someone. That's probably the main reason.

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Billy: I go to the bar all the time. Do you think I'm hooking up?

Matt: No I trust you. But it's also a gay space. It is a safe space and when you are in there you are with other people. It's true. The bar is not always about sex, but, oh my goodness, when I was single I lived at the bar.

Billy: I still live in the bar.

Matt: Now that we are a couple I don't hang out as often.

Billy: I said I still live in the bar.

Matt: Well, that's just your alcoholism *[Matt, Billy, and I laugh].*

The above exchange highlights the two differing viewpoints about bars. Billy (and Will) continued to use bars as places to meet people in a relatively safe environment, but the other participants associated bars with sex. For example, Elyse thought that bars were places that people went when they were first coming out or trying to hook up with someone. In fact, she likened bars to the places in which you spend your "gay adolescence." Elyse described gay adolescence this way

Elyse: And the gay adolescence happens in bars and it happens in like gay pride weekends and whatever like that. And that's when you want to be around a lot of gay people and that's where you feel like you are totally affected and whatever and you seek to be absolutely 100% accepted and as idealized as possible.

She felt that as people grew older and out of their gay adolescence, bars began to lose their attraction. She said, "You can't spend every weekend in the bar and if you do spend every weekend in the bar you're not going to have a good as time as you do if you do it once in a while. Gay drunk people aren't any more fun that straight drunk people *[Elyse, Simone, and I laugh].*" Zach also agreed with this idea of a gay adolescence, saying that gay people often were not out when they were teenagers, and the bars represented what

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people usually do during their teenage years – experiment with sex and relationships. In other words "we didn't get to date or do all that stuff then, so we have to do it later." These were not the only reason that people said that bars no longer held the same kind of attraction for them – for example, neither Miriam nor Pam drank alcohol – yet the main reason that people said that they no longer hung out in bars was that they no longer wanted to find a sex partner. They did not have that same overriding need to meet other people as they once did.

Aside from bars, there were very few actual physical spaces that the participants associated with gay community. Community centers came up again and again, but surprisingly, the participants felt that the centers contained nothing that helped to draw them in. Some of this related to the changing aspect of people's communities based on where they were in their lives. For example, Miriam said that she sometimes looked at the events of the local Pride Center "but there doesn't seem to be any group that fits our needs. Things are mostly singles oriented or coming out oriented." Therefore, in spite of the center being "two minutes from here" in Miriam's words, she never went there. Matt and Zach were more disparaging of the centers themselves. They admitted that it was very important to have centers in the community and that they served a vital need, but that they really did not cater to their needs.

> Zach: There is the counseling center and then there is the whole gay center for New Jersey is right in New Brunswick, but nobody ever thinks of it as, well, it's a place to go, but guys are going there to try to hook up, you know, but they always think of it as guys who can't hook up anywhere else, like the bars. *[Zach, Billy, Matt, and I laugh]*. I've never been, but the popular notion is that it is the loserville.
>
> Matt: I have to second that. I have friend who, I think he still does, volunteers

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> and helps organize dances at the gay and lesbian center, the Center Dances. They've done them in the summertime, but they also do them in the Fall and Winter and Spring. And I did go to one of them once with [my friend] Emilio before Billy existed and we basically spent the whole night making fun of everyone there. Because it was the losers who wouldn't go to the actual dance night club. Instead they are going to the community center dances, and we are making fun of the guy with the bolo tie.

Zach: Yeah. Sort of the people who would be outcasts anyway.

Matt: We had the mentality that it was for rejects. So it is funny that the community center, that it does feel good to have it there and it is so important that it exists

Richard: But at the same time –

Matt *[taking up my thought]*: It serves people –

Zach *[finishing Matt's thought]*: Who can't quite cut it.

Zach and Matt's dismissal of the people who frequent community centers highlighted that even though the community center served some community, it was not their own. Even though the people inside them may be gay, those people were outside the community that Matt and Zach had established. They were people who, as Zach put it, "can't quite cut it," or succeed, in the more traditional scene of the bars. This was a repeated theme for the other participants as well. They were glad to see community centers in their area, but they never went to them.

Bars and community centers were the only physical buildings that people thought of as gay places, yet the participants did not spend much time in either one of them. If bars and community centers did not function as their focus of gay community, then what did? I asked the participants that very question. For all of them, the focus now tended to be homes, both their own and their friends. Miriam explained it this way. "So um, so it

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feels good to go into other gay households, where there may or may not be kids or kids in the works and to see how other people negotiate their communities in their *homes [emphasis hers].* There is no one building."

Elyse expanded upon that notion. From the time that she was young, Elyse' family told her that "home" represented the place to which she could go to escape harm. "I think that my family always approached the world [as if] everyone else was against us. There was harm outside of our house and so therefore you could stay there and feel safe." In spite of being told that home was safe, this was not completely true for Elyse. There were parts of her that were not "safe" in her home. In fact she said that even before she realized that she was a lesbian, "I always felt different from [my parents] and my sister. We had different interests and priorities." Because she was "different," she therefore had to leave home to find a community in which she could feel completely safe. Unfortunately, this was not quite so easy due to what she had been taught as a child. Having been told that everyone was against her, Elyse was as at loss as to where she should go to seek community once she left home.

Eventually, Elyse found a community in which it was safe to be a lesbian, but what she had been taught stayed with her. Home itself continued to have multiple meanings for her. It could be unsafe and safe all at the same time. In spite of the apparent contradictions inherent in this, Elyse continued to feel that "home" represented a form of safety for her in her adult life. Buying a house was therefore very important to her and Simone. It meant establishing roots and making a family of her own. With this change in focus came a change in the way that she sought out community. It also

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represented a reconciliation of sorts with her experiences with safety and home. Now home could be truly safe. She no longer had to leave it to find community. Community could exist right inside her very house, inside the home that she and Simone had created.

> Elyse: You're doing the happily ever after thing. A lot of time gay people when you talk about it, when you talk about buying a house and being married and having children and you actually show that you can buy a house and you can have your family support with weddings and have the wedding, then you are doing something that they've always wanted but didn't think could happen. And so that is a really amazing feeling and I think because of that we have gravitated to having our lifestyle be a lot more um, gay person oriented, not necessarily gay oriented, but as in more gay friendships established and sort of upholding them.

Their new focus on gay people on an individual level meant that they no longer had to leave their houses to find community. These individuals could come to them or they could go to the individual's houses. This meant that the very word "home" had to be reconceptualized for many of the participants. They had started life with their houses feeling relatively unsafe because they were gay or lesbian in a heterosexual household. Community was therefore focused elsewhere. They had to leave their houses to go get it. Now that they were older, they were establishing homes that did feel safe to them. As such, they did not have to leave their homes to find community. It existed inside it.

The Fellowship of the Ring (Or the Role of the Internet in Community)

One of the reasons that people do not have to leave their homes in order to connect to other gay people is the rising popularity of the Internet[30]. With the popularity

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[30] The Internet or net is a system of interconnected computer networks through which anyone who has a computer and an ISP (Internet service provider) can communicate with anyone else who has the same (Jones, 1995a). Its history can be traced as far back as the 1960s and early 1970s when the U.S. Department of Defense and several research universities linked their computers through DARPA (Defense Advanced Research Program Agency). The resulting linkage, the Arpanet was supposed to be used for communication and research, but almost immediately it was used mainly for communication. Today, the

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of the Internet also comes controversy. Much of the debate about community and the Internet is due to the assumption that community needs a physical place in which to exist. Nessim Watson (1997) investigated an on-line community and argues that if community is conceived as "a product of . . . shared *relationships* among people" (p. 120, emphasis Watson's) then the Internet should be considered a primary source of community. The specific case that Watson investigated was on-line interaction based on the identity of a fan of the music group Phish. If community could be fostered through something as seemingly incidental as Phish fandom, then community based on something as important as sexual orientation can be fostered through the Internet. Indeed, David Shaw (1997) in a study of gay men's use of the Internet reported that the men in his study came together and expressed discourses of need – a need of belonging, a need of desire. For some in his study, face-to-face interaction was the ultimate goal, but for others, the community and interaction on-line was the goal in itself. Most importantly perhaps to what I have uncovered in my study, Shaw maintained that the Internet allowed his participants to try on their sexuality and identity in a place in which it was safe to do so.

In spite of Shaw and Watson's assertions that the Internet can foster community, there is some evidence that participation on the Internet can have negative effects on community behavior. In a longitudinal study of Internet usage, Kraut, Patterson, Lundmark, Keisler, Mukopadhyay, and Scherlis (1998) reported that greater Internet use was associated with declines in participation with family members, declines in the size of

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Internet allows people from all over the world to talk to each other through newsgroups, e-mail, and other "real time" interaction service such as IRC (Internet Relay Chat) allowing people access to information and to other people that previously would have been much more difficult.

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physical social circles[31], and increases in depression and loneliness. Their findings may not be true for all Internet users. For example, some of the negative outcomes in Kraut et al.'s study may have opposite meanings when applied to gay and lesbian people. Although the sexual orientation of the Kraut et al. sample was not mentioned, it was presumably a heterosexual one since there was an emphasis on family communication and no gay men or lesbians were sought out for the study. For gay men and lesbians, a decrease in communication with the family may be desirable if family interactions were homonegative. Additionally, the decrease in size of physical non-gay circles may correspond with an increase in size of a new gay and lesbian Internet circle. Homopositive interactions with other gay or lesbian people on-line could therefore lead to a decrease in depression thereby negating the most troubling finding in Kraut et al.'s study, the small but significant increase in depression and loneliness of their respondents. The authors stressed that on-line friends were less likely to be able to provide tangible social support, like baby-sitting or a small loan. It may well be for gay men and lesbians, emotional and informational social support is more important than tangible social

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[31] One of the many debates about the Internet focuses on whether it increases or decreases participation in community settings. The main point of contention behind this debate is that Internet interactions are not seen as "real" interactions because they lack most of the components of "real time" interactions like visual or auditory cues. (Jones, 1995b). This is an ablist argument since it assumes that one needs to have vision or hearing in order to have community. Other theorists have held that those "real" time cues are unnecessary for community and maintain that other cues have replaced the ones associated with face-to-face interactions (McLaughlin, Osborne, & Smith, 1995). Others have argued that people need to imagine ever increasing changes in ways that people foster community, and that the Internet is one of these new ways (Kramarae, 1995). Additionally, each new communications medium created or popularized in the 20th century – such as the telephone and television – created debates over their effects on community. These inventions changed the way that people interact, and during their initial periods of popularity, many believed that they would destroy community (Jones, 1995b).

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support. Although there is no direct evidence to support this[32], it is entirely possible that finding other gay and lesbian people on the Internet may actually serve to lessen depression and loneliness in gay and lesbian respondents due to the social support that the interaction provides for them.

It may seem unusual to focus on the Internet in a chapter about space. To some, the Internet represents the antithesis of a bound "place." In fact, some studies, such as the one cited by Kraut et al. actually see the Internet as adding to a sense of loss and placelessness. Arefi (1999) has stated that non-place and placelessness have emerged as concepts because of the alienation that many people now feel from place. For gay men and lesbians, the Internet can open up a new kind of place, one that is not as bound by rigid geographic boundaries. These less rigid types of places were the kinds that the participants in my study focused on. They were not looking for bars, they were staying in their homes and creating a sense of place that was not geographically bound. The Internet has undoubtedly been important in opening up such new kinds of more "liminal" spaces for gay men and lesbians. Additionally, it can take an existing heterosexual space, like a young person's home, and change it into a gay or lesbian space simply by

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[32] There is indirect evidence to support this assertion. In spite of a prevalence of negative outcomes associated with Internet usage, the Internet has been extremely important to gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals. This may be because the Internet serves a different purpose for gay men and lesbians than it does for heterosexuals. In a study of Internet newsgroups, McKenna and Bargh (1998) showed that the newsgroups were more important to people with what they called "concealable marginalized identities" such as homosexuality (the focus of their study) than it was to people with non-concealable marginalized identities or non-marginalized identities. Additionally, they found that group involvement on the Internet newsgroups led to increased self-acceptance. So strong was this self-acceptance that participants reported coming out to other non-gay and lesbian people in their lives as a result of Internet usage. This is considerably important when taking into consideration that concealing one's sexual orientation has been linked to various negative health results including the increased incidence of cancer and moderately serious infectious diseases regardless of any other demographic, psychosocial, or health behavior variable (Cole, Kemeny, Taylor, & Visscher, 1996).

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providing access to other gay and lesbian people through e-mail, BBSs, chatrooms, or web pages. It has been shown that places do not necessarily have to be "gay" in order for a young person to feel safe as long as they can carry with them a liminal sense of safety due to interaction with a community (Barry, 1997). The Internet can provide this for young people and older people alike. So popular is the use of the Internet as a meeting place for gay and lesbian community that *The Advocate*, a national gay and lesbian newsmagazine, ran a cover story about chat rooms referring to them as "On-line Chat Rooms: The New Gay Bars" (Fries, 1998).

With all of this in mind, I expected my participants to talk at length about the ways in which the Internet had helped them foster community. I was somewhat surprised by the responses that I got. In fact, many of them did not mention the Internet at all.

Richard: You never mention the Internet. Does that impact you in any way at all?

Elyse: No.

Simone: No.

Elyse and Simone's response was echoed again and again amongst the participants. In spite of these straightforward assertions of unimportance, the Internet was a tool used by the participants to gather information or for entertainment and diversion. Using the Internet in this way fostered community for my participants in spite of their "no" protestations. This happened in several ways. The Internet allowed the participants to be informed about what was happening in the world regarding gay and lesbian civil rights, gay and lesbian celebrities, or other gay related newsworthy events. For example, it was through the Internet that we first found out that Mark Bingham, one

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of the people who helped bring down the plane over Pennsylvania, was gay. The participants also looked up sites for lesbian or gay organizations in their community. For example, Miriam and Pam found a nearby group for lesbians with children on the Internet. Similarly, they checked out the listings at the local Pride Center. Although they have not yet found anything that seemed interesting, they regularly check the site just in case.

Another way the participants fostered community through the Internet was through e-mail. Simone illustrated this point when she told us "[After the patriotic fervor following September 11th]. I started to think I'm not safe [from the patriotic people], and then all of a sudden, people are starting to send out e-mails about all this legislation they are trying to pass about gay families and only [recognizing] unions that are legitimate as a man and a woman." In fact, I use the Internet to correspond regularly with a bisexual friend of mine in England with whom I may have lost touch if it were not for e-mail. E-mail became especially important in the wake of the attacks on September 11th when all the phone lines were down. Pam explains how she felt after that occurred.

> Pam: And then it started drifted off to other people. One of my next thoughts was to email my friend John in Florida who I used to work with and he is gay and ask him if he had any friends or family who might have been there. You know check with my gay community people. I think that happened with everybody.

In spite of this, the participants still felt as if the Internet did not help them establish community, yet they all knew other gay and lesbian people for whom it had. The following exchange summed up the participants' overall feeling about the Internet.

> Richard: You haven't mentioned anything at all about the Internet. Do you think the Internet in any way plays a part in gay community?

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Matt: *[laugh]*

Billy: Hell yeah! Well, I don't chat or anything, but I look at a lot of porn on the Internet.

Zach: Porn sweet porn!

Richard: Very solitary community building.

Matt: Apart from occasionally looking at porn, I haven't really used it. There are people who do, though. In my experience, the people who – This is certainly – I mean there are tons and tons of gay and lesbian people who find their community on line, but I actually have thought about it more in relationship to people who are HIV positive and um, communities like on AOL of men who identify themselves as positive in their little profiles, and I guess I can't help to think about this because I was just reading about this and talking about this to somebody who says it is an avenue for other positive men to find other positive men. And it's because frankly there isn't another place. I mean okay, there's bars where we can hook up as gay men, but for another positive man to find another positive man the options are extremely limited and I think the Internet has been revolutionary in helping connect people like that. In ways which are good and bad.

Billy: Even in Minneapolis, they would have positive parties.

Matt: Every time in the work that I do, the theme that comes out again and again is that there is no social outlet. There is no place for positive men to go. There is a few now, like Party Positive has started throwing these socials but that's about it.

Zach: I think that cyber-spaces do make a difference because it also helps people in rural areas. Especially like this 16 year old guy I met on line who lives in Boufou, South Carolina who doesn't even know where to go to find anyone, so he goes on line and types in gay and 40 chat rooms pop up on AOL. Any of these you may go and try. And he told me that he didn't know any gay people at all until he went on line and then he established this huge community of people that he knows, quote "know." But for us, we're a little old. We missed it and we're couples so we don't have as much reason to go on line.

While the participants used the Internet to firm up previously set community, they

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felt that others used it to establish community. Zach touched upon the reason it did not seem to help my participants when he said, "We missed it." All of the people in this study had already established communal connections before the Internet became commonplace in people's lives. They felt the Internet was only vitally important for people who were first coming out, or for people who wanted to have sex or establish relationships. Therefore age, strength of previous community, and being in a relationship all affected my participant's reliance on the Internet.

It is important to note, however, that all of the participants knew someone for whom the Internet was vitally important. After saying the Internet played no part in her own life, Simone then went on to talk about a younger person she knew who was very much reliant on the Internet for her interactions. Simone felt that the younger people used the Internet in the same ways that she used to use campus meeting groups and action events as a focus of community.

> Simone: Justine, the 18 year-old that Elyse mentors, she lives on the Internet and she, that's her community. She meets people on the Internet constantly and considers them like friends and close relationships and even dates some of them so it seems like maybe the age 18-20 year olds aren't doing the same type of community organizing as was what I did when I was in college.

Being in a couple also played a part in keeping people not reliant on the Internet for community. Just as being in a couple kept the participants out of the bars, it also kept them out of the chat rooms. For people who were not in committed relationships, the Internet helped to find other people to relate to. For example, Roxie, a long time friend of Miriam's relied on the Internet for much of her community. In fact, the last three people she dated she met through the Internet. Additionally, after breaking up with her

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last girlfriend, it was to her friends on the Internet that Roxie turned for social support. The people on Roxie's Internet groups and buddy lists helped her through the healing process, not the friends she had in the "real" world, such as Miriam.

In this vein, only one participant, Will, used the Internet in the way that *The Advocate* had envisioned. Will differed from the other participants in two ways. His relationship with Parker was not as firmly established as the relationships of the other participants, and he had moved relatively recently to a new area with a small population. As a result, he knew very few gay people around him. Given his location and situation, he felt that the Internet was very important for his ability to keep and connect to community. This exchange elucidates why Will thought that Internet was so important for people in less densely populated areas.

Richard: What did you want to say?

Will: Only that there is a lot more gay life in the country than you would know. You could even go into the whole Internet thing, you know.

Richard: Well, how important is the Internet out here?

Will: Oh, it's very important. For a lot of people it is the vehicle for meeting people. You're not going to walk to the store around here. Everywhere you want to go, you've got to drive for at least 20 minutes. The Internet acts like a vehicle to get you to meet other people.

Richard: Have you met a lot of people through the Internet out here?

Will: Yes, quite a few. Tyler for instance. There are gay men out here. We actually met on the Internet, because I was looking for friends to have out here and that caused problems in my relationship because Parker did not understand why I would have to meet people out here and have a little community or a network. But it is like a security, just having people that you know who are also gay.

Paul: You really don't want to be secluded or excluded from people, your people,

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your own way of life.

The Internet for Will acted just as it did for Roxie. It was a linkage to other people who were gay or lesbian. Unlike Roxie, however, the ultimate purpose for Will in using the Internet, was to actually meet someone face-to-face. Will's use of the Internet caused tensions between Parker and him. Parker assumed the Internet was for meeting people for sex[33], but Will said that there were a number of people who just wanted to meet other gay people with whom they could be friends, hang out, or form a community. The Internet was their "vehicle" for meeting other people either face-to-face or on-line. The Internet created what Will called a "security" or safe place for interaction in a section of the country that could be homophobic. Both the on-line and the face-to-face interactions formed community for Will.

There were therefore a number of ways that the Internet offered a sense of community for the participants in my study. It not only offered connection to gay and lesbian people as it did for Will or through e-mail for all of the participants, but also it offered less direct ways of keeping community alive. In all, it was, as Will said, a safe place, a place of "security" in which to let community grow.

Place for the participants was therefore complicated. In fact, they did not seem to

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[33] Parker is not alone in thinking that the Internet is for sex. Recall that Billy said he used the Internet to look up porn. The Internet grew based partially on access to pornography. Whenever pornography is discussed, inevitably someone brings up safety. In fact, one of the buzzwords around the Internet has been "safety." The sexual nature of the Internet causes moral panics around its use causing the Internet to be perceived as an unsafe place where predators prey on the young and naive. This panic has caused some to call for tougher regulation to deny access to the Internet in order to "protect" children and others from these "dangers," including relatively easy access to pornography (Hoj, 1998). Many Internet "protection" devices rely on not allowing access to sites containing certain words. Most of these words are sexual in nature, but some devices include *gay* and *lesbian*. This means that young gay and lesbian people are denied access to sites that could help them establish community. Fortunately, in 1997 the Supreme Court

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have much of a connection to physical place at all. Pam even used the word "mythical" to describe gay places. Surprisingly, bars, cities, and even the Internet were not as important to them as the relationships that they established with other people. Instead they related stories of diasporas, of needing security and safety, and of liminal spaces. It is necessary then to reimagine place for the participants. Any place they felt secure became a gay place. Simone related it this way, "every place that I had come out in, in which I had a positive experience, ended up being some place that I could feel safe being gay." It is therefore necessary to let go of previously held gay places and imagine that any place they went could be gay. It is that such reimagining, that refining of and transforming community that I next turn.

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unanimously struck down the Communications Decency Act, a law aimed at creating a more "decent" and therefore "safe" Internet by regulating Internet content.

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Chapter Six

Refining Community

As evidenced thus far, the participants and the literature sometimes diverged from each other. For example, the literature suggested that large cities should be seen as a gay haven. They were not. Additionally, the literature suggested that the Internet should play a large role in my participants' lives. It did not. The divergence did not stop there. The literature also suggests that the participants should have two other important connections that they did not have – family and history. In traditional conceptualizations, community often has a historical referent, a built in starting place. Often that historical referent is the family. Although it is often true that people, regardless of their sexual orientation, often try to distance themselves from their family, the option is open for family providing a focal point for community.

For gay and lesbian people, this option is not always present. Families can become hostile and unsafe places regardless of how supportive they seem. Because families can be unsafe, they do not always provide the sense of safety vitally important to community. This unsafety ties into the diaporic idea touched upon earlier. The places into which gay people are born seem somehow alien to them. As such, there is little connection to either the history of their own family or the history of a larger gay and lesbian community. They therefore leave those places and search for someplace else to be gay. This diapora may not have happened if families were an easy focal point for community.

Therefore community for gay and lesbian people is often elsewhere. They either

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have to find it or to create it for themselves. Evidence of creation has already been apparent through the participants' transforming their adult homes into safe gay places for the first time. This chapter explores the reasons for the separation and also touches upon the disconnect this causes for communal history. It then looks at a different way the participants connected to a larger community, through a medium that also represents someplace out there – television.

All in the Family (or Ways in Which Gay and Lesbian People Are Cut Off from Family)

To quickly review, many conceptualizations of community, including Sarason's (1974) original one, place family and home in a central role. In fact, many theories deem the neighborhood one of, if not the most important, gathering places for community (Evans & Boyte, 1992; Oldenberg, 1989). The neighborhood as it often described in such literature is not the gay neighborhoods of the Castro in San Francisco or Park Slope in Brooklyn, it is instead the neighborhood of families. So important is this focus on the family that some theorists point to the breakup of the heterosexual family as the reason for the decline of neighborhoods and a sense of community (Oldenberg, 1989). In spite of this focus, it is possible to conceptualize neighborhoods as places to which *individuals* become attached. Yet when dealing with attachment to place, families and home often underlie the structure. For example, the concept of place identity relies almost exclusively on the attachments that people have to families and home (Manzo, 1993). Of course, home, just as the neighborhoods in which home is embedded, is thoroughly enmeshed in the construct of family. Therefore family plays an important part in fostering community.

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This undoubtedly comes from the notion that families are safe environments where people have an important sense of belonging, a vital component of a sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). This is certainly not true of all families (Field, 1995) especially for gay, lesbian, and bisexual young people due to their sometimes-dangerous position as outsider. The separation can result in a sense of fear in the gay, lesbian, or bisexual child, coming from a very real interpretation of the consequences of being "out" in a homophobic and heterosexist society. The gay, lesbian, or bisexual child therefore feels isolated in its own home and left without the sense of belonging that is vitally important for the creation of a sense of community.

The problematic relationship of family to community is clear to gay and lesbian theorists. One of the items that D'Augelli and Garnets (1995) listed as a barrier to gay community is that gay and lesbian children are most often embedded in a heterosexual family. Not only does being alone inside one's family serve as a barrier to inclusion in the family unit, but also it isolates gay and lesbian people from others like them. In this way, they are doubly cut off from sources of community. Because of this, gay and lesbian people often feel compelled to look outside of the family unit for the formation of their community. The conceptualization of community for gay and lesbian people must therefore differ from the accepted "home" and family based communities prevalent in the literature.

The participants experienced this separation from family as Pam eloquently reveals.

> Pam: Well actually my family isn't part of my concept of community at all. They only barely accept me; they don't necessarily accept my circle of

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> friends. They don't necessarily accept my partnership with Miriam. They don't – you know, they've made a few steps. Only because I'm their daughter. It's not something they would be a part of. Not even my sister who thinks she's more open minded, and I won't even go near liberal *[Pam, Miriam, and I laugh]*. They're just not, even if they wanted to be, they aren't in this community. They're not comfortable in my concept of community.

Richard: What about before you were with Miriam, even before you may have even been out? Were they part of your community then or were they even then separate?

Pam: They were separate then, but they weren't aware that I had community *[Pam, Miriam, and I laugh]* or they were in denial. We didn't have to talk about it. Unless there were some reason, we didn't have to talk about it. They knew [I was a lesbian] at a point a long time ago, and it wasn't an issue because I didn't have it in their face, and I was away. Separate worlds. Just "Hello, how are you?" They didn't really know how I lived my life.

Pam, who is 42, has never included her family as part of her community. Note that she uses the phrase "separate worlds." Such a phrase denotes an extreme separation. Separate worlds may share the same solar system, but never do they meet. Pam says that her family tries to understand, but she views this attempt as insincere. They do it only out of an obligation they feel because she is their daughter. Even if their attempt were sincere, Pam feels that they could never be a part of her community "even if they wanted to." They do not share the same history of oppression; they do not share the same alienation from their own family of origin. There is always a divide.

This separation from her own family has caused Pam to view Miriam's family with a certain amount of distance as well. Even though Miriam's family is remarkably supportive of them and their son, Pam's experiences caused her to look on any family with suspicion.

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Richard: Do you consider Miriam's family part of your community?

Pam: *[somewhat hesitantly]* Yes, much more so than my – I'm not completely sure that they are 100 percent comfortable, but they try very hard *[Pam, Miriam, and I laugh]*.

Richard: That's always important.

Pam: And they've had a lot longer to do that. I'm sure that in the future it'll be a little bit different with my family. But as far as [Miriam's family being] part of the community? Not totally. They're supportive, but I wouldn't really put them there, even though I appreciate them.

One of the barriers to community between gay children and their heterosexual parents is that gay and lesbian children are accepted or rejected on the whim of the more dominant group, the heterosexuals. According to McMillan and Chavis (1986) a sense of community is based in part on feeling as if one matters and has a voice in the decision-making processes of their community. Membership in a heterosexual family community is contingent on the willingness of the family to accept the gay or lesbian family member. When gay or lesbian people are accepted in the family, it is often conditional. They are accepted only if they do not discuss their sexual orientation, are out only to the immediate family, or do not bring anyone gay or lesbian home with them. Without an equal, or at least more recognized, voice in the rules of community, gay and lesbian people often feel at odds with their heterosexual families even if the they are "accepted" into its midst. It is a relationship with very unequal power dynamics.

Miriam: My family is a big part of my life, and I think my family to us is a big part of our life. Possibly because Pam's family is so far away. I do get a lot of support from them and I talk to them all the time. Um, we're very close. Especially in comparison to other families I've seen *[Miriam and I laugh]*.

Richard: Yeah.

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> Miriam: Um, but it is still that family of origin community, and that is still separate from a lot of my life as an adult and a lot of my life with my friends. Even though they may hear about certain things and peripherally participate in certain things, they still are not part of that group. If there's a – there's a separation I think between my friends and my family.

In spite of her family's acceptance of her and her partner and her son, Miriam still felt separated from them. Her feelings of separation were given dramatic revelation at two of the community events in which I was a participant observer. The events, a baby shower and a *brit milah*, focused on Miriam and Pam as a lesbian family unit and included both their gay and lesbian community and Miriam's heterosexual family of origin. Both times, as soon as it was possible to separate, the heterosexuals gathered in one room and the gay and lesbian people gathered in another. Even though many of Miriam's gay and lesbian friends knew her heterosexual family of origin and were friendly with them, the two sides went to the zones of most comfort, the places where they felt most safe. Occasionally, one person would drift to the area of the "other," but these minglings would be fleeting. Because of this, Miriam did what many gay people do who are still connected in some way to their family. She traveled in between two worlds, her heterosexual family of origin and her gay and lesbian community. When pressed however, it was the gay and lesbian people to whom Miriam would turn for community and for safety.

These unequal power dynamics often cause some people to simply never come out to their families, thereby insuring that there is a divide between them. Will, at 35, had never come out to his family. He wanted their support and felt coming out to them would mean losing it.

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Will: Are you kidding? I haven't even come out to them yet.

Richard: You haven't even yet?

Will: They know, it's just an unspoken know.

Richard: How important is your family to your community?

Will: I think it is important to have the support of your family. A lot of time the downside of the gay community is that it is like a freak show. Especially the gay parade. I went there a few times and it was like a freak show and that's what's being portrayed to people out there.

Will was the only person who talked about the "freak show" aspects of gay community. Even at 35 years old, there was a fear that his family would view him as one of the "freaks" and reject him. Ironically, his not coming out led to the very estrangement that he feared. They knew little about his life and did not ask him about it. In return, he volunteered no information.

When most of the participants told their families, it was a liberating experience (Jaime even chose the Statue of Liberty as the place to tell his parents) and their families displayed conditional acceptance or tolerance[34]. Only two people had extraordinarily accepting heterosexual families of origin, Miriam and Matt. When Matt first told his family he was gay, they celebrated the news. In spite of this tremendous support, even Matt felt a separation.

Matt: Well, my family was really about as supportive as they could be. The outcast in my family was the religious brother not the gay brother, and I think that is the opposite of a lot of families. So I've always gotten a lot of

[34] In spite of these relatively positive experiences, many of them knew gay and lesbian people who had negative, often violent, experiences when coming out to their family. For example, Zach knew a gay teenager whose father would hold him down so that his brother could "beat the gay out of him." The parents of the ex-boyfriend of another participant dropped him off on the side of the Interstate 100 miles away from their home. They told him if he were going to be gay, he would not be gay anywhere near where they lived. He was 16 at the time.

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support from them . . . I speak to my mom every other week or so, but um I guess, well, are they are a part of my community?

Billy: Your family is incredibly supportive.

Matt: But my family is separate from me and my friends. . . You know what the other part of that is when you talk about community and family? None of us live near our family. I mean, we have all moved away.

Billy: Purposefully.

Matt: Yeah, purposefully. I think it helps for family to be separate from our current friends and community because they are not in the same place. And so my family I travel to once or twice a year. So that's it apart from phone calls. Being here in this gay community in New York separates me from my family at home.

Each of the people in the room during that conversation took the psychological sense of separation from his family and purposefully turned it into a physical sense of separation as well. Matt, Billy, Zach, and I, were physically separated from our families by 533, 758, 1024, and 1217 miles respectively. That is a dramatic representation of the psychological and communal distance that can occur between a heterosexual family and its gay, lesbian or bisexual members regardless of how supportive the families are. Moving away is a way of redefining the power dynamics. Inclusion and exclusion in the family unit is not simply based on the heterosexual family member's whims, but also on the gay person's act of physical separation. If the gay person is not included in the family at that point, it is because he or she chooses not to be, not because of active or passive exclusion by their heterosexual family members.

Family Ties (or Recreating Families all over Again)

In spite of these tensions, family is a powerful concept, and the participants felt ambivalent about it – families were not safe, but they were supposed to be. Not only did

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they use family as a metaphor for gay community, but also several of them were intent on starting families on their own, in spite of, and sometimes because of, the separation that they felt from their own families of origin. This concept of using family as a metaphor for gay community is not unknown in the literature. The small tightly knit communities created by gay, lesbian, and bisexual people have been termed "families of choice" (Bohan, 1996; D'Augelli & Garnet, 1995;Weston, 1991). Families of choice are composed of peers who give gay men and lesbians the support they cannot get from their families of origin, no matter how supportive they are. A family of choice is just that, a family that is chosen. Inside a family of choice, gay, lesbian, and bisexual people have the power of their own inclusion, unlike in a family of origin.

The notion of families of choice is not aproblematic, however. Families of choice presume that being gay is the only minority status that people have. Some gay and lesbian people of color feel that it is not always possible to make a complete break from their families of origin because these families remain one of the bastions they have against societal racism (Bohan, 1996; Weston, 1991). The term is also problematic in that it also ignores the fact that families, whether chosen or not, can be hostile, dysfunctional entities. In spite of this, calling the gay or lesbian community to which a person belongs "a family" can be useful as a metaphor (Barry, 2000). For example, Paul was explicit in his desire for gay community to mirror the family units of heterosexuality. He said a goal of community was "trying to make straight life and gay life the same, you know to be like a family, to give the same kind of love to each other, gay or straight." In fact, it is a metaphor that several of the participants used.

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Miriam: I think that gay community, it's just about support, but I think with gay community versus the larger community it's an added dimension, which is similar to family, and I don't think that's present as much in larger "community." In the gay community it serves another purpose.

Richard: What is the other purpose?

Miriam: To serve as family. I think that um, *[sigh pause]* obviously not everybody who is gay can be part of this community. I think for myself I'd like, I've had this in the past, and it's where I'd like to go now, is to build this close network of people that are like family. And I think that part of that comes around because we don't get certain things from our family, even if they are very supportive in certain other ways. They don't know what it is like to be gay. And so if you're part of another group, if you are person of color, you have your family there to help you to build your identity to be there to support you, but you don't have that if you're gay, so you get that from your community.

Miriam uses the metaphor of family as one of safety. It offers support from the larger heterosexual environment. However, she also points out that people of color have a community through their family of origin. Miriam is Jewish and remarked that if several of her identities were competing with each other for importance, it is usually her Jewish identity that won out. Her family of origin provided a realm of safety for being Jewish, but not for being gay. In spite of her connection to them through her minority status, she was still separated from them due to sexuality. This was true of many of the other participants of color as well. In spite of providing safety against racism, family was still an unsafe place overall.

Simone: They're tolerant. When I first came out, I was sixteen and – well, when I first came out to *them [emphasis hers]*, I was sixteen – and their first initial reaction was that I was going to hell. I'm going to hell. They are very religious and they, everything corresponded to what was in the Bible, you know, "man shall not lie with man." Well, I'm not a man. *[Simone, Elyse, and I laugh]*

Richard: Sexist loophole *[Simone, Elyse, and I laugh]*

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> Simone: They were very much against it at first, but as the years passed, and they met more of my partners, I think they had a chance to grapple with things and sort of feel things out and gain a little bit of a better understanding about who I was, but still even at this point, they are not more than tolerant. They love me and they want me to be happy, but they don't agree with how I live my life. Um, so *[pause]* it's actually created sort of an interesting dynamic in my family because I think my mother wants to support me more than she does, but she is just struggling with her, uh, partly struggling with her religious beliefs, but more so struggling with her siblings and her step father over their religious beliefs.

Although the families of people of color can be bastions against racism, it often is not a bastion against homophobia. In fact, it can foster homophobia. For Simone, this was due in part to religious beliefs. For African Americans, churches have often been safe havens whose cultural practices have led to activism and community (Pattillo-McCoy, 1998). The cultural importance of the Black church has caused participation in them to become "semi-involuntary" in some regions of the country, especially in the rural South (Hunt & Hunt, 2000). Simone's own family comes in part from the rural South. Therefore the cultural benefits she could gain from being part of the church is at odds with church tradition of intolerance and persecution of gay and lesbian people.

All of this leads to the creation of families of choice, yet the families of gay people are not always simply families of choice. When the concept arose in the 1980s and early 1990s, this new "family" was comprised completely of gay friendships. The possibility children through adoption, surrogate motherhood for gay men, or artificial insemination for lesbians seemed untenable. There were certainly gay and lesbian people with children, but these children tended to come from previous heterosexual relationships. Just a decade later, that has changed. There are a growing number of gay

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and lesbian people choosing to have children of their own in spite of legal barriers against it[35].

The participants found that having children served to reduce the separation that happened between them and their families of origin. In having a child, a point of common reference developed for them that did not previously exist. For example, Miriam, Pam, Elyse, and Simone, all of whom either had a baby or were planning to have a baby, noticed a change in the way that they related to their families of origin.

> Simone: I think that since I've started dating Elyse and since we've gotten engaged, that's gotten me closer in connection with my parents.
>
> Richard: How did that happen if they were uneasy feelings about your being a lesbian, then how would a wedding make them feel closer?
>
> Simone: Well, because, a lot of it had to do with a change in age and a change in direction in my life and now it's like I'm becoming more family oriented, and I'm moving towards establishing a family of my own, and I want our family to be a part of our larger extended family . . . So my definition of how family fits together coincides with my definitions of community and how community functions for me. Um, most of the gay people that we have in our life now are people who are establishing families or have already established families or are about to establish families, um, and so that community for me becomes much more a matter of connecting families together. So now there is not a separation for me between gay families and straight families. It's all families and those families are all becoming part of our community. And how we are seeking support for ourselves and our relationship and our wanting to have children within our relationship.

Getting married, getting a house, and having a child are all things with which Simone's family can identify and allowed them to connect once again. Similarly, in all

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[35] For example, unless a woman specifically asked for a gay man's sperm, gay men are not allowed to donate to a sperm bank. Additionally, only 20 states allow gay adoptions. Three states, Florida, Utah, and Mississippi expressly forbid it by law. Mississippi not only bars adoption by gay men and lesbians, it also refuses to recognize the legality of a pre-existing gay adoption if such a family moves to the state (CNN.com, Aug 21, 2001).

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the years that Pam had lived in New Jersey, her family had never come to visit her from Mississippi. The birth of Isaac changed that. For the first time, Pam's mother decided to come visit Pam, Miriam, and Isaac. Pam was very pleased to see that this was happening.

As powerful as this shift in relationship was, reestablishing contact with families was not the reason that any of the participants chose to have children. Having a child is not a decision that is made lightly in most gay or lesbian couples given the tremendous effort and expense involved, effort and expense that is not necessary for most heterosexual couples. Their parents were secondary in the process, and even though a strengthening of ties occurred, there was still a divide. Their parents knew what it was like to be a parent. They did not know what it was like to be a gay parent.

This related to a new dilemma presented to the gay parents. Although gay people provided a sense of safety, their parents had experience in raising children. The question became which was more important – gay or family – when searching for community. Invariably, the participants said that although they would prefer to have both, gay was more important. Miriam and Pam explained this to me when we were talking about spending time with other lesbian mothers in a group to which they belonged.

> Miriam: I think it is really scary to be a parent. I think that's big. But I think it is bigger when you are a gay parent. Um. Just like it is bigger in most communities if you are a parent of color or a single parent. You have less support; there is less of a community. Your community may be strong, but it is small.
>
> Pam: I think [between lesbians or mothers as to who is our community] it was lesbian mothers, and at this point in all our lives, you really can't separate the two either.

At this point in the conversation in which they were talking about how they could

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not separate their identities. Isaac coughed and distracted both of them. Their point was therefore made both visually and verbally. They were not lesbians or mothers; they were lesbian mothers. For the other participants who had or were having children also found this rearranging of priorities. Parenthood became a main focus of their lives. I asked Elyse and Simone who were in the process of artificial insemination about how they were searching for community. Given the choice between other parents and gay people, Elyse said they too were searching for people who were both. If they could not find both, then it was important that their community be gay. In fact, her impending pregnancy made searching for gay community even more important to her than it had been in some time.

> Elyse: I think that [finding] gay [people for community] is actually more important to me than it used to be, and I think the reason is that I intend for us to have children very soon *[Elyse laughs]*. It is something that we both want and are in the process of working on, and in doing so it is very important to me that the child grow up having other children in his or her life that are also experiencing gay parents and gay parented households. It is also important to me to live in communities that support gay families, and not just don't burn crosses on their front lawn type of support, but openly acknowledge that there are gay people and gay families living in this town, and that they uphold that as being an appropriate or acceptable household or family unit. And so I think that I am gravitating a lot more towards to finding gay people, some of whom are parents and some of whom are not.

Like Elyse and Simone, Miriam and Pam started to search out other gay and lesbian people who also were in the process of having families before their son Isaac was born. They found an organization that catered to gay and lesbian people who were trying to start a family through adoption, artificial insemination, or surrogate motherhood. It also catered to people who had already established families with children of different ages. They mentioned the group to Elyse and Simone, yet Elyse and Simone had some

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misgivings. When they attended a meeting, Elyse felt that the group was insensitive to the experience of gay fathers who, by design, could not carry their child. Miriam and Pam felt that was just an unfortunately make-up of the one group that Elyse and Simone had attended. They had felt nothing but support and comfort with the groups. Given Miriam and Pam's previous positive experiences, Simone and Elyse were planning to attend again. This point of conflict, however, does show one of the problems presented whenever one searches for community. Miriam and Pam explained their experience in more detail.

Miriam: Well, one of the things that we did was to join [the organization] to meet other couples that are having kids or trying to have children, but just because other people are gay or are having kids or are trying to have children doesn't mean that you want them as part of your community. *[Miriam, Pam, and I laugh]* You might have nothing else in common. I wouldn't necessarily feel that all those people who are having kids – they wouldn't feel like family to me. But that's what I'm searching for. People don't have to be gay, but it helps because then they understand more completely my life.

Pam: And sometimes I feel like a pride sort of thing. Like I don't want to be rejected, but I want to reject people who are straight. I don't have time for straight people. *[Pam, Miriam, and I laugh]*

Richard: I feel that sometimes too.

Miriam: And we have issues as gay parents that straight parents don't have and don't have to think and don't understand. I'm sure they could be made to understand if they think about it. But they are just things that people don't even consider. If they could be gay parents that would great.

Richard: Do you think that you've found it all through [the organization] or have potential?

Pam: *[pause. She and Miriam look to each other]* I think that's there's potential.

Miriam: Potential, yeah.

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Potential is in many ways the main focus of community for gay and lesbian people. Having known since childhood that their community was someplace other than where they were, they constantly seek out that potential of community. Because of the expectation that community is somewhere else, even when we arrive, the community can seem not quite right. That explains how people could move to New York and be disappointed in the gay community they found there. It also explains why bars lose their appeal over time. And it explains why an organization specifically designed to cater to gay parents could not meet the need of my gay parent participants. The process of forming community is ongoing, and often one has to be creative in order to live up to the potential.

For the First Time in History (or Barriers to an Ongoing Historical Community)

The barriers created by being disconnected from families of origin not only affect community in the present, but also in the past. Family can provide access to an ongoing history, which is important in many theories about community[36]. Sarason (1974) referred to a community's history, and McMillan and Chavis (1986) made history important to a psychological sense of community. Connecting to history has been problematic for gay, lesbian, and bisexual people because there is not easy and ready access available for our history. D'Augelli and Garnets' (1995) review of lesbian and gay community building

[36] Children of other minority groups have a built in connection not only to other minority individuals, but also to their history through parents who share the same group affiliation. Even if the larger dominant culture denies or tries to erase their history, a connection exists through the family as exemplars of their culture. Gay, lesbian, and bisexual children do not have that connection. Their parents usually are not gay and may deny the sexuality of other family members. In many ways, they are completely alone. Only one of the participants had a gay parent. Simone's father lived several years with a male lover. Unfortunately, after he left his lover, he married a woman and denied his gay past, effectively cutting Simone off from the community that they could have shared.

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lists a lack of awareness among gay and lesbian people of a collective history as one of the three main difficulties in creating community. The other two of D'Augelli and Garnet's barriers, that the community is fictive and that we are raised in a heterosexual community, are also tangentially related to this lack of history. Because of our lack of connection, when we do find other gay, lesbian, or bisexual people, they are often as ill informed about our history as we are. To further complicate matters, there is a denial that gay, lesbian, and bisexual people have a history at all[37].

This lack of historical connection was borne up in my participants. Although they acknowledged that history was important in general, it did not have much personal importance. Only one, Miriam, expressed an interest in gay and lesbian history. Miriam's connection to history was based not on her being a lesbian, but rather on her Jewish heritage. Miriam explains, "I think part of my appreciation for history and the political side of it and activism comes from being Jewish and being part of another community, and a lot of it applies to being gay and I don't know if I would be so sensitive [to gay and lesbian history] if I didn't have [being Jewish] as part of my [personal] history." This connection to Jewish history was so strong that Miriam often

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[37] Part of this denial is due to a misuse of social constructionism. Vance (1989) claims that social constructionism makes oppressed people somewhat nervous. If concepts such as race, class, gender, and sexuality are simple constructions of the historical and social moment and not "real," then in the future they could become deconstructed and disappear. Sexuality seems most vulnerable because it lacks the apparent physical markers of gender and race. Kitzinger (1995) has noted that this apparent danger has led some lesbian feminists to abandon social constructionism altogether saying that they would deconstruct when those in social power deconstruct. In spite of this, Vance does not see social constructionism as antithetical to movements of empowerment. It is her belief that the notion that sexuality is socially constructed can be empowering because, as Rich (1993) notes, heterosexuality is also socially constructed and not "real." She does acknowledge, however, that in a non-equal society, there is little social need for heterosexuals, who have social privilege, to view their sexuality as constructed, but there is much social need for them to view other types of sexuality as constructed. By doing this, the majority strengthens its view of itself and weakens its view of sexual minorities, keeping the status quo alive.

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considered her being Jewish as her most important identity, even though she does not consider herself to be "particularly Jewish."

> Well they are so interactive, I mean always. I mean, I'm a woman, I'm a lesbian, I'm a Jew. They are always connected. Unfortunately, in my perspective, things always come back to being Jewish no matter what other group I'm in. I mean, I have experienced anti-Semitism in the straight community and I've experienced anti-Semitism in the gay community too. Being a Jew is usually the identity that comes to the forefront. It is usually the main identity. And I'm not particularly Jewish. I'm not religious. I'm not really part of a big Jewish community or any thing, but it is just so ingrained and it is just a very powerful thing and it is one of those things that just bubble up.

Miriam noted that being Jewish was "ingrained" in her. This ingraining came from her family, all of who are also Jewish, but none of who is out as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Her family therefore repeatedly exposed her to her Jewish cultural history from early childhood, but they never exposed her to lesbian cultural history. Her connection to gay and lesbian history came much later in her life. Miriam's affirmation that her Jewish identity was most important is complicated, however. Miriam chose two gay, non-Jewish men to parent her son in the event of her death. In this important decision, being a lesbian was more important to her than being Jewish. This seems to contradict her statement about the primacy of being Jewish. Her choice, however, was an effect of the level of safety that she felt partially because of a distrust of her family. She believed the gay men would raise her son to respect his Jewish heritage, but did not believe her family would raise him to respect gay people in general.

Pam, Miriam's partner, felt, as Miriam did, that history was vitally important, but she had no close connection to it. Her relationship to history was complicated by and intimately tied to her being a Southerner.

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> [My connection to history comes] in a much different way, though. Growing up in the South, until I as an adult, most of what was done to Black people was kept from me. We didn't learn about it in school. I didn't know the atrocities until I was an adult and came to college until I was in my 30s until late in life, through literature and some of the classes. And when I learned and was like "Where was I?" I was alive. I was right there. Certain things were just presented to us, and I was so sheltered, and it was presented to us in such a way that I wasn't aware of what was going on. And it's the same about gays. Although it wasn't talked about much, but when it was, it was sort of the same thing. It was just bad. It was different in a way. If anyone said "Gay," my ears just perked up and when they said Black or white or whatever, but I was truly curious and wanted to find out more, but there were no resources for me back then. So I had no way of getting the scoop on the history.

In many ways, Pam's Southernness in the North led to a cultural connection the same way that Miriam's Jewishness in a predominantly non-Jewish country did. Both of them were aware of their Southern and Jewish cultural roots in a way that they were not aware of their lesbian roots. They were more familiar with the history that they were given in their childhood, even if that history was, as Pam pointed out, distorted or outright lies. For gay and lesbian history, however, Pam and Miriam were on their own. It was up to them to be informed. Because many gay and lesbian people are often denied access to other gay and lesbian people while growing up, when they meet others who share their sexuality, their collective history starts at the moment of first meeting. History therefore becomes immediate. It extends only as far back as coming out and meeting others.

Sometimes the people with whom we connect can help us connect to a deeper communal history. For instance Pam connected to the past through Miriam and Miriam's connections were a result of the lesbian groups that she sought out when first coming out. Her first lesbian community was a group of out radical feminist lesbians who have a

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tradition of knowing the history of oppression lesbians face. She felt, however, that her passion for our collective history was a passion that was not shared by all gay and lesbian people, especially by younger gay, lesbian, and bisexual people.

> I'm only 30 years old, but sometimes I feel so old. I mean, young lesbians today are not like they were when I was first coming out. Politics seem to be left behind and behavior's different and a lot it has gone back to being all about [fun and] sex. And I feel so old and so conservative when I talk like this, but we don't have – lesbians of *my* generation *[Miriam laughs. Emphasis hers]* – don't have a lot to relate to a lot of the younger lesbians. . .I don't think that they respect that history or care about the history, and that may or may not be true, but that's my perception, but no, I think that history is important, very important.

Although the existence of a "generation gap" is an often-heard lament of people of different ages, Miriam felt this was especially true of gay and lesbian people given their lack of connection to gay and lesbian people who are older than they are. Because gay and lesbian people are often isolated when growing up, they sometimes can have what Miriam perceived to be a disdain of the accomplishments and history of others. Many gay and lesbian people are not connected to the past and therefore each new grouping of gay and lesbian people becomes something "new" – in effect each community becomes a new community, one formed by them. This can cause disconnectedness to the past and to people of a different age who share a gay and lesbian culture. Although Miriam felt the younger groups were all about fun and sex, this could be complicated as well. Often gay and lesbian people have to focus on other things in their lives at the expense of political action and a search for history. When faced with the daily hassles of surviving in a heterosexist world, sometimes they simply need to be with other gay people and focus on fun. The demands of daily living in a homophobic and heterosexist environment can lead to a lack of time or energy to research the history of

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gay and lesbian people. Being connected to a history can be viewed as a luxury (Barry, 2000).

Paul and Jaime said this was true for them. Although they had been in a relationship for twelve years, Paul was still not out to many people in his life. He also had been having difficulties related to his work, a place where he had been very closeted. For several years, he had been working at a relatively high paying job on Wall Street. His position, however, had been the result of promotions inside the firm itself. When downsizing occurred, he lost his job and did not have the academic credential to get another similar job. This weighed heavily on his mind during the time of the interview. When I asked him about the importance of history, he said other things took precedent at the moment.

> It would be important, but the thing is, we are not that settled in our lives right now to be fully a part of that, because I'm still looking to get on my feet. I don't focus or get involved with the gay life everyday, not seeing what events are happening because we are not into that section yet. We would like to be there, but we're just not free yet to be in that section.

Paul's employment problems were recent. He had not actually taken time to investigate history during any of the 12 years of his relationships. Recall that Paul was very much concerned with being accepted by heterosexual people. Only recently had he started to try to connect to other gay people. Attention to homophobia, personal safety, and the possibility of rejection from his family continually took precedence over a connection to a history.

There are other ways that we can become disconnected from our history. For example, in Matt's job, he worked with people who have HIV. He felt that there was a

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whole generation of gay men to whom he was denied access because so many gay men had died from AIDS.

> I have to say this. I for a long time really felt that AIDS destroyed an entire generation of gay men. There is a whole cohort of gay men who do not exist because of HIV and AIDS[38]. And for me, like my boss, is like 50 or 55 or something, and he is actually one of the few gay men I know of that age. In some ways, one of the things that I like about working with him is that he's kind of like a role model in some ways. I think a lot of gay men our age don't have people like 20 years older or 30 years older because they are not there. They're gone, and I kind of feel like that I like having that connection to people who are a little bit older than me, gay men who are leading terrific gay lives and I didn't have that for a long time until just recently until I met a few people who were 15, 20, 25 years older than me.

The decimation of nearly an entire generation of gay men is another of the ways that it becomes very difficult to connect to history. Yet there are other ways as well. Much of our past is simply completely ignored, hidden or denied. For example, history courses and books often gloss over or ignore gay people completely[39]. It is not atypical

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[38] One aspect of gay life that bolstered a sense of community was the coming of AIDS in the 1980s. In fact, some researchers say that dividing gay history into Pre-AIDS and Post-AIDS is a more significant marker than Pre-Stonewall and Post-Stonewall (Paul Hayes, & Coates, 1995). Social support was a necessary reaction to the crisis. Gay men often get support from friends and lovers instead of from family members (Weston, 1991), and ties with communities were increasingly seen as important. Additionally, AIDS gave gay men something to rally around. AIDS led to the highly successful early 1990s political community groups ACT-UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) and Queer Nation. The actions taken by ACT UP especially were reminiscent of the "zaps" done by the successful early 1970s groups, the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) and the Gay Activist Alliance (GAA). However, just as the GLF and the GAA eventually died down, ACT UP and Queer Nation began to dissolve as the 1990s progressed. Even though the impact of AIDS continues, its place of importance, especially to a generation of gay men who came of age with AIDS as a daily reality, has waned. Therefore, its ability to serve as a nexus both for a sense of community and as a community organizer has also waned.

[39] Most of the fault of the erasure of gay, lesbian, and bisexual history lies at the feet of heterosexual historians and theorists. In spite of this, gay, lesbian, and bisexual academics can share some of the responsibility. One of the largest barriers in trying to find a collective gay and lesbian past is a present day tendency to assume that "gay and lesbian" people appeared for the first time in the late 19th century. This tendency exists in spite of the fact that the word *gay* comes from *gai* or *gaiol*, a thirteenth century French word referring to intimate courtly and sexual love between two men and that the term *lesbian* is in acknowledgment of Sappho's poems about her love for women in ancient Greece (Panati, 1998). The recent arrival of gay or lesbian as an identity, however, usually focuses on the history of the word *homosexual*, not on *gay* and *lesbian* and relies heavily on a medicalized model of history. It assumes that

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even today to have the gay and lesbian parts of history completely ignored, even with substantial evidence to corroborate it. For example, the role that gay people played on September 11, 2001, was almost completely ignored.

Richard: Another thing that when you were talking about the planes, I think it was interesting that my mother actually Friday e-mailed me and said "I just heard that the guy Mark Bingham on the plane that went down in Pennsylvania was gay and I thought that was really interesting."

Elyse: That he was gay?

Richard: Well, that he was gay and he helped bring down that plane.

Elyse *[sarcastically]*: My god! He wasn't sitting in a corner crying?

Richard: But I was thinking when she said that, that I knew that from the beginning that he was gay because in gay media it does say that and whereas when the President had everyone together about that plane, he brought the woman who was married to a man and not the –

Simone: Right and not the gay guy.

Miriam: So our gay heroes for our gay youth get erased.

Simone: You know gay people can't be heroes because that might screw up the whole balance and people might actually give us some rights.

Richard: Right. And now it is turned around, and I don't know what happened on that plane obviously, but where the straight guy who was married to the blond woman is now the one who instigated everyone to fight back and is now the great American Straight Hero.

Simone: When it is really the gay man who has nothing left to lose. *[Simone, Elyse, Pam, Zach, Miriam, and I laugh]*

Richard *[speaking as Mark Bingham]*: "I will bring the plane down!"

Simone *[speaking as Mark Bingham]*: "I will not be oppressed again!" *[all*

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sexual identity as we know it came into being in 1892, about the same time that the word *homosexuality* first was coined by Charles Gilbert Chaddock. This is in spite of the fact that Karl Kertbeny had used the word in pamphlet in 1869 (Halperin, 1989) and in 1860 the word lesbian appeared in the American journal *The Alienist and Neurologist* in regards to a woman who dressed as a man (Panati, 1998).

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laugh]

Because heterosexual history ignores our gay past, gay, lesbian, and bisexual people can be completely unaware that it exists. The history of gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals can then be forced to become a local history, one of individual groups of friends who find each other. This shared local history is important in McMillan and Chavis' (1986) conceptualization of a sense of community in that shared events provide a connecting point for community members. Other groups certainly have local shared histories to bond them together in communities, but they often have a more widespread acknowledgment that a wider communal cultural history exists. This is not true of gay and lesbian people.

Get Real/ The Real World/St Elsewhere (or Creating our Own Connections to Community)

If family, the Internet, and history could provide no real connections for community, the question became "What did?" The answer was surprising. Even though the Internet did not help the participants to establish a global cultural history, they did have access to it through an unexpected place, a place that, ironically, was also connected to the media –entertainment. Many of the participants in this study commented on the importance of television and the entertainment industry in providing a sense of community. Before mass media, it would have been difficult for an entire country to speculate at once over such seemingly unimportant events as who shot J.R., what was Murphy Brown going to do about her pregnancy, and was Ellen ever coming out.

These examples may seem flippant and irrelevant to some, but at different times

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in the past 20 years, they have been the subject of intense conversation and have become important cultural moments. Therefore, mass media has the potential of creating a sense of community, even when the people watching the events are otherwise unconnected[40]. Much of gay cultural moments are tied up with the entertainment industry. For example, Disco began as a Black gay underground movement; the Harlem Renaissance led to a flowering of musical and literary output[41]; and even Stonewall happened shortly after Judy Garland died. To the participants the media was important for connecting to some larger gay culture. In fact, Zach interrupted one of the group interviews and made comment on the music playing. He said, "It's Melissa Etheridge. I think it is appropriate to have her in the background." Additionally, Matt compared television for people of his generation (early 30s) to what the Internet is to young people now – a way to know that there are other people with whom they could connect.

> Matt: For us and for me, I actually think more like *The Real World* on MTV, as being something, like, "Oh my goodness there are gay people on television," and not Billy Crystal in *Soap* but gay people, real gay people.
>
> Richard: Where, like Billy Crystal's character in *Soap*, the only person he has sex with is a woman in spite of being gay.

---

[40] Of course, the problem with mass media is that it is often times as racist, as homophobic, and as sexist as the public at large. This lack of diversity has caused more than one protest towards the TV and movie industries, notably by the NAACP and GLAAD among others (KQED Media Salon, May 14, 2001). In spite of this, entertainment remains a focal point of community for many gay and lesbian people. Much of their connection to others came from forms of entertainment that seemed to have either camp or gay sensibilities.

[41] One of the first large moments in a collectivist sense of gay community occurred in Harlem in the 1920s and early 1930s. The Harlem Renaissance was caused by the revitalization of the Harlem section of Manhattan due to an influx of Black Americans from other sections of the country. Literary and musical flowering were integral to this movement, and this same artistic flowering made it possible for Black gay men and lesbians to gather and form community (Garber, 1989). It also allowed for the emergence of nationally known gay African American literary figures like Langston Hughes. The communities formed often crossed racial lines because many white gays and lesbians flocked to Harlem clubs during the Renaissance. However, the racism of the time still led to a separation and helped create a uniquely Black gay and lesbian tradition.

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Matt: Exactly.

Richard: Like Stephen on *Dynasty*.

Zach: Yeah, gay in name only. There is still some of that that goes on.

Matt: I mean before the Internet, although it started at the same time. But there were a lot more people who had access to cable than the Internet and I think there were a lot more people who saw gay people on TV like *The Real World*.

Richard: I'm glad you said that about *The Real World*, because the year before I came to New York, the first season of the Real World was on and there was this girl from the South living with a gay guy in New York City and that meant so much to me. Because there was my Southern connection and there's. . .

Zach: I think these images do mean a lot. I would just grasp at any small thing that I saw when I was coming out and figuring things out. I mean I saw some movie *Threesome* which was awful and practically homophobic, but it had a guy who liked a guy *[Zach, Matt, Billy, and I laugh]* and he said it out loud.

Matt *[in a voice to mock the straight cultural "naughtiness" of the situation]*: And he puts his hand on the other guy's *leg. [Matt, Zach, Billy, and I laugh. Emphasis Matt's]*

Zach: And he touches it and talks about it and then there's Lara Flynn Boyle and she's fabulous, so you know. When I saw it, I thought, "This is cool and I could do it," but now I look back at that movie and think what a piece of crap. There's another movie that's older, not *Threesome* but older with a similar situation.

Matt: The one with the *Scarecrow and Mrs. King* woman.

Richard: Yeah, and it had Harry Hamlin.

Zach: That's the one I was trying to think of.

Richard: *Making Love*!

Zach: That was racy central for the time.

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Billy: I clung on to that one.

Matt: The formative film of my youth, believe it or not was *Beastmaster [Matt, Billy, Zach, and I laugh]*. They repeated that on HBO every day and that hot hot hot Marc Singer prancing around in his little loincloth, if something made me gay it was that.

Richard: I agree with you there.

Billy: Can we go rent *Beastmaster*? I don't seem to recall this.

Matt: Television is the medium that has made more of difference to me in gaiety than the Internet.

Zach: Oh yeah.

It is interesting to note that in talking about TV shows and movies, the participants became more active and more energetic than in other time during the interviews. These shows had provided for them connections in a time when they thought that they were completely alone in their desires. It did not matter how bad the programs were, they became historical mileposts in the participants' stories of coming out. Note that Zach said that even though *Threesome* was an awful movie and the gay character never had sex with a man – in fact, he only had sex with women – while watching it, Zach felt justified and empowered in his attractions to men. "When I saw it, I thought, 'This is cool and I could do it'." The "it" Zach was referring to was being gay, being with a man, and being out. When Zach knew no other gay and lesbian people, *Threesome* provided him with a context for his desires.

Similarly, Miriam noted that when she was young, she obsessively watched and taped *Cagney and Lacey*, a TV police drama about the lives of two female officers. At the time, Miriam did not know why this show drew her in so deeply, but in retrospect she

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said that it was the fact that it was about the relationship of two very strong women. The fact that they were heterosexual in the program did not matter. In an era where being out was not common, *Cagney and Lacy* provided an example of two women caring for each other in a strong, non-competitive relationship. Miriam told me that *Cagney and Lacey* was such a bonding point for community for her that she forced everyone in her family to watch the show with her. She wanted them to be a part of what she was experiencing. None of them liked the show like she did, however.

Returning to the above exchange, not only did these shows provide sign posts for gay and lesbian people, but it also introduced more and more of so-called "gay culture" into mainstream American culture. Not only were we being told it was okay to be gay, the rest of the country was as well. This also meant that things that were just "ours" suddenly became available to everyone. Zach notes that there were good and bad things associated with this.

Richard: And it's ironic too we have *Queer As Folk* and *Will & Grace* and we're like that's not gay enough.

Zach: Now *Will & Grace* is pretty good.

Matt: I like *Will & Grace*. And I think it's pretty gay.

Zach: It is pretty gay and they say stuff.

Matt: It's about as gay as you're gonna get.

Zach: Well when you have Homer Simpson saying "Thank you, God, for everything that's great in the world – like glory holes."

Matt: Who said that?

Zach: Homer. Then you know that gay culture is starting to permeate, I mean this is my own personal opinion, but you know how white people sort of

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basically took it and co-opted what Black people came up with, and so whites have Eminen. It's like rap and pop come out of Jazz and all the Black singers and all this stuff has been stolen from Black people, and we white people have come up and acted like we did it, especially back when Pat Boone would actually copy Black songs.

Richard: And white comedians would come to Black clubs and steal the jokes.

Zach: It's crazy. I think the same thing is happening with some gay stuff where it is starting to permeate the culture more. And [straight white] people are [taking our culture, just like they did with Black people and saying things] like, "This is a white thing now, a white straight thing."

Matt: I feel that's true.

Zach: And it's starting to come like that, so it's becoming okay. So that's good in a way, but at the same time they've co-opted and stolen it. So it's good and bad and at least people are broader.

Matt: There are shows are shows that feature largely heterosexual characters that still have a gay sensibility about them. And I think I would name *Malcolm in the Middle* as one, and I don't watch it very much, but *Popular*.

Richard: Well, *Popular*'s written by a gay man.

Matt: It is? Well, there you go.

Zach: *Sex and the City*.

Richard: *Sex and City* of course, it's about women, but my god, you know. Samantha's a drag queen.

Zach: Right.

Matt: And that's gay culture permeating.

Of course, gay culture permeating could also be read as gay culture diluting. It can also be read as a more privileged social group taking something from a less privileged group and making it their own. This is the interpretation that Zach ascribes to the permeation of gay culture into the dominant heterosexual one. Although not

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completely comfortable with this, he realizes that even though the mainstreaming of gay culture could be considering co-opting and stealing, there are unexpected positive results from this theft/assimilation. It allows gay and lesbian people who still feel alone and are still closeted to realize that they are not alone. By having things that are considered to be "ours" out there for everyone, it allows avenues of bonding together for community that previously did not exist.

These shows also allowed people to join together. Although none of us had ever gotten together to watch any of these programs or movies, each of them joined us together culturally. We all knew what the other person was talking about. Each of them offered a connection where none was before. They became part of our cultural history, and history is an important signifier for community. And as further evidence of the importance of mass media in our lives, one of the participants chose her pseudonym based on a sitcom from the 1980s. Elyse chose the name because she had always thought that Elyse Keaton, the mother on *Family Ties* was attractive.

In honor of Elyse's own choice and the importance of media in creating community for gay and lesbian people, I have added the device of having each of the subtitles in the chapters reflect a popular television show, movie, or song. The media becomes metaphor for creating unity, and it is a perfect one for an early 21st century community. People are bound together when they are not even in the same room. Yet having the non-Internet media create the link actually ties into the diaspora idea from earlier. The Internet can actually bring contact with other gay and lesbian people. Seeing gay people or gay-themed shows on TV reinforces the idea that gay people are elsewhere,

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not in the home. It reifies this search for community elsewhere.

In spite of this, all of the participants noted the importance of seeing gay people in the entertainment media. Several even noted that the increased diversity among television programs was actually helping people come out at younger and younger ages. As evidence of people coming out at younger ages, when my daughter was eleven, two classmates came out to her. Elyse talked about the rise of programming that feature gay and lesbian characters and how that can do nothing but help gay and lesbian young people who want to come out.

> But I think that kids are also exposed to gay lifestyles earlier. It is easier for children to come out as gay than it used to be because I think that, you know I mean. We didn't have *Will and Grace* on TV when we were kids. We didn't have shows where the gay character is not even a central "special focal point" or even a comic foil but is just a person who is gay on that show. And I think that as much there are still people who are homophobic and who don't feel that being gay is the way to go or is even acceptable, [these homophobic people] also know that it is not acceptable to be outwardly homophobic. Closeted homophobia does give people the opportunity to feel more comfortable in coming out. And so I think that kids come out earlier than they used to.

For her, programming like *Will and Grace* make it easier for young people to come out, partly because they have knowledge of other gay people who exist in the world. Elyse also brings up the notion of "closeted homophobia" caused in part by these shows. Elyse does not believe that homophobia is any less virulent or dangerous, but she knows that many people believe that it is not acceptable to be open about their homophobia. Having more images of gay people in pop culture not only gives young gay people focal points for community, but also it sends a subtle message that overt homophobia is not as tolerated as it once was. Yet the term also reminds us that institutional homophobia continues to exist. The world only *seems* less hostile.

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Homophobic people simply must be more subtle or clever in its perpetration. Popular culture can make being gay seem like a safe choice to young people, and this safety allows them to come out and connect to other gay people at younger ages. They are still aware, however, that homophobia is out there, and that we continue to be denied many of the same rights that heterosexuals enjoy.

The associations formed from the media can be strong indeed, so much so that a sense of betrayal can be felt when a cultural icon acts in a way that seems counter to our interests. Because there are relatively few visible out gay people in the media, these few people take on an importance that they would not carry if we were more fully represented.

Richard: Do you feel, as Miriam does, that you are part of a larger gay and lesbian community?

Pam: Yeah, but it's only been recent. Only since we went to um, only since we went to the March [on Washington], that I really began to feel that way and think about it and want the opportunity to contribute or feel like I want the opportunity to contribute to the community as a whole. When I start to think about like, listening to certain things Melissa's Etheridge's last album, you know "The Scarecrow" and certain songs and stuff like that, that, you know, it is almost like listening to the national anthem in a way *[Pam, Miriam, and I laugh].*

Miriam: See it's a cultural thing.

Pam: When you feel, when you feel like that, you want to feel that way, but it's also something that can be painful, and I *don't* want to feel that way and purposefully try not to think about [the fact] that I am a part of a community that's um, got a long way to go and might never make it ever, you know. *[Pam, Miriam, and Richard laugh. Emphasis Pam's].* Things could never be right.

Richard: When you say it's painful, do mean our position or the way that the community itself acts?

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Pam: As the position in the world, the community's position in the world, and sometimes I get annoyed when the community, or when members, or when visible members of the community seem to betray us or something like that. I get annoyed when they act stupid.

Miriam acknowledges that these popular entertainers become our culture. Pam feels that so strongly about this issue that a song by Melissa Etheridge becomes a National Anthem for gay and lesbian people, and a national anthem is a song that acts as a symbol for people in a certain country (culture or group) to feel unified and part of a larger whole. For Pam, however, the U.S. national anthem as a symbol of community carries little meaning to her. She is excluded in many ways from the whole that song is supposed to represent. She therefore needs another rallying symbol. In many ways, these pop culture moments become our symbolic standards around which we can gather.

The metaphor of a national anthem invokes good as well as bad. For instance, inherent in the idea of a nation is that a person can act counter to "national interests," that a person can be a traitor. Pam invoked this idea of a betrayal when she talked about people who "act stupid." I asked her to elucidate this point.

Richard: What's an example of betrayal?

Pam: *[laughs]* Well, when – I don't know. *[long pause]* I'm thinking of the whole Ellen and Anne episode.

Miriam: I knew we were going talk about that! *[Miriam, Pam, and I laugh].*

Pam: I mean, you sucked up all the attention, and then you know, just acted a fool. Who knows what you're doing now, you're accused of all kinds of things and if you're gonna do all that, then stay out of the public eye. This doesn't help. This gives them ammunition. You know. And "them" being like my parents who are nowhere near my definition of my community or the community at large.

The downside of having so few icons to act as our cultural symbols is their

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perceived misbehavior takes on an importance they would not have if there were more adequate and diverse representation. If that were the case, then Ellen Degeneres and Anne Heche's breakup would simply be another failed Hollywood union. In this case, Anne's subsequent breakdown and quick marriage to a man is seen to be projecting an image that lesbians are unstable and that they can go back to heterosexuality if they would just try. Pam further invokes nationalistic metaphors when she talks about ammunition for the enemy. The enemy in this case is heterosexuals, like her parents, who she sees as standing as a barrier to our being able to live our lives with little harm. Pam is not a violent person. In fact, she portrays an extraordinary calmness about her. Yet these are important issues to her, being part of a greater whole, a whole that is still an oppressed group. When "living" among the enemy, so to speak, you must be aware of their cultural norms. It is these norms that Anne broke when she "acted the fool."

Pam and Miriam's exchange show another way that media can help to make community. Pam felt more connected to a larger gay and lesbian community once she participated in the March on Washington, a march that received much media coverage. In essence, Pam's act of protest and demonstration with thousands of other gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people gave her access to a moment that not only made history, but also strengthened her sense of community. This moment of history and community was caught on camera for all to see. It allowed gay and lesbian people, both closeted and out, to see a broad spectrum of us from the more mainstream to the more marginalized. It provided visual evidence for a large, active "community" of gay and lesbian people.

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Chapter Seven

Concluding Community

This dissertation began with the question, "How does community function for gay and lesbian people?" As has been shown, the primary function of community for my group of participants is one of safety. This search for a sense of safety informed most of the participants' decisions about community itself – from where they lived to whom they chose to include inside their communities. In traditional conceptualizations of a sense of community, safety has played a negligible role at best. In order for these conceptualizations to be relevant for gay and lesbian people, safety must assume a more prominent role.

The search for a sense of safety the participants presented was not some frightened, mindless dash for cover, however. It was instead an agentic act. The participants actively and purposely searched for and created situations in which they would have contact with other gay and lesbian people. In such a way, they created situation and places that leant to a sense of fortification and strength that would be more difficult if people were isolated from those similar to them.

Emphasizing the active aspect of the search for safety, two themes continually run through the participants' stories of a sense of safety within community – potentiality and intentionality. Potentiality encompasses the diasporic nature of community for gay and lesbian people. In realizing that community was not be found in their families' homes, the participants left those homes and began a search that encompassed the process of potentiality. They were and are always looking for the potential of community wherever

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they go. This explains the choices the participants made when selecting both the members of their community and the places they chose to live. Symbols of gay acceptance in these places meant the areas seemed to have a potential of safety, even if they were in reality unsafe. Recall that Zach said he would not have moved to Highland Park if he had not seen gay symbols around the town. The possibility (or potential) of being welcoming to gays and lesbians allowed the participants to feel more safe than they would otherwise, thus opening up the possibility of community in the area.

The notion of potentiality underlies the entire concept of a sense of safety. The possibility of being attacked or discriminated against in a homophobic and heterosexist society creates the need for a sense of safety inside community. This need for a sense of safety explains my participants' reactions to September 11th. Because they had always lived the possibility of being targeted for who they were, September 11th did not have the same meaning for the participants as the one being presented in the media. Perhaps the traditional theoretical conceptualizations of community would be sufficient for my gay and lesbian participants and a sense of safety would be unnecessary if there were not always the potential of danger based on homophobia and heterosexism.

Potentiality also explains how the reality of community sometimes can be disappointing. It is possible that the reality does not always live up to the perceived potential. Yet even when the potential is not realized, there can be hope that with some effort it could be. Recall this exchange as Miriam and Pam discussed the gay parents organization they had joined.

> Richard: Do you think that you've found it all through [the organization] or have potential?

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Pam: *[pause. She and Miriam look to each other]* I think that's there's potential.

Miriam: Potential, yeah.

This effort involved in meeting potential underscores the way that potentiality is closely related to the other theme running through the conceptualizations of community – intentionality. There was purposefulness in the creation of community as realized by my participants. The participants carefully considered who would be allowed to be in the communities they created. Recall that several participants acknowledged that not every gay person could belong to their communities. Instead, they made specific searches for people around whom they felt most safe. Miriam said it this way

> I don't necessarily get what I need out as a human being from the gay community just because other people are gay. I share certain cultural things with the larger gay community. I would stand up and be counted as part of the gay community. I would turn to the gay community if I felt like I was in trouble and I would feel obligated to stand up for someone else if they were gay, but that doesn't necessarily mean that I would have anything else in common. I wouldn't want someone just because they were part of the gay community to come to my home.

In this passage Miriam shows the selectivity inherent in the choices she made around community, or as she put it, in who would be welcome in her home. The other participants showed similar distinctions in deciding who could "come to their homes." For instance, at one time Pam avoided radical lesbians and sought out gay men because she felt safer around them, yet her partner Miriam sought out radical lesbians because she felt they shared her values. Similarly Simone sought out gay men who expressed themselves in stereotypically female ways because she felt safest around them. Matt sought out a gay community that was diverse ethnically because he felt this was important, while Will sought out people he perceived to be most similar to him. The

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communities created by my participants were not simply ones made of their neighbors, of their families, or of the people around them. Instead, the participants intently searched for specific types of people to belong.

Because of the purposefulness of this search, geographic boundaries were sometimes less important to a sense of community than a sense of connectedness. The geographic positioning of the participants in this study bears that out. Recall that the participants were derived from Zach's community. In spite of being inside his community, the area in which the participants lived covered three states. In fact, almost none of the participants included their neighbors inside their community, even those living in the suburbs. For example, Zach included no one in Highland Park as part of his community except Pam, Miriam, and their son Isaac even though they lived halfway across town. Simple physical closeness did not matter as much as the sense of safety felt with chosen community members. This intentionality troubles the traditional notions of ZIP code based community, of suburban life, even of the role of family in creating communities.

These themes of intentionality and potentiality closely tie into the theme of diaspora. If the potential of one's geographic community is not realized, then one only has to move and search for it somewhere else. In this way, community is also about process. It is not set in stone; instead it is a constantly moving and adapting entity. Simone put it this way, "I guess that across space and time, community changes. I mean I know for me, community has changed. My definition of what is community has changed." Miriam said, "I think that your community needs change throughout your life

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cycle. I think as your life changes, the people around you and your community needs change to suit that. I'm definitely in a different place now than when I was first coming out." Zach also felt change was important. "I don't think community is necessarily restricted to time or place nor is it completely static – that is, it may change completely with new identities or it may simply alter more subtly as one develops changes in identity over time." Even Sarason recognized this facet of community when he said, "A community has changed, is changing, and will change again (p. 131, 1974)."

Part of what allowed me to capture community as process was my methodology. My method allowed me to interact with the participants over several months in a variety of situations and in a variety of locations. It also allowed me to see the changes in their lives. Miriam and Pam had a baby during the study. Simone and Elyse bought a house, had a wedding, and started attempts to have a baby. Paul lost his job, and he and Jaime were struggling to get back on their feet financially. Zach got a promotion, enrolled in a Ph.D. program, and moved into a new house. Billy lost his job, and he and Matt were planning their own wedding for the summer of 2002. Will kept going back and forth between dating Parker and not dating Parker. And of course, the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11th happened during my study.

The process of change in the participants meant that my relationships with them also changed throughout the study. For example, I saw Paul and Jaime less and less as they turned their attention away from hanging out with their friends and towards establishing themselves financially. I also became particularly close to the participants I had not known or known only casually before the study began, such as Elyse and

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Simone. By looking at community across time and place, I enriched not only the study of community, but also my relationship with the participants, allowing a more thorough understanding of the issues important to them in the creation of their communities.

Even though I was able to access my participants across a time span of nearly a year, I still caught them in a particular moment in history, and a particular moment in gay history as well. This helps to explain some of the participants' reactions to certain places that were created to foster a sense of gay community. For example, they were somewhat disdainful of places such as community centers, but at the same time, they said that they were glad the centers existed. The reason for this could lie partially in the particular time at which they were interviewed. As gay visibility increases through shows like *Queer as Folk* and *Will and Grace*, there is a growing sense that gay-specific spaces are not as necessary as they once were. Additionally, there is a rise in liminal gay spaces like the Internet. Although my participants did not seem to be heavily reliant on the Internet to meet people, they still used it for information. The Internet has also served to foster the destruction of one of the most important areas of gay community in the 80s and early 90s – the bookstore. The rise of such sites as Amazon.com, which features large gay and lesbian selections, also helped to hasten the demise of such gay bookstores as A Different Light. Even New York City no longer has this once very prominent gay bookstore.

I also caught my participants at a particular moment in their lives. Many of them were focused on careers and families, as people often can be in their 30s and early 40s. Therefore, the activism of their youth has transformed into a more home focused conceptualization of community. Their focus on family oriented community coincided

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with a particular point in history when many gay and lesbian organizations also turned their focus towards battles surrounding family oriented community – such as the right to marry, adopt children, and enjoy the rights freely given to heterosexual couples.

This shift in focus may make it seem as if the participants were simply accepting and aping heterosexual norms or conservative in their outlook, but the participants did not see it that way. In fact, none of them would describe themselves as conservative, and they disagreed about the importance of institutions like marriage. Although committed long term to his partner, Zach did not like the concept of marriage and as such never had a commitment ceremony. Even couples who had a ceremony, like Elyse and Simone, acknowledged the complications involved in such an act. In fact, during their ceremony, Simone told the attendees that she and Elyse were not having the ceremony for each other. They were sure of their commitment. Instead, they were having their ceremony for everyone there, so the people in their various communities could join in acknowledging their love for each other. The important thing to keep in mind, however, is that none of the participants could legally marry, no matter what private convictions they held about the institution. They could not make the choice themselves because exclusionary laws had made it for them.

As highlighted by the disagreements over the importance of such things like marriage and commitment ceremonies, my method allowed me to tap into the diversity of the participants' conceptualizations of community itself. In spite of many overlaps, there was also variability among the participants' perceptions. This variability highlighted the dynamic nature of community. For example, Paul was focused on fitting in with

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heterosexual people, but the other participants were not. Everyone therefore did not always agree on what community meant or was supposed to mean. Additionally, the definitions put forth were often a result of interactive negotiation among the participants. No one was ever interviewed alone, and the interplay between participants showed not only agreement, but also complexity and diversity of thought.

In spite of allowing for this diversity of thought, the method purposefully created situations in which *gay* community would be prominent in their thinking. The participants were always interviewed only with gay or lesbian people, and the community events were ones that highlighted the gay aspect of people's identities, especially those events chosen by the participants themselves. For instance, when I interviewed Matt and Billy, they said they wanted to do something "gay" in honor of the interview. Matt suggested a drag show at a local bar. He did not suggest getting together with any of his heterosexual friends or with his acquaintances from work. Similarly, when I interviewed Will, he took me to the local gay resort and nightclub. In doing this, the participants were in gay conceptual space at all times throughout the research process.

The method thus extracted a particular gay and lesbian consciousness. Although this was a strength in enabling me to ascertain what gay community meant among my participants, it also created a space in which the gay aspect of community was somewhat romanticized while other outgroup aspects became downplayed. Although participants talked about the other components of their identities, the main focus of the conversations was about being gay. Other identities were thus seen through that lens. The focus may have been different if I had set up situations in which the participants talked about

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gender-based communities, or communities of color. This in no way diminishes what the participants told me about gay community. It simply highlights the strengths and limitations of the methodology in uncovering gay community consciousness while understanding the diversity and multiplicities of self the participants experienced in their day-to-day lives.

Accessing the diversity and variability of my participants is a strength of my methodology. As a result of the methodology, however, no claims of generalization can be made. In spite of this, there is room for what could be called "speculation" about ways in which the findings of this study could apply to other gay and lesbian communities or to communities formed by other groups. In part, this dissertation is concerned with the formation of community in places where people were not invited and perhaps not even entirely welcome. In other words, by being gay, my participants had the potential to be marginalized and made unwelcome in places that are usually seen as relatively safe places for community – such as the family and the neighborhood. Because of this potential for marginalization, my participants needed to feel a sense of safety. It stands to reason, therefore, that other gay and lesbian people, or other groups who have the potential to be marginalized – such as people of color, the poor, or any other group with less social power – may also have need of a sense of safety when creating their communities.

This need of a sense of safety may also apply to any group, even ones who seem to have some areas of relative social power. Keep in mind that the participants still felt a need for safety even though they were not marginalized in all aspects of their identities.

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For instance, many of them were not necessarily materialistically marginalized, but still felt usafe based on being gay, or being a person of color, or being a woman, or being Jewish. In fact, this need of safety even permeated the perception of their class status. In spite of having many of the hallmarks of middle classdom – education, ownership of homes, life in suburbia – many of the participants felt their class position was tenuous. Simone noted this possibility when she recalled that after September 11th, there was legislation proposed to make certain that gay and lesbian partners of the victims of the attacks were not entitled to the same benefits as heterosexual partners. No matter how protected they thought they were, the participants realized that their being gay or lesbian could mean that whatever gains they had achieved could be taken away from them since we are not equally protected under the law. Recall that all of them had either experienced discrimination based on being gay or lesbian, knew someone who was, or knew someone who had experienced violence based on their sexual orientation. Other marginalized groups may also have a desire for safety based on similar stories or experiences.

Finally, it must be pointed out that by emphasizing safety as a vital component of community for my participants, I run the risk of making them seem particularly victim-oriented. This was not the case. They were vibrant people working their way through their lives actively making decisions about the make-up and construction of their communities. They realized, however, that there is danger in being out, even in a relatively tolerant society. Gay bars and meeting places continue to be targeted for attack, and people continue to be killed because of their sexual orientation. The knowledge of these possible dangers informed the participants' choices, but it did not

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dictate them. Elyse, Miriam and Pam demonstrate this when talking about visiting a gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender festival in New Jersey, a place that was supposed to be safe.

> Elyse: The thing is that straight people who more often than not, and maybe not straight people who are not white but straight people can most of the time can go through life without going to a festival where a little piece of you is like well there is a possibility of danger, because pretty much everything you do if you choose to allow to let people know that you are gay, you are opening up a slight possibility of danger.
>
> Miriam: . . .And sometimes you do things because you are in danger. Like you might be scared to go to the festival, so that is why you go to the festival, because you can't not go.
>
> Pam: Yeah, but I have to admit that I had just a brief moment of anxiety at the festival when we put the [rainbow] sticker on the baby stroller because I felt like we were pasting a big target on there. For just a moment, but it passed. . . And even though we're at the gay and lesbian festival, we're targeting ourselves as lesbians. You have to think about it and then do it any way.
>
> Elyse: . . .And it is interesting because the exact fear you have like, this could possibly be a danger, at the same time it is something that could be very liberating for somebody else.

This passage shows how safety and community are related to each other. Even in a safe space there is the possibility of danger, but people face that possibility and gather together anyway. As Elyse said, her being open, out, and with other gay and lesbian people in public could be very liberating for others, especially those just coming out or without communities of their own. That very liberation could encourage those people to start their own gay and lesbian communities. In this way gay community not only need a sense of safety to prosper, but also create a sense of safety for others as well.

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APPENDIX A

Questions Used in the In Depth Interviews

What does community mean to you?

Who do you consider to be part of your community?

How important is it for your communities to be diverse in respect to race or ethnicity?

How important is it for your communities to be diverse in respect to gender?

How did you find/create a gay community?

How have your communities changed over time?

How important is history to community?

What part does your family play in your community?

What part does the Internet play in your community?

Tell about the places that seem gay (or lesbian) to you.

Why do you live where you live?

How easy is it to connect to a community where you live?

How important is New York City to you?

Would you rather live in a large city or in a smaller area (i.e. suburban or rural area)?

Besides the gay and lesbian community, what other communities are important to you?

What is the relationship between those communities and gay and lesbian communities?

Are there any questions that you think that I should have asked, but did not ask?

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