

## The Positive Aspects of Being a Lesbian or Gay Man

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The need to provide culturally competent training for counseling gay men and lesbians (as well as other sexual minorities) is limited by the relative scarcity of research. Extant research has focused on psychopathologies and negative life experiences with little attention to the positive aspects of the lives of gay men and lesbians. An online survey collected data on perceptions of the positive aspects of being a gay man or lesbian ( $N = 553$ ). Qualitative analyses revealed 3 domains with 11 themes. The positive aspects of gay or lesbian identity were belonging to a community, creating families of choice, forging strong connections with others, serving as positive role models, developing empathy and compassion, living authentically and honestly, gaining personal insight and sense of self, involvement in social justice and activism, freedom from gender-specific roles, exploring sexuality and relationships, and enjoying egalitarian relationships (lesbian participants only). These findings are discussed in light of recent literature on positive psychology and strength-based therapeutic approaches.

*Keywords:* well-being, meaning, positive psychology, minority stress, identity

Affirmative psychological services for gay men and lesbians not only address symptom reduction but psychosocial well-being and flourishing. Few psychologists have been trained to provide affirmative services to sexual minorities (Murphy, Rawlings, & Howe, 2002), and much remains to be done to create a comprehensive base of knowledge for empirically supported service delivery. Our purpose in this article is to share the results of a research study aimed at explicating the positive aspects of living life as a gay man or lesbian. With this knowledge, psychologists can be better equipped to help sexual minorities and their families envision and claim the positive aspects of their lives.

The majority of published psychological studies concerning lesbians and gay men (and bisexual individuals) have focused on psychopathology, negative events, and stress. Although the current sociopolitical environment continues to negatively affect the psychological and physical health of lesbians and gay men (e.g., Cochran, 2001), some recent research has suggested that aspects of a sexual minority identity may contribute to psychosocial health and well-being. For example, a study of resilience during antigay political debates found that connection to a lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) community provided a source of support for lesbians and gay men (Russell & Richards, 2003). Constantine and Sue

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WE THANK C. Stuart Reedy for his assistance with the Web survey.

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(2006) suggested that for people of color, pride in one's race and ethnicity and the experiences of oppression "sharpen and hone their survival skills to such a degree that these skills are now deemed to be assets" (p. 235). The stress of having a minority status can offer people of color opportunities to transform oppressive experiences into behaviors leading to resiliency and even optimal functioning.

For gay men and lesbians, the minority stress model (Meyer, 2003) conceptualizes the impact of stigmatization on their experiences of stress. In this model, negative psychological symptoms increase as a result of experiences of discrimination, the anticipation of rejection, hiding or concealing the sexual minority identity, and the internalization of the negative societal views of gay men and lesbians. The final factor in the minority stress model is the coping efforts expended in efforts to ameliorate these stresses. One recent study (Rostosky, Riggle, Gray, & Hatton, in press) of a sample of 40 same-sex couples found that the couples used four general types of coping strategies in response to minority stress. These coping efforts included both positive and negative strategies. For example, some couples in the study ignored or compartmentalized their lives to avoid dealing directly with the stress of negative rejection experiences. On the other hand, some couples engaged in positive reframing that identified prejudice as an external source of stress and reaffirmed the relationship as positive and empowering.

Making meaning out of negative experiences is another strategy for coping. Folkman (1997; Folkman, Moskowitz, Ozer, & Park, 1997) studied how the caregiving partners of men with AIDS create positive meaning from events associated with the progression of the disease and the deaths of their partners. These positive meanings were associated with reduced depressive symptoms in the caregivers. Other researchers have studied how lesbians make meaning of their lesbian identity (e.g., Abes & Jones, 2004; Fassinger, 1998). Abes and Jones's (2004) study of 10 lesbian college students found that the meanings created by some of the students revealed an ability to understand and differentiate the contextual influences on their lives and then "self-author" their identities. These researchers concluded that "lesbian identity might foster the development of cognitive complexity" (p. 626) and enhance future meaning-making capacity.

The studies reviewed above support further inquiry into the nature of positive aspects of sexual minority identities and experiences. In light of the recent emphasis on the study of positive psychology and the processes by which individuals develop positive character values and virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Seligman, 2005), attention to empirical studies of the "positive psychology" of gay men and lesbians is needed. To date, no empirical study has directly examined these aspects. Therefore, to systematically delineate and describe the breadth of positive aspects in the lives of gay men and lesbians, we used an online survey to ask participants, "Please tell us what you think the positive things are about being a [gay man/lesbian or man-loving-man/woman-loving-woman]?" The qualitative analysis of the answers gathered from 203 gay men and 350 lesbians revealed the themes described below.

## Positive Aspects Study

### Participants

The participants in the study self-identified either as a gay man (or man-loving-man) or lesbian (or woman-loving-woman)<sup>1</sup> who was at least 18 years of age. Participants were recruited through e-mail announcements sent to lists that targeted members of the gay and lesbian community. These lists included an electronic newsletter from the Human Rights Campaign and several workplace, social, and professional groups (e.g., an e-mail list for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender [GLBT] social and political scientists, APA Division 44, Yahoo groups, and company affinity groups). Those who received the announcements were asked to forward the e-mail as appropriate. The e-mail announcement included a link to the Web site where one version of the survey for gay men and one for lesbians were posted for online access.

### Demographic Information

Two hundred three gay men and 350 lesbians from 45 states participated in the online survey.<sup>2</sup> Participants were asked, "Overall, how positive do you feel about your current self-identification as a gay man/lesbian or man-loving-man/woman-loving-woman?" Ninety percent of participants reported feeling extremely or very positive, 8.5% reported feeling somewhat positive, and 1% reported feeling not very or not at all positive (with no significant gender differences).

*Gay male participants.* The average age of the gay male participants was 38.4 years ( $SD = 12.3$ , range = 18–72). Participants self-identified as 87.6% Caucasian, 3.5% bi- or multiracial, 3% Latino, 3% Asian American, 1.5% African American, and 1.5% other racial identities. Twenty-five percent had a high school diploma or some college education, 31% had a bachelor's degree, and 44% had an advanced college degree. Sixty-one percent reported being in a committed relationship with a same-sex partner for an average duration of 7.97 years ( $SD = 8.1$ , range = 1–52). Eighteen percent reported having children. Ninety-four percent identified their sexual orientation or identity as a "gay man," and the remainder identified as a "man-loving-man," "bisexual," or "queer."

*Lesbian participants.* The average age of the lesbian participants was 35.2 years ( $SD = 10.4$ , range = 18–65). Participants

<sup>1</sup> This research explored only the experiences of gay men and lesbians. Although bisexuals and transgender persons are a part of the larger GLBT community, each group has unique circumstances. Future research should explore the positive aspects of identity as a bisexual or transgender person. The descriptions *man-loving-man* and *woman-loving-woman* were included because some members of racial or ethnic minority groups do not identify with the labels of *gay man* or *lesbian*, which are seen as applying only to the White/Caucasian community. This also provided for inclusion of any person who would include gay man or lesbian as a part of their identity, even if they did not accept the label as their only identity.

<sup>2</sup> Web-based sampling typically results in self-selected participants with higher levels of education and income, as well as higher percentages of Caucasian/White respondents than the general population (see Riggle, Rostosky, & Reedy, 2005, for a discussion of Web-based sampling of bisexual, gay, lesbian, and transgender individuals). There are no population statistics for gay men and lesbians to compare samples to assess representativeness.

self-identified as 89.5% Caucasian, 4.1% bi- or multiracial, 2.6% Latina, 0.6% Asian American, 0.9% African American, and 2.4% other racial identities. Thirty-three percent had a high school diploma or some college education, 29.7% had a bachelor's degree, and 37.7% had an advanced college degree. Seventy-eight percent reported being in a committed relationship with a same-sex partner for an average duration of 6.95 years ( $SD = 6.0$ , range = 1–43). Thirty-seven percent reported having children. Eighty-one percent identified their sexual orientation or identity as a “lesbian or gay woman,” 11.4% as bisexual, and the remainder identified as a “woman-loving-woman,” “queer,” or “other.”

### *Procedures and Survey Items*

The online survey began with an informed consent page. After indicating consent to participate, participants were asked a series of demographic questions about their primary gender identity, sexual identity, age, state of residence, education, racial or ethnic identity, current relationship status, and whether they had children. Participants were also asked a question about how positive they felt about their sexual self-identification. Finally, they were asked, “Please tell us below what you think the positive things are about being a (lesbian [or woman-loving-woman]/gay man [or man-loving-man]). Please describe as many positive aspects as you think are important to your life and in as much detail and with examples if you wish.” An expandable text box was provided for answers.

### *Data Analysis*

The answers submitted by participants to the open-ended question were analyzed using a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This approach allowed the “lived experiences or lifeworlds of people being studied” to be inductively analyzed (Hatch, 2002, p. 29). Data for all 203 gay male respondents and for a random set of 200 lesbian respondents were analyzed initially. Data from the remaining 150 lesbian respondents were read to check the reliability of the domains and themes but were not coded (as no new themes emerged). The data for the lesbian and gay male participants were analyzed separately to preserve any gender differences that might emerge. Three of the authors separately analyzed the data for domains and themes. The list of domains and themes was compared and reconciled by reference to the data. A final consensual list of domains and themes that emerged was created, and data were recoded consistent with this list.

### *Findings*

Most of the participants provided answers reflecting positive aspects of being a gay man or lesbian. One percent of the sample of participants stated that they did not believe there was anything positive about being a gay man or lesbian. Less than 5% of sample participants reported that there was nothing positive or negative about being a gay man or lesbian; they submitted “it just is” or it is just “part of who I am” (although some of these participants added comments about positive aspects that were coded).

Three overarching domains emerged from the data. These included disclosure and social support, insight into and empathy for self and others, and freedom from societal definitions of roles.

Within the domains, a total of 11 themes emerged. Some themes took on different meanings for gay men and lesbians, as illustrated below. One theme, “egalitarian relationships,” was specific to lesbians. Some of the concepts within the themes are overlapping; therefore, the themes should not be read as being unrelated or disconnected.

### *Disclosure and Social Support*

Disclosure of a gay male or lesbian identity to self or others is considered an important step in the achievement of a positive identity (Cass, 1979; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). The coming-out process is ongoing and involves continually assessing changing social environments and practical (e.g., physical safety or job security) considerations. However, for many participants in this study, coming out enhanced their well-being through the creation of social support systems and support for other life activities. Within this domain, four themes emerged: belonging to a community, creating families of choice, having strong connections with others, and serving as positive role models.

*Belonging to a community.* For many participants in this study, inclusivity in a broad gay and lesbian (or broader GLBT) community was seen as a positive aspect of being gay or lesbian. This theme was the most common mentioned by lesbians and the second most common overall theme (combining both groups). Both lesbians and gay men reported a sense of belonging to a community of people with the commonality of experiences of being gay or lesbian. For example, a gay male participant wrote, “a real sense of community and support from other gay men and lesbians who can understand the ups and downs of what it’s like to be gay in our society—who can be a surrogate family and share your joys as well as your disappointments.” One lesbian participant wrote, “I find the gay community (men and women) to be an incredibly diverse tribe . . . you can draw strength and positive energy from it and utilize those tools to improve yourself and build a better and more understanding society.”

Many lesbians, perhaps following the language of the survey, wrote about the “lesbian community” or the “women’s community.” For example, one lesbian participant wrote, “lesbian communities: both the social connection and a kind of intangible sense of power/empowerment in being a part of a large group of very capable, independent, and creative women.” The responses of gay men were less clear as to whether they were referring exclusively to a “gay male” community because the reference was often to the “gay community” or to “gay people.”

*Creating families of choice.* Past research has shown that many gay men and lesbians experience rejection (or perceive that they would be rejected) by their families of origin (Laird, 1996; Rostosky et al., 2004). In the present sample, 75% of participants had completely disclosed their sexual identity to their parents and siblings, whereas only a third were completely out to their extended family members. Approximately 3 out of 5 participants indicated that they felt very supported or a good amount of support from their families of origin; however, 2 out of 5 felt only some or little support.

In response to rejection by families of origin, some gay men and lesbians may create families of choice (see Barker, Herdt, & de Vries, 2006). Families of choice often include current partners, former partners, friends (both from the GLBT community and

supportive straight allies), and select family members. In this context, the creation of families of choice plays an important role in the emotional and sometimes physical support of gay men and lesbians. A lesbian respondent wrote, "I found it to be the lesbians who showed up, my friends who became my family when no one else was around to help with the hard things—physically and emotionally caring for me in illness, helping me physically care for my ill mother in ways it is assumed family does (but blood family do not always do)." One gay man observed, "I have a big community of friends and extended family. My brother, who is married with children, is the opposite. When they got married and had kids, he lost all his friends. He is sad and isolated and when he is not working he is doing chores. He says he wants me back as a close family member but in truth I get much more love and support from my 'chosen family.'"

*Having strong connections with others.* Participants reported that because of their insights, empathy, and freedom from socially prescribed roles for men and women (themes discussed below), they could make stronger connections with other people. Many gay men wrote about the value of being able to have close friendships with women and heterosexual men. For example, one gay man wrote, "Living outside of many of society's expectations for male-female interactions, gay men are free to have closer, nonsexual friendships with women (lesbian or heterosexual)." Another gay man wrote about how being gay facilitated his relationships with straight men and stated, "I also like how I've served as a bridge for some straight men. . . . They often feel free to open up to me because I'll understand and yet not put them down for being fallible or vulnerable as their straight male friends might." The experiences of the lesbian participants were similar. A lesbian wrote, "I am able to have close friendships with both straight and gay men without any concerns or confusion over whether there is any sexual component to our relationships. I am also able to have close friendships with both straight and gay women, because straight women seem unconcerned about my sexuality and other gay women are obviously comfortable with it."

Many participants noted that being gay or lesbian created opportunities to have strong connections with a same-sex partner. For example, one gay man wrote, "As a gay man, I have insider knowledge about the very group of people I am attracted to. . . . I always have a keen understanding about what I am dealing with, positive and negative, when I am interacting with another man in a friendship or relationship." Some lesbians in this sample wrote about their strong connection to their female partner, sometimes as a contrast to what they had experienced in their past relationships with men. A lesbian wrote, "Another positive thing about being a lesbian is that I am able to not only relate to my partner, but understand her as well. We understand each other's emotions and feelings. Communication is easier than it ever was in my relationships with men."

*Serving as positive role models.* Coming out allowed some respondents to create relationships with others by acting as leaders and positive role models. Some participants were role models at work or in their social networks. For example, one gay man wrote, "I find it positive to be a role model for the gay community in my workplace. I enjoy being openly gay in the workplace, particularly where I work with younger gay and lesbian students who look to me for support and guidance." A lesbian participant wrote, "I think my partner and I, working as 'out' lesbians, try to set an example

and be good role models for ALL our friends, including our lesbian friends and couples."

### *Insight Into and Empathy for Self and Others*

The process of coming out to oneself often involves a tremendous amount of personal insight and reflection. Some gay men and lesbians in this sample saw this process as a strength that helped them to perceive themselves and others differently. They expressed an increased self-awareness and empathy with others, especially those who are oppressed. This domain included four themes: authentic self and honesty, personal insight and sense of self, increased empathy and compassion for others, and social justice and activism.

*Authentic self and honesty.* Authenticity and honesty, with self and others, was the most common theme mentioned by respondents overall. These feelings often accompanied the coming-out process but were also expressed as self-acceptance or as a way of communicating with others more generally. Some participants simply wrote that "being who I am" and "not having to live my life as a lie" were positive aspects. Others elaborated how being gay or lesbian affected their overall sense of being. For example, one lesbian stated, "I am living authentically, which feeds my confidence, my joy and happiness, my relationship with God, my improved health." One gay man noted, "I think that all the experiences of struggle that often constitute the development of a gay identity become a positive—in knowing self, in building relationships built on authenticity and congruence, in learning to stand with others and for oneself."

*Personal insight and sense of self.* Participants reported feeling that they enjoyed deepened insight and a stronger sense of self and identity. This was sometimes connected with their ability to be compassionate and empathize with others (reported below). Other times, it was connected to their feelings of authenticity (discussed above). However, this theme was distinct in that it was most often perceived as a critical skill that was derived from being a gay man or lesbian and that, in turn, influenced other parts of their life. For example, one gay male participant explained, "because homosexuality is often taboo—even recently illegal—yet good in my experience, it has made me examine other social and legal bans and decide for myself whether they are good or bad. Whether [the topic] is marijuana or Christianity, being gay has given me a critical eye and sharp sense of irony in the double standards of society." Another gay man wrote, "The impact of deepening my own insight and positive development as a whole person, richer deeper meaning of the real masculine." One lesbian wrote, "Another aspect . . . is that being gay encourages one to really search within for self-understanding and acceptance. Since society is largely not very supportive of gays or gay rights, a gay person needs to find inner sources of strength and confidence."

*Increased empathy and compassion for others.* Lesbians and gay men in the sample reported feeling that they had an increased sense of empathy and compassion for other people who are oppressed. This was the most common theme mentioned by gay men. One gay man eloquently stated, "I enjoy being a member of the gay community because it teaches me a lot of things about acceptance, openness, diversity, and sincerity. If I had turned out to be straight, although I would like to think that I would be as accepting of others as I am now, I still would have been missing the

perspective that only minority members feel and can share with others." Although this was a common theme for Caucasian/White gay men, it was also mentioned by gay men of color. For example, a Latino gay man reported, "If I were not gay, I don't think I would understand and/or appreciate differences between peoples (sex, gender, ethnic, race, cultural) as well as I do now." Lesbian respondents made similar observations. One lesbian participant reported, "I am less judgmental, because I know how easily others can judge me. Being 'other' has made me more sensitive to other minorities and more conscious of the work of acceptance that needs to be done in the world."

*Social justice and activism.* Relevant to their increased empathy and compassion for other minorities, some participants expressed their desires to promote social justice and to be active in the struggle for gay and lesbian rights as well as a broader set of social issues. Some respondents expressed that the "personal is political" and perceived themselves as activists simply by virtue of living "out" their lives. One lesbian explained, "I like belonging to an alternative group of the population and feeling like I am a part of a political and cultural movement that is very important in our world today. I like the fight for human rights and continuing work toward equality. Being a lesbian is making the personal political, being politically active just by being out." Two gay men wrote, "I have been an active feminist as I realize that fighting gender roles and limitations does much to create discussion of and freedom for same-sex relationships," and "I am more concerned with social justice, not only for LGBT issues, but any minority, the disabled, children, and so on."

### *Freedom From Societal Definitions of Roles*

The lesbians and gay men in this sample expressed several ways in which they felt freedom from societal definitions of roles related to gender and sexuality and the freedom to create their identities and relationships outside of social norms. Societal norms regarding gender and relationships affect men and women differently, and some of these differences are reflected in the themes below. The themes included freedom from gender-specific roles, exploration of sexuality and relationships, and egalitarian relationships.

*Freedom from gender-specific roles.* Many participants reported a sense of freedom from gender role stereotypes and expectations and the social constructions of gender roles. For some, this was a general freedom, whereas others mentioned a variety of specific forms. Gender seemed to influence perceptions of this freedom. The general sense of freedom is illustrated by a lesbian who wrote, "It gives me the freedom to be who I am, rather than trying to figure out how to be the woman society expects me to be. That is very empowering!"

For some gay men and lesbians in this sample, part of the freedom from gender role expectations included freedom from pressures to follow the traditional heterosexual gender scripts of "getting married and having kids." Some participants noted they appreciated that they could "choose to have children instead of being expected to have children." One lesbian wrote, "Being lesbian allows us to choose to have children and how to raise children in ways not claimed by straight women." One gay man noted, "There is less pressure on gay men to have children and, as such, the decision for a gay man to have or not to have children may involve a healthier process."

For gay men, freedom from gender roles included the freedom to express themselves emotionally. For example, one gay man wrote, "I am more free to express myself in terms of behaviors and emotions—I do not have to monitor as closely what I do, think, and feel to make sure it conforms to what it means to be a 'real man.'" For lesbians, freedom from gender roles included feelings of independence, confidence, and strength. For example, one lesbian noted, "I can play (to some extent) by different rules in life (that is, I can be a strong, tough aggressive woman) because I have already broken a major one by being a lesbian."

*Exploring sexuality and relationships.* A consequence of freedom from gender role expectations that some participants expressed was being freer to explore different expressions of their sexuality and different constructions of intimate relationships. One gay man wrote, "Our relationship was 'unconventional' to start with, which has given us the opportunity to work on it with a lot of freedom [including] more sexual freedom." A lesbian participant shared, "Being a lesbian is positive because it provides the opportunity to create a lot of the rules of life and relationships. . . . It has a freedom to create new types of relationships."

*Egalitarian relationships.* This theme was specifically noted by lesbian participants but not mentioned by male participants. For some lesbian participants, the freedom from gender-based stereotypes (discussed above) extended to a more specific freedom from patriarchal power relationships and the creation of an egalitarian relationship with a partner. For some women, it also included feeling "safer" in a same-sex relationship. One lesbian shared, "Unlike previous relationships with men, my relationships with women are not filled with constant power struggles or struggles to have my voice heard and my needs met. . . . My girlfriends and partners understand what it means to be scared to walk alone at night, understand fears of rape and the frustrations of inequality." Another lesbian stated, ". . . we don't fall into traditional patterns of behavior because we are conscious of the ways that these patterns of behavior have oppressed women."

## Discussion

The findings from this study illustrate a number of interrelated positive aspects of a gay male or lesbian identity. Although limitations of the sample invite caution in generalizing the findings, the emerging themes are suggestive of possible positive aspects to be explored further in future research. The extent to which these aspects contribute to optimal human functioning in gay men and lesbian women is an empirical question that also awaits further research. However, reviews of the psychological literature have concluded that positive relationships and a sense of meaning in life are two important factors for health and well-being (Ryff & Singer, 1998). The participants in this study appreciated that their gay and lesbian identities provided them with insight and awareness, key tools for making meaning out of one's life and circumstances. They also reported increased empathy and compassion for themselves and others, attitudes essential to positive interpersonal relationships.

Excellent resources for affirmative therapy with lesbian and gay male clients have been published recently (e.g., Bigner & Wetchler, 2004; Ritter & Terndrup, 2002; Whitman & Boyd, 2003). These handbooks and edited volumes offer many suggestions for helping clients cope with the challenges of a sexual

minority identity and same-sex relationships. Drawing on the findings from this study, we suggest that practitioners augment a conceptual framework aimed at meeting the challenges of a gay or lesbian identity to include identifying strengths and positive associations. Specific suggestions based on three major domain themes discovered in this sample of participants are discussed below.

### *Creative and Authentic Living*

Participants reported that the practice of being “authentic” and “honest” with oneself and others through the processes of coming out contributed to a sense of well-being. The participants in this study were able to perceive themselves as having the freedom to live their lives in uniquely satisfying ways, including creating new gender and relational scripts. Where applicable, practitioners can reinforce this type of creativity as a positive aspect of identity development.

Practitioners can help clients unpack beliefs about gender and engage in a gender role analysis, a standard technique of feminist theory and therapy (e.g., Worell & Remer, 2003). Stigma attached to nontraditional gender identities and roles can be deconstructed and individuals’ choices reframed as positive aspects of their identities. Providing gay male and lesbian clients with the opportunity to see their chosen gender expressions as positive aspects of themselves also can help them contest sexist and homophobic messages, messages that often conflate gender with sexual identity.

The concept of gender role flexibility for older gay men and lesbians has been discussed in the literature as a strength (Berger & Kelly, 1986; Friend, 1987, 1990) as it allows for greater adaptation to the demands of aging and for greater flexibility in the roles within a relationship. Adapted gender behavior is a positive aspect that allows individuals to “have a wider repertoire of available coping tools and responses at their disposal as they age” (Ritter & Terndrup, 2002, p. 141).

Participants in this study reported that a positive aspect to being gay or lesbian was freedom from rules and heterosexual social scripts that set expectations for behaviors, psychological styles, and emotional responsiveness. As a result, many participants reported that they were able to create their own relationship norms. Practitioners can explore with gay male and lesbian clients their “rules” within relationships and help them create and value unique prescriptions.

### *Connecting and Belonging*

Participants reported that they felt better able to make strong connections with others. A sense of belonging and interpersonal connectedness is fundamental to psychological well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Strong social support networks have been linked to enhanced meaning in life and physical health (e.g., Emmons, 2003; also see Barker et al., 2006, for a recent review of social support in the lesbian and gay community). Practitioners can help gay and lesbian clients enhance social relations and build strong social support networks.

The support networks described by the participants in this study were primarily (but not exclusively) gay or lesbian. The creation of an individual identity as a gay man or lesbian occurs simultaneously while developing a group membership identity (see Fass-

inger & Miller, 1996; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). Clients’ beliefs about gay and lesbian reference groups and specifically any negative beliefs born of accompanying social stigma are important to explore. Practitioners need to respect the possibility of negative experiences in coming out within and connecting with gay and lesbian social support networks, while also emphasizing the possible importance of these communities to the development of a positive sexual identity. Exploring specific gay and lesbian groups that mirror their own values (such as a gay sports team or a lesbian reading group) and that highlight the positive aspects of being gay and lesbian can be a useful homework activity for clients who need to strengthen their social connections.

This idea is extended to the creation of families of choice. Whereas many lesbians and gay men have positive relationships with their family of origin, others may experience (or anticipate) rejection. Practitioners may help clients grieve the “loss” of certain family members because of rejection and also help clients see the strengths and advantages of creating families of choice. Depending on the situation of a client, it may be appropriate to help clients build networks of gay and lesbian and nongay and nonlesbian individuals that provide support while the client negotiates a new relationship with the family of origin.

Some clients may need help visualizing how “new families” can be created. Reference to Oswald’s (2002) discussion of resilience within lesbian and gay family networks can be helpful. She highlighted the idea of intentionality or “conscious actions that gay and lesbian people and their heterosexual loved ones use to validate themselves as family members and strengthen their ties to supportive others” (p. 375). Families of choice can be invited to engage in rituals of importance to the individual (e.g., sharing meals during holidays or participating in a relationship commitment ceremony).

### *Empathy and Social Activism*

Having empathy for others and being socially involved in positive ways allow an individual to be a good role model for others and inspire them to engage in positive action. This self-reinforcing chain positively reclaims power for individuals and reinforces good stereotypes while disrupting negative ones. Many participants in this study transformed reactions to institutionalized oppression and stigmatization into empathy and social activism. The literature on character strengths and values (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) offers a context within which to understand this phenomenon. Practitioners may emphasize particular character strengths implicated in creating a positive gay male and lesbian identity. These may include integrity, social intelligence, and citizenship. For example, integrity is “a regular pattern of behavior that is consistent with espoused values, public justification of moral convictions, even if those convictions are not popular, and treatment of others with care, as evident by helping those in need” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 250). Applying Wong’s (2006) strength-centered therapy, therapists can explicitly search for these strengths and others with gay and lesbian clients and discover with them how they have used these character strengths to enhance their sense of well-being. Examining these strengths in their gay and lesbian clients can facilitate a therapeutic process by which “events that shake the foundation of one’s life, calling into question one’s sense of purpose, meaning, or identity” (O’Leary & Ickovics,

1995, p. 128) can be used to deepen one's compassion for self and others.

### Limitations

Several factors should be considered in evaluating the results of this study. Most significantly, the sample was self-selected, non-random, and limited to those with access to the Web, thereby possibly limiting representativeness of the general population of gay men and lesbians (see footnote 2). A larger sample of racial and ethnic minority gay men and lesbians might reveal different positive aspects. For example, experiencing double oppression based on gender and sexual identity did, in the present study, contribute an additional theme unique to lesbian women, one that combined freedom from gender role expectations with freedom from the oppression and power structure inherent in those gender roles for women.

Although the majority of individuals in this sample had disclosed their sexual identity to their immediate family and their friends, a majority was not totally disclosed to extended family, at work, or in their cultural communities (e.g., church or racial/ethnic community). Future research needs to explore whether individuals who are less open about their sexual identity (i.e., closeted totally or in certain contexts) may have different positive aspects of their identity than those who are more out. Also, those with fewer resources (e.g., education or income) may perceive different positive aspects to their identity.

### Conclusions

Despite the limitations of this sample, the findings from this study lend empirical support to the possibility of using strength-based interventions with gay and lesbian clients. No doubt, few gay and lesbian individuals when they first come out to themselves and others are told that, in addition to challenges, they can anticipate positive outcomes for their lives. Perhaps that is why, in this study and in previous research studies and clinical work, we routinely hear gay and lesbian research participants talk about the importance of having positive role models and how few such models are available to them, particularly in smaller communities. Counselors and mental health practitioners can help fill this gap by being positive voices in the lives of their gay and lesbian clients, by helping them marshal their strengths, and by helping them imagine and then realize lives of meaning and connectedness.

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Received October 23, 2006  
 Revision received January 10, 2007  
 Accepted February 8, 2007 ■



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