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Being out Matters for Lesbian Faculty: Personal Identities Influence Professional Experiences

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Five lesbian faculty who were out in the workplace had positive personal and professional experiences in relation to how they negotiated family, campus culture, community, and personal fulfillment. This phenomenological qualitative study offers an alternative to deficit model research by exploring the participants' lived-experiences using a feminist constructivist framework to highlight the shared consensus of the participants' experiences. Based on these experiences, higher education administration can support positive intersections of work and personal life in order to maintain or create a healthy environment for lesbian and diverse faculty. Some recommendations are: develop and promote events and programs specifically for LGBT faculty and staff, merge the overall LGBT community with the campus LGBT community to address quality of life concerns, provide opportunities for all of campus to educate themselves on LGBT issues, and ensure that information for and about LGBT faculty and staff is readily available.

In the last several decades, higher education institutions have transformed the campus culture by adding diversity to mission statements, creating nondiscrimination and domestic partner policies, and intentionally recruiting diverse students, faculty, and staff (Cook & Glass, 2008; Iverson, 2012; Yost & Gilmore, 2011). Included in the complex mission of diversity are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students, faculty, and staff. Beginning in the 1980s, as society increased awareness and support of LGBT workers and their rights, many higher education institutions responded with domestic partner benefits and the addition of sexual orientation to nondiscrimination policies (Cook & Glass, 2008; Euben, 2005; Goral, 2006; Messinger, 2011; Russell, 2007; Yost & Gilmore, 2011). More recently, as institutions have become more aware of the issues facing gender-nonconforming and transgender individuals, gender identity nondiscrimination policies are being developed to create a more welcoming and safe environment for transgender individuals (Beemyn & Pettitt, 2006; Campus Pride, 2014). While institutions have made gains in creating healthy campus climates, many LGBT students, faculty, and staff still report hostile environments (Rankin, 2003,

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2005; Vaccaro, 2012; Yost & Gilmore, 2011) and patriarchal and androcentric structures that enable heteronormativity and heterosexism (Glazer-Raymo, 1999; Ng, 2000; Rich, 1979; Ropers-Huilman, 2008). With increased political attention on same-sex marriage rights and nondiscrimination policies, it is important for higher education administrators to remain committed to creating a welcoming and comfortable environment for LGBT students, faculty, and staff.

Higher education institutions have made many positive improvements for diversity in recent decades, which is one reason to reexamine how one population experiences these changes. This study explores the lived experiences of lesbian academics and how they make meaning out of those experiences. The scholarship on diversity and higher education faculty often does not focus solely on lesbian voices. As discussed later, writers may group lesbian issues under a broader LGBT umbrella or assume a heteronormative experience for all women in higher education. While more women are earning higher education degrees, are reaching parity in tenure-track positions, and are overrepresented in contingent faculty positions, they remain under-represented in tenured faculty and higher-level academic and administrative positions (August & Waltman, 2004; Metcalfe & Gonzalez, 2013; Samble, 2008). Lesbian faculty are even less visible than their heterosexual women peers due to the heteronormative environment of academe.

This phenomenological qualitative study attempts to capture the essence of what it means to be a lesbian faculty member negotiating personal and professional identities as seen through the participants' lived experiences (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002). These findings highlight how participants' "out-ness" in their work environments provided benefits to both their personal and professional lives and allow us to draw out implications for how higher education institutions can create healthy environments for lesbian faculty, develop research areas on lesbian academics, and create departmental cultures that are inclusive of lesbian academics.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As the higher education institutional climate for LGBT faculty has improved with the addition of more inclusive policies and benefits (Euben, 2005; Goral, 2006; Russell, 2007; Zemsky & Sanlo, 2005), so has literature on LGBT issues and experiences (Mayo, 2007; Messinger, 2011; Renn, 2010; Tierney, 1997; Yost & Gilmore, 2011). However, this literature often groups LGBT faculty together and examines them by field or discipline (e.g. Bilimoria & Stewart, 2009; Sears, 2002), neglecting to highlight the unique experiences of each group. Lesbian faculty are often discussed as a collective with gay men or ignored completely. Literature on the specific experiences of lesbian academics largely focuses on the coming out process (Badgett, 1996), consequences of coming out or remaining closeted (Bensimon, 1992; Chevillot, Manning, & Nesbitt, 2002; Mayo, 2007), and the risks and rewards of doing LGBT-focused research (LaSala, Jenkins, Wheeler, & Fredriksen-Goldsen, 2008; Rothblum, 1995; Tierney, 1997). As such, we include a general overview of related research on women faculty experiences with the limited scholarship on lesbian and LGBT faculty to support and inform this study.

Still "Chilly": Women Faculty

Higher education organizations have a long history of operating as patriarchal and androcentric systems as well as heterosexist and heteronormative environments (Danby, 2007; Morrison,

Rudd, & Nerad, 2011) in which women faculty, staff, and students must adapt by assimilation (Abes & Kasch, 2007; Hornsby & Munn, 2009; Ng, 2000; Rich, 1979; Terosky, Phifer, & Neumann, 2008). Adapting to this environment produces challenges for all women, including isolation, barriers to promotion, and career fatigue, and particularly can negatively influence the experiences of lesbians in academia who may already struggle with identity presentation and exclusion from colleagues. The finding that higher education culture is still “chilly” for women faculty (Morrison et al., 2011; Sandler, 1986) establishes a base understanding of what lesbian academics may encounter in their professional lives when they are perceived to be heterosexual.

Within academia, women must mask (disguise) or compartmentalize (hide) identities (e.g., identities related to sexual orientation, motherhood, religion, communities), thus negotiating which identities to reveal or hide to aid in career maintenance or progress, depending on context (Ropers-Huilman, 2008). Additionally, women faculty must often choose between career and family, work harder than male peers for the same respect, and fight to be in a field that easily excludes women (Cress & Hart, 2009; Glazer-Raymo, 1999; Hirshfield & Joseph, 2012; Ropers-Huilman, 2008; Terosky et al., 2008). As a result, in comparison to male peers, women faculty often face additional barriers to career employment and advancement (Curry, 2002; Glazer-Raymo, 1999; Ropers-Huilman, 2008; Terosky et al., 2008; Wolfinger, 2008), experience less job satisfaction often due to sexual harassment and lack of safety, experience devaluation and exclusion along with double standards, earn lower salaries, and are less likely to be promoted to associate or full professor (Glazer-Raymo, 1999; Perna, 2005; Ropers-Huilman, 2008).

In addition to masking and compartmentalizing identities in order to fit into the academic environment, women faculty must also negotiate their identities to assimilate into the cultural norms and expectations of academe (Curry, 2002; Glazer-Raymo, 1999; Ropers-Huilman, 2008). This negotiation of identities can often lead to silencing important parts of the self that are necessary for both career advancement and retention in the profession. Abandoning parts of the self for assimilation and acceptance takes a toll on the individual and leads to stress, reduced job satisfaction, and potential career change (Curry, 2002; Glazer-Raymo, 1999; Ropers-Huilman, 2008).

While many of these challenges and obstacles are similar for women across professions, it is important to note that a major difference between an academic career and other professions is the unique and firmly set amount of time in which tenure-track faculty must obtain promotion and tenure (Mason & Goulden, 2004; Philipsen, 2008; Ropers-Huilman, 2008; Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2003). One of the most significant challenges for women faculty is that the timing of this tenure process usually occurs during the physiological time in which many women choose to have or adopt children (Manchester, Leslie, & Kramer, 2010). Within the existing culture of higher education, women faculty receive the message that having both a family and a career is not possible (Philipsen, 2008; Wolfinger, 2008). For some, the desire to have a family outweighs the possible risks to career advancement that having children may produce (Collay, 2002; Mason, Goulden, & Wolfinger, 2006; Philipsen, 2008; Wolfinger, 2008; Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2003). In addition to risks to career advancement, women who already have children when entering academia often have a difficult journey in obtaining tenure-track positions (Morrison et al., 2011; Wolfinger, 2008). In contrast, women who begin in tenure-track positions without children are 65% less likely to ever have them (Mason et al., 2006). Women academics largely do not recognize academia as supportive of having a family (Mason et al., 2006; Wolfinger, 2008). While the effect of children on the academic career is not definitively established, the fear and belief that children have a negative effect on promotion may speak to

the larger issue of the patriarchal culture of higher education (Glazer-Raymo, 1999; Manchester et al., 2010; Ropers-Huilman, 2008).

LGBT Faculty and Lesbian Faculty

The public has viewed sexual orientation as a private, sexual issue or act only and has failed to acknowledge that sexuality is an identity that cannot be comfortably hidden from the public (Bensimon, 1992; McDonough, 2002; Tierney, 1997). This heterosexism remains a key obstacle to equity and acceptance within higher education for LGBT faculty. As a result, many lesbian academics may feel the need to keep their sexuality hidden and maintain separate personal and professional lives (Bilimoria & Stewart, 2009; Rankin, Blumenfeld, Weber, & Frazer, 2010; Tierney, 1997). Another key issue with heterosexism is that it makes the coming out process a lifelong event and remains a barrier in the way of change (Johnson, 2009; McDonough, 2002; Mitchell, 2008).

Although there are positives to being out in academia such as not having to pretend to be heterosexual, serving as a role model to LGBT students, more easily connecting with other LGBT individuals in higher education (Rothblum, 1995), LGBT faculty still face potential pigeonholing, veiled prejudice, isolation, being misunderstood, and lack of identification as a legitimate minority (Bilimoria & Stewart, 2009; D'Augelli, 2006; Rankin et al., 2010). LGBT faculty also risk tokenism, heightened visibility, and stereotyping (d'Emilio, 1990; LaSala et al., 2008). Therefore, in addition to the obstacles and pressures that all women faculty may experience within the academy, lesbian faculty face additional obstacles and pressures that can block career advancement and fulfillment. Lesbians encounter discrimination in higher education during the hiring process and tenure and promotion reviews, face intimidation and harassment, and experience exclusion from social and professional networks (Talbert, 2002). While a primary career risk that heterosexual women faculty consider is having children, lesbian faculty are often willing to risk their careers to fulfill their desire to be open about their sexuality (Chevillot et al., 2002; Dugan, 1997; Eliason, 1997; Hyman, 1997). Indeed, since the majority of the literature on lesbian faculty experiences focuses on negative consequences and risks, our study's emphasis on the positive experiences of lesbian faculty contributes significantly to the literature.

The negotiation of when and if lesbian academics disclose their sexuality in their academic life is reflected in the literature; however, how they disclose and the effects of that disclosure beyond the academic life are not as frequently discussed. Personal fulfillment from being open about one's sexuality is established, but consequences to home life, community, and even career are missing in the literature with the exception of possibilities and fears. Also missing in the literature are advantages that lesbian faculty members may have in their decisions related to career advancement and stability in their field.

FRAMEWORK

This phenomenological qualitative study sought to understand the experiences of lesbian academics contextualized within a heteronormative and patriarchal organization. The focus of phenomenological research is to portray the basic structure of the experiences of the participants and study their perceptions of their lived worlds (Merriam, 2009). A focused goal of phenomenological research is

the method of bracketing or avoiding researcher assumptions and bias to the degree that is possible (Merriam, 2009; Sokolowski, 2000). To aid in bracketing, researchers are encouraged to look inward at the positions, biases, experiences, and identities they bring to the study that may be important to the phenomenon being studied. Our positionality in this study includes feminist identities, as a lesbian and as a heterosexual, and as women living and working within academia. These identities and positions aided in relating to and caring about the topic, being intentional about the trustworthiness of the study, and building rapport with the participants.

To assist in highlighting the gendered experiences and constructed meanings of the participants' experiences, we used a feminist constructivist framework. Constructivism avoids a deficit approach by not focusing on the negative consequences of being lesbian academics but instead emphasizing the multiple realities of participants' experiences. Additionally, constructivism notes that objectivity is impossible (Schwandt, 1998) and thereby honors the participants' experiences and the value they add to the institution. The assumption in constructivism is that participants individually perceive a reality constructed out of their experiences. Then through the research process, the multiple realities of various participants can co-exist while also creating common themes of experience (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002; Schwandt, 1998).

Including feminism in this framework centralizes gender in the creation of experiences and identity while also recognizing that gender is socially constructed. Feminist theories "center and make problematic women's diverse situations as well as the institutions that frame those situations" (Olesen, 2000, p. 216). A feminist perspective supports the foundation that heterosexism and heteronormativity in higher education are the standard and that everyone is heterosexual until proven otherwise (Ingraham, 1994). Furthermore, a feminist perspective also supports how women who self identify as lesbians experience higher education. While we acknowledge the utility of queer theory in research working to destabilize a normative construction of experiences, particularly in hierarchal and patriarchal systems (Renn, 2010), we chose not to use queer theory for this study, based on our focus on understanding the specific identities of lesbian and woman in the academy, which was more fittingly served by a feminist constructivist lens. Further, we believe the feminist constructivist lens held more utility for this specific study on lesbian academics due to our participants' focus on gender more than sexuality in some of their experiences.

Borrowed from international studies and relations, feminist constructivism adds "an understanding of power as an integral element" because constructivism on its own fails to explain how power gets replicated through gendered structures and socialization (Locher & Prügl, 2001, p. 113). A limitation with constructivism is that it does not centralize power differentials as feminism or other critical theories do. The combination of feminism and constructivism reveals the continued marginalization and discrimination of LGBT individuals (Danby, 2007; Ingraham, 1994) when heterosexism creates a stressful environment for LGBT individuals due to the continuous maintenance of identity and frequent decisions about disclosing that identity (Hequembourg & Braillier, 2009).

Method

Rural locations produce greater obstacles for LGBT individuals due to the lack of connection to a larger LGBT community, distance from and lack of programs, events, and spaces for

LGBT individuals, and increased discrimination (D'Augelli, 2006). Therefore, to gain an understanding of lesbian faculty experiences within the context of academia, we sought out a research site in which participants could not rely upon surrounding city factors that might influence their experiences. Urban environments offer more support and employment options for women faculty (Kulis & Sicotte, 2002); therefore the selected site was a midwestern research university located in a small rural environment approximately a two-hour drive from the nearest city. At the time of data collection, the laws for the state where this institution resides provided domestic partnership recognitions, covered sexual orientation and gender identity in anti-discrimination policies, and allowed second-parent adoptions by same-sex partners. At time of data collection, this campus had 572 total full-time women faculty members out of 1,362 total full-time faculty, situating women academics as the minority. This institution includes sexual orientation in its nondiscrimination policy and offers domestic partner benefits, showing an effort by the institution to create a welcoming policy environment for LGBT individuals.

Following a criterion-based sampling procedure (Creswell, 2013), an e-mail solicitation on two large faculty listservs was sent out detailing the desired population for the study. The solicitation yielded five participants (see Table 1). Each of the five participants was a full-time faculty member, four were tenured and one was non-tenure track. One had a doctorate; three had tertiary degrees for their disciplines, and one held a master's degree and was working on her doctorate. All participants had long-term partnerships ranging from 3 years to 15 years in duration. The participants represented three different disciplines and all had been at this institution for at least seven years. In-person interviews were conducted with each participant with the objective to explore their lived experiences and how they make meaning of those experiences as women, faculty, lesbians, partners, and mothers (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Merriam, 2009). The open-ended questions addressed career path, academic experiences, degrees of sexual orientation performance, and relationship and family negotiations.

Each interview was transcribed and coded using predetermined codes, as well as codes that emerged from the data. The predetermined codes were based on the literature in effort to find how participants' experiences connected to or highlighted gaps in the literature (Gibbs, 2007; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Maxwell, 2005). The process of coding was multi-tiered, first using concept-driven coding, then using codes developed from the data in subsequent rounds (Gibbs, 2007). Additionally, horizontalization ensured support of the emerging themes, and all of the data held equal weight during the analysis process. The technique of reflexivity was used in the form of reflexive journaling following each interview and follow-ups with participants on interpretations

TABLE 1.
Participant details

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Tenure Status</i>	<i>College</i>	<i>Degree</i>	<i>Years at Institution</i>	<i>Partnered Years</i>
Gail	Tenured	Science	Ph.D.	15 years	15 years
Jill	Non-Tenure Track	Education	M.S.	13 years	11 years
Erin	Tenured	Liberal Arts	M.L.S.	7 years	3 years
Alex	Tenured	Liberal Arts	M.F.A.	7 years	5 years
Lynn	Tenured	Liberal Arts	M.F.A.	23 years	9 years

of meanings needing more clarity from the interview data to assist in reliability in the data. Additionally, participants reviewed transcripts to ensure accuracy of their intended meanings.

Participant Details

Table 1 outlines basic details of the participants who were assigned pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality given the sensitive nature of questions about identities and relationships.

Limitations

The study's primary limitation is the small number of participants. With only five participants, the themes and findings are not representative of the community of lesbian faculty members at this institution or beyond. However, since the goal of qualitative research is not to be generalizable but rather exploratory, we posit that this study illuminates gaps in the research and how scholars conceptualize women and LGBT academics (Maxwell, 2005; Merriam, 2009). Additionally, as with any research involving sensitive topics and vulnerable populations, this study only involved participants who were tenured or non-tenure track and out and willing to discuss their sexuality in their academic lives. We recognize that in educational research, the concept of "out" limits who researchers can identify and study as it also limits the understanding of experiences by categorizing them back into dualities of "out" versus "closeted" (Mayo, 2007). This study specifically did not explore participants' complex negotiations of how they came to be out but did find that their process was interconnected to their self-identified status in both their professional and personal lives. Furthermore, while similarities in each participant's experiences were revealed, the differences between their family situations and college or departments cause some limitations. Even with these limitations, due to the continued dearth of research about, for, and by lesbian faculty and on LGBT campus climate, "single-campus studies remain an important tool for assessing climate and supporting policy and programmatic change" (Renn, 2010, p. 135) and "make those institutions more accountable to LGBT members" (Mayo, 2007, p. 80).

SHARED THEMES OF LESBIAN FACULTY: PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL

Career Advantages for Balancing Work-Life and Family

According to these five participants, being out as a lesbian provided them with some career advantages not previously discussed in research about women faculty. Participants stated a lack of worry about promotion due to reliance on or priority of their personal life, an ability or perceived requirement of balancing of work and home life, and balance of home responsibilities. None of the participants stated that they worried about whether their relationships or sexuality openness would hinder their career satisfaction or progress but rather noted how being open about their sexuality at work allowed them to focus equally on both their personal and professional lives. All participants had long-term partners and expressed balance in their home and work life as well as a lack of pressure of having to fulfill additional responsibilities at home (e.g., child/elder care, domestic chores) while still having a family. Four of the five participants in this study had responsibilities of care for individuals other than their partners including

children, elders, and friends considered family. Their interpretations of what “family” meant varied across participants who had children, participants who included the elders they took care of, and one participant who considered many of her close friends to be family in addition to her partner. Regardless of family make-up, the lack of pressure related to substantial responsibilities at home for participants is counter to heterosexual women faculty with families, who cite a second full-time job at home due to more domestic and child/elder care responsibilities than their male counterparts, possibly due to society’s construction of gender roles (Wolfinger, 2008). While this does not suggest that all lesbian partnerships include equal distribution of home responsibilities, the participants in this study referred to their partnerships as having a degree of equality in the distribution of home and child/elder care responsibilities. Literature on women faculty continues to find that adding and caring for children has an adverse effect on their careers (Manchester et al., 2010; Mason et al., 2006; Wolfinger, 2008). Because only two participants had children, this section addresses their negotiations of work and personal lives as it relates to family.

The lack of concern expressed by participants about the addition of children negatively affecting their career advancement shows a significant advantage to negotiation of their academic lives. While going through the adoption process, neither Gail nor Jill considered how having children might affect their careers. Because adoption and the addition of children can be expensive, both ensured they had financial stability prior to engaging in the adoption process. Jill and Gail’s need for financial stability as a significant factor in their choice to add children to their lives is a shared experience with all women academics (Letherby, Marchbank, Ramsay, & Shiels, 2005; Mezey, 2008). However, neither acknowledged any fears or worries over their professional lives when it came to fulfilling their desire to have children.

As to whether Jill’s career or work life factored into her decision to have a child, she said,

No. You know this is the first time I’ve ever realized that. You’re asking the question, I’ve never realized that before. At that point, I never thought about my job, I just assumed that I would have the career that I have with no interruptions and no change. That was a big assumption on my part, I think.

While Jill explained that she did not consider an influence on her career advancement when adopting her child, she did ensure the timing would occur during the summer and used the leave provided through the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) without missing the busy time of the academic schedule. These adoption plans aligned with the May baby phenomenon in which female faculty try to schedule pregnancies to deliver in the summer to decrease interference with their careers, and specifically with the nine-month teaching schedule (Armenti, 2004).

Similar to Jill, Gail also did not consciously connect her career to making the decision to adopt, but did strategically time the addition of children after achieving career stability.

...it [career and promotions] was a means to an end in terms of providing economic resources. So I didn’t do it [adopt children] until I was in a tenure [track] position. I didn’t do it in graduate school because I have complete choice over the timing. It [the choice to adopt] was just a matter of having a fulfilling life, it’s not an either, or.

Because an individual must be the legal guardian of the child in order to use FMLA leave, the choice of adoption over in-vitro fertilization is also strategic (“Family and medical,” 2011). Particular to the accessibility and use of FMLA, if participants had chosen in-vitro fertilization

and their partners had given birth, the process of second parent adoption would have taken additional time and they would not have been able to take FMLA immediately after the child's birth or entrance into their lives. A possible career advantage for these two couples is in the decision to adopt. If they had chosen to become pregnant themselves, they could have encountered career obstacles including pregnancy discrimination and stereotypes, which adopting avoids (Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2006). Second-parent adoption of a child that their partner bears and being pregnant could provide significant obstacles for lesbian academics, thus making adoption potentially more appealing.

The final career advantage was the perceived ability to effectively negotiate work and home life and achieve what participants' labeled as a type of balance. Because of participants' perceived ability to share the load of domestic chores with their partners, they also saw themselves as having greater agency to effectively negotiate their work and home lives. This ability to balance stemmed from having partners who shared the weight of work at home. While Gail expressed that she has her routine "streamlined" and efficiently organized, Jill admitted that she has had to make adjustments since adding a child to her life; however, she noted:

I knew that there would have to be a balance. Not necessarily a sacrifice that I would be all self sacrificing, I'm not that type, but a balance that I would have to, and when I say I, I mean my partner too, that we would meet his [son's] needs and make sure he is taken care of . . . and we would still have the things we need but maybe not all the things we wanted.

Jill expressed her experiences with balance of her home, social, and academic life, reflecting a lack of stress about this balance when she spoke about adding her son to her and her partner's life, leaning towards the belief that she truly has a working balance to her multiple lives or identities.

The participants in this study spoke of having a personal support system (partners, children, extended family they cared for, and friends) who supported and respected their work including their openness of their sexuality at work. They also spoke about supportive colleagues within their departments and colleges who respected them, including their lesbian identity, who aided their ability to achieve balance in their personal and professional lives. However, while they saw numerous career and personal advantages to being out, a significant concern was how to negotiate FMLA and campus policies when considering adoption versus in-vitro fertilization.

Departmental Culture

The importance of departmental culture and interactions with colleagues affected participants' satisfaction with their work environment. Every participant but Jill expressed discomfort with colleague interaction and collegial relationships at some point in their careers. Reasons for negative experiences ranged from gender, sexuality, class, and ethnicity discrimination to volatile department politics. On the other hand, colleague interaction during work and inclusion in social events were both important to establishing a positive and satisfying work environment for participants.

While some participants were invited to faculty and colleague functions, they did not always feel comfortable due to their awareness of being "different." The isolation of not feeling welcome or comfortable to attend these functions was harmful to participants' satisfaction, work environment, and desire to remain at the institution. For all of the participants,

departmental culture and level of collegiality arose as important to their lived-experiences in academia, specifically including the acceptance and respect of their sexuality. The literature supports that departmental norms and culture are important factors in faculty decisions and sense of agency, specifically decisions related to work/family responsibilities (Lester, 2011; O'Meara & Campbell, 2011).

Alex described her experiences with colleagues as mixed due to outsider feelings. While she acknowledged that her colleagues were inclusive and welcoming, she still received subtle messages of being "other" or an outsider. When reflecting on social events with her colleagues, Alex mentioned:

I don't attend them with my colleagues as much as I did initially. And it's not that I'm [avoiding them], but often I'm the only queer person, but maybe there's one or two [others]. So I'm not always connecting. People are very wonderful and welcome, my colleagues, but I just feel distant.

Alex's experiences with her colleagues were mixed. This was most likely due to the heteronormative culture in academia and the absence of greater visible numbers of LGBT faculty in the department and college. Fortunately for the institution, the experiences of not feeling included or welcome seemed less influential to Alex's overall experiences because she had a close group of LGBT friends from the larger community. This allowed her to not have to rely on colleague interaction as much as someone who does not have an outside group of friends, which can be difficult in rural locations.

Only one participant, Jill, was comfortable and happy with her department culture and she experienced the most collegial departmental culture of all the women. Her colleagues' reactions when she and her partner adopted their son had a particular impact on her feelings of inclusion and acceptance. Jill reflected that when they brought home their son,

I remember when I was off on FMLA, my colleagues called me and asked if they could come over and have lunch. I said "okay" because they wanted to meet my son. I said, "I'll make something" and they said "No, no, no, you do nothing. You just be there." And they came, they catered out... and they all brought gifts for him, for my son. And that was fun. I didn't expect that. But they all came to visit him so that was nice.

This accepting example shows how the acts of blurring personal and professional boundaries and being open about her sexuality resulted in job satisfaction and contributed to why Jill did not express stress with balancing her personal and professional identities and lives.

All of the participants described their work environments as "good" or "fine" when directly asked how they perceived their immediate atmosphere. However, follow-up and probing questions revealed that only Jill truly experienced a welcoming and respectful work environment. While not all of the participants' experiences are unique to sexuality or even gender, the experiences that Gail and Alex had in not feeling comfortable or like they did not completely belong or connect with their heterosexual colleagues alludes to experiencing the marginalization that LGBT faculty often encounter due to their sexuality and/or gender identity.

Surrounding Community Influence

Due to the small, conservative rural location of the institution and the lack of community the participants found within the institution, all participants expressed the influence of the

community outside the institution as especially important to their experiences. The participants who planned to remain at the institution had positive experiences with the broader community and those looking to leave had less positive experiences. With the closest metro area over two hours away, the location is isolating for LGBT individuals. All participants expressed the difficulties of finding a community at the institution and in their departments due to the absence of other known LGBT faculty and communication about groups that could bring the LGBT faculty together, which leads to the importance of the support of the surrounding community.

Only Alex and Lynn expressed a desire to stay at the institution. The other three women, Gail, Jill, and Erin, all shared that they were seeking employment elsewhere. Reasons for wanting to leave initially focused on expanding career aspirations but dissatisfaction with the community was actively expressed as an underlying reason. Alex's strong ties to the LGBT community outside of the institution influenced her desire to remain at this institution for the foreseeable future, whereas Lynn was looking to finish out her academic career at the institution because, after 23 years, she had no desire to start new at another institution. The LGBT community outside of the institution influenced Alex's positive experiences at this institution. Alex stated that, "What made it palatable and what made it much easier was to actually meet and find out there was an LGBT community here that was pretty welcoming." As Alex reflected how she now was immersed into that community, she wondered about new people moving to the area and whether new LGBT faculty would have time to get involved. She expressed how the tenure process affected the time she had to spend with the community:

In fact, there was hardly any time to be in that community because I had to keep up my teaching, my creative research, and service and I just found it exhausting. I feel like it really cost a lot health-wise and socially because there was very little time.

All of the participants expressed the importance of the overall community to their satisfaction with both their personal and professional lives. While this was expressed in different ways, the presence of a liberal and prominent LGBT community was an important feature. Both Erin and Jill commented that finding a more liberal environment would enhance their satisfaction with both their personal and professional lives. While Alex found that community, the rest of the participants seemed to still be searching for a balance to the small town atmosphere by either living in a larger city on the weekends or actively seeking new employment.

Personal Fulfillment Trumps Professional Prioritization

For all participants, the desire for personal fulfillment, which is defined as meeting goals to have a satisfactory quality of life, was the primary motivation for their career, family, and openness about sexuality decisions. When discussing their career decision-making processes, all participants primarily based their decisions on personal fulfillment defined as what the participants wanted out of their lives and how they would obtain balance in those decisions. Balance was a key motivator for both career and home decisions, although the importance of balance and the definition of balance differed for each participant. Gail and Jill, for instance, had specific interpretations and need for balance due to the presence of children in their lives. For Lynn, balance meant being able to leave work on the weekends to spend time with her partner, who was living in a different location. For Alex and Erin, balance meant achieving satisfaction within their careers while also maintaining happiness within their personal lives.

Participants made career decisions after referencing their personal goals and satisfaction and all participants seemed to balance the other parts of their lives around these desires. For Gail and Jill, having children was a step towards life fulfillment, not a factor in their career negotiation. Gail explained that her decision to adopt three children was part of her goal of having a fulfilling life when referencing whether or not women can have a family and a career in academia. Having a family did not diminish her career aspirations to be an academic dean but provided a balance and focus in her life. For Alex, career aspirations were driven by her desire for personal fulfillment because, to her, that is what is most important. On career aspirations, Alex stated, "I just sort of go along with doing what my heart says to do. What's important and if that takes me up a ladder that's great. It doesn't matter to me." This sentiment was reflected when she spoke about her reasoning for being open about her sexuality in her professional life. Alex explained how she shared her queer identity:

I didn't really think about it. I mean I just felt that I had to be where I was at and I had to respect my own self and process. So while I was here, I came out as queer. So yeah, I was out from the get go and I feel like that is part of my identity.

Being open about her identity and sexuality allowed Alex to create a queer course at her institution, which increased her level of personal and professional satisfaction. Creating a queer course, Alex believed, addressed the LGBT marginalization on campus, which had, at that time, been increased by an administrator's public statements on the immorality of same-sex relationships.

There wasn't anything here [queer courses] and I just felt like, well, there needs to be something. So I felt like I wanted to and was able to do it and I felt it was really important here because of the comments made by the administration on LGBT individuals.

The desire to provide a queer course for students outweighed worries about what that exposure would do to Alex's career.

All of the participants expressed little worry that their home life or openness about their sexuality would negatively affect their careers, which contradicts previous research from earlier decades (Garber, 1994). Erin, Alex, and Lynn all expressed that their lack of concern primarily resided in how progressive their liberal arts departments and colleges were in general. This follows the literature in that social sciences and humanities disciplines are more likely than other disciplines to be exposed to sexuality studies and therefore be more aware and educated on the subject (Bilimoria & Stewart, 2009; Dolan, 1998). Another aspect of personal and professional satisfaction was the introduction of queer studies by Alex and a feminist course by Lynn in their early years at the institution. Although each experienced early criticism from students and colleagues, their desires to add these topics to their academic career and institutional curriculum diminished the significance of the negative reactions. Fear of student evaluations as a consequence of being out is common for LGBT faculty (Vaccaro, 2012) due to the role these evaluations have in tenure and promotion decisions. However, the participants in this study overcame most of their fear associated with student evaluations and student comments by being open about their sexuality over time. This openness allowed Alex to introduce and continue providing a course on queer studies, something she would not have been able to do freely had she been concerned with keeping her sexuality hidden.

Although Erin and Jill were looking to leave the institution and area, they were both cognizant of how that decision would affect their partners. While Erin wanted to find a position that would utilize her degree more, she expressed that any potential position would have to be a step up to justify moving her partner away from her family. Like Erin, Jill did not simply look to advance in her career because of personal fulfillment but that was a major influence in her decisions. At the time of this study, both Jill and her partner were seeking career advancement by moving to a new location in search of better options for both their personal and professional lives.

Nearly all of the decisions Lynn expressed were based on personal fulfillment. Her decisions to take an administrative position and to be open about her sexuality were based on her desire to fulfill her personal needs first. Regarding her sexuality, Lynn explained:

There's no other way I wanted to live and I actually saw it as a position of strength because when you're closeted people have something over you. So I always saw it both as the way I wanted to live, out of the closet, and also a position of strength for me to be out.

The desire to not endure the consequences of hiding her sexuality outweighed Lynn's concern over how, or if, her disclosure would negatively influence her career. Additionally, her openness about her sexuality allowed Lynn to teach queer studies and queer subjects in her classes. LGBT faculty are more satisfied when they have the freedom to teach and research the subjects that are fulfilling and rewarding to them (Bensimon, 1992; Hyman, 1997; Talburt, 2000; Tierney, 1997).

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

The five lesbian women academics in this study expressed how they negotiated their personal and professional identities and priorities and contributed to four themes (career advantages, departmental culture, community influence, and personal fulfillment) common through their experiences. At first glance, some experiences seem similar to all women, but others contradict and highlight new perspectives and opportunities for both lesbian academics and higher education institutions. All participants focused on how their gender as women influenced their personal and professional experiences sometimes more than their sexuality or identity as lesbian or queer. Experiences of lesbian faculty members who are not out or open about their sexuality in the workplace could be more applicable to changing environments, policies, and understanding experiences and offer areas for further research.

The two participants who had children found positive opportunities in separating their decision of having children from their career advancement and being open about their sexual orientation. The lack of concern that adding children to their lives would complicate or hinder their career advancement and goals allowed for personal fulfillment and career advancement goals to exist simultaneously. This directly contradicts how heterosexual women faculty discuss their decisions to have children and how children directly and indirectly hinder academic careers (Collay, 2002; Mason et al., 2006; Morrison et al., 2011; Philipsen, 2008; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2004; Wolfinger, 2008; Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2003). Higher education institutions should consider promoting more awareness of the policies on adoption and FMLA, and the programs seeking to make having children less stressful on faculty careers and promotion opportunities. Additionally, institutions should introduce and support policies that provide and allow for greater

flexibility in faculty careers, including paid leave or reduction in course load for new parents and institutional and cultural support of “stop-the-clock” policies for faculty on the tenure track (Lester & Sallee, 2009; Manchester et al., 2010; Thomas & McLaughlin, 2009). These efforts would ensure more faculty have more options available to them, are aware of those options, and are less fearful of the repercussions that having children might bring to their careers.

The study participants were not concerned that their identities created any real barriers to their tenure and promotion opportunities; however, each participant had already earned tenure or promotion by the time of the interviews. If lesbian faculty who are not “out” or have yet to receive promotion and/or tenure had participated in this study, this finding could have been different, which illuminates the need for further research on the experiences of LGBT faculty who are not comfortable sharing their identity within the higher education community. Additionally, further research on lesbian faculty might look to highlight how those faculty who are untenured or in term positions understand and define personal fulfillment and career satisfaction compared to those who are tenured. Finally, in this study all participants were in long-term partnerships providing perspectives on experiences different from lesbian faculty who are single. Future research on lesbian faculty should include single participants, as their experiences with their personal and professional lives undoubtedly differ in several ways from those of partnered lesbian faculty.

The void of concern over family formation, disclosure of sexuality, and a focus on decisions made largely in consideration of personal fulfillment conflicts with the literature on women academics and could lead to an interesting examination of how heterosexual women academics might benefit from these revelations. If this lack of concern over personal characteristics and circumstances emerges in a larger study, the current culture of fear of adding children to the family or being open about relationships could be altered. For heterosexual women academics, the decision-making processes about career advancement, family, and relocation have been found to be stressful and may lead to some women leaving higher education (Mason et al., 2006; Philipsen, 2008; Wolfinger, 2008; Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2003). Having a supportive partner and basing decisions on personal fulfillment demonstrates an alternative decision-making process. More research on this negotiation might offer additional options for all women faculty.

The small sample of this study, while not generalizable, offers guidance for future research and expands the described options of how women faculty experience higher education careers and personal negotiation. Participants’ experiences refuted existing research and revealed research gaps. The lack of concern over the addition of children affecting career advancement or promotion was outweighed by the desire for personal fulfillment. The findings further demonstrate that lesbian academics experience their own set of obstacles and advantages in higher education and therefore need more recognition in the literature. From a feminist constructivist framework, this research lends to efforts to end the perpetuation of silence in the work environment, which mimics the silence in the literature.

In recruitment of faculty and staff, it is important for institutions to factor in the surrounding community’s offerings for LGBT individuals since the environment outside of academia is influential to recruitment and retention (Dolan, 1998; Hornsby & Munn, 2009). While the academic institution is just a section of the overall community, efforts could be made to develop programs and events for faculty and staff that relate to diverse cultures. Recruitment staff and committees can help in the attraction and retention of LGBT faculty by providing potential and current LGBT faculty with information about the LGBT community in the surrounding area and

highlighting institutional groups or support systems for LGBT faculty. The participants in this study expressed the importance of connecting to the larger LGBT community since there was not an accessible and visible LGBT community on campus. This has retention and satisfaction implications for new LGBT faculty in their first few years at such an institution as it highlights the imbalance between personal life and tenure-track career pursuits with an added importance for faculty to connect to an outside community when the institution does not reflect their identities. There is a necessity to having support systems, especially in rural areas, in finding happiness and a desire to remain in a certain environment (Bensimon, 1992; McDonough, 2002; Tierney, 1997). Merging the overall LGBT community with the campus LGBT community more effectively could create a more welcoming environment for those LGBT faculty and staff who feel isolated and in “limbo.” Highlighting the benefits of a truly diverse campus, including faculty and staff, in ways that can retain LGBT individuals could have a significant affect in improving campus climates. Although the study cannot generalize the experiences of all lesbian academics based upon participants’ reflections on their lived-world, these experiences offer rich detail on what lesbian faculty experience in the academy.

CONCLUSION

Each of the participants revealed specific and unique experiences related to their gender and sexuality. The findings, as well as the absence of lesbian academic experiences in the literature, support the significance of this study in highlighting the experiences of these five lesbian academics in relation to the negotiation of their personal and academic lives. Both the literature and the findings highlight that lesbian faculty have specific experiences that vary from heterosexual women faculty. Each of the four themes both supports and challenges the current literature. The findings from this phenomenological study offer rich description of the lived experience of lesbian faculty through the framework of feminist constructivism and suggest further research capitalizing on this lens.

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