

# **A member of the wedding? Heterosexism and family ritual**

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ABSTRACT

Heterosexism as an interpersonal dynamic at weddings was examined using feminist critical science. Data were collected from 45 gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people who attended focus groups. Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender participants described multiple interactions in which they were devalued or hidden, while heterosexuality was elevated, as well as interactions in which they or another family member resisted heterosexism. Weddings were perceived to be difficult, and participation in them was questioned. As part of their critique of weddings, participants offered a vision of relationships that was based on commitment, rather than heterosexuality or material benefits. Results of this study were used to create a brochure and website for educating heterosexual people planning weddings.

KEY WORDS: family ritual/weddings • gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender • grounded theory • heterosexism

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Proud mothers and tearful fathers. Beaming brides, nervous grooms, and grandparents offering advice. Poses and flashbulbs and itchy clothes. Petty arguments behind closed doors. Children abuzz with too much cake and excitement. Boisterous friends kidding each other about whom will be next. Although perhaps the most normative of rituals, weddings are not neutral. Rituals are significant in part because they link private and public meanings, and demonstrate an acceptance and/or rejection of social convention (Roberts, 1988). Our society privileges heterosexual marriage, and thus weddings also link the personal decision to marry with an institutional heterosexual privilege carrying profound social, legal, financial, and religious

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benefits. These benefits are not currently available to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) people. In addition, within current public discourse and policy, privilege linked to the union of one man and one woman is bolstered by defining GLBT people as a threat to family life based in heterosexual marriage (e.g., Federal Defense of Marriage Act, 1996). Thus, weddings not only celebrate heterosexuality, they also symbolize the multiple social benefits surrounding marriage that are denied GLBT people. Weddings, therefore, offer a unique opportunity to examine ways in which power relations between heterosexual and GLBT people may be reproduced. The purpose of this study was to examine whether, and how, GLBT family members perceive heterosexism at family weddings.

Weddings are not, however, theorized to be simplistically scripted events that are or are not heterosexist. Like all rituals, proper weddings are proscribed by social authority (Parkin, 1992). Given that family members are front-stage (Goffman, 1959) during weddings, they are likely to construct an image of themselves that is consistent with social proscriptions (Cheal, 1988) even if that image belies their non-ritual way of interacting. Because ritual is a kind of social performance (Goffman, 1959), the discovery of heterosexism at weddings should not be surprising, even when it is experienced by GLBT people who are out and relatively accepted in everyday life. In addition, any analysis of weddings should allow for the possibility that proper enactment is subverted as individuals pursue their own meanings and desires in social interaction with others (Parkin, 1992). This potential co-existence of multiple and competing realities brings out Baumann's (1992) claim that rituals implicate otherness; they are always constructed with reference to an outside group. Thus, while many aspects of ritual can be understood by looking only at the in-group experience, our knowledge will be deepened, and even challenged, when we look at how that ritual is experienced and/or perceived by members of the out-group who affect, and are affected by, the ritual. In the case of weddings, GLBT people do constitute an out-group in relation to heterosexuals, and their experience potentially corrects and expands current knowledge about weddings, about family, and about the consequences social inequality may have for personal relationships.

The few interpretive studies of heterosexual weddings and related rituals that have been published have not questioned the heterosexist social context in which family relations are negotiated. For example, Braithwaite and Baxter (1995) interviewed husbands and wives about their vow-renewal ceremonies. Participants emphasized the importance of having their renewals be like conventional weddings, but did not acknowledge the existence of any GLBT family members, or the impact that their ritual choice might have had on others. While Braithwaite and Baxter (1995) examined how wives and husbands use vow renewal to maintain their relationships, most other wedding scholars have analyzed the social construction of gender. Cheal (1988) observed bridal showers and argued that they are sites of female solidarity where women affirm the ties that they will need in order to survive sexist marriages. Currie (1993) interviewed brides about

their wedding planning processes and found that they opted for traditional symbolism and behavior that subordinated them to their husbands. Brides defined their choice as a matter of personal preference rather than adherence to tradition. Braithwaite (1995) participated in co-ed wedding showers and analyzed the ways in which women, being the ritual experts, embarrassed men into complying with ritual practices. These existing studies demonstrate the intercom (Roberts, 1988) by which social interaction during rituals aligns individual behavior and desires with social norms that promote conventional gender and heterosexual relationships. This study adds to existing knowledge an understanding of what happens within personal relationships when presumptions of universal heterosexuality are interrupted.

### **Methodology**

Feminist critical science guided this investigation. Demo and Allen (1996) argued that the family field needs more research on gay and lesbian people from a variety of paradigms, including critical science. The goal of feminist critical science research is to promote social justice by using empirical research to challenge beliefs and practices that exclude non-hegemonic experience and knowledge (Lather, 1991). This goal requires the development of a standpoint (Comstock, 1982).

Reflexive practice, the process by which relationships between self, social location, and knowledge are analyzed, aids in the development of a standpoint (Lather, 1991). Having a standpoint is a first step towards challenging injustice; it enables people to see the ways in which hegemonic discourse privileges some perspectives while obscuring others, and it links this process to ongoing material inequalities in society (Comstock, 1982). My own evolving critical consciousness is the base from which this project developed. During two very intense years, I attended family weddings, had co-workers who got married, and my partner and I had a commitment ceremony. I initially thought about the various exclusions that I experienced as products of specific interpersonal relationships. It was only after talking with many other GLBT people that I was able to think about heterosexism and weddings as a shared rather than idiosyncratic experience. I began to identify myself as a member of a marginalized group rather than someone who just had an alternative lifestyle and a difficult family.

Despite my developing standpoint, I was challenged throughout this project to rethink the constructed 'myth of us' (Haraway, 1990: 197): GLBT people are not necessarily alike. I have learned to take seriously the importance of religion in people's lives, the pull of family loyalty, and the desire of many to participate in mainstream culture so that I can engage in 'open and flexible theory building, grounded in a body of empirical work ceaselessly confronted with, and respectful of, the experiences of people in their daily lives' (Lather, 1991, p. 54).

Thus, when I sought to use Comstock's (1982) method for critical research, I could not follow it exactly. He began with the investigator working with an established group, and implied that the researcher is an outsider to the group who tries to understand insider meanings. Because I am an insider, and GLBT

group membership is not organized in a formal way around weddings, I instead conceptualized this research more loosely as a community project. Participants were recruited through community venues and I presented myself as a lesbian who wanted to know what other GLBT people had experienced at weddings. Flyers, newspaper and Internet postings, and word of mouth recruiting were all used to locate participants.

### **Participants**

Recruiting took place within Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota, a place in which GLBT people are highly visible and relatively accepted. Response was rapid — most participants were recruited within 2 weeks. Forty-five adult GLBT people who had attended at least one heterosexual family wedding participated. They ranged in age from 18 to 71 years. Forty-two participants attended one of nine focus groups, and two gay male participants attended two focus groups because they felt that they had more to say.

Twenty-six participants identified as female, fifteen as male, and four as something other than male or female (I will refer to them as transgender). Twenty-four women identified as lesbian, fourteen men identified as gay, and two women and one man identified as bisexual. One transgender participant claimed a bisexual identity, while the other three self-identified as queer, femme, or oriented to drag culture.

I had originally planned to recruit only gay male and lesbian participants. However, it quickly became clear to me that doing so would unnecessarily alienate members of the community who identified themselves as other than gay or lesbian, male or female. Rust (1992, 1993) argued that social scientists typically ignore bisexuality, or conceptualize it as homosexuality. When recruiting for this study, I tried to be inclusive of the range of non-heterosexual identities. I use the acronym GLBT because insiders considered it the inclusive and correct identifier for this community.

Thirty-three participants were white with primarily northern and central European ancestry, and twelve participants were people of color with African, Hispanic, Native, or Caribbean ancestry. An attempt was made to recruit people of color for the first six groups. When this largely failed, three groups were added that specifically welcomed people of color. This was successful when I personally invited participation, and relied upon personal contacts who vouched for my trustworthiness.

Seventeen participants grew up in Catholic families, but only seven were currently practicing. Nineteen participants claimed no religious identity, eleven belonged to a Christian denomination, six were Jewish, and five practiced Wicca (numbers do not add up to forty-five because people could claim more than one religion).

Thirty-one participants described themselves as middle class, seven as poor, and three as working class. The remaining three refused to answer the question. Twenty-three participants worked in human services, seven were students, five did clerical work, three were political activists, and three did not answer the question (not the same three who refused to indicate class). There was also an engineer, an accountant, a mechanic, and a retired dress designer.

In addition to providing demographic information, participants rated the degree to which they were out to themselves as GLBT ( $M=5.7$ ), and the degree to which they were out to their families ( $M=5.0$ ), on a scale of 1 to 6. The mean scores suggest that participants were committed to living openly as GLBT, and

at least one other person in their family of origin was aware of their sexual orientation. It is important to realize in the analysis presented below that at every wedding some (or all) family members were aware of the GLBT person's sexual orientation.

### **Focus group interviews**

Comstock's (1982) second step is for the researcher to work with the group to construct intersubjective agreement about the experience of oppression. Participants are encouraged to talk not only about their experiences, but also about what those experiences mean, and why they participated in the way that they did. This is not to say that group members have to have identical experiences or interpretations, but rather that they should come to some understanding that what they have experienced is linked to power relations that also affect other group members. To facilitate this, it is important to create what Habermas (in Rediger, 1996) referred to as an ideal speech situation in which participants are not afraid to speak openly. For this reason, interviews were held in locations considered friendly and familiar. They lasted approximately 2 hours 30 minutes. I served pizza as a way to facilitate group bonding before the interview started.

During the interviews, participants were asked about: (i) their general opinion of heterosexual weddings; (ii) their experiences at the last wedding they attended; (iii) how their experiences were shaped by gender, culture, class, age, race, and religion; (iv) why they chose to attend; (v) how they knew that their experiences were real (i.e., what criteria they used in order to validate their experience given that they were interacting with people and symbols who were often invalidating); (vi) what they would like to have been different; and (vii) how they would like this research to be used. These open-ended questions were intended to generate data about weddings without imposing researcher preconceptions.

Patricia Nelson, my African-American lesbian research assistant, and I alternated responsibility for facilitation and recording. As facilitators, we took a fluid approach, covering all topics but following the group lead when deciding when to ask each question. The interviews generally proceeded as Krueger (1994) suggested, starting with general, moving to specific, and ending with application and closure. As recorders, we were silent and tried to sit outside the group (although in two locations this was not possible) so that everyone sitting at the table would be an active participant.

I intentionally recruited a qualified assistant who was of a different race from myself (I am white) with the intent of constructing a research environment in which differences were noticed and accepted at both the visual and verbal level of experience (it turned out that we also differed by age and class). Participants were told that we were interested in hearing about their lives and that we expected people to have differences and disagreements. They were encouraged to ask questions of each other, and of us. There was evidence of intersubjective agreement, such as when participants nodded, agreed, reproduced, and expanded upon each other's stories. At the same time, each interview also had multiple instances when participants disagreed with each other or pointed out how their experience was different from someone else's. In the analysis presented below, I integrate a range of perspectives and experiences.

Immediately after each interview, I sent each participant a thank-you card. A week later, I tried to contact all participants for a check-in. I asked the 31

participants who I reached what they thought about their experience, if they had anything to add about weddings, and if there was anything I could do for them related to this project. Responses indicated that the experience was positive and that people wanted to receive any materials that were developed.

### **Data analysis**

Because critical science attends to the language of participants and the group dynamics out of which data are constructed (Comstock, 1982), interviews were audio-recorded, and then transcribed verbatim. Transcription produced approximately 300 single spaced pages of data. Because transcripts were completed over the course of several months, I analyzed them in the order in which they were completed. After using open and axial coding procedures (Strauss & Corbin, 1991) with data from focus groups one, two, and four, the performance and resistance of heterosexism emerged as a core category to which other categories were linked. Core categories are threads that pull together and explain other categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1991). Although we never asked directly about heterosexism, without it, none of the data made sense. Heterosexism was the thread that pulled together and explained the myriad of interactions, meanings, and motives that participants expressed. The remaining six transcripts were then selectively coded (Strauss & Corbin, 1991) for data regarding the enactment of, and resistance to, heterosexism. By analyzing both heterosexism and anti-heterosexism, I was able to integrate a range of experience within one theoretical frame, and avoid presenting heterosexism as all-encompassing. In addition, my constant comparative selective coding process (Strauss & Corbin, 1991) was such that I continually moved back and forth between transcripts and analysis looking for data that would qualify or contradict my emerging theory.

### **Validity**

Ensuring that the researcher has captured participant realities is the next step in Comstock's (1982) method. Lather (1991) calls this working to obtain the yes-of-course response from participants. Toward this end, a draft of this manuscript was mailed to each participant and honest comments were requested. Comments were offered over the telephone or in person, and were positive. In addition, two participants returned the manuscript filled with editorial comments.

Critical science research has catalytic validity (Lather, 1991) when it results in social change. Praxis refers to the process of moving between research and social change. Comstock's (1982) conception of praxis involves the researcher working with the group over time to put their knowledge into action. However, he assumes that the researcher is working with an established group that is committed to social action. This assumption did not fit the design of this study. In addition, given the constraints of graduate school, it was not realistic for me to pursue an ongoing social action relationship with participants (Rettig, Tam, & Yellowthunder, 1995). My compromise was to ask how they would like the results of this study to be used. Participants overwhelmingly wanted their family members (and other heterosexual people) to access expert information about how to include them in family events. They did not, however, want to be the experts. At their request, I used the results presented here to create an educational brochure and matching website ([www.staff.uiuc.edu/~roswald](http://www.staff.uiuc.edu/~roswald)) targeting heterosexual people who are planning weddings. Both include practical

advice about how to be inclusive, offer resources, and encourage readers to think about the impact of heterosexism on them and their GLBT loved ones. The website includes a guest book where visitors can post their own experiences at weddings. Participants have been instrumental in the distribution of brochures despite their lack of involvement in creating the actual copy. Although the brochure/website project does not strictly adhere to Comstock's (1982) interpretation of praxis, I believe it is true to the spirit of critical science.

Although praxis in this study is limited, there is evidence that participation led to varying degrees of critical consciousness. Before attending a focus group, most participants in this study had thought about weddings in terms of their personal experience as well as political implications. Some had engaged in political discussions. However, few had discussed their experiences with other GLBT people in any depth, and none had openly discussed their feelings and experiences with heterosexual family members. I believe that the research design used led participants to think more deeply about how their lives are and are not shaped by heterosexism, and what they might do about it. In their closing statements, and in follow up comments, many participants indicated that they had come to be more reflexive than reactive about weddings. Their 'ideologically frozen conceptions of the actual and the possible' (Comstock, 1982, p. 371) had thawed into a sense that they had choices about how to participate, and had clarified their own values about marriage in relation to dominant discourse.

## Results and Discussion

Heterosexism was central to the experience of GLBT people at family weddings. It contributed to a sense that weddings were rife with social meanings and practices that devalued GLBT people. A sense of emptiness and unfairness at weddings was pervasive, and led participants to question, and even avoid, participation in these family rituals. Exceptions to this main narrative are integrated into the analysis presented below.

### Doing heterosexism

Heterosexism in this study was a dynamic whereby heterosexuality was elevated while GLBT identities and relationships were hidden or devalued. Thus, heterosexism was not a property of individuals, nor was it merely a contextual factor. Like West & Zimmerman's (1987) concept of 'doing gender', heterosexism emerged from social interaction that linked ideology with behavior. Given that heterosexism is also a macro-level phenomenon, this finding supports symbolic interactionist, feminist, and ritual theory assumptions that social and cultural meanings and practices are negotiated within interpersonal interaction (Cheal, 1988; LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993; Osmond & Thorne, 1993).

Behavior is neutral with regards to meaning; action is meaningful or purposeful behavior that is shaped by conditions not necessarily under the control, or in the awareness, of the actor (Comstock, 1982). Whether due to ignorance, ambivalence, or meanness, all of the heterosexism reported by participants was *perceived* to be action rather than behavior. Given the design of this study, there is no way to determine what those they interacted with were intending or perceiving.

What follows is an account of how heterosexism was performed and resisted

from the onset to the conclusion of the wedding ritual. Because critical science accounts should use the language of participants (Comstock, 1982), I make extensive use of quotes. All participants have been given pseudonyms.

**Invitations.** Wedding invitations are typically extended to both partners in a heterosexual couple or, if the heterosexual person is single, to that person and a guest. When invitations were sent to GLBT family members, and either allowed for a guest or invited a partner, then these invitations were small but profound gestures that symbolized the GLBT person's inclusion in his or her family of origin, and the sender was perceived as resisting heterosexism. When invitations were not sent to GLBT family members, or were sent with conditions that pressured the GLBT person to hide or change, then the act of inviting was perceived as doing heterosexism.

Most participants were invited to family weddings. Several, however, were not. Gloria Ramirez was not invited to her aunt's wedding 'because they're really prejudiced ... they won't talk to me because I'm bisexual.' Gloria attended the wedding anyway 'because it was this big family event and I would be the only person not there.' Her aunt then told her not to attend the reception. Gloria conceded the struggle and went home.

GLBT people who were in long-term relationships recalled wedding invitations in which their partners were not invited. For example, Lucy Gibbons was invited to a wedding where the bride called and 'specifically asked me to not bring Karen to the wedding ... it was appalling to me ... she had this fear that I was going to bring Karen and embarrass her.' Karen did not attend the wedding because she was not welcome, and Lucy attended as if she were single; they did not resist.

Some relatives resisted heterosexism by allowing or encouraging their GLBT family members to bring a date to the wedding. GLBT family members felt tremendously affirmed when this happened. For example, Aaron Loeffler's cousin 'called and said "you know what, we want to make sure that you bring somebody and that be whomever you want, that person is welcome."' Aaron went on to say that he had:

been to weddings where [his date or partner] isn't included, and they know that I'm gay, and they specifically leave off the 'and guest' part even though all the rest of my friends or family have 'and guest' listed on theirs ... when people include 'and guest' it's definitely an ally move [the group agrees].

When their partners were invited, several GLBT family members were compelled to attend the wedding just to reciprocate the support shown to them by the sender. Barbara Greene and her partner attended a wedding together after they had broken up just because both their names were on the invitation. Having her relationship validated on an invitation by family members was so important that Debbie Miller, who has attended more than 25 family weddings, 'saved every envelope that says "Debbie Miller and guest."'

**Clothing.** GLBT family members who attended weddings agonized over what to wear. Dressing up is expected at weddings because it symbolizes both the importance of the event, and the demarcation of ritual from every day life. GLBT participants did not challenge the belief that wedding guests should wear special clothes, but they did seek to break rules about what those special



clothes could be. Participants struggled with how to 'feel comfortable for who I am, and yet not make other people uncomfortable' (Terry Novitski).

What one wears symbolizes who one is; clothing signifies identity. In order to maintain the heterosexual meaning within weddings, participants need to appear heterosexual, which means that they need to look conventionally male and female. Participants felt intense pressure to comply with this symbolism. Several lesbians who conformed to the rules of dress described their attire as 'being in drag', because it meant that they physically represented exaggerated notions of helpless and petite femininity that were incongruent with their 'zaftig' bodies and lesbian or bisexual identities. Nathan Lowry was told by his parents not to wear a festive tie because it 'looked too trendy [meaning gay].' A male-to-female transgender guest wore flowing pants to one family wedding and has since been banned from attending any others: 'They're calling it a dress now, but it wasn't' (Jess Avery).

Breaking gendered dress codes limits heterosexual power by presenting other options for identities and relationships. It was difficult, however, for lesbians to break gender rules and not play into stereotypes that they want to look or act like heterosexual men. For example, Debbie Miller intended to wear a tuxedo in her sister's wedding but changed into a dress at the last minute because all 14 groomsmen were wearing her chosen outfit: 'It was this huge crisis for me, and my sister was very homophobic, ... I didn't have the gall to wear the tuxedo because I didn't want to look like them.' Within the GLBT community, Debbie's tuxedo would perhaps have been seen as 'lesbian' rather than 'male.' The contextual nature of identity implied here suggests that the struggle to dress appropriately is the struggle to translate meaning from a supportive social context to one in which there is no foundation on which who one is can be expressed or understood.

At weddings where at least some family members were openly supportive of their GLBT relatives, lesbians felt more permission to dress as they wished. For some that meant wearing 'an awesome dress' (Laura Bryce), and for others it meant wearing pants. Kaitlin Owens felt permission to challenge her sister's choice of a bridesmaid's dress because she was out to her: 'My sister would hold up some ridiculous dress and say, "oh I think you should try this on." But then I would suggest some equally hideous dresses for her. So we compromised.' Several lesbians described the process by which they decided to wear comfortable clothes. For example, it took Rosa Mancini 'four weddings to figure out that I could wear a vest, slacks, and loafers.'

**The wedding party.** Being asked to participate in the wedding party is an act of inclusion. GLBT family members who were bridesmaids and groomsmen participated in the ritual construction of family and friend support for the couple getting married. This was, however, a mixed blessing. As bridesmaids paired up with groomsmen, and vice versa, GLBT family members were expected to symbolize heterosexuality during the wedding while hiding their GLBT identities and same-sex relationships. For example, Beth Stein was a bridesmaid, and her partner was the Matron of Honor, at a wedding where the bride and groom tried to keep their relationship submerged from view. Beth and her partner resisted invisibility by coming out as a couple:

The Matron of Honor walks in with the Best Man, and so who was I supposed to walk with? ... I ended up being paired with this kind of football player, tall, straight guy

who drank lots of beer ... and the bride and groom did not take the time to say who I was. You know, there would be these social things like parties and little things and they would go, okay, 'this is so and so and his wife blah blah', 'and this is so and so his wife, blah blah', 'and this is Beth ...' They wouldn't say what our relationship was. And it was like, after having a commitment ceremony and being with my partner for 25 years I thought, 'oh, did you forget already that *we're* married?' [she laughs]. And this kept happening, so my partner continued bringing up exactly who we were. So we're rehearsing and I'm supposed to be going in with this football player, and he goes, 'So! So! How do you know the bride or the groom?' And I just said, 'well, I'm a [she sighs], her sister is my partner.' And he goes, 'OH! What business?' [the group laughs]. And I said, 'we're lesbians'. And he went, 'Ooooh.'

**God talk.** Religion permeated the weddings described in this study. It served to promote heterosexuality as a religious imperative, and to denigrate homosexuality. This denigration was felt by participants who listened to 'the religious figure standing in front of however many people saying "the Lord this, the Lord that", you know, "your vows are recognized by the Lord". When I'm sitting there it feels like the priest or minister is saying "you don't belong here because you're queer"' (Jason Royball).

GLBT family members listened to the religiously based sexist and procreative content of weddings that they attended, and quietly disagreed. During the focus group interview, participants voiced their concerns. Dave Knaebel said:

before I came out, I'd go to a wedding and hear the vows and be all emotional and happy, and nowadays I hear, 'you must obey your husband' and 'you must be fruitful and multiply' and 'bear children', and suddenly the wedding becomes very uncomfortable.

Hannah Sadler heard Catholic vows that 'allude to the man being dominant, "I'm going to be your protector, ruler, Promise Keeper, white knight" ... and that incites me ... and it sort of scares me that people say these things and don't question them.' GLBT relationships are typically organized by an ethic of equality, not domination (Kurdek, 1993), and marriage is not a cultural prerequisite for GLBT parenthood. The procreative and sexist imperative heard by GLBT participants was not only offensive, it did not mesh with their cultural expectations.

Hearing the validation that heterosexual couples automatically receive for conforming to religious expectations exacerbated already hard feelings about being invisible and/or invalidated. For example, Susan Peterson is a practicing Christian, and her brother is serving a life sentence for murdering his girlfriend. Susan attended his wedding in prison and was 'so taken with the fact that ... everybody was okay with this wedding ... everyone was so supportive and "God this" and "God that" and I thought, you know, I couldn't even bring a woman into this family and have her be welcomed, and yet my brother's wedding is accepted and welcomed and he's a *murderer*.'

In addition to listening, some GLBT family members were lay readers in the ceremony. They voiced the very ideas that excluded them. For example, at her brother's wedding, Lynn Regan read a passage from the Bible about God blessing all married couples. Lynn's family is fundamentalist Christian. She considered resisting by saying 'all couples' rather than 'all married couples,' but couldn't find the nerve. Kaitlin Owens, who is comfortably out within her family of origin, and whose family attends a more liberal church, was able to

negotiate the reading with her sister. Kaitlin read 'my love is like a leaping stag' from the Songs of Solomon, rather than a passage inferring that God ordains only heterosexual couples.

**Family portraits.** Wedding portraits document who is considered a family member and who is not. They are artifacts shown to others, and thus they incorporate beliefs about how a family should be represented publicly. If GLBT family members (or their partners) are included in pictures, then their membership is solidified. Family photographs presented a situation in which GLBT guests questioned whether they and/or their partner would be included. For example, Beth Stein and her partner attended a Christian wedding in the bride's rural hometown. Beth and her family did not know how safe it was for them to be openly Jewish. When it was time for family photographs, the photographer did not understand that Beth and Sarah were a couple and kept trying to separate them when all other couples were positioned together. Finally the bride yelled, 'they're together!' Beth said that:

we felt confused and surrounded . . . and my family of origin was silent, my brother [the groom] didn't say a word. It was the bride who decided to say something, and part of it was that we were on her turf, but, there's this blending stuff about being Jewish, of trying not to make waves, but also there's this stuff about speaking out against oppression, and here was a place where my family chose to blend in, they could have stood up for me and they didn't. I felt very let down.

Other participants were excluded from photographs; their existence as family members was erased in one quick flash. Lori Milford was in the back of the room at her brother's wedding when she noticed that the family photographs had been taken without her:

And I thought, did the photographer not know that there was also a sister? All the questions that suddenly came through my mind, and yet my emotions were so close to the surface that I couldn't ask, I felt too vulnerable to ask, 'was I supposed to be in this picture and if so can we take it again?' . . . nobody noticed, my brother never said 'wait a minute, my sister should be here.'

Believing that they would be excluded led some participants to resist by avoiding the situation. Karen Johnson and her partner:

ducked out of my brother's wedding after the cake thing so as to avoid the family pictures. Because I know what would have happened. She would not have been recognized as family in those orchestrated pictures, and that would have just killed me . . . we ditched, basically . . . At that point I'd rather that my family deal with my unexplained absence of me in the photos than me having to live with the absence of my partner in them.

**Catch the bouquet and garter.** Participants understood catching the bouquet to be a time when unmarried females unite around the possibility of heterosexual marriage for all women, and compete with each other to be next. Where the bouquet ritual symbolized the importance of marriage for women, the garter ritual was understood to symbolize male bonding over the sexual domination of women within marriage. The values underlying these rituals were in conflict with the values held by GLBT family members. Participants described the bou-

quiet ritual as silly, but were 'repulsed by the whole idea of degrading this woman who just got married' (Dave Knaebel). 'The garter is not fun, it's angering. It's like, you're marrying her so now you're going to show the other men her leg? ... This brings us right back to the ownership of women. "What's important in a wedding?" "Oh yes, the way the bride's leg looks." Yuk' (Laura Bryce).

A few single lesbians in this study were able to participate jokingly in the bouquet ritual: 'Every once in a while I'll get in there and try to catch the bouquet, which is like a brilliant joke amongst all my friends' (Hilary Smith). Other GLBT family members participated half-heartedly in whichever gender ritual they felt pressured to embrace. Joseph Montero 'just stood there and tried to look like I was interested in the garter, but it was hard for me.' Many GLBT family members, single or coupled, avoided the garter and bouquet by getting refills on their drinks, taking pictures, or making some other socially appropriate excuse. Several sighed with relief when brides and grooms chose not to pursue these rituals: 'It was really nice for me to not have to face that [and pretend] that I'm out there trying to catch the flowers' (Ann Heller).

During the bouquet and garter rituals, GLBT guests (even those who were 'out' and in committed relationships) perceived heterosexual guests as treating them as if they were single women and men who desired heterosexual marriage: 'I think the bouquet is the worst part of the wedding for me. Because, like even when I was there with my partner, people were like, "Get up there, you're single!" And I'd be like, "fuck you!" ... I just find it so frustrating and so humiliating' (Terry Novitski).

Pharr (1988) theorized that gay men are equated with women as a way to negatively sanction homosexuality, and in this study gay men found themselves 'shunted into a female role' (Kyle Monroe) during the bouquet ritual. Nathan Lowry:

was sitting down with all my friends and all the girls got up to catch the bouquet. And one of my male friends hits me and says, like, 'why aren't you going up there?' Which at first I thought was really cool, but then I realized that he was kidding, and then, I'm like, 'yeah, whatever, dork' [the group laughs]. Yeah, no kidding ... it was just so awkward, because with whom am I supposed to associate? Especially since some of my friends are associating me with the girls who are going up there.

**Dancing.** GLBT family members consciously decided whether or not to dance during the reception. Dancing at weddings was described as a performance governed by the following heterosexist rules: Men and women are expected to dance together, and 'women can dance together, maybe not slow dance, but ... two men who dance together are out to get laughs, you know. My family would joke, "oh the groom is going to dance with the best man, ha ha ha", and it was meant to be hilarious. It was meant to be ridiculed ... because "just look what they're suggesting"' (Dave Knaebel).

Faced with these perceived rules, many participants chose not to dance. Some explained their decision as a product of internalized homophobia: 'I feel threatened by the possibility of going up there, it's that homophobia inside of me pushing out going, "oh there's no way I can pull my lover on the dance floor"' (Aaron Loeffler). Other participants felt coerced by homophobia within the ritual, rather than within themselves: 'We were together, people saw us together, but somehow ... we had pushed every barrier, but that was one we couldn't break through' (Karen MacDonald).

The pressure to dance in heterosexual pairings was deeply felt. For example, against her wishes, Joan Prutsman felt expected to, and did, dance with a groomsman at her mother's wedding, and Barbara Greene felt obliged to dance with her estranged father, who led despite her insistence that she did not want to follow. At several weddings, the pressure to dance heterosexually was overlaid with expectations of heterosexual matchmaking: Dave Knaebel went to a wedding alone (because his partner was specifically not invited) and during the reception, where:

a heterosexual aura filled the room, um, suddenly everyone was trying to set me up [with a woman] ... they'd ask me questions and just try to be really heavy match-makers ... and I wasn't comfortable ... but I submitted to the pressures to a certain extent. I danced with her.

Carl Schultz left his brother's reception because his relatives kept saying 'oh don't you want to dance with that woman or that girl?'

Some participants subverted this pressure by seeking out 'safe' heterosexual dancing partners, such as cousins or siblings. Others used polite excuses to avoid the situation: 'slow song, bathroom break ... slow dance, time to leave again' (Dave Knaebel). The dollar dance, a staple in working class weddings where guests pay a dollar to dance with the bride or groom, provided an opportunity for GLBT guests to break the perceived heterosexual-pairing rule. Several participants described how they were the only one of their sex in line to dance with the bride or groom. For example, Jason Royball 'stands in the line for the groom ... it's always a joke, but it's never a joke for me ... because I don't make it a two second dance — they're dancing with me. I get my dollar's worth!' In contrast, several participants described how they wanted to dance with the bride or groom but 'didn't feel free to do it' and sat out (Terry Novitski).

A few lesbian couples danced together non-sexually after negotiating the issue: At her father's wedding in rural New England, Laura Bryce's partner did not want to dance as a couple because 'some redneck will come and shoot us.' Laura replied, 'Look, if they're here they're here for my father's wedding — they're not going to turn around and shoot his daughter on the way out. Maybe the next day [she laughs], but not on the way out! Once we got past that we danced, but the fear was pretty real.'

When same-sex couples overtly resisted the perceived rules and danced together as lovers, they had a profound impact on other GLBT guests. Joseph Montero watched two men slow dance and 'wanted that to be me! ... I was like, "oh my gosh! Look at that, look at those guys!" ... It just felt so different to see two guys do it ... it was pretty incredible.' Beth Stein and her partner were the only lesbian couple dancing:

and we were dancing slow songs and fast songs and we were just out there, we had a great time ... and at the end of the reception the bride's mom came out to everyone as a lesbian! She was just sobbing, the bride hadn't known, it was incredibly moving, it was this gift ... the bride's mother's partner was there as 'the roommate' and it's like, us being out dancing at this wedding was a catalyst for someone to come out and for a family to get closer.

**Silencing.** Rituals usually include some proscription against talk that would challenge or contradict the symbols being enacted (Roberts, 1988). GLBT

guests in this study often felt obliged to not say anything about their personal lives even when they observed heterosexual guests doing so. For example, Kyle Monroe heard people talking:

about what was new in their love lives, their marriages, whatever, and all of a sudden when they got to me it was 'well, um.'. Even though they knew I had just moved in with my boyfriend. 'So are you going back to school? What's your favorite color?' [the group laughs].

Heterosexual guests were not perceived as telling GLBT family members to remain silent. Rather, participants described a sense of feeling coerced by the ritual, of 'pretending to be straight even though everyone there knew I was gay, but I was still acting straight because I *couldn't be gay* [in that setting]' (Nathan Lowry).

Like all other dynamics described in this article, silencing was resisted. A few GLBT guests did try to talk about themselves even though they felt ignored or discounted for doing so. For example Amber Lawrence mentioned happily that she 'had a new lover!' but noticed people glazing over and changing the subject. Also, there were heterosexual guests who went out of their way to talk openly with their GLBT relatives. Carl Schultz's sister, for example, kept checking in with him to see if he was doing okay. Stories of guests who tried to include them, even if their attempts appeared awkward, were shared. For example Lynn Regan was approached by a woman who patted her arm and asked very sincerely, 'Did you have to come out like Ellen [DeGeneres]? [the group laughs].'

**Pressure to marry.** At the same time that GLBT family members were expected to keep their lives quiet, they were sometimes asked 'when are you going to get married?' The question was perceived as a kind of 'double-whammy' that increased feelings of discomfort. For example, Anthony Watson was physically ill in his car after attending a wedding where he hid being gay. At that wedding, everyone had been asking, 'Oh when's Anthony getting married?' He wondered:

how do I tell these people that there's no damn way I'm getting married in the traditional sense of having a big Italian wedding, you know?! It's just a weird struggle inside of you when you're sitting there and all the people are wondering, 'where's your girlfriend?' ... It's a very uncomfortable feeling.

Some participants were asked when they would marry even by people who know they were GLBT. The question is perhaps asked of anyone at a wedding who is not heterosexually married, and is perhaps offensive to anyone who feels that heterosexual marriage should be a choice rather than an obligation. It had an additional meaning for GLBT guests, however, in light of the fact that same-sex marriage is illegal, and because it put them in the position of wondering whether or not it is safe to come out to the person asking. GLBT family members not faced with this question were those who felt that their GLBT identities and same-sex partners were more or less accepted within their extended families of origin.

### **The meaning of weddings**

In order to more fully understand the experiences of GLBT people, we need to

know what meaning they attach to that experience (Comstock, 1982). Brief discussion of meaning differences between GLBT and heterosexual family members was offered earlier when it related to specific constructs being explored. I now explore the more over-arching meanings about weddings that were implied or described by participants.

Hollow rituals are experienced when the symbols constructed are not congruent with the symbols desired, and/or when they are performed out of obligation rather than sincerity (Roberts, 1988). In this study, participants used the term hollow repeatedly to suggest that weddings exclude them, and they felt that conventionally scripted weddings were especially alienating. Many GLBT family members appreciated the 'promise and the hope at weddings' and the sense that marriage was an incredible 'act of faith between two people' (Thomas Kincaid). However, 'there were also feelings of jealousy ... because I'm *never* going to be able to share that experience with my family in the way that my brother did' (Ann Heller).

Participants also felt that weddings were overly materialistic, that family members tended to focus on gifts and money more than the commitment being made. For example, Thomas Kincaid recalled that:

there are all these arguments about money. And 'she didn't send this' and 'they only had this kind of appetizer', you know? My god! Is this really what people are thinking? I mean right at the wedding reception people are talking about 'whose idea of food was this?' And it's like, wow!

Rachel Greenberg continued his thought, 'It's all measured up, they're measuring the worth of the marriage by the money that was spent on it.' The materialistic emphasis was insulting to middle-class GLBT family members who did not receive comparable help when setting up their own households or entering into committed relationships. They were perhaps hoping to maintain their class privilege despite being oppressed as GLBT. In poor and working class families, GLBT family members did not expect such gifts, but observed that the wealthier sides of their family were passing it on. 'There's a lot of anxiety and anger when it comes to somebody having a lavish wedding ... a big part of it is the money [because my parents never had any]' (Jason Royball).

Participants discussed what it would take for heterosexual weddings to be inclusive of, and positively meaningful for, GLBT family members. Making weddings about commitment rather than any particular kind of relationship was the general theme (see website for practical suggestions). Gillis (1996) argued that weddings are becoming more individualized and less traditional in part because brides and grooms are personalizing their ceremonies. Participants in this study, however, pointed out that 'personalizing' does not necessarily change the meaning, or the social power behind that meaning (see also Currie, 1993). In order for weddings to truly change, participants believed that heterosexism must be resisted rather than disguised. As Jason Royball said, it will take more effort than putting 'everyone in cowboy outfits.'

The inclusive weddings that GLBT family members had experienced were described as similar to same-sex commitment ceremonies; they were focused on commitment rather than heterosexuality. Karen MacDonald said:

they weren't materialistic, they weren't requesting gifts, they wrote their own vows. Actually when you think of it [the wedding was] similar to what gay people do when they have their own commitment ceremonies: They have their own vows, it's very

small, its more focused on friends . . . family was not [necessarily] invited. [There was] a lot of preparation to the ceremony and the meaning behind it rather than the parties, the gifts, the reception.

### **Motivations for attendance and nonattendance**

We need to understand why people participate in the ways that they do (Comstock, 1982). Despite the inequities that they face, GLBT family members love and feel loyal towards their siblings, parents, and other relatives, and want to be supportive of their relationships: Joan Prutsman is 'happy for anyone who can find a mate, be they straight, gay, or whatever.' Many participants said, 'of course I would be there;' failing to attend was not an option. In some families, not showing up would have led to more conflict than showing up and suffering through the events. Over and over, participants voiced that they did not want to make a scene and take away from the bride and groom's big day. Many hoped that their loyalty and affection would be reciprocated, but few believed that this would ever happen, Jess Avery wondered:

would they come through and fill the role that I want them in? I don't think so [the group agrees]. I think I'd have a lonely little thing on a deserted beach somewhere, a small fire going. And that's the double exclusion; 'yes you must submit to what we want you to be in this ceremony, and no, we will not commit to what you want.'

The decision not to attend family weddings, or to attend only under certain conditions, was sometimes made after being mistreated. Kyle Monroe:

decided I'm not going to any more straight weddings. I've been to a lot of them, and I can't really see any of them as a positive experience for me . . . I've had too much of a negative experience to ever go through it again.

Most of the time, however, participants found a way to negotiate involvement. Some decided to attend only weddings where their partner was also equally included. Others, such as Debbie Miller, found polite excuses for limiting their attendance:

I'm at the age where my nieces and nephews are getting married, and thank God I belong to a track club that runs on Saturdays! [the group laughs] I avoid the church, shower at the club, rush into the reception with the gift and rush out before the dance. I say 'glad for you! Happy day! Blah, blah, blah.'

### **Social and historical context**

An interpretive account of action, meaning, and motives is not sufficient for feminist critical science. The account must be also positioned within social and historical context (Comstock, 1982). The idea that weddings could be problematic for GLBT family members is perhaps recent. For example, Beth Stein described how different it felt to be at a family wedding in the 1970s. Attending a wedding where her partner was not invited 'upset' her, but the meaning behind her emotions 'didn't sink in for years.' The lesbians that Beth associated with at that time did not have commitment ceremonies or wear rings to show that they were in a relationship. Feeling excluded at



heterosexual weddings ‘was just a given’ back then, while today she has the expectation that she and her family should be included in their family of origin rituals. Beth’s experience is congruent with Weston’s (1991) analysis of the shift from GLBT people defining family as heterosexual only, to differentiating between families of origin and families of choice.

To simplify Weston (1991), as the costs of coming out (such as being arrested, institutionalized, or blacklisted) have diminished and the modern GLBT civil rights movement has grown, more GLBT people feel free to disclose their identities, and to expect that their identities and relationships will be accepted if not affirmed. The GLBT tradition of making family out of friendship and community has continued to evolve. In addition, GLBT people have increased access to alternate insemination and other routes to parenthood, and have made inroads in the area of domestic partnership benefits. Thus, not only have GLBT people come to define their own unique relationship structures as relevant to heterosexual society, but they have also inserted themselves into dominant family categories of parent, child, and spouse as openly GLBT people. This transformation has co-occurred with major changes in heterosexual family structure and the growing expectation of heterosexual people that their own diverse family forms be accepted. Even when acceptance and affirmation do not occur or are contested, and even though GLBT relationships have no legal recognition and few social privileges, the expectation is growing that they *should*. This moral imperative has opened the closet door and allowed a questioning of the relationships between heterosexism and family life. The analysis presented in this article is made possible by this social transformation.

### Implications

Doing heterosexism at weddings was much more complex than hiding the existence of GLBT family members. Yes, sometimes GLBT people were excluded outright, such as when they were not invited, not photographed, or not spoken to. But other times, there was more of an insidious redefinition in which GLBT persons were asked to change themselves so that they would not have to be excluded: Wear this, say this, do that, and *then* you will be included. Often, these conditions for inclusion pressured the GLBT family member to approximate gender conformity. Thus, this research does support the idea that weddings reproduce gender relations (e.g., Cheal, 1988; Currie, 1993). It goes further, however, to complicate gender by showing its interrelationship with heterosexism (see also Pharr, 1988).

Resistance to heterosexism was also complex. Sometimes it was a simple and blatant refusal to do something. However, resistance at weddings was more likely to be indirect and socially acceptable — it was accomplished in ways that subverted but did not overtly challenge heterosexism. The prevalence of subversion, rather than more overt resistance, suggests that GLBT people have partially accommodated themselves to heterosexism within their families of origin. This suggests that GLBT family members some-

times compromise their own well-being in order to preserve family ties. Given the tenacity and pervasiveness of heterosexism in our society, and the expectation of front-stage behavior (Goffman, 1959) at weddings, it is not surprising that GLBT family members found it difficult, or even incomprehensible, to consider directly challenging mistreatment meted out by their families. This does not mean that GLBT people deserve or enjoy being marginalized. Rather, it speaks to the power of heterosexism to create a situation in which GLBT people have double binds rather than choices: If you are real, you may lose your family. If you hide, you may lose yourself.

The double binds experienced by GLBT people suggest that they inhabit a paradoxical position within their families of origin, and within the wedding itself (in contrast to unmarried heterosexual people who may feel excluded by a wedding, but not by their family of origin). Hill-Collins (1991) described *outsider within* as the position of being subjugated in a social situation where dominant cultural norms are being acted out and insiders fail to notice, much less question, your subjugation. The *outsider within* understands the inside rules, but also understands the power-relations behind those rules and what alternative realities they obscure. As *outsiders within*, GLBT family members bring our attention to within-family diversity.

We need to move beyond the assumption that families are either straight or gay. Most current research on GLBT relationships focuses on the romantic and parenting relationships that gay and lesbian adults create (e.g., Patterson, 1992; Kurdek, 1993). This research is extremely important. At the same time, it should be noted that people have families of origin and families of creation that incorporate both heterosexual and GLBT members (cf. Weston, 1991; Crosbie-Burnett, Foster, Murray, & Bowen, 1996). Empirical work in this area has tremendous potential for the development of more inclusive family theory. An example is my study of young women's social networks after a young woman came out to herself as bisexual or lesbian (Oswald, 2000). Coming out transformed not only the newly bisexual or lesbian woman, but also her heterosexual siblings, parents, friends, lovers, and coworkers, and their relationships with each other. By exploring GLBT and heterosexual loved ones in relation to each other, we avoid setting up gay versus straight dichotomies, and instead are able to see how each affects the other. Future research should be designed to account for multiple perceptions of the same phenomena.

Although this study sampled only GLBT people, it is important to investigate whether, and how, heterosexism shapes the lives of heterosexual people. Participants in this study offered a vision of weddings that was based on commitment rather than heterosexuality or material benefits. The critique underlying this vision reveals distaste for hetero-normative scripts that may be shared by heterosexual people. What is the experience of heterosexual people at weddings? Do they also feel hollow? Overly materialistic? What values are driving their vision of relationships? We need comparative research that locates the experiences of heterosexual people within a heterosexist context.

Finally, a note about policy. Although a link between the sociopolitical and the interpersonal was made, perceptions of interpersonal dynamics were emphasized. This emphasis reflects my intention to offer information that practitioners can readily apply to their work with families. It would be a mistake, however, to not consider the implications for policy. Participants continually explained the quality of interaction between themselves and members of their families of origin as shaped by the legal and socially accepted derogation of GLBT relationships and identities. This suggests that when we debate marriage rights, or any other policy issue that shapes the lives of GLBT people, their partners, and children, we need to remember that the parents, grandparents, siblings, cousins, aunts, and uncles of GLBT people are also being affected. Any family policy should be assessed for its impact on both heterosexual and GLBT people, and an equal distribution of benefits should be one criterion for success.

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