DOMA's Demise: A Victory for Non-heterosexual Binational Families

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DOMA'S DEMISE: A VICTORY FOR NON-HETEROSEXUAL BINATIONAL FAMILIES

By
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DISSERTATION TOPIC
Presented to the Faculty of the Department of Psychology
Our Lady of the Lake University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of
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In Counseling Psychology
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ABSTRACT

An unprecedented number of American citizens faced the challenge of being in a non-heterosexual binational relationship when the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) was the law of the land. Although immigration laws are based on the principle of family unification, under previous federal law lesbian, gay and bisexual Americans were not able to sponsor their same-sex foreign national partners for residency in the United States. Consequently, an estimated 36,000 couples faced the threat of family separation because America's immigration policies narrowed the definition of "family" to exclude same-sex couples and their children. Despite the fact that family researchers indicate that long periods of separation have harmful effects on the family, immigration law denied non-heterosexual binational families the basic right of family unity afforded many of their heterosexual counterparts. Non-heterosexual binational couples were forced to learn how to function in a social system while dealing with heterosexism, overt discrimination, violence and the psychological symptoms that result from helplessness. My dissertation explored the ways in which non-heterosexual binational families struggled to keep their families together as a result of the discriminatory ways in which DOMA defined marriage.

The purpose of this study was to increase knowledge of how binational non-heterosexual couples and families thrived in a heterosexist society that legitimizes discriminatory immigration policies and sexual prejudice. Of particular interest were the personal and relational strengths and resources that positively affected their achievement. Utilizing a narrative analysis qualitative research approach, I partnered with four non-heterosexual binational couples to understand their shared realities and collective stories. The socio-cultural settings in which these couples remarkably dealt with adversity were learned using a semi-structured interview process. I transcribed their stories and analyzed the information using a categorical aggregation approach.
This literature contribution is significant in that it studies an invisible population and adds to the way that mental health providers understand family dynamics specific to same-sex binational families.

1"/>All data and information in this dissertation was collected before the repeal of DOMA. The Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) was ruled unconstitutional in a 5-4 ruling, and Proposition 8 was dismissed due to a lack of standing in a 5-4 ruling in the Supreme Court. This means that couples in 13 states will now have their marriages recognized by the federal government. The U.S. Supreme Court’s ruling that Section 3 of the Defense of Marriage Act is unconstitutional means that American citizens and lawful permanent residents can submit green card applications for their same-sex spouse. The proposal for this dissertation was defended before the repeal of DOMA. Thus, data and results in this dissertation are related to how couples felt when DOMA was the law of the land.
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Night and day I constantly remember you in my prayers.

Dedico mi trayectoria doctoral a Dios y a mi familia. Gracias por entender y respetar pacientemente todo el tiempo que invertí en esta disertación. Ustedes son mi fuente de inspiración. No hay palabras para decirles lo mucho que los amo.

Bold prayers honor God and God honors bold prayers. Thank you God for changing the course of history.
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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

Imagine having a life story that involves being passionately in love with a "foreigner." Continue imagining that this foreigner falls deeply in love with you and vows to make a permanent and exclusive commitment to your relationship. As a result, you both invest your love, time, effort and resources in building a hopeful future for your family. Now imagine this--the United States government tells you, an American citizen, that the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) does not recognize your family as a legitimate family and that you cannot submit a green card application for your same-sex partner. That is correct, the government just informed you that under DOMA you do not have the fundamental right to sponsor your foreign partner for residency in the United States. You are given the following options: family separation as your partner is forced to return to her or his home country; moving to another country with your partner; or remaining in the United States with a foreign partner that you cannot fully protect. You chose the latter and are now facing discrimination and sexual prejudice for the mere fact that you chose to be a part of a non-heterosexual binational relationship.² Non-heterosexual binational families are defined here as non-heterosexual couples and their children who comprise a combination of both American citizens and non-citizens.³

² The previous scenario presented how DOMA prevented non-heterosexual bi-national families from accessing immigration benefits. Today however, DOMA’s repeal allows LGBT U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents to sponsor their foreign-born spouses for green cards. On June 26, 2013 the Supreme Court declared that DOMA was unconstitutional.

Marriage and family are socially, culturally and legally constructed terms used differently around the world (Demleitner, 2004). Influenced by the rules, symbols and meanings of their time, social organizations including the family, community, church and state have shaped their definitions (Luibhéid, 2002). Their meanings have changed dramatically over time in some sectors of society to include non-heterosexual families and, in some cities, states, provinces and entire nations, non-heterosexual marriages. In 2010 same-sex headed families were represented in 68% of Americans’ definitions of family, a significant increase from 54% in 2003 (American Family Therapy Academy, 2011). Although a large percentage of Americans have embraced inclusive definitions of family, DOMA only recognized definitions that were limited to opposite-sex headed families. These discriminatory laws (a) limited the definition of marriage to the union of a man and a woman and (b) rigidly excluded non-heterosexual binational families for immigration purposes.

Federal immigration laws have been designed with particular visions of the preferred U.S nation and citizenry. Until as recently as 1990, excluded from immigration’s category of “preferred citizen,” non-heterosexual immigrants and their families were restricted from entering the country and sanctioned with legal expulsion (Luibhéid, 2002; Rank, 2002). Whilst the government is no longer able to restrict entry solely based on sexuality, United States policy harbored ideological biases as immigration laws denied family reunification provisions to non-heterosexual binational families before DOMA was repealed. Compared to lawful heterosexual permanent residents and American citizens, non-heterosexual binational families did not qualify for family reunification provisions established by immigration law under DOMA (Moore v. East Cleveland, 431 U.S. 494, 1977; Pabon, 2008). “Even if the couple had lived together for decades, even if their commitment was incontrovertible and public, even if they had been married and
formalized their partnership” (Immigration Equality Human Rights Watch Campaign, 2006, p.8), they were not able to exercise the basic right of family unity.

As of 2011 there were 25 countries providing immigration rights to non-heterosexual families (Konnoth & Gates, 2011). Contrary to non-heterosexual citizens living in these countries, DOMA made it impossible for LGBT Americans to bring their foreign partner/spouse to the United States. It also made it impossible for LGBT Americans to provide citizenship to their settled immigrant partner living with them in the United States. As a result, the non-citizen family member had to choose between the following options: (a) face voluntary deportation; (b) apply for a temporary visa (e.g. employment visa); (c) assume undocumented status for an indefinite period of time or, perhaps, for a lifetime; or (d) move his/her family to another country where same-sex binational families are fully recognized (American Psychological Association, 2012). Although same-sex couples have gained full recognition in some sectors of society, the definition of marriage remains strongly influenced by heterosexual norms in states where same-sex marriage is not allowed. Under DOMA, a question I often asked was, how did binational families remain resilient in a nation that oppressed and marginalized their members?

**Purpose of the Study**

Prominent historian Margot Canaday (2009) in her book *The Straight State*, a historical account of the federal regulation of homosexuality, postulates the question, “What exactly does it mean (to LGBT people), to be written out of the nation’s ideas altogether—to be deprived of what the historian William Chafe has called the ‘legal rights’ to full citizenship?” (p. 261). Inspired by this question, my dissertation delved into the lives of non-heterosexual families who were recently deprived of “legal rights” to full citizenship. However, rather than exploring “what

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4 Today, the United States has joined the list of countries that offer immigration rights to same-sex couples.
it means” to lack citizenship rights, my study explored how non-heterosexual binational families utilized protective factors that help enhance their healthy adaptation. Using a social constructionist framework, my dissertation is guided by the principle that immigrants are resilient survivors that thrive in spite of contextual risks (American Psychological Association, 2012). Findings provided some evidence regarding how non-heterosexual binational families managed to succeed in an anti-immigrant and anti-LGBT climate under DOMA.

Grounded in the advocacy tone of a narrative research study, I collaborated with four non-heterosexual binational families to allow for intimate conversations about how family members of this group, could not just survive, but thrive with success and strength in a heterosexist society; a society that possesses notorious anxieties about sexuality and immigration “threats.” My prediction prior to conducting the study was that although these family members experience marginalization and stigmatization as a result of their sexual identity and immigrant status, binational families manage to balance stress using their powerful thriving engine.

**Significance of the Study**

The topics of *same-sex marriage* and *immigration reform* have been contentiously debated. Rarely are these topics talked about concurrently. Despite the vast amount of sexuality and immigration scholarship, no research has examined how families managed to succeed when they were denied marriage and immigration rights under DOMA. This dissertation establishes that not every family is a heterosexual family—and not every family is a fully legalized American family. Instead my study makes the argument that families are complex and existing in multiple forms; in the case of non-heterosexual binational families, they include same-sex couples and foreign nationals. This study does not elaborate on previously conducted research. Rather, it integrates literature on sexuality, immigration, gender, ethnic and resiliency
scholarship to provide a description of the socio-cultural context in which non-heterosexual binational families are situated. Although researchers have previously studied the factors that support and enhance resilience in gay and lesbian individuals, couples, parents and families, the literature suggests that only this researcher has previously explored the topic of resilience in the context of same-sex binational families (Domínguez, Solórzano, Peña, 2012). This investigation not only addresses a gap in the research literature, it turns binational families into visible members of society and provides them with an opportunity to author new stories with new possibilities and new futures.

**Contributions to the Field**

Psychologists are, and increasingly will be, collaborating with immigrant families and their children (American Psychological Association, 2012). Despite their high need for psychological treatment, the literature on LGBT migrant populations suggests that they are “flying under the radar of service provision” (Chavez, 2011, p. 195). Thus, given the increasing presence of non-heterosexual immigrants in clinical settings, this study provides counseling professionals with legal, historical, socio-cultural and psychological information that may increase their understanding of non-heterosexual binational families. To help increase the effectiveness of various treatment programs, this study offers valuable findings that include information about how non-heterosexual binational families cope with risks, threats, demands and stress and use specific strategies to draw upon resiliencies that strengthen their family unit.

With the understanding that counseling professionals are encouraged by the profession to promote human rights and social justice, this study purports to stimulate psychologists to advocate in favor of equal family rights for non-heterosexual binational families. It must be clear, that this study is not a value-free process; it raises questions about justice, discrimination,
prejudice, ethics and morals. This study contends that family researchers and practitioners can help advocate in support of laws that are inclusive of non-heterosexual binational families. Researchers and practitioners interested in the advocacy of equal immigration rights for same-sex binational couples living in states that have not legalized same-sex marriage, should consider becoming familiar with the Uniting American Families Act (UAFA, H.R. 1537, S. 821, 2011). If passed, this piece of legislation would allow American citizens and permanent residents in same-sex relationships to sponsor foreign partners for residency in the United States. Permanent partners would be subject to the same restrictions, requirements of evidence of marriage, and enforcement mechanisms as heterosexual married couples. UAFA establishes that a permanent partnership is not “marriage” in the legal sense of the term and would not affect the federal definition of marriage; it would simply provide immigration benefits to such families.
CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Non-heterosexual Binational Families: Resilient Victims of Sexual Prejudice and Discriminatory Immigration Policies

Mass media and popular culture tend to think of gay men and lesbians in a vacuum. But we are so large a part of the fabric of society. We are sons, daughters, brothers, sisters. We are also tuition-paying students, tax-paying social workers, working with people with AIDS, helping people with addictions. I think you would have to ask my mother, my brother, my accountant, my clients, my colleagues, my landlord, my neighbors, my friends, my writing partner, my students, how they would be affected if I left this country (Immigration Equality and Human Rights Watch, 2003, p. 116).

Researchers, scholars and practitioners in the helping professions are becoming increasingly aware of the notion of "family" as a social construction with multiple meanings, relational patterns and unique caring bonds (Walsh, 2011). Families that include lesbian and gay binational relationships are part of the increasingly diverse family landscape. Social constructionist perspectives offer definitions that capture open-ended possibilities for what a family can be while challenging essentialist notions of normality that privilege certain family arrangements and marginalize families that do not fit the conventional standards. In particular, many of today's family scholars have been influenced by Michel Foucault's (1980) statement that if our lens lacks the capability of observing multiple viewpoints, hegemonic "truth claims" can dehumanize and objectify many groups of people (p. 80-84). Understanding the family system as a construct of society that operates within a cultural milieu, this study explored how non-heterosexual binational families managed to thrive in a heterosexist society that neglected their legitimacy, repressed their visibility and regulated their accomplishments.
Using a social constructionist framework, I maintain that stressful events affect the entire family and create a ripple effect on all family members and their relationships. Rather than thinking about gays and lesbians as individuals, my theoretical orientation views their systemic interactions as being central to their wellbeing and health. Inspired by Michel Foucault (1980) and his analysis of the inseparability of power and knowledge, the present piece of literature is based on the belief that privileging specific cultural practices, under the guise of a natural or self-evident law, can invalidate and silence groups of people who are considered by the culture to be different. And by extension, through my dissertation I seek to make visible that the ideological underpinnings inherent in immigration laws can have negative emotional effects on society’s most vulnerable populations, in this case, on non-heterosexual binational families.

Heteronormativity and nativism in the law can be understood as emerging from the dominant institutions in power and as a function of people’s reactions to the behaviors of others (Green & Hart, 1996). Homosexuality and citizenship are both a type of status that is constructed and regulated by the state; they are socially constructed and influenced by the growth of the federal state. The rise in bureaucracy has perpetuated anti-immigrant philosophies and heterosexual privilege (Canaday, 2009). Because immigration and homosexuality have historically been presented as social problems in need of fixing (Suárez-Orozco, Louie & Suro, 2011), immigration control has done more than secure the nation’s borders. It has created a stratified citizenry that grants access to immigrants only under certain conditions. In the case of non-heterosexuals, it reduced lesbian, gay and gender variant family life into the monolithic and exclusive category of “anti-citizenship” (Luibhéid, 2002). Thus, socially constructed federal laws, in particular those pertaining to citizenship and homosexuality, shaped people’s identities and built legacies about sexuality; legacies that Americans have imparted to their own children in
both subtle and overt ways (American Family Therapy Academy, 2011). In sharp contrast to natural law legal theorists who believe that laws are natural, universal and timeless, I propose that laws should be fluid concepts that mirror the reality of the time and culture in which they emerge and develop. Laws should mirror the reality of present diverse intimate family bonds and arrangements. I argue that family, immigration and naturalization policies excluded non-heterosexual binational families not for some universal, essentialist, or “natural” reason, but because they are based on sexual prejudice that force LGBT families into a second-class citizenship status. Because the concept of law is sensitive to change over time (Schauer, 2005), policies are subject to revisions and modifications in the future. Existing changes in trends include the repeal of DOMA and a growing acceptance among various sectors of society for a variety of relationship forms, gender identities, gender roles, sexual orientations, and sexual practices. Although today’s non-heterosexual binational families continue to struggle with family inequality within the larger social-historical-cultural context where heterosexual families hold more political, financial and moral power, progressive changes in society over time might one day help recognize LGBT immigrant families as “families” not only under federal law but also at the state level.

**Contemporary Research on the Family vs. Immigration’s Narrow Definitions**

Individuals have witnessed presumptions that family functions best when arrangements focus around a heterosexual couple. Fortunately, there are researchers and practitioners who think differently. Walsh (2011) for example, proposed that healthy family functioning can be found in a variety of kinship arrangements. She suggested that what matters most are the family processes that nurture caring, safe, and committed relationships. In efforts to demonstrate healthy family functioning among non-heterosexual family systems, some researchers who study lesbian
and gay families have turned to “defensive normalizing constructions” that portray LGBT families as no different than heterosexual families (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 2004a, p. 183). In reaction, researchers who advocate (Clarke, 2002; Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 2004b; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001, p. 178) for equal rights contend that granting rights to non-heterosexual individuals should not require finding similarities between heterosexual families and non-heterosexual families. Human rights should be guaranteed by the simple virtue of being human beings (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 2004a). They explained:

To argue that lesbians and gays deserve equal rights because we are like heterosexuals, and our children turn out just like theirs, is to concede the ground to those who would argue that differences are deficits that render us unworthy of equal human rights.

(Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 2004a, p. 183)

With diversity in mind, many LGBT family researchers propose that family complexities will continue to grow as family arrangements change and expand. Therefore, any attempt to rigidly define families or ignore non-heterosexual forms of family formation that “do not conform so rigidly to white, middle class, and binary forms of gender and sexual orientation” (Hudak, 2011, p.61), becomes vulnerable to shifts in political and ideological movements (Laird, 1993). For instance, binary conceptualizations of gender roles that present men as masculine providers and females as feminine dependents are challenged by the large presence and visibility of existing mixed gender roles within heterosexual and non-heterosexual families (American Family Therapy Academy, 2011). Regardless of their configuration, recent family research suggests that diverse forms of identity are “equally valid and loving ways of relating” (Maurel, 2011, p. 48). Evidence of increasingly diverse ways of relating include the rise in lesbian and gay transracial adoptive parents (Goldberg, 2009), the increased visibility of trans individuals (i.e.,
transgender, transsexual, and gender nonconforming) within families (Brill & Pepper, 2008), and the growing presence of LGBT immigrants and refugees in the United States (Chavez, 2011). Contrary to mainstream assumptions that families are physiologically created systems, social constructionist discourses decenter heterosexuality as the normative construction of family and work systemically in celebration of multiple-definitions of family. Because “gender and sexuality are multifarious matters, challenging to grasp and hard to contain” (p. 8), social constructionist perceptions and interventions are critical to empower family members and create social change (American Family Therapy Academy, 2011). With these multiple family arrangements in mind, supporters of gay rights and family equality fought successfully to dismantle the federally created system of second-class citizenship for LGBT persons (Canaday, 2009). They claimed that “tradition” should not be confused with discrimination and underlined the constitutional promise of the equal protection of laws for all Americans as the foundation for the fundamental right to be with (or marry) a person of one’s choosing (Fingerhut, Riggle, & Rostosky, 2011).

Under DOMA, immigration, marriage, and family federal law adopted a narrow and restrictive definition of family that lagged behind contemporary research and understandings on the family. Following the Standard North American Family model (SNAF), federal law policies were influenced by the concept of the “ideal family,” a nuclear family with a married male-female couple practicing the bearing and raising of children (Smith, 1993). Immigration’s historical subscription to this model granted preferred admission to heterosexual families under DOMA. Opponents of the repeal of DOMA argued that providing marriage rights to non-heterosexual couples will lead to a downfall of the “traditional” institution of marriage and damage the health of children (Eskridge & Spedale, 2006). Designed to define marriage as the
legal and valid union between a man and a woman (Defense of Marriage Act, 1996), DOMA ensured that same-sex marriages recognized by individual states would not be entitled to any federal marriage benefits. While supporters of same-sex marriage argued that DOMA endorsed and legitimized the inequality to which same-sex couples are subject, opponents of same-sex marriage and the federal government contended that DOMA legitimately follows a tradition of male–female unions. Luibheid (2002) argued that DOMA was an appropriate example of how sexual regulation at the border is associated with sexual regulation within the country, and how all forms of sexual regulation sanction those who do not conform to the nation’s heterosexual imperative. Prior to June 26, 2013, DOMA governed all federal laws, including immigration law (Froomkin, 2011). Because immigration courts legally constructed the term *spouse* as a “person who is married to a petitioner where the marriage was legally valid at the time performed, is still in existence, and was not entered into solely for immigration purposes” (Dueñas, 2000, p. 815), same-sex marriages were invalid for immigration purposes even if they were recognized at the state level. When DOMA was the law of the land, United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) did not consider a same-sex partner a spouse; therefore, same-sex couples with children were *de facto* not legally considered *families*.

Signaling a radical shift in discourse, on June 26, the United States Supreme Court struck down the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), a law that prohibited the federal government from recognizing marriages of same-sex couples for all purposes including immigration benefits, as a violation of the equal protection guarantee of the United States Constitution. As a result, President Obama directed United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) to review immigration visa petitions filed on behalf of a same-sex spouse in the same manner as those filed on behalf of an opposite-sex spouse. Today, same-sex binational families have
achieved freedom from the heterosexist laws that separated loving and committed couples, forced couples into exile, and resulted in the cruel deportation of partners and spouses of Americans.

Hawthorne (2007) argued that governments must recognize that the term “family” cannot be limited to a statute’s narrow view of who is and who is not “family,” when society itself reflects different models than those embodied in the statute (p. 824). Nevertheless, because non-heterosexual binational families exist outside the confines of the traditional nuclear family, they unfortunately often go unrecognized and are considered by some to be pathological. This lack of recognition is noticeable in the “profound heteronormativity” of immigration and sexuality scholarship which often explored immigration and LGBT concerns separately and assumed that all LGBT individuals lived in this country as citizens (Chavez, 2011, p. 189). Despite empirical evidence that illustrates the harmful psychological effects of policies restricting marriage rights for same-sex couples (American Psychological Association, 2010), some states continue to neglect the former scientific contributions and continue to marginalize same-sex binational couples with knowledge that these families would benefit from being recognized at the state level. To put an end to discrimination on the basis of sexuality, Luibhéid (2002) recommended a revision of present scholarship to be inclusive of “sexuality in all its forms” (p. 139).

**Barriers Faced by Same-Sex Binational Families**

**Constitutional amendments and mental health.** Hopelessness, chronic worry, hypervigilance (Mays, Cochran, & Barnes, 2007), emotional dysregulation, and social isolation (Hatzenbuehler, McLaughlin, & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2008) are common symptoms encountered when faced with discrimination in hostile environments. It has been well established that discrimination leads to higher levels of stress exposure among lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB)
individuals (McCabe, Bostwick, Hughes, West, & Boyd, 2010; McLaughlin, Hatzenbuehler, & Keyes, 2010). Empirical evidence from studies conducted to assess whether discriminatory policies adversely affect the mental health of LGB populations indicates that the prevalence of psychological distress and psychiatric disorders was consistently higher among LGB populations living in states with policies that did not grant protections to non-heterosexuals (Hatzenbuehler, Keyes, & Hasin, 2009) as well as in states that approved constitutional amendments banning gay marriage (Hatzenbuehler, McLaughlin, Keyes, & Hasin, 2010). These findings suggest that discriminatory laws may act as risk factors for psychiatric morbidity in LGB populations.

Institutional discrimination against lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) populations is exercised in the act of passing constitutional amendments that ban same-sex marriage (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2010). Bans on same-sex marriage at the state level exclude LGB individuals from receiving resources and opportunities that are made available to heterosexual individuals.

According to Fingerhut et al. (2011), even before anti-gay marriage amendments are voted on or implemented, public debates over rights for LGB individuals, including the right to civil marriage, affect the psychological health and social relations of same-sex couples, their families, friends, and communities. A similar study examining minority stress and psychological distress—following the 2006 general election in which anti-gay marriage amendments were on the ballot—indicated that LGB respondents living in states that passed antigay marriage amendments had higher levels of minority stress and psychological distress than did LGB individuals in states without such an amendment on the ballot (Rostosky, Riggle, Horne, & Miller, 2009). Hatzenbuehler et al. (2010) hypothesized that the deprivation of marriage rights as well as the persistent and heated public discourse focusing on the legitimacy of such deprivation, would adversely impact the mental health of LGB populations. Using 2001-2002 (wave 1)
2004-2005 (wave 2) data from the National Epidemiologic Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions, this study investigated the relationship between individuals residing in states that passed bans on same-sex marriage and the prevalence of psychiatric morbidity among LGB participants. Findings from the study indicated that LGB participants living in states with constitutional bans on gay marriage demonstrated a significant increase in the prevalence of mood disorders (36.6% increase), generalized anxiety disorder (248.2% increase), alcohol use disorders (41.9% increase), and psychiatric comorbidity (36.3% increase). Psychiatric disorders did not increase significantly among LGB respondents living in states without constitutional amendments.

Hatzenbuehler et al. (2010) propose that constitutional bans on gay marriage negatively impact the psychological well being of LGB populations. Like many other LGBT couples, non-heterosexual binational couples are deprived of marriage rights at the state level. Although this study provides important information about the high prevalence of psychological distress and psychiatric disorders in states with anti-gay marriage constitutional amendments, future studies should also consider how the deprivation of immigration rights at the national level under DOMA, impacted the prevalence of psychiatric disorders among non-heterosexual binational families.

The politics of fear vs. visibility. As of 2010, statistics indicated that 79,200 same-sex couples in the United States reported having a partner who is currently not a citizen or was naturalized as a citizen (Konnoth & Gates, 2011). It is important to note that these numbers were likely understated and do not reflect the most accurate estimate of same-sex couples living in the United States. In 2006, researchers working for The Immigration Equality and Human Rights Watch found that non-heterosexual binational couples suffered from emotional hardship and
feelings of immobility, isolation, fear, anxiety, and terror as a result of the “forced confidentiality” that came with threats of facing family separation or deportation. According to their report, same-sex binational families perceived invisibility as a helpful, adaptive mechanism that prevented the attention that might otherwise come from adversely affecting their foreign partner’s status. In the case of same-sex binational couples with children, invisibility was perceived as a defensive coping strategy that protected binational families from experiencing parent-child separation. Binational non-heterosexual parents had to navigate the persistent tension between recognition and protection. Further, they were forced to make important determinations about disclosure when interacting with various systems (e.g. religious community, neighbors, job, and school). Families who were able to reach out and make use of their support systems described great relief in finding others who were challenged by similar experiences (Gold, 2008).

The multiplicity of identities. LGBTQ immigrants are in a “double or triple jeopardy” being exposed to discrimination based on their multiple identities (Thing, 2010).

*To endorse the centralization of sex and sexuality in lesbian/gay studies without serious consideration of how other axes of difference form, inform, and deform the queer subject…would be to cast the white, European, middle-class gay man as the unacknowledged universal subject of lesbian/gay and queer studies.* (Eng & Hom, p. 12)

Slavery, colonization, natural reproduction, and immigration are the four ways in which the United States obtained its population (Luibhéid, 2002). Because immigration control is partly responsible for nation making, immigration officers rigorously consider sexuality and its overlapping identities including gender, race, and class at the time of admission. Their discretionary decisions have produced particular racial, ethnic, and class compositions in the U.S
Ethnic and racial minorities are often strictly evaluated on their fitness to be disciplined into potential "Americans" (Luibhéid, 2002). Unique barriers surface for LGBT immigrants as they are many times situated at the intersection of homophobia, racism, and anti-immigrant sentiment. Adding fuel to the fire, the current recession has turned immigration into a contentious and divisive social and political issue that has aggravated the existing anti-immigrant sentiment (Massey & Sánchez, 2010).

In the case of LGBT ethnic and racial minorities, a "double jeopardy" status as a "double minority" makes them vulnerable to the risk factors of both immigrants and LGBT persons (Díaz, Ayala, Bein, Henne, & Marin, 2001). Language, cultural barriers, and racism inside mainstream LGBT groups may interfere with their integration into the local LGBT community. Other losses include family, church, and social support disconnect during the coming out process for gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender individuals (MacNish & Gold-Peifer, 2011).

**Family separation and psychosocial stressors.** Today's laws contrast sharply with the post-World War II immigration policies that increasingly provided rights to immigrants and their citizen and non-citizen families (Hagan, Castro, & Rodriguez, 2010). The tide against more progressive immigration policies began to turn in the wake of the shifts in the demographics of third-wave immigrants (e.g., immigrants from the southern hemisphere; Koven & Götzke, 2010). Today, an estimated 39.9 million immigrants live in the United States—the highest number in history (Passel & Cohn, 2012). While this nation's demographics continue to change, the United States is facing a difficult economic recession. The economic crisis together with today's War against Terror, has turned immigration into a disputed and divisive sociopolitical topic. Before September 11, 2001, the possibility that a binational family would face arrest and removal was low because enforcement was predominantly focused on border protection (Thronson, 2008).
Today, stricter immigration laws induce ongoing psychological stress for immigrant families living in the interior of the nation as they potentially face long-term family separation as a result of deportation or voluntary departure (Thronson, 2008). Their bodies, documents, biographies, and appearances are vulnerable to strict examinations and intrusive questions (Luibheid, 2002). Immigrants must survive everyday risks and stressors including negative media coverage that perpetuates anti-immigrant sentiment, race/ethnic/sexual orientation/gender identity-based hate crimes, and exclusionary political legislation (American Psychological Association, 2012).

Luibheid (2002) explained that inspection at the border is not a one-time unpleasant experience for immigrants but rather a "life-long network of surveillance and disciplinary relations" (p. xvii). The list of deported individuals includes a wide spectrum of cases. On one extreme it is first time attempted unauthorized entry individuals who are deported; on the other extreme some deportees are settled migrants, even young adults brought to the United States as young children. Immigrants may be deported back to countries where they may be persecuted based on their sexual orientation (McClure et al., 2000). Same-sex behavior is illegal in 78 countries and is punishable by death in five of these countries and some parts of Nigeria and Somalia (International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association, 2012). With respect to settled migrants, deportation may interfere with previously established family and household relationships and seriously disrupt parent-child attachments (Chacon, 2007). Evidence suggests that if separation takes place, partners and children often wait years to be reunited with their deported family member (Pabon, 2008).

Children in immigrant families form the fastest growing segment of the United States child population. Fix, Zimmerman, and Passel (2001) reported that one of every ten children living in the United States lives in a heterosexual or non-heterosexual mixed-status family.
Leiter, McDonald, and Jacobson (2006) indicated that 15 percent of all children in the United States were native-born children with immigrant parents and 4 percent of children were foreign-born children with at least one immigrant parent. All things considered, immigration continues to separate mixed-status families despite research showing that when separated from their parents for extended periods, children have difficulties forming secure attachment bonds; they experience withdrawal, depressive symptoms, sadness, guilt, anger, hopelessness and "ambiguous loss" (Boss, 1999; Pabon, 2008; Suárez-Orozco, Todorova, & Louie, 2002). While systems of social support may alleviate the pain of family separation, children often suffer the same hardship that their parents are exposed to.

Ambiguous loss in family separation is experienced when the parent is physically absent but psychologically present (Boss, 1999). "Since the parent is not dead but simply gone for what is expected to be a short time, 'permission to grieve' may not be granted" (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2002, p. 628). Many children separated from their parents by immigration challenges report feeling a sense of abandonment, grief, and sadness even though the parent did not leave voluntarily. Further, children that stay in this country apart from their parent and are later reunited find that they may later suffer the loss of the person that took care of them during the separation (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2002). Not surprisingly, researchers found that when separation is prolonged, children and parents report that they feel like strangers to one another (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2002). Research on family resilience supports the idea that families with a strong social support system demonstrate greater resilience in the face of stressors (Walsh, 1996). With that in mind, how do families remain resilient when their social support system is taken away from them as a result of deportation?
Understandably, one of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement’s (ICE) main goals is to stop and prevent danger from entering into American territory. A question remains however: Why were peaceful non-heterosexual binational couples denied entry or citizenship to this country? Were they a real threat to American society or was the denial based on sexual prejudice? While policy makers and the court argued whether DOMA was constitutional or unconstitutional, families were disrupted by physical separation, economic instability, and psychological symptoms of helplessness, anxiety, and depression.

**Sexual prejudice in the law: A historical and present barrier.** The progress of civil rights for sexual minorities has been slow, falling behind that of women and ethnic minorities in terms of legal rights. Many sectors of society have endorsed heterosexism with knowledge that this system of privilege overtly oppresses “sexual minorities and creates institutional barriers to their full participation in society” (Herek, 2007, p. 5). Herek (2009) suggested that the socially constructed term homosexuality, which originally was considered a pathological form of behavior by the medical establishment, categorized heterosexuals as *people* and homosexuals as *deviant*. Unfortunately, non-heterosexual individuals have historically and are presently encountering the barriers in the law created by these ideological biases stemming from the medicalization, or pathologization, of same-sex orientation (Somerville, 2000). Although advances have been made, much remains to be achieved at the societal, national and legal level.

non-heterosexuals on the basis that they were “aliens with psychopathic personality, epilepsy or a mental defect” (McCarran-Walter Act, 1952, section 211). The term “psychopathic personality” included homosexuality because society, psychiatrists, psychologists and the diagnostic norms of the time considered sexual minorities to be mentally defective (Rosenberg v. Fleuti, 374 U.S. 449, 1963). Individuals seeking entry to the United States who were suspected of being homosexual were referred to an officer of the Public Health Service (PHS) for a medical examination. The use of visual appearance to monitor the border against LGBT immigrants resulted in the rejection and deportation of effeminate gay men and masculine lesbians (Luibheid, 2002). The socially constructed belief among immigration law enforcers and public health officers was that gay and lesbians, also known as sex deviants, would display normative traits of the opposite sex. Although victims of the McCarran-Walter Act challenged the court’s rulings with arguments that homosexuals did not suffer from psychopathic personality, the Supreme Court firmly ruled in the end that the classes of what they referred to as “mental defectives” did in fact include “homosexuals and other sex perverts” (Boutilier v INS, 387 U.S. at 121, 1967). In 1973, after the American Psychiatric Association’s Board of Directors voted to remove homosexuality from the second edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM), the United States Surgeon General stated that homosexuality was no longer an issue that had to be medically certified for immigration purposes because same-sex attraction was no longer considered a mental disorder (Hill v. INS, 714 F.2d 1472-1473, 1983). Thus, because the canons of medical practice did not consider homosexuality to be a mental disorder, the U.S Surgeon General concluded that homosexuality could not be determined by a medical diagnostic procedure. Finally, in Hill v. INS (775 F.2d 1037, 1980), because the Public Health Service, the only authority in this matter, had previously stated that issuing the certificates
based on sexual orientation was no longer necessary, the courts ruled that homosexuals could not be excluded without such certificates. In response to this ruling, the INS decided that immigration officials were no longer going to ask foreign nationals about their sexual orientation to determine admission. Rather, if individuals hoping to enter the United States voluntarily stated that they were homosexual, they would have to be examined privately by an immigration official and asked to sign a statement declaring a homosexual identity.

The court's conclusion was a partial win for gay and lesbian binational couples and individuals. Although gays and lesbians were granted admission into the country on grounds that they are not mentally defective, immigration laws under DOMA continued to separate their families because gays and lesbians were, by immigration's standards, considered to be "individuals" rather than "family members." Although today's dominant mental health institutions such as the American Psychiatric Association and the American Psychological Association have recognized their historical role in exposing sexual minorities to distress, legislators in some states have lagged behind and continue to deny LGBT Americans the right to marry and sponsor their foreign national partner for United States residency or citizenship. The following section presents a case that brings into relief the cultural flux that surrounds the status of same-sex binational families under DOMA.

**Bradford and Anthony: A Case Example of Today's Discriminatory Immigration System**

Bradford Wells and Anthony John Makk are a San Francisco gay binational married couple that has been together for over twenty years (Wilkey, 2011). Makk is an Australian national and San Francisco business owner who has lived in the United States for more than 20 years. He has no criminal history, has never lived in the United States illegally and has also served as the primary caregiver to his husband Wells who suffers from advanced AIDS-related
symptoms. Makk applied for permanent residency as a spouse of an American citizen when his visa expired, however, despite Makk's clean record, immigration ordered his deportation to Australia. Wells could have joined Makk in Australia, but he would have been forced to give up the medical insurance that was crucial for his survival. Although Makk’s deportation date was set for August 25, 2011, the couple continued living together in the United States after they were granted a two-year reprieve against the threat of deportation. Although this couple was considered to be low priority at that time, the threat of deportation and sexual prejudice will persist unless the case is altogether dismissed. This case is an illustration of immigration’s earlier discriminatory practices that has only recently been met with some change of heart. The winds of change have blown, but up to what point and for how long?

Like Wells and Makk, thousands of other non-heterosexual binational couples and their children are faced with psychological stressors. Unlike Wells and Makk however, many of these families’ stories have not been narrated, heard, and understood in family research, psychotherapy settings, or the media. The question now turns to how mental health professionals can help non-heterosexual binational families overcome these risks, demands, and stressors. What are the implications for current family practice? And, what is needed for mental health practitioners to develop competence in highlighting the resiliency qualities possessed by these families?

**What is resilience?**

Psychological resilience has been described in different ways by investigators in diverse disciplines. Although there is no consensus, the following are predominant characteristics found across definitions and theories: (a) resilience is an adaptive and dynamic quality found among all humans that enables them to cope and thrive despite adversity (Garmezy & Rutter, 1983; Luthar & Wong, 2003; Masten, 2001); (b) it is a cognitive and behavioral process that can be cultivated,
developed and learned (Denz-Penhey & Murdoch 2008; Valenti, 2012); (c) it is a protective factor that allows individuals to bounce back, rebound from stress successfully and regain mental health (Gordon & Coscarelli, 1996; Walsh, 1998); (d) resilience cannot occur in the absence of troubled times because without struggles, only the potential to be resilient exists (Frydenberg, 2004); (e) resilience is not a categorical state, but a continuum in which individuals can be more or less resilient (Olsson, Bond, Burns, Vella-Brodrick, Sawyer, 2003; Richman & Fraser, 2001); (f) resilience is a multidimensional variable that is influenced by individual and environmental variables including context, time, age, gender, cultural origin, and life circumstance (Cowan, Cowan, & Schulz, 1996; Winfield & North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 1994); and (g) resilience interacts with a wide range of attributes including biological, psychological, dispositional characteristics, and social support (Herrman, Stewart, Diaz-Granados, Berger, Jackson, & Yuen, 2011).

All in all, regardless of the model, method, theory, or framework, the study of resilience offers an understanding of how individuals withstand distress in a way that their growth and adaptation is enhanced (Masten, 2001). Despite prevalent erroneous assumptions that positive psychology introduced the scientific community to the study of resilience, historical reviews track the beginnings of resiliency research to the 1970s (Valenti, 2012). The story of “resiliency” begins with a group of researchers that explored the mystery behind children’s survival in the midst of pain, poverty, and emotional stress. Garmezy (1973) published the first research findings on resilience. He was primarily interested in understanding how children at risk due to parental mental illness and other stressful life experiences managed to survive successfully. Garmezy’s was encouraged by findings suggesting that traumatic experiences were not inevitably damaging. His research generated a ripple effect that inspired other mental health
experts to study children who developed successfully despite having to surmount obstacles and disadvantages (Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990; Simeonsson & Garbarino, 1995). Since then, generations of researchers have focused on understanding the resilient qualities that help people become stress-resistant.

Grounded in family systems theory, the family resilience framework developed by Walsh (1996) maintains that stressful events impact the entire family and create a ripple effect on all members and their relationships. Walsh proposed that family members already have the necessary tools to reduce their distress and to strengthen their relationships with others. Moreover, this framework openly challenges the myth that the Standard North American Family (white intact nuclear family headed by father) is healthier than any other family constellation (Smith, 1993), and openly welcomes diverse family arrangements. Thus, Walsh (2011) conceptualized the notion of “family” as a social construction with multiple meanings, relational patterns, and unique caring bonds. In short, this framework focuses on: (a) family strengths under stress, (b) multiple realities for diverse families, (c) the socio-cultural context in which people are situated, (d) the belief that families have the resources to recover and grow from adversity, and (e) the understanding that what helps boost resilience are the family processes that nurture caring, safe, and committed relationships.

Regardless of family configuration (e.g. heterosexual, non-heterosexual, single-parent headed family, multigenerational etc.), family resilience has been defined as a collectivistic phenomenon that grows and develops with each challenge; resilience allowing families to balance stress and demands (Patterson, 2002). According to family resiliency theorists, family relationships are strengthened when participants view environmental adversity as a kind of collaborative challenge that can be met by the family system (Walsh, 1998). When families
overcome adversity in a multi-systemic fashion, opportunities are created in which they can define what it means for them to be a family. Open communication about present or expected crisis situations (e.g. possible anti-LGBT legislation, hate crimes) facilitates authentic family relationships in an environment of mutual support. Resilient families who commit to realistic and concrete goals may feel empowered to continue building on their previous successes. If crises do occur, families display resilience by weathering troubled times, using their coping arsenal and adapting to new challenges. The overall theory contends that a regular interaction with environmental stressors can in fact create productive and protective qualities for the family system and each its members (Patterson, 2002).

Support for this theory can be found in studies that indicate that when families employ various capabilities and protective factors (individual, family, and community), they are best suited to meet life’s demands and successfully manage risks and stressors (Power et al., 2010; Walsh, 1998). On the other hand, if environmental stressors overwhelm the family’s capabilities and resources, crises or breakdowns may occur. In other words, family systems whose resources and capabilities become depleted, are at risk of being overwhelmed by breakdown and hardship. In this light, theorists advise that families build a collaborative support system to continue building on family resources that successfully meet life’s inevitable challenges. Walsh (2003) also recommended that spiritual families capitalize on faith-based resources that may be beneficial for families in search of hope or inspiration. Above all, because family systems are uniquely different, each family system can overcome adversity by using its own set of tools and strategies.

Research on LGBT family resilience has suggested that lesbian parents and their children are consistently affected by homophobia. Particularly, children in lesbian families are challenged
by the experience of homophobic stigmatization in the form of sexual prejudice against their mothers' sexual orientation (Bos, Gartrell, Peyser, & Van Balen, 2008). Even though non-heterosexual families often endure teasing and bullying, researchers have found no differences in the psychological development, social relations, or academic performance of children in lesbian-parented families when compared with children in heterosexual two-parent families (Bos et al., 2008). Bos and her colleagues suggested that family resilience in lesbian headed households may be explained by the mechanisms that lesbian parents employ to provide emotional support to their children. They found that lesbian mothers who are active in the gay community, who enroll their children in schools with LGBT curricula, and increase their children’s contact with children who have similar family stories help protect children against sexual prejudice and strengthen their resilience (Bos et al., 2008). These findings suggest that social networks are valuable resources that offer resilient families support in times of stress. Short (2007) found that lesbian mothers used several strategies and shared efforts to deal with homophobia themselves, including having a deep understanding of heterosexism, studying the literature on family studies, participating in the LGBT community, and carefully selecting the schools their children attended. Other researchers have found that support for the same-sex couple and family in the form of legal recognition helps support family resilience (Power et al., 2010, p. 3; Rawstorne, 2009).

**Conclusion**

Improving the quality of life for non-heterosexual binational families is a crucial humanitarian issue. In bringing awareness to these issues, this review questions equality in the larger society and increases our understanding regarding the specific psychological and sociopolitical issues that same-sex binational couples struggle to overcome. Of those benefits denied to same-sex binational families under DOMA were federal immigration benefits based on
Therefore, prior to June 26, 2013 gay and lesbian Americans were not able to enjoy the fundamental right of family unity that had been granted by the government to their heterosexual counterparts based on family unification provisions. Binational families endured hardship and psychological stress when a non-citizen family member was unable to legally remain in the country. When DOMA was the law of the land, heterosexist immigration policies discriminated against sexual minorities and separated thousands of families. Unfortunately, although family research points to the multiple realities of diverse family arrangements, state governments have fallen behind contemporary family research as marriage continues to employ a narrow definition that excludes same-sex couples from receiving state benefits.

The primary intention of this review is not to condense the wide variety of stressors and demands that same-sex binational headed families have had to endure. Instead, it is significant information that has made this investigator question; how do these families manage to overcome these risks, demands, and stressors? How do they capitalize on the limited resources that are available to their family? My study delved into their stories in search for the answer to the following questions:

**Research Questions**

1) What are the challenges that non-heterosexual binational couples and families experience in the face of discriminatory laws and sexual prejudice?

2) How does a couple or family cope with the potential or present threat of family separation?
family unification principles. Due to the social construction of DOMA and other such legislative efforts, the United States government failed to recognize non-heterosexual binational couples as
3) What kind of activities, resources and support systems do binational families utilize to thrive in a heterosexist nation?
CHAPTER III: METHOD

Rationale for Method

I invested hours trying to decide which methodological approach would best satisfy my research questions. I looked at a number of possible frameworks, worldviews, and approaches to inquiry that seemed suitable for this study. In the end, I made the informed choice to undertake a systematic qualitative method of inquiry with a social constructionist and advocacy worldview. Within this social constructionist and advocacy worldviews and through their lenses, I situated the study around a narrative framework of inquiry. In other words, my qualitative research design is held together by a set of social constructionist and advocacy beliefs that inform a narrative method of inquiry whose main focus is to study the experiences of four same-sex binational families. I felt that a narrative approach to data analysis was the most appropriate method as these are invisible families whose stories have not been narrated, heard, and understood in the field of counseling psychology. I utilized Mishler’s (1986) skeleton plot to understand the core plots in the participants’ stories.

Qualitative Methodology

_I think metaphorically of qualitative research as an intricate fabric composed of minute threads, many colors, different textures, and various blends of material. This fabric is not explained easily or simply. Like the loom on which fabric is woven, general worldviews and perspectives hold qualitative research together._ (Creswell, 2007, p. 35)

I wanted to share with others the powerful life stories of the binational families in this study. I dismissed the idea of using a quantitative approach because the reduction of rich and colorful narratives to numbers, variables, statistical prediction, and probabilities would have contradicted the purpose of my study. Instead, I used a method that rejected normative
definitions of “family,” “resilience,” and “thriving” to rather embrace the unique voices of these families. Creswell (2007) suggested using a qualitative design when researchers want to understand their topics in detail and from multiple standpoints. Creswell (2007) and Denzin and Lincoln (2000) have created definitions that describe qualitative research as a method. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) propose that the definitions of qualitative research share the following common characteristics: (a) it is naturalistic, (b) it draws upon multiple methods that respect the humanity of participants in the study, (c) it is emergent and evolving, and (d) it is interpretive.

With the former definitions in mind, I chose to use a qualitative methodological approach to gain an inductive and holistic understanding of these families' experiences in their own socio-cultural context. In particular, I wanted to hear and learn from them about the unique factors that helped protect their families from crisis, breakdown, or separation in a non-supportive society. The idea that qualitative designs allow researchers to distance themselves from the more traditional modernist scientific approaches that have turned women, minorities, and gays and lesbians into invisible populations (Berghauser, 2009; Travis & White, 2000) played a crucial role in my decision to adopt this method. Along with this decision came the idea to view this study from a social constructionist and advocacy lens that would allow me to carefully consider how narratives of the dominant culture are imposed onto marginalized members of society.

**A Social Constructionist and Advocacy Worldview**

Research conducted from a social constructionist worldview rejects universally applicable interpretations of objects or events and invites others to celebrate diversity and multiple realities (Freedman & Combs, 1996). Freedman and Combs stated, “We work with people in ways that invite them to celebrate their differences and to develop and perform narratives that they prefer around the particularities of their lives” (p. 33). Thus, rather than
viewing differences as deficits or pathologies, social constructionists are inspired by idiosyncrasies. This paradigm is a great fit for this study as it prevents me, the researcher, from ignoring the larger social-historical-cultural context where heterosexuals have the power to define the norms of what is considered moral. With all the above in mind, I focused on the uniqueness of same-sex binational families following what Freedman and Combs (1996) considered to be the four critical points to social constructionism:

1. Realities are socially constructed and societies construct the lenses through which their members interpret the world.
2. Realities are constituted through language.
3. Realities are organized and maintained through narrative.
4. There are no essential truths (Freedman & Combs, 1996, p. 22)

Hence, my study rejected taken for granted realities, monolithic truths, and the idea that one self (heterosexual American families) is truer than another self (same-sex binational families). Instead, I observed this study through a lens with the capability of observing how beliefs, laws, and customs are created through human interaction. Foucault and Gordon (1980) argued that if the lens lacks the capability of observing multiple viewpoints, “truth claims” would dehumanize, objectify, and marginalize many people (p. 80-84). Observing this study from a social constructionist standpoint, the lens allowed me to view the following:

1. Heterosexuality is no more real than same-sex attraction.
2. Immigrant families are American families.
3. The definition of “family” is a social construct that changes across time, place, and context.
4. The idea that homosexuality is a mental disorder is a socially constructed belief founded on prejudice against non-heterosexuals.
I used a social constructionist philosophy because I wanted to understand these families from within the context of their worldview and independent from normative understandings. It became evident that my study required a paradigm that reported on the oppression that same-sex binational families experience at the hands of the dominant culture. Thus, my study involved more than understanding experiences. I wanted these families' stories to resonate in ways that could potentially change their experience and living conditions. Creswell (2007) suggested using an advocacy paradigm when research contains an action agenda for reform that may change the lives of participants and the institutions in which they live and work. An advocacy paradigm utilizes a democratic and practical process (Kemmis, 2001) that addresses salient issues of concern to marginalized individuals and their ignored communities. With oppression, domination, and inequity in mind, investigators frame research questions in ways that contribute to the flourishing of participants (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). In fact, the use of this paradigm is only possible with and for persons and their communities for political, moral, and epistemological reasons (Reason, 2006, p. 193). I strongly believe that the integration and blend of a social constructionist and advocacy lens would organize these families' experiential worlds in ways that would permit a comprehensive understanding of their stories and a potential for reform.

**Narrative Method of Inquiry**

*When we use both narrative and social constructionism in our work, we see how the stories that circulate in society constitute our lives and those of the people we work with.*

*We also notice how the stories of individual lives can influence the constitution of whole cultures—not just the stories of people like Gandhi or Martin Luther King, but also those of people like Pocahontas, Annie Oakley, Helen Keller, and Tina Turner, as well as the*
stories of "ordinary" people whose names we have never heard. As we work with these people, we think about the interactions between the stories that they are living out in their personal lives and the stories that are circulating in their cultures—both their local culture and the larger culture. We think about how cultural stories are influencing the way they interpret their daily experience and how their daily actions are influencing the stories that circulate in society. (Friedman & Combs, 1996, p. 16)

As a result of my graduate training, I conceptualize people's experiences in terms of narratives. With an educational background in social constructionist principles and narrative theory, I have come to understand my world as an environment that is shaped by stories, stories that we as people adopt to help make sense of our lives (Bruner, 2002). I believe that we create, edit, re-author, and perform our stories to appropriately represent who we were in the past, who we are in the present, and who we want to become in the future. Thus, our self-representations do not simply reside within our internal cognitions; there is no "true self" living in some entity of our brain (Dennett, 1992). Instead, our selfhood develops through the narratives that we tell others about our lived experiences (Gergen, 1994). In order for our interactions to be effective however, we need to be able to tell our stories in a coherent and organized manner that will facilitate communication. Culture offers a long menu of techniques regarding narrative norms, content, structure, and expression that storytellers select from in order to best organize, represent, and express their lived experience (Smith, 2008). People use these tools in their stories so that they can entertain, teach, and learn from others.

In the research world, the narratives that are gathered through interviews and other methods are more than a sequential telling of events; they are "retrospective meaning making - the shaping or ordering [of] the past experience" (Chase, 2005, p. 656). When it comes to
narrative interviewing, Mishler (1986) is one of its most prominent sources. He saw narrative interviewing as a method that could be used to empower participants—"the aim being to recover and strengthen the voice of the lifeworld, that is, individuals' contextual understanding of their problems in their own terms" (1986, p. 142-143). Following Mishler's understanding of narrative interviewing, my study did not focus on the specific sociolinguistic techniques used by the participant storytellers. Instead, I focused on the meaning and the core plot behind the particular life events that shaped their stories. The procedures that I followed to achieve the purpose of my study involved gathering data through the collection of their stories, reporting their individual experiences, and chronologically ordering the meaning of those experiences (Creswell, 2008). In particular, I analyzed the common plots in the stories (What do binational families say about themselves and their lives?) and the participants' understanding of how and why that story was created. Mishler's narrative approach provides organizational structure designed to be responsive to analysis. A typical narrative framework focuses on the 'core narrative' or skeleton plot through four categories: (a) orientation - describes the setting and character; (b) abstract - summarizes the events or incidents of the story; (c) complicating Action - offers an evaluative commentary on events, conflicts and themes; and (d) resolution - describes the outcomes of the story or conflict (Mishler, 1986, p. 236-237). Through these stages, I hoped to understand how binational families interpreted their experience in a predominantly heterosexual society and how they told these stories to make sense of their lives.

**Researcher as Instrument**

The interpretive nature of my work demonstrates that I am not a sterile research instrument free from outside influences (Creswell, 2007). Rather, all data in this study were subjectively collected, studied, analyzed, and shaped by my background, ethnicity, race, gender,
nationality, immigration status, sexual orientation, education, and political views. Because my dissertation did not rely on objective or rigorously structured interviews, controlled laboratory experiments or reliable computer software, I remained actively aware and cautious of my biases, preconceptions, and personal experiences at all times during the study. Nonetheless, it should be clear to the reader that I did not take a detached or neutral stance during a large part of the research process because that would have interfered with my role as an advocate. As both a researcher and practitioner, I take a one-sided stance in support for equal immigration rights to same-sex couples. I feel a special commitment to explore the life stories of non-heterosexual families—stories that have been overlooked by previous researchers, politicians, lawmakers, and the larger society.

My view of the world, not every person’s reality, influenced every single area in this study including the choice of my research questions, the selection of a narrative research design of inquiry, the social constructionist lens through which data were analyzed, and the manner in which exchanges took place between participants and researcher. I believe that my social constructionist lens and advocacy efforts blended nicely as they worked together on bringing these families’ oppressed realities to the surface. In addition, my adoption of an open, curious and not-knowing stance during the interview process helped make sense of the experiences and meanings behind each family’s unique story.

This project includes what I considered to be important information for the reader to understand and what I interpreted to be appropriate representations of the phenomena under study. As Barrett (2007) explained, “data analysis and interpretation are often intertwined and rely upon the researcher’s logic, artistry, imagination, clarity, and knowledge of the field under
study” (p. 418). In conclusion, the interpretation of all data in this study was in one way or another influenced by my own story.

The Researcher

At the time that I conducted this study I was a third year doctoral student in counseling psychology. In terms of experience, I had a master’s degree in counseling psychology, had completed doctoral coursework in qualitative research, and had received significant training counseling individuals, couples, and families as a licensed professional counselor. In addition, my professional and research experiences were enriched by the presentations I conducted on issues related to LGBT mental health at national and local conferences.

I first became interested in conducting research for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community as a master’s student at Our Lady of the Lake University. As a professional advocate working to help the LGBT community, I presented at the South Eastern Psychological Association Conference, the Center for Mexican American Studies and Research Conference, the National Latina/o Psychological Association Conference, and the National Multicultural Conference and Summit on topics related to non-heterosexual binational families. To increase my involvement within the community of professionals in psychology, I also served as member of Division 44-The Society for the Psychological Study of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Issues and Division 35 section 4- Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Concerns. While my work as a master’s student first focused on promoting LGBT cultural competence among mental health clinicians, transitional changes and personal needs motivated me to shift gears and to begin doing research on the specific stressors affecting same-sex binational families. It did not take too long for me to realize that issues related to same-sex binational families were not being addressed by professionals working in the mental health field.
Feeling surprised by this information, I decided to follow psychology's call to become more active in serving the LGBT population. As a doctoral student today, my research, practice, and presentation interests have focused on promoting and advocating for the equal treatment of sexual minorities.

Self-Reflexivity

Yeh and Inman (2007) suggested that one way to limit the threat of the researcher's biases on the methodology of a study is to reflect on and explain the researcher's key biases. The motivation to begin this study was not solely driven by scholarly inquiry. Upon a reflection of key biases, I concluded that my thirst for intellectual discovery was not the only value that inspired my interest in the topic of same-sex binational families. My own bias begins with an examination of my own sexual orientation and immigration status; I am a lesbian and Mexican national. My experiences as a non-heterosexual foreigner have promoted a deep interest in understanding how gay foreign national individuals have managed to thrive under strenuous circumstances. My journey as a foreigner living in the United States has been shaped in several ways by my temporary legal immigration status as an international student. Ten years ago, I moved to the United States with one dream, to receive quality education at an American college. Oddly enough, a year before my student visa expired, I met my former partner, another college student living on the university campus. When we started our relationship, seven years ago, we were unaware that my immigration status would ultimately become a powerful stressor in our relationship. Sadly, it was a matter of time before the realities of not having immigration privileges began to raise unforeseen obstacles. I am grateful that my love for higher education brought necessary extensions that pushed back the expiration date on my student visa and permitted our relationship to last longer. However, I write this dissertation as an individual
whose relationship endured both sexual prejudice and the effects of discriminatory immigration policies. While in that relationship, I saw my friends, other international students, get married, get sponsored for citizenship by their American husband or wife, and hold employment after establishing a valid and legal relationship with an American. My relationship with my former partner however, despite being as long and as real, was not worthy in the eyes of the law of the same rights for the mere reason that we were together in a non-heterosexual relationship affected by DOMA. Having lived these experiences myself and standing as an ethical professional in the field of psychology have motivated me to voice my concerns and to advocate on behalf of other families who are undergoing similar stressors. To this project I brought not only my academic and professional knowledge but also the expertise of my own lived experience as a lesbian Latina immigrant who has endured marginalization on the basis of my sexuality, ethnicity, and nationality.

With this background in mind, I asked myself, could my identity as a member of this particular group limit my ability to create an open conversational space with other same-sex binational families? According to Mehra (2002), the degree of affinity researchers have with the population under study including researchers being a member of the group themselves can introduce a question of bias in the study. In various sections of this work, I have explained that my dissertation stands firmly in support of equal immigration rights to same-sex couples. However, my deep sense of responsibility for valid data collection and analysis and my loyalty to an ethical code of conduct, served as present and constant reminders that the phenomena under study had to be observed, recorded, and analyzed in a manner that reflected the true realities of the participants. My performance as a researcher was assisted by ongoing conversations that I had with my self about my impressions and experiences during the research process. Thus, I
made a conscious effort to actively check-in with myself to ensure that my conversations and interactions with participants were true to the purpose of my study.

**Participants**

**Recruitment**

To recruit participants, I contacted the following individuals and organizations:

1. Families who blogged to share their story on the LGBT Immigration Equality Rights (IMEQ) website (http://imeq.us/). LGBT Immigration Equality Rights is a public website where non-heterosexual families share how immigration policy impacted their family system (Appendix A).

2. Administration employees from the three most prominent organizations working to support same-sex binational families- Immigration Equality Rights, Out4immigration, and Love Exiles (Appendix B).

3. Via e-mail, APA Divison 44’s (Society for the Psychological Study of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Issues) e-mail listserv to help with the recruitment of participants (Appendix C).

Subsequently, I had a conversation with participants and related organizations about their thoughts regarding my study and in particular whether they thought that my study would be helpful to the binational community. In the end, participating families were recruited using the criterion method of sampling (Creswell, 2007). Criterion sampling involves “selecting cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance” (Patton, 2002, p. 238).

The participants were made up of four binational families headed by same-sex couples. The selected participants were those who had stated interest in communicating by phone, electronic mail, Skype, and in person. The requirements were the following:
Method 41

1. Same-sex couple.

2. Ages 25 and up.

3. One person must be a foreign national and the other person must be an American citizen.

4. Should be at least in a 3 year committed relationship.

Four families were chosen to represent four common scenarios. Every participant in this study was given a pseudonym.

- *The first family (Lori and Rebecca):* Lori is an American citizen and her foreign national partner, Rebecca, holds a temporary visa with an upcoming expiration date (See Appendix D for visa types).

- *The second family (Alejandro and Ricardo):* Alejandro is an American citizen and his foreign national partner, Ricardo, has an expired visa. Ricardo is currently living in the United States with documentation.

- *The third family (Paulina and Alejandra):* Paulina is an American citizen and her foreign national partner, Alejandra, was deported after her visa expired. They are currently maintaining a distance relationship.

- *The fourth family (Bob and Nicolas):* Bob, an American citizen, had to move to Canada with this foreign national partner to prevent family hardship as a result of family separation.

**Participant Demographics**

The eight participants in this study ranged in age from 30 to 50 years. All participants were given pseudonyms and all identifying markers were removed from this project. Five of the participants, Nicolas, Alejandra, Paulina, Ricardo, and Alejandro were Hispanic (all pseudonyms). Three of the participants, Lori, Rebecca, and Bob were Caucasian. The
participants lived in three different countries: Canada, Mexico, and the United States. Bob and Nicolas lived in Canada, Rebecca and Lori lived in New York, Ricardo and Alejandro lived in Texas, and while Paulina lived in Texas, her partner Alejandra lived in Mexico. Four of the participants, Bob, Lori, Alejandro, and Paulina were American citizens. And their partners, Nicolas, Rebecca, Ricardo, and Alejandra were foreign nationals. Nicolas was from Venezuela, Rebecca was from England, and Ricardo and Alejandra were from Mexico. Bob and Nicolas were in a domestic partnership, Rebecca and Lori were legally married in New York, Alejandra and Paulina were engaged, and Ricardo and Alejandra were in a partnership that could not be legalized in the state of Texas. No couple in this sample had children.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

Phone and Skype interviews were used as the primary source of data in this study. Interviews were recorded with the use of an audio recorder (iPad and iPhone). Bob and Nicolas were interviewed using Skype; Ricardo, Alejandro, Lori, and Rebecca were interviewed via phone; and a conference call (multi-party function using iPhone) was used to interview Paulina and Alejandra. All couples were interviewed together with the idea that this would facilitate my understanding of their systemic interactions. In addition, e-mail was used to clarify and confirm results with participants.

Before the day of the interview, I provided an electronic copy of the informed consent to all participants (see Appendix F). After participants agreed to the terms identified in the informed consent, an appointment was scheduled at a time that was convenient for them. On the day of the interview, I first introduced myself to participants, thanked them for their participation, reviewed informed consent, and answered any questions regarding the interview process. I told participants that I had a list of questions (Appendix E) that I would be asking
during our conversation, but that the format of the interview was intended to be semi-structured
and that they would have the opportunity to expand or deviate from those questions to share any
aspects of their story they deemed important. No notes were written during the interview to allow
for a more natural conversation flow with participants. Rather, field notes were taken between
each interview to help organize my thoughts, record my observations, and summarize my
impressions. My field notes described all couples as open, friendly, welcoming, and happy to be
participating in the study. Participants saw this study as an opportunity to advocate for their
cause. Notes reported on their collective optimism and strong commitment to keeping their
family together. I also documented my impression that couples who had endured deportation
(Bob, Nicolas, Paulina, and Alejandra) reported higher levels of stress, as a result of their exile,
when compared to individuals who were still living in the United States.

Subsequently, I transcribed the interview and omitted participants’ identifying
information to protect anonymity. I chose to transcribe the interviews with the belief that it
would help with immersion in the data and facilitate the analysis process. Once I finalized the
transcriptions, I reviewed the transcribed documents going back to each audiotape multiple times
until full accuracy was achieved. All audiotapes and respective transcriptions were saved in a
password-protected file within a password-protected folder within my password-protected laptop
computer. Hard copies of the transcript were locked in my dissertation chair’s filing cabinet
located inside her clinic’s office.

To conduct the analysis, I followed Marshall and Rossman’s (2011) seven phases of
analytic procedures:

1. organizing the data
2. immersion in the data
3. generating categories and themes
4. coding the data
5. offering interpretations through analytic memos
6. searching for alternative understandings
7. writing the report.

I used labels to keep interview and field note data organized into files. The data was subsequently logged according to date, person, and setting. I coded and categorize findings, evaluated their importance, and indicated abstract relations between data. Once the data appeared organized, I read, re-read, and read it again until I felt completely immersed in it. Having a more intimate relationship with the data, I began looking for categories, themes or patterns in the emerging stories. The categories searched for followed Mishler’s skeleton plot (1986):

1. orientation- describes the setting and the character
2. abstract- summarizes the events or incidents of the story
3. complicating action- offers an evaluative commentary on conflicts
4. resolution- describes the outcomes of the story or conflict.

As I read through the data, I searched for the plot of the story by asking myself, “What is this story about” (Mishler, 1986, p. 236)? I highlighted, using different colors, the words or phrases belonging to the former categories. Margin notes were written to form codes that represented categorization of ideas. Codes were provided for each category in the form of key words that represented behaviors or important events falling within the former categories (e.g. “thriving tools,” “stressors,” “hopeful future,” “support” etc). After codes were established, I began searching for clusters that demonstrated how salient themes appeared in a patterned sequence or chronology in the story. I used analytic memos to write my thoughts and insight
about how the data was coming together in these patterns. Memos included methodological memos that pointed to what was being helpful or not about the study design; thematic memos that pointed to how a story of events had meanings; and theoretical memos that pointed to the ways in which sexual prejudice theory and resiliency theory explained participants’ stories. After I organized each family’s narratives into one skeleton plot, the core plots for all four couples were compared. Subsequently, a new file was created in which the various skeleton plots were organized into linking discourses across participants. Common themes across the four skeleton plots were identified and meaning and significance were brought to the different patterns and categories through interpretation. A description of the story was placed in a chronology that presented through short narratives the experiences of same-sex binational families in this study.

**Trustworthiness**

To meet trustworthiness and goodness standards, I practiced prolonged engagement, triangulation, member checks and peer debriefing. According to Marshall and Rossman (2011), trustworthiness should “move beyond the procedural to focus on matters of relationships-with participants, stakeholders, with peers, and with the larger community of discourse” (p. 44). Accordingly, the following steps were practiced with the goal of strengthening relational matters and ensuring the objectivity and accuracy of my study. I invested significant time with participants. During the process of immersion, I remained mindful of within-group diversity, especially because of each family’s unique characteristics including nationality, culture and type of same-sex gender household. The primary sources of data for this study were the in-depth interviews with participants. To secure the soundness of my study, after the data was collected, studied and interpreted, I shared the results with each participating family to validate themes, interpretations and findings. To ensure rigor and to increase the transparency of participants’
voices, I discussed findings with three colleagues in the field of counseling psychology. During the practice of the former steps, I demonstrated commitment to rigorous procedures and ethical issues.

**Ethics**

My dissertation was grounded in the moral principles of respect for persons, beneficence, justice and sensitivity to the care and protection of these families. Knowing that the participants in this study have already been victimized and oppressed by society, careful thought was put into each interaction and procedure with the goal of redressing past societal injustices and ensuring that participants would not be harmed. Leaning (2001) argued that ethical dilemmas often arise when researchers working with vulnerable populations try to balance attention to humanitarian concerns with scientific rigor. Similarly, Jacobsen and Landau (2003) proposed that researchers face a “dual imperative” when balancing concerns to reduce suffering with professional responsibility to produce research that meets the highest scientific standards. Like Birman (2005), I believe that ensuring scientific rigor in research on culturally diverse and politically vulnerable populations is an ethical responsibility due to the need for accurate data that can inform intervention efforts and inform policies that currently have pernicious consequences on the lives of many people. My ethical responsibility with participants, the discipline of counseling psychology and society motivated me to work tirelessly to ensure that my study was designed and conducted in trustworthy ways.

The informed consent provided to participants demonstrate that all participants understood the purpose of my study, their commitment to the study, the fact that their participation was voluntary, that they could withdraw at any time, the risks involved in being a participant in the study and the limits of confidentiality. Knowing that these are just standard
forms that lack sensitivity to cultural differences, I made sure to customize my explanation of informed consent during my work with each family. Although all families in this study demonstrated their willingness to participate, I remained aware of their vulnerability as survivors of heterosexism and particularly important, I remained extremely cautious in keeping the foreign nationals' identity confidential as well as anonymity across participants. Although affinity with participants is sometimes thought to be a source of bias, my own experience as a binational individual helps me understand on a more personal level the dangers and consequences involved in disclosing the participants' identity. With this understanding, all participants were given pseudonyms and all identifying markers were removed from this project.
CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

Through the use of story-telling, participants in this study shaped and ordered their past binational experiences. Focusing on the meaning and the core plot behind the particular life events that shaped their stories, I chronologically ordered each family’s narratives using Mishler’s four categories: (a) orientation - describes the setting and character; (b) abstract - summarizes the events or incidents of the story; (c) complicating action - offers an evaluative commentary on events, conflicts and themes; and (d) resolution - describes the outcomes of the story or conflict. After I organized each family’s narratives into one skeleton plot, I printed the core plots for all four couples. Subsequently, I created a new file in which I organized the various skeleton plots into linking discourses across participants. In the end, common themes across the four skeleton plots were identified.

The Skeleton Plot

Nicolas and Bob

Orientation. Nicolas, who left Venezuela due to discrimination related to his sexual orientation, was working in a large northeastern metropolitan area as a chef on a work sponsorship. Bob, an American citizen, met Nicolas in late 2001. Their first date was on 1/13/02 at a diner. They knew on their first date, that there was an immediate connection between them. They are a family of two that presently lives in Canada.

Abstract. Because of their same-sex relationship, for eleven years Bob and Nicolas were deprived of a basic right that most American families take for granted; Bob and Nicolas were denied the right to live together in the United States. To keep Nicolas from returning to Venezuela after his visa expired, they decided to move to Canada where they could become permanent residents and receive full spousal rights. Because Nicolas’s move to Canada was
considered by immigration to be "self-deportation," he was not allowed to return to the United States for 10 years.

**Complicating action.** Although Bob and Nicolas consider themselves to be a loving family in every sense of the word, the couple indicated that the United States government defined them as strangers under the law. After Nicolas's employment-based visa expired, Bob learned that the loss of his partner's work sponsorship would have harmful consequences on their relationship including the threat of family separation. Bob had a difficult time understanding why family sponsorship was not an option for Nicolas if they were legal domestic partners in New Jersey. He described that prior to meeting Nicolas he was unaware of the complexities and difficulties surrounding immigration. Bob could not comprehend why a good-hearted man like Nicolas would be banned from entering the United States when he was not a threat to national security. While seeking asylum in the United States, Nicolas was forced to experience the stress of going to court every six months for six years. Bob was not allowed to testify in court as Nicolas's life partner; he was only allowed to be a witness to Nicolas's mental state during court proceedings. In fact, their attorney stated that Bob was irrelevant and unnecessary for the case. Nicolas and Bob believe that the United States government had treated them like second-class citizens and forced them into exile simply because of their sexual minority status. Bob described their court experience and subsequent exile as traumatic and gave it the name of PTSD. Consequently, their move to Canada generated several challenges; Bob felt homesickness, anger, depression, and difficulty adjusting to another country. Nicolas also experienced depression, guilt, and self-blame regarding the fact that Bob had to move to another country leaving friends, family, and "the known" behind. In addition, Bob continued to pay taxes to the United States government, taxes he believes are paying for his persecution. Bob and Nicolas have experienced
financial hardship as a result of legal fees, income lost because Nicolas was forbidden to work, moving expenses among others.

**Resolution.** Bob explained that separating from Nicolas was never an option and that he always intended to keep family unity regardless of the court’s decision. He reported that even though challenges surfaced, he has never blamed Nicolas for the stressors they experienced as a result of Nicolas's deportation. Instead, he externalized and attributed the cause of those stressors to outside forces and the American government's intention to harm them. To take power away from the United States government, Bob and Nicolas designed a back-up plan that involved moving and seeking residency in Canada. Feeling empowered, they submitted their documentation to Canada’s immigration system and were successfully accepted for residency. Rather than thinking about Canada as a second-home, the couple perceived their move as the successful completion of their plan. They have fully embraced Canada as their home, an inclusive and welcoming environment. Bob and Nicolas perceived the completion of this strategy to be a win over the U.S government because heterosexist immigration policies failed to tear them apart.

Hoping to overcome the depression that started during court proceedings, Bob and Nicolas sought help in counseling and antidepressants. Despite the challenges and barriers encountered, Bob is certain that Nicolas and their binational experience changed his life for the better. He explained that as a result of their battle with immigration services, he had no option but to fight shyness through the use of his voice. Presenting their improved self-confidence and ability to speak-out, Bob and Nicolas used the media (newspapers and television) to share their story with the world. In addition, family members and friends served as an important source of support that helped the couple thrive during challenging times. Bob’s family demonstrated
empathy and understanding during the couple's journey because they recognized that Bob was in love for the first time. Other sources of support that facilitated their coping skills included the couple's strong friendship with each other and their ability to share activities that mattered to both. They also explained that although they continue to argue like a regular couple about the ordinary things in life, they do not let those bad moments escalate into their immigration issues. They see themselves as a strong family that has thrived in spite of being persecuted by the United States government.

Alejandro and Ricardo

Orientation. Hoping to create a path toward financial and professional success, Ricardo, a foreign national from Mexico moved to the United States to pursue a business degree at a university in Texas (omitted name to ensure confidentiality). Alejandro, an American citizen and marketing consultant, met Ricardo at a coffee shop. At first sight and after a brief exchange of words, they recognized that there was a special connection between them. The following day, they both returned to the coffee shop hoping to see each other again. A rich conversation at the coffee shop led to the beginning of their romantic relationship. After a year of dating, they decided to move in together. Ricardo found in Alejandro a new family. At the time of the interview, Ricardo and Alejandro were a family of two residing in Texas.

Abstract. During the time of his studies at a university in Texas, Ricardo, an international student, met Alejandro, an American citizen and marketing consultant, at a coffee shop. After experiencing love at first sight and a strong connection, they began dating. They rapidly recognized that they had found the person that they were intended to be with long-term. They decided to move in together after a year of dating. Post-graduation, Ricardo quickly learned that employment-based visas were scarce and difficult to acquire. Faced with the reality that his
student visa was close to its expiration date, Ricardo had no alternative but to find an immediate and effective way to acquire an employment-based visa. Nevertheless, in spite of his professional talent and skill, Ricardo was unable to find employment and his visa expired. Searching tirelessly for a solution that would allow the couple to maintain family unity, they concluded that the only viable option was for Ricardo to continue living in the United States with an expired visa fearing the threat of deportation. Presently, Ricardo and Alejandro are currently living with an undocumented status.

Complicating action. After graduation, Ricardo’s student visa expired. Although he considers himself to be a talented individual with unique skills, he encountered a rigid immigration system that hindered his professional success. The stress and fears of living in the United States with an undocumented status interfered with Ricardo’s everyday functioning including his ability to drive and interview for jobs. With a lack of knowledge regarding immigration issues, Alejandro offered marriage as an effective solution to Ricardo’s immigration troubles. Alejandro experienced disbelief, shock and chest pain after he learned that binational couples did not qualify for family sponsorship. Affected by news that Ricardo faced the risk of deportation, Alejandro felt a need to reassure Ricardo that alternative solutions would become available to them. However, he quickly realized that he had no control or say over immigration matters. Alejandro described feeling pain not being able to provide Ricardo with the immigration rights that he deserved and earned. Ricardo reported feeling guilty knowing that Alejandro experienced feelings of helplessness as a result of their immigration struggles. He also described feeling a loss of control not being able to ease the pain Alejandro endured. The couple felt overwhelmed trying to come up with various strategies that would allow their family to continue living in the United States together; however, the couple eventually ran out of options and family
separation became a real threat. This threat prevented them from establishing long-term goals and commitments. In particular, the threat of deportation interrupted the couple’s plan to adopt a child and directly impacted their financial well-being. Because Ricardo is unable to work as a result of his undocumented status, Alejandro is the sole provider in the family. They believed that their inability to enjoy the same rights given to heterosexual couples was a message sent to them from the American government to show that they were inferior and less valuable than heterosexual families. On a larger scale, they believe that the U.S government had neglected and explicitly discriminated against gay American citizens by taking their immigration rights away. With the understanding that discrimination against them was based on their sexual minority status, they described feeling misunderstood because of society’s lack of awareness regarding the presence of sexual prejudice in the law.

Resolution. Although they have historically followed federal laws, to prevent heartbreak and immediate family separation, Ricardo decided to disregard his visa’s expiration to continue living in the United States with Alejandro. However, Alejandro and Ricardo agreed that if deportation were to become a reality, they would both move to Mexico. Knowing that their future was uncertain, the couple dealt with their lack of control over future events by living one day at a time and staying grounded in the present moment. The couple managed to thrive through the adoption of a “we are fighters regardless of circumstances” identity and a “seizing the moment with each other” philosophy. To help cope with their loss of control, Alejandro and Ricardo found prayer to be a coping mechanism. In fact, they believed that their fight against sexual prejudice is “their call” in life. According to this couple, their call is to fight for what was given to them by God, which is freedom. The couple stated that injustice had given them a sense of purpose and that by speaking out and using their voice to advocate for equality, they would be
able to change their future. To facilitate coping, Ricardo and Alejandro surrounded themselves with supportive, intelligent and inclusive friends. At the same time, they avoided interacting with individuals who opposed the policies that promote same-sex family unity. Ricardo and Alejandro's friends demonstrated their support by assertively stating that they support marriage equality and comprehensive immigration reform.

Ricardo and Alejandro indicated that if the government provided them with equal immigration rights, rather than fearing family separation, they would begin worrying about the "ordinary" things that other couples worry about. They explained that immigration's recognition of their relationship would validate their love for each other and legitimize their commitment to each other. In addition, they would experience improvement in their family finances because Ricardo would be able to work, and feelings of uncertainty, fear and frustration would disappear. More importantly they explained, they would begin planning for a baby by beginning the adoption process.

Paulina and Alejandra

Orientation. Alejandra, a foreign national from Mexico, moved to a Southwestern state with her parents and younger sister when she was 16 years old. Her parents moved the family to the United States with the goal of investing their funds in a beauty salon and spa in Texas and to facilitate their daughters' pursuit of a college degree in the United States. Alejandra described growing up in a "sheltered Mexican family" with strong values. Paulina, an American citizen from Texas moved to San Antonio after being offered an administrative job at a national bank. Soon after graduating from college and coming-out to her family and friends, Alejandra met Paulina at a friend's party. Although Paulina had a boyfriend at the time, Paulina and Alejandra noticed an undeniable and immediate connection and attraction to each other. Consequently,
Paulina ended the relationship she had with her boyfriend. She explained that what attracted her to Alejandra was her sweetness, her humor and the fact that she was a caring individual. In 2012, after 2 years of dating and living together, Alejandra proposed to Paulina. A year after she proposed, Alejandra was deported to Mexico. The couple remains actively committed to each other in spite of the physical distance between them.

**Abstract.** In 2009, Alejandra, a foreign national, experienced the expiration of her visa without viable options for renewal. Her former visa, an investment visa, was provided by the government based on her family's business. At the time that her visa expired, her family business filed for bankruptcy. Unfortunately, she had no back-up plan and nothing in line to help sponsor her next status. In 2010, months before her visa expired, Alejandra's sister introduced Alejandra and Paulina (American citizen) at a party. Alejandra and Paulina continued spending time with each other given the strong connection and attraction they immediately felt. Paulina's undeniable feelings for Alejandra pushed her to terminate the relationship with her boyfriend. Although Paulina was aware of Alejandra's immigration status, she began dating and feeling optimistic that she would find solutions to her immigration troubles. After months of "magical" dating, Alejandra proposed to Paulina. Although engaged and in a committed relationship, in early 2013, the United States government deported Alejandra. Currently, the couple is experiencing family separation; Alejandra lives in Mexico and Paulina resides in Texas. Paulina, the only provider in the family, has to send money to Mexico on a weekly basis to help her fiancé with living expenses.

**Complicating Action.** In her former binational relationship, Alejandra struggled finding support from her friends because her girlfriend at the time was not a Spanish-speaking person of Mexican origin. Her friends perceived Alejandra's girlfriend as an "outsider." Chiefly, Alejandra
explained that the rejection that she faced from friends had to do more with nationality and ethnicity rather than sexuality. In contrast, after Alejandra and Paulina began dating, Alejandra’s friends quickly embraced and accepted her as Alejandra’s legitimate girlfriend. Because Paulina is a second-generation Spanish-speaking Mexican-American, friends and family supported the couple’s decision to live together. Alejandra described it as no longer experiencing the dividing line between gay couples and straight couples in their group of friends. Grateful to be respected and accepted by Alejandra’s friends, Paulina described their dating experience as “magical.” Paulina explained that there was nothing that she could do to prevent herself from “falling in love,” not even the fact that she was falling in love with another woman (she had only dated men before) or the fact that this woman was a foreigner without proper documentation. Soon after they began dating, Alejandra’s visa expired. At the same time, her family’s business filed bankruptcy. Because her visa was granted by the United States government as a result of her family’s investment in a business in the United States, the opportunity to renew her visa was no longer an option. Although at first optimistic about finding an alternative solution to their situation, numerous unhelpful and costly attorney meetings left them feeling stuck, frustrated and without viable options. Understanding the reality of their situation, the couple briefly and tentatively considered cheating the system through the use of a sham marriage. They could not understand how pretending to marry a man using lies against the United States government, could result in Alejandra’s acquisition of a green card, yet marrying a woman legitimately would not grant them the same privileges. Strongly believing in what is right and what is sacred, the couple disregarded the option of a sham marriage. Paulina indicated that although she worked tirelessly to come up with legal solutions to find a way out of their impasse, there was nothing that she could do as an American citizen to help change her fiancée’s immigration status. Because
Alejandra was unable to quickly acquire a new visa, she no longer had proper documentation to continue living in the United States legally. According to Paulina, foreign nationals in binational relationships were only given two options by the American government which included living in the United States without proper documentation or having the foreign national move back to his or her native country. She indicated that the American government’s “illogical last century policies, induce suffering among gay individuals.” She also emphasized feeling confused by the idea that a nation that has been built by immigrants and a nation that protects its families could discriminate and separate binational families in a cruel fashion. She also described the government’s decision to not allow American citizens to choose who they wanted to spend the rest of their lives with as “discrimination in its most transparent form”. After three years of living together, the couple experienced family separation as a result of deportation. Alejandra explained that she was “forced” by the American government to move back to Mexico and banned from traveling back to the United States. Paulina highlighted the fact that she has had to work “twice as hard” because she is the sole provider in the family. In response to why Paula did not move to Mexico, Alejandra explained that if Paulina would have done that, the couple would not have survived financially. In addition, Paulina’s friends and family would have been devastated if she would have moved.

Resolution. According to Paulina, it is impossible for people to “ignore who they are meant to be with and abandon them.” Thus, once an individual finds “the one”, it is necessary “to keep walking.” Alejandra describes being blessed with friends that love who she is authentically. Similarly, Paulina’s parents find it difficult to understand how their own government, the government that they served and fought for, discriminates against their daughter. She indicates that her parents believe that she deserves to live with her fiancée. According to Alejandra, they
believe that marriage is the union and long-term commitment between two people who love each other, want to create a family, and want to share the same path in life; it is that belief that keeps them fighting for family unity. With the understanding that couples should be able to “live the life that they as humans deserve to live”, Alejandra remains hopeful that one day they will be able to enjoy family unity. Paulina came to the conclusion that all that they can do for now, is to keep “their heads up high”. She explained that the couple is able to battle loneliness by remembering that there are others binational couples who understand their struggles. In addition, they have found in friends and family a strong support system that “helps them smile even during dark moments.” Both members of the partnership explained that they have found in life a new purpose, which is to fight with the goal of being reunited with each other. Paulina explained that if the couple were to be recognized as a legitimate family by the American government, they would both be “great producers and great providers” which would in turn help make the United States a stronger nation. She also indicated that because gay issues are the civil rights movement of our time, it is inevitable for things to change. For now, Paulina indicated that their only option available was to wait with faith and pray for things to change. When change does happen, she believed that with “joy,” they would be able to live ordinary lives. If they were granted immigration rights, it would be evidence that God heard her prayers; it would be a blessing and an everyday gift. She indicated that with immigration equality, “her life would be a life,” “loneliness would not exist,” “fear would be replaced with peace” and “resentment towards her government would be gone.”

Rebecca and Lori

Orientation. In the summer of 2007, Lori from Texas and Rebecca from London decided to move to New York. Lori, who “ran away from Texas” with hopes of finding a safer and more
accepting environment, was working in New York as a bartender. Lori, an English citizen, moved to the United States as an international student after being accepted to a master’s program. Rebecca’s apartment was located above the bar where Lori was bar-tending. One day, waiting for her work-shift, Lori saw Rebecca walking her dog. Lori was immediately attracted to Rebecca. Interestingly, although geographically close and although Rebecca’s roommate worked at that same bar, Rebecca first met Lori during a basketball game. Introduced to each other by a basketball coach, Rebecca also felt an "instant attraction" for Lori. A month later, they both began a serious committed relationship and had recently celebrated a fifth year anniversary at the time of the interview. Rebecca holds a temporary-work visa that allows her to remain in the United States with her wife.

Abstract. Approaching the expiration of her student visa, Rebecca, an English international student, met Lori, an American citizen and bartender, at a basketball game. Experiencing an instant attraction when they first saw each other, they had their first conversation after Rebecca’s roommate fractured her foot and Lori offered to assist with the injury. Hoping to begin a friendship, Lori asked Tony, Rebecca’s roommate, for Rebecca’s cell phone number. Not knowing whether Rebecca was a “permanent player for the ladies’ team,” Lori was prepared to establish a respectful friendship with her. They began texting frequently and Rebecca admired Lori’s integrity and respectful attitude towards their relationship. Faced with the upcoming expiration date of her student visa, Rebecca came to the realization that Lori was also experiencing strong romantic feelings for her. Although she had only dated men in the past, Rebecca made the decision to pursue Lori, who she believed was special and different. A month after they began dating, Rebecca was forced to move back to England. This was not a surprise to Lori as she was well aware of Rebecca’s immigration status. Lori decided to move
back to Texas. Rebecca traveled to the United States from England every other month to visit Lori. Hoping to make her way back to the United States, Rebecca began applying to business schools and was accepted. After she finished her master’s degree, Rebecca’s high level of education made her a strong candidate for an H1-B visa. She was hired by an American marketing company where she is known for performing as an outstanding marketing consultant. Although her visa will expire September 2014 she felt confident that she would be able to renew her visa. Rebecca’s ability to remain in the United States with Lori depends on her employer’s continued sponsorship.

**Complicating action.** Lori and Rebecca were “forced to fast-forward to make a decision to date long distance and across the ocean.” They considered this decision to be their official marker as a couple. Rebecca moved back to England committed to making her relationship with Lori work out. While apart, Rebecca traveled to the United States every other month to visit Lori. Eventually, she was accepted to a business school in New York and came to the United States once more on a student visa. Faced with yet another expiration date and the stress of uncertainty, Rebecca began working diligently by applying for doctorate programs and available jobs. Fortunately, she was hired by a marketing company who sponsored her H1-B work visa. Although happy with her job, Rebecca felt pressured to always have an outstanding performance with the goal of keeping her employer satisfied given that her immigration status depends on her employer’s sponsorship. Although extremely grateful to her employer, the obligation to always perform impeccably created a constant level of stress. Rebecca reported that if she were to be sponsored by Lori, that burden would be lifted off her shoulders. They indicated that if they were given the opportunity to have equal immigration rights, they would have the option of moving
outside of the New York and to California. Rebecca explained that it would be nice not to feel tied down to her job and instead have the freedom to move wherever they desire.

**Resolution.** Lori and Rebecca considered themselves a lucky and optimistic couple that had a variety of options and back-up plans. They held the belief that if at any point Rebecca is unable to remain legally in the United States, Lori would have the option of moving to England where Rebecca would be able to provide immigration rights to Lori. Although they would like to enjoy the same legal rights as their heterosexual counterparts in the United States, Lori and Rebecca believed that they still had to live by and overcome the laws that they did not necessarily agree with. They indicated that in spite of the fact that the law is not on their side, they had the ability to come up with other solutions without the government’s help. They have embraced a “we will figure it out” philosophy. At the same time, they argued that if the options that they currently have were not available for any reason, they predicted that they would feel “angry at the system”. Creating a safe-space where they can enjoy each other as a couple and surrounding themselves with supportive friends were two critical factors that helped them succeed. The couple indicated that they intentionally put themselves in locations and around people that do not judge. For them, New York is a comfortable and respectful physical space where people genuinely “do not care” how you choose to live your life. Their choice to live five minutes away from the biggest lesbian community in New York, working for employers who are affirmative and inclusive, and serving the LGBT community facilitated the creation of their safe environment. In addition, they explained that the fact that they are often “oblivious” to sexual prejudice has worked in their favor. They believe that they are “not coping” nor “hiding,” they are simply living their lives. The couple explains that they do have challenges; they have had stressful times; and it would have been easier if these had not existed, but they consider their life
to be a “normal” life with options. Both Lori and Rebecca found strong support among family members. Rebecca believed that although it has probably taken some time on their side to come to grips with the idea that she is in a same-sex relationship, she has an open-minded family that has “never once” given an indication that they are disappointed. On the contrary, she had seen excitement, particularly from her sister. She described how her family has made it clear that they can see a clear difference in her around Lori, in terms of happiness, versus anybody else that she had ever been with. Similarly, Lori’s mother demonstrated her support by recognizing that “there is no other better person” than Rebecca for Lori to marry. While Lori describes that she had one half of the family that was supportive and another half that was not, they all had noticed her personal growth since she met Rebecca.

**Linking Discourses**

The first linking discourse includes participant narratives that were focused on the foreigner’s purpose for moving to the United States which involved the pursuit of success (i.e. occupational, professional or academic). The second linking discourse presents participants’ immediate awareness of their attraction for each other. After meeting their current partner, all couples reported experiencing immediate connectedness and physical attraction. The third linking discourse relates to the struggles that these families encountered as a result of sexual prejudice in society and the law. This discourse has five sub-discourses. The first sub-discourse focuses on how surprised and shocked American citizen participants were when they first learned that they were unable to sponsor their foreign national partner for residency. The second sub-discourse is associated with the stress endured by couples because they were considered to be strangers under the law rather than a legitimate family. The third sub-discourse examines the feelings of guilt and pain experienced by the family. In particular, it explores the feelings of guilt
that foreign national participants experienced when they realized the stress that their partner was experiencing as a result of their temporary immigration status. This sub-discourse also examines the feelings of pain experienced by American citizen participants after they realized that they were unable to sponsor their partners for residency. The fourth sub-discourse involves participants' feelings of loss of control. Participants reported that they did not feel confident establishing long-term goals because of the foreigner's temporary immigration status. Thus, participants experienced having little control over future events including having children. The fifth sub-discourse presents the financial hardship encountered by participants as a result of the barriers imposed on them by policies that prevented foreign national partners from working freely in the United States. American citizen participants shared how employment restrictions placed on foreign national partners made the couple's financial success a challenging endeavor.

The fourth linking discourse explores how participants fought for family unity above all. This discourse has four sub-discourses. The first sub-discourse points to the ways in which participants spoke-out to voice their needs as a family. The second sub-discourse examines how participants saw staying committed to their partnership as "a win" over the American government and their discriminatory policies. The third sub-discourse explores participants' perception of their fight as a clean fight, a fight for freedom and justice. The fourth sub-discourse highlights how participants' fight against discrimination and in favor of family unity became the top motivator that helped them thrive. The fifth linking discourse presents the different sources of support for these participants during their journey. This discourse has three sub-discourses. The first sub-discourse involves seeking help from professionals in the field of mental health as a source of support. The second sub-discourse presents how participants benefited from the support of family and friends during stressful times. The third sub-discourse is associated with
how participants grew on a personal level as a result of the helpful systemic interactions that they had together as a couple. The sixth and last linking discourse describes participants’ vision of their preferred future, a future with immigration equality.

The Pursuit of Success

The first linking discourse includes participant narratives that were focused on the foreigner’s purpose for moving to the United States which involved the pursuit of success (i.e. occupational, professional or academic). This first influence was discussed by all four foreign national participants. They talked about how their professional dreams and desires to achieve occupational success were the engine that motivated them to move to the United States. For them, moving meant the opportunity to be prosperous and achieve upward social and/or financial mobility through hard work. Ricardo commented, “I came to the U.S. on a student visa. I wanted to pursue a Business degree. And I thought [name of university] was a pretty neat school. I moved hoping for a better life. Maybe more money, more status, more knowledge.” Alejandra added, “I’m from a sheltered Mexican family, with strong values and I was almost encapsulated in a happy bubble. When I was 17 my parents decided to move to the U.S. They wanted the best for us. They wanted us to benefit from studying in the U.S. with the idea that if we did that, we would become the best version of ourselves.” Rebecca lived in New York for eight years when she was younger. Her desire to pursue a master’s degree in the United States brought her back to New York from England. As a result of her success in business school, she is now a successful and outstanding consultant for an American marketing company. Similarly, Nicolas moved to the United States with an employment visa hoping for professional success and growth in the world of business. For Nicolas however, it was more than just traveling to the United States to achieve success. He decided to apply for asylum because of his fear of persecution as a gay man from
Venezuela. He identified Venezuela as a “homophobic country” where people struggle being out of the closet or in same-sex relationships. For him, moving to the United States meant much more than financial upward mobility. He believed that if he moved to the country that proclaimed that “all men are created equal,” he would be able to pursue happiness as a gay man without the persecution that he experienced as in his native land.

Meeting “The One”

The second linking discourse presents participants’ immediate awareness of the connectedness and physical attraction for each other. After meeting their current partner, all couples reported experiencing an immediate feeling of connectedness. Participants described feeling a quick connection and easy bond with their current partner despite disparate cultural backgrounds and lifestyles. Bob recalled, “I met Nicolas in late 2001 in New York City. Our first date was on January, 13, 2002 at a diner in Jersey City. I knew he was special. We just fit together.” Nicolas added:

The first time I saw Bob. Um...He transmitted to me something so powerful, when he saw me. That... somehow, I felt that he was the right one. And let me tell you something, and I think Bob knows this. Before I met Bob, a few days...I mean a few weeks before...I had a terrible date with somebody and I told myself- “I will never go on a date again”. But you know what?... It was everything! It was from seeing him and having the butterflies in the stomach....That meant something to me--physically and emotionally. But it was also...how I met him. I was shy with him. I mean we are both shy guys. I remember that he actually came behind me to pick up his jacket when we were at the bar in New York and I forced myself to grab his hand behind his back.

Bob remembered, “Yes, behind my back and it was the sweetest thing in the world. It was very sweet.” Like Bob and Nicolas, Ricardo and Alejandro experienced a relational bond upon meeting each other for the first time at a coffee shop in Austin. They knew immediately that they were right for each other. Ricardo shared:

I guess I had pictured myself with someone from Mexico. I thought that I was going to come study in the U.S. for four years, get my degree, and then I was going to eventually move back and open a successful business in Mexico. I never thought I would find the
love of my life here. But I enjoy surprises. It was pretty cold...It can actually get pretty cold in Austin during the winter. So the coffee shop was crowded. People wanted their hot cup of cocoa.

Alejandro interrupted and recalled, “I was actually sitting down working on some homework. And he asked if he could share the table with me.” Looking at each other and remembering with smiles on their faces, Ricardo continued describing their story:

And he probably thought I was weird for asking but..you know, it was a table with two chairs and I figured..what the heck! I am cold. I have my warm cup of coco, and this guy seems nice. And cute I might add. So I could have asked any other person sitting at a table, but I chose him.

Alejandro remembered:

He was definitely attractive. But I have to be honest; the connection came after we exchanged words. He was just nice. After he was done with his cup of cocoa, he genuinely thanked me. He was sweet. I remember that. And then he left. And I was like darn! I went back to the coffee shop the next day..ha! And he was there. I wanted to see him again. I mean... Wouldn’t you have gone back? Come on.. look at those eyes. And I was there waiting not because that was my daily hang-out spot, but because I was hoping that I could see him again!

Ricardo summed up their story by saying, “I knew he was the one.” Paulina and Alejandra also cited how through their interactions they realized that they had found the person that they were supposed to be with. Paulina explained their romantic connection and magnetism:

I moved to San Antonio a few years ago. I met Alejandra through her sister. She was fun and cute. I liked her instantly. We met at a party. I had a boyfriend at that time. Seeing Alejandra was difficult for me because I had very strong feelings for her. I knew it was inappropriate to have a boyfriend and have such strong feelings for someone else. But I fell in love with her! She was sweet and funny and caring. I had to break-up with my boyfriend. Soon after, I began dating Alejandra. It was magical. I was aware that Alejandra’s visa had expired before I even met her. Her sister had told me about her struggles with finding a way to renew her visa. But after I met her, and fell in love with her, I was convinced that we could come up with a solution to help her stay in the U.S. It goes to show you that you cannot help who you fall in love with-- I fell in love with another woman who happened to have an expired visa and there was nothing that I could do to stop myself from falling in love.

Similarly, Alejandra talked about Paulina’s eyes as the source of her attraction. She remembered exchanging words with Paulina and being stunned by her beauty. She identified that
attraction as love at first sight. Rebecca and Lori also experienced romantic chemistry upon meeting each other on the basketball court. When asked how they knew that they were meant for each other, Lori described being genuinely attracted to her from the first time she saw Rebecca walking the dog. She said:

Well, I had actually seen Rebecca. She was walking. I was waiting outside to go in for my shift at the bar. And I had seen her walking a dog. They have a dog. So I had seen her before. She had never seen me. I didn’t at the time...my intention was not to chase her down. So when I met her, I had already been attracted to her because I remember seeing her on the street thinking—Wow, she is really attractive! So for me, that was already something that was like...that “thought” had already gone through my mind. And I don’t want to interfere because I am interested to hear.

Rebecca jumped into the conversation and shared how she was automatically drawn to Lori. She said, “Like to me, it was like...it was instant. But, I had never dated a girl before. I had only dated guys. But the first time I saw Lori...something was going on! I knew it was different.” Although having serious romantic feelings for a person of the same gender was something new for Rebecca, she recognized that her attraction for Lori was meaningful and passionate. Even though Lori was concerned that Rebecca was not a “permanent player for the ladies’ team”, Rebecca’s strong feelings for Lori encouraged her to be open about her romantic attraction for her. She indicated:

Lori thought that I was going to freak out and that at some point it was all going to dawn on me. And it never did. I was never scared to do it. I guess I was waiting on her to do it. And obviously as she said, she was of the mind that she wasn’t going to push me into anything. So I was like...I was flying back to England that day to a friend’s wedding and it was close to the time that I was going to be moving back to England as well and...I don’t know; I was like “screw it. I am going to do it!” It wasn’t a scary thing for me at all. Umm, because I could tell that she felt the same way and I could tell that she was respecting me by not doing anything. Um, and I guess that made me like her even more.

In essence, all participants interviewed experience emotional upheaval upon seeing each other. Their stories capture how their physical attraction for each other and automatic deep connection was the beginning chapter of their fortuitous partnership.
Struggles from Discrimination

The third linking discourses are the struggles that these loving families encountered as a result of discrimination and fear of separation. This discourse presents a clear picture of the dark cloud placed by DOMA over participants. Because family unity was not at the heart of United States immigration laws and policies, participants reported experiencing the following five sub-discourses: shock, stress, guilt and pain, loss of control and financial hardship.

Shock. Two of the four American citizen participants (Bob and Alejandro), reported experiencing disbelief or shock when they found out that they were unable to provide, through family sponsorship, their partner with a green card. In contrast, the other two American citizen participants (Paulina and Lori) were aware, prior to dating their partner, of the barriers their partnership faced because of existing heterosexist immigration laws. Bob stated:

On our first date Nicolas explained the process of employment-based sponsorship. He described how he was trying to obtain a green card through employment. I had no idea how difficult immigration was. After Nicolas lost his work sponsorship and we looked into family sponsorship, I learned that we as a couple, were effectively two strangers under the law. Even though we were a family in every sense of the word.

Alejandro reported:

When he (Ricardo) was close to graduating from UT Austin. A semester before graduation, he started stressing out. He told me that there was the possibility that if he could not find a job soon after graduation, that he would have to go back to Mexico. So, I said what many men in love say, “We should get married. We should do it.”

After Ricardo quickly explained the notion that same-sex couples cannot enjoy immigration benefits even when married, he could not believe it. He added:

Umm..yes! shock! To me, graduation meant break-up or separation. Basically, in a day, I found out that the man that I loved and was living with, would be moving back to his country. And that things were out of our control...that the only thing we could do was pray. Pray that he would find a job after graduation. And the problem is that he didn’t. And now we find ourselves in a situation were Ricardo fears driving, drinking, interviewing for a job and so many other things because he is afraid that anything that he will do will get him deported.
As soon as Bob and Alejandro found out about the impossibility of same-sex sponsorship, they began brainstorming alternative solutions. Unfortunately, both were unable to help their partner acquire legal permanent status in the United States. Although they both advocated to end discrimination in United States immigration law, their partners eventually acquired undocumented status which amplified the shock factor.

**Stress.** The second sub-discourse focuses on the stress endured by couples. All participants reported experiencing stress because of the negative impact of heterosexist laws. Their stress was induced because they were considered strangers, rather than family members, under the law. Hoping to win asylum for Nicolas who was fleeing persecution from Venezuela based on his sexual orientation, the couple had to undergo high levels of stress. Recalling the asylum process, Nicolas shared:

I had to ask for asylum in order to remain in the U.S. And I think...um... that part of the process was, you know, going to court every six months. For six years! Where he (Bob) wasn’t allowed to be with me in the court room every six months. (Omitted Interviewer’s comment). Finally, he was allowed in the room. But the attorney said that he was not relevant for the case.

Nicolas who for six years was an asylum seeker, was eventually forced into exile. Bob described the stressful reality of going through court proceedings and exile.

It is just ridiculous and unfair. Basically we are both forced into exile simply because we are gay. The government treats both of us as second-class citizens. I would even consider it like PTSD. You just get beaten down. Because for me, I was actually at the point... I actually did quit my job but I was lucky to have it back. Between fighting the government, giving all that money to lawyers, going to the court cases and being disappointed so often. The meaning matter that they had towards me..they literally said, “you have no”— What were the words that they used Nico? (Nicolas responded “You are not relevant for the case”). Yes, you are not relevant for the case (asylum case)-And I said, “That is my fuckn’ husband! How dare you say that?”

Nicolas added how in the United States and in his home-country it is difficult for people to grasp the concept of second class-citizenship, he explained:
My family doesn’t get the whole thing. Remember Venezuela is a very homophobic country and we don’t have laws or anything. Not even the basics that the U.S. might have, Venezuela struggles. So you know we are still in that process.

Although Alejandro and Ricardo strongly demanded equality under the law through their advocacy efforts, they ran out of options when Ricardo’s visa expired. Ricardo and Alejandro experienced fear and stress knowing that their family could be torn apart if Ricardo were to be deported. Although grateful to this country for the academic opportunities that he was given, Ricardo described the hurt that they endured as a couple because of Ricardo’s undocumented status in the U.S:

Well, I have to say that I am very grateful to this country because I was given the opportunity to study here in the first place. But I also have to say that it hurts to know that the only reason why I can’t have rights is because I am gay. Because it is plain and simple- If I was straight and in a relationship with an American, by now, I would have been a married American resident. You know? Well, if we don’t have the option of getting married—Why won’t immigration at least allow us to live together? I mean we are living together in spite of immigration’s will, but not legally. If I decide to stay here longer, I would have to continue living with an undocumented status..and that is just not me. I like to do things right. It just hurts to leave the man that I love. But to answer your question, it makes me feel like I am not worth...and our relationship is not worth as much..as that of a heterosexual couple. And more importantly, who cares about me, why don’t they care about their own citizens—the government is basically telling Alejandro that he is not as important; that he is basically inferior to other straight American citizens. It sucks and it is stressful girl.

Alejandro echoed Ricardo’s feelings and added, “The idea of knowing that this happens because we are gay, really impacts us as individuals on a psychological level.” For Paulina and Alejandra although they hoped to shatter discrimination against binational couples by asserting their own inherent equality through active advocacy, Alejandra was eventually deported by ICE to her home country. She stated that she is now living with stress and without her fiancé in Mexico. She explained:

After plenty of attorney meetings looking into all my options to stay legally in the US to be able to form my family with my now fiancé and work legally at a job to the level of my scholarly we find it close to impossible. Even when it’s legal to marry in different states, that does not help my immigration status.. As of right now I’m put off status or in
other words illegal. My beloved partner has no way to legally sponsor me to be in the U.S. and form a family. I was forced by the U.S. government to move back to Mexico. I am now living, without my fiancée in Mexico. After three years of living together, immigration separated us. It's incredible to know that I could marry a guy and pretend and lie to the U.S. that we are together in order to get sponsorship but I cannot do it the right way.

Paulina explained how immigration's "cruel" ways of treating binational families has caused their family stress because of the lack of options that they are given. She added the following:

We came up with several ideas to make things work! Many! We felt desperate and we worked tirelessly to come up with good legal solutions. But we ran out of options. The U.S. government does not give you options if you are gay. The U.S. government puts you in a situation in which your foreign partner has two options: 1) to continue living with you in the U.S illegally, or 2) to move back to their country. Immigration has no idea how many gay American Citizens suffer because of their illogical last century policies. I have to work twice as hard because I am the provider in this family. If immigration were to recognize our marriage as legitimate, then we both would be great producers, great providers, which would help make this country stronger. Why make it difficult for us? This country is a nation that has been built by immigrants and a nation that protects its families—So, what is wrong with the U.S. government? Can't they see that this is cruel. Not allowing us to choose who we want to spend the rest of our lives with, is discrimination in its most transparent form. Marriage issues aside, what the U.S. government is telling us, is that as gay people we cannot choose who we want to live with or who we want to love. It is just sick.

Lori shared the stress that she experienced seeing Rebecca go through the period of visa renewal:

So...watching Rebecca go through the process of...when she was looking for a job...Well first, when she was applying to schools and then she got in, that was I would say-- a very stressful situation. And then she graduated and that was an elevated stress... Because you were applying to schools, you were applying to doctorate programs, and you were applying for jobs. And knowing that, I think at one point if you didn't just interview within a week you had to fly back because you had been here for three months and that was your limited stay. So, I was sitting here. I mean, there was crying, there was stress. It wasn't depression. No. I don't want to put that there. But it was definitely too serious. I think...we just fought so hard through it. You believe in it so much. You want it. She was working her ass off.

Guilt and pain. The third sub-discourse examines the feelings of guilt and pain experienced by the family. In particular, it explores the feelings of guilt experienced by foreign national participants for putting the American citizen through stress related to their immigration
status and examines the feelings of pain experienced by American citizen participants when they realized they were unable to sponsor their partners for residency.

Nicolas described the guilt he experienced after seeing how Bob struggled failing to convince the government of the inherent dignity and integrity of his family. Nicolas stated:

When we went to Canada for the first time, just for a week or so, he felt sick. He was really angry that he had to move to a new place that he had never even considered before or even met before. That is part of why I feel guilty. I feel sometimes... You know, that guilt that I separated him from his family and friends. And I brought him here... I know it was his decision, is not my fault. But deep inside of me there is a little bit of guilt he did it for me and I feel guilty.

For Alejandro, seeing Ricardo fear deportation caused pain. He reported:

I feel helpless. Just talking about it... my chest hurts. There is really nothing I can do to ease his pain; his anxiety; the fact that he has trouble sleeping at night not knowing what will happen if he gets deported. I don’t have the privilege, like other straight couples, to tell him that things will be o.k because I can’t help. I can’t give him the rights that he deserves. It breaks my heart. Mmmm. It hurts me to see him suffer. But I got to be honest; I suffer as well... in a selfish way- because I want him and need him by my side. Separation is not an option for us. I know, that I can’t have a future without him. I would be miserable if immigration were to deport him.

**Loss of control.** The fourth sub-discourse involves feelings of loss of control experienced by the couple. Not being able to establish long-term goals as a couple because of the temporary immigration status of the foreigner, participants felt a loss of control over future events. Alejandro explained that not knowing whether or when Ricardo would be deported forced them to put a hold on important life decisions such as having children. He explained, “We want to adopt a little boy. That would make me the happiest dude in the world. I mean, we already have his name picked out and everything. (Omitted Interviewer’s comments). We chose Jorge.” Ricardo added:

It is just difficult; you know? We do not want to adopt our baby boy YET (with emphasis) because we do not know what the future has in store for us. One day we are optimistic, and the next day we become overwhelmed with the idea that I might have to return to Mexico. There is no way that I can reassure him that I will always be by his side. You know? That is what couples do... they reassure each other. But the whole VISA
situation is so out of my control. How can I make the commitment to have a baby with
the man I love most dearly in the world, if I can’t promise him that I will be by his side. It
almost feels like our dreams as a couple...(pause)...marriage, investments, children-they
are on hold. At this point it seems like it is kinda’ like- “no papers no baby”. It is all up to
immigration.

Alejandra indicated:

As of today our future looks very gray. I cannot legally go back to the US. If I were to go
back, I would be unable to renew my driver’s license which is expired or do anything
legal for that matter. We are being split by uncertainty til’ I can find my way back to her.
She is currently staying in the U.S because that is her country. If she were to move to
Mexico, we wouldn’t survive. We would have no income, she would not know the
language and her friends and family would be devastated.

Financial hardship. The fifth sub-discourse presents the financial hardship encountered
by participants as a result of the barriers imposed on them by policies that prevent foreign
national partners to work legally in the United States. Out of the three participating couples, all
have experienced significant financial stress except for Lori and Rebecca. Rebecca is on an
employment-based visa which allows her to work and maintain the financial well-being of her
family. According to Bob, the financial hardship has been a challenging stressor that they have
had to survive. He indicated that during Nicolas’s asylum process, he spent thousands of dollars
going to court every month. Forced to live a life in a country other than his own, Bob describes
feeling irritated by the fact that he funded his own persecution by paying United States taxes
while living in Canada:

One of the things that irritated me the most. And it still does to this day... I am paying
taxes. Even if I live in Canada, I still have to pay U.S. Taxes. So I am paying for my
persecution. Because the people at the department of justice..I pay their salary. So it
irritates me. We stopped counting at 20,000 but we didn’t calculate...Well you should
count all of those years that Nicolas wasn’t allowed to work; so if we did that, we are
talking about hundreds of thousands of dollars. Of income lost! On average he would
make 40 to 45 thousand dollars a year. We have been together for 11 years and he hasn’t
been allowed to work for half of that, so we are talking about a big chunk of money. You
know? I might have a good life now in Canada but... if Nicolas and I would have met at
24 instead of me 34 we probably wouldn’t have financially survived this. So it is about
advocacy and helping others.
Similarly, Alejandro reported, "Gosh! Finances are difficult with only one person being able to work. And I know that Ricardo hopes and dreams that he could help me build our financial future, but again, it is out of his control." For Paulina and Alejandra, deportation resulted in the depletion of Paulina’s savings given that she was left with no options but to exhaust her hard earned money to help Alejandra survive in Mexico. In fact, Paulina and Alejandra indicated that one of the main reasons why Paulina chose to stay in the U.S rather than move to Mexico is because the couple would not have financially survived if they both had moved to Mexico. Alejandra explained, "If she (Paulina) were to move to Mexico, we wouldn’t survive. We would have no income." Alejandra explained that because Paulina has never lived in Mexico, she would have difficulty adapting to how businesses function in Mexico. She also added that language barriers would have made it very difficult for Paulina to have a successful career in Mexico. When Rebecca and Lori were asked if financial stress was an issue for them, Lori indicated that the immigration process did cost them a lot of money. At the same time, Rebecca added that “Thankfully, it wasn’t so much of an issue” and that it “Didn’t hinder” them.

Fighting for Family Unity Above All

The fourth linking discourse explores how participants fought for family unity above all. This discourse has four sub-discourses: speaking out, together means winning, a clean fight, and a motivator.

Speaking out. The first sub-discourse points to the ways in which participants spoke-out to voice their needs as a family. All participants used their voice as a critical instrument in their fight for family unity. When asked what had helped them thrive in spite of stressors, Bob stated that speaking out had been helpful. As a result of their voices, Bob and Nicolas are respected as pioneers in the movement for marriage equality and immigration rights for lesbian and gay
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binational couples. Occupying an important place in the history of this civil rights movement, Bob explained:

The thing is, when Nicolas and I were at this stage in our relationship, this was relatively new- there were no gay binational couples speaking out. They were terrified to. So we decided, I think it was as early as 2004 that we started doing media. And we used our names and our pictures. We just didn’t care because we said, “What do we have to lose? If no one else is going to stand up and show their face, we are not going to get anywhere”. So we did Spanish Media. Then we did a documentary.

In addition, when Nicolas was going to court, Bob was informed that he would only be allowed to be a witness to Nicolas’s mental state. In reaction to this, Bob decided to speak out. He explained how this process transformed him from a shy young man in his twenties to an empowered man with a voice:

I was only allowed to be a witness to Nicolas’s mental state. So I let the lawyer have it in court. I really told him the story...you know?...shamed him really. Which is amazing because I don’t know where those words came from. They came flying out of me. (Omitted interviewer’s commentary). I went through my 20s like a door mat. I never...I was afraid even to return items at the store. It was ridiculous. And then I met this man and in 2002 my life had changed. Because it was that time in my life when I had to use my voice.

Alejandro also talked about how they took up the cause of equality for LGBT families and used speaking out as a social justice tool. Refusing to allow their family to be torn apart by a discriminatory law, they became fighters. He stated:

We also like to remind each other that we are fighters. We are outspoken individuals who believe in equality. The injustice that we experience has given us a sense of purpose. We believe that this in some ways... this is Our Call--Our call to fight for what was given to us by God..which is freedom.

Similarly, standing up to a powerful federal government agency that refused to recognize their family, Alejandra and Paulina attended multiple Gay Pride Events (prior to Alejandra’s deportation) where they informed other members of the LGBT community and their allies about the Uniting American Families Act. In the same manner, determined to protect their relationship...
and build a future together in the United States, Lori and Rebecca saw their marriage in a New York court as a tool to voice and exercise equality for same-sex couples.

**Together means winning.** The second sub-discourse concentrates on how participants saw staying together as “a win” over the American government and their discriminatory policies. In spite of the dark shadow that sexual prejudice casted over their relationship, none of the participants in this study saw the divorce or permanent separation as an option. Even in the midst of the cultural and social stresses to which these participants were uniquely vulnerable, family unity remained their top priority. Bob summarized it best when he explained that their relationship always came first. Rather than allowing sexual prejudice to come between their family, Bob focused on fighting DOMA—the enemy that took away their rights and benefits. Bob stated,

> Well, I always say that Nicolas and I are a family, not merely legal domestic partners. Either way, the U.S. government does not recognize us as anything but complete strangers despite that fact that we have a New Jersey Domestic partnership.

> The thing is...I never have blamed him for what we have gone through. It was always the outside forces that were trying to hurt us. There was never an internal conflict between us. Because, it was never Nicolas’s fault that the U.S. government did not want me to sponsor him. They are the enemy. Our relationship always came first. It never occurred to me to not move to Canada to be with him. It was just what we had to do. It was about let’s plan it, let’s emotionally deal with it.

**A clean fight.** The third sub-discourse explores participants’ perception of their fight as a clean fight; a fight for freedom, what is right, and what is sacred. All participants reported that they made a conscious decision to be honest and true to their same-sex relationship. They did not allow their feelings of frustration or powerlessness to contaminate their judgment. Ricardo and Alejandra indicated that although at some point friends and family members suggested the idea of creating a sham marriage with someone of the opposite sex. Although at some point it crossed their mind, they decided that faking a marriage was not the right thing to do. Therefore, they
decided to fight clean. Bob indicated that his win over the government was facilitated by his move to Canada, a place where his relationship was recognized as a valid and legitimate partnership:

At some point when we were going through all this, I felt powerless. And I think that doing the back-up plan to move to Canada, it was about us taking power away from the U.S. government to tear us apart. I didn't realize until now how completely empowering it was to file those documents back in February to what is immigration here in Canada.

But the back-up plan to move to Canada was really good. Because no matter what happened after the court decision, we could say, "You know, screw you America. You didn't beat us, you just made it a little more inconvenient for us. But we still win because we are still together." Sometimes I will revisit what we went through at that moment to feel the emotion of it. To put me there for a moment. And that is why I continue to fight. Why it is so important for me to change the law forever.

Like Bob and Nicolas, Ricardo and Alejandro stated that if immigration were to deport Ricardo, Alejandro would move to Mexico. Therefore, they would continue fighting according to their values with a back-up plan that involves Mexico City a potential new home. Alejandra provided a description of how they managed to fight against immigration's discriminatory policies in a way that reflected their values and beliefs. She shared:

Many times we have thought about cheating the system, we have been offered for her to sponsor a gay guy close friend of us and his partner to sponsor me. We have been scared to do it and afraid it would end in a bigger problem. We thought about how marriage a gay guy dressed in DRAG. You know places like California are pretty flexible! However we also have strong beliefs about what is right and what is sacred. To me and to both of us, getting married is the union between two beloved people, it's a commitment of love and respect, is sharing a path in life till the end, it's the beginning of a family and not just a piece of paper. It's devastating that other people get to choose and discriminate my life, what we feel for each other... as well as being able to live the life we as humans deserve to have a shot at.

Lori and Rebecca explained that although they had been stressed by governmental policies that they did not agree with, their fight was a "fact of life" and if the law was not on their side, then they would find an alternative solution. Fortunately, for Lori and Rebecca, they had different options that made their fight more bearable. They realized that if for any reason living
together in the United States was no longer an option, they could move to England. Lori said, “I could move back to England and she could sponsor me that way. So we, luckily, have quite a few options.” Rebecca described what their fight against the law looked like:

Um, I am trying to think of...it wasn’t like a heartbreaking thing. It wasn’t really upsetting, it was just like—“that is a fact of life”...it sucks, and it is stupid because that is the law but we both...we are not passive. But we understand that there are laws out there that we don’t necessarily agree with, but we still have to live by them. So it wasn’t a shock. It wasn’t upsetting. It was just the way it was and we were going to have to figure out how to do it otherwise. Because...So what if they are not on our side, we are going to figure it out kind of thing.

A motivator. The fourth sub-discourse highlights how participants’ fight for family unity became a motivator that provided a sense of purpose and meaning. Instead of looking at obstacles imposed by immigration as barriers that hindered their success, they saw their “fight for family unity” as a motivator. Alejandra argued,

My life continues to have meaning which is to be reunited with my fiancé. This type of discrimination simply cannot continue happening. Things need to change. It is inevitable. Gay issues are the civil rights movement of our time. I will just wait and have faith.

Rebecca is grateful that she is allowed to work temporarily and live in the United States as a result of her employer’s sponsorship. Although she feels indebted to her employer, she also feels motivated to have an outstanding performance at work to convince her employer to give her the opportunity to remain in the United States through employment sponsorship. Rebecca admitted,

I think that is probably why I work so hard at work because I have this sort of feeling of gratitude towards them; so it makes me probably work too much. And it would be really great if that sort of burden was lifted and I could be sponsored through Lori instead of work. Umm..., so to that extent it’s really... is disappointing but yeah, we are lucky (to have the option of employment sponsorship).

Tools to Thrive

The fifth linking discourse points to the specific tools that participants used to thrive within a difficult context.
Not escalating. The first sub-discourse presents how Bob and Nicolas kept their ordinary everyday life problems from escalating into arguments about immigration. Bob claimed,

We have our bad moments. Just those bad moments don’t escalate into our immigration issues. But you know if we are fighting about why someone didn’t make dinner last night, it doesn’t escalate into—and I left the U.S. because of you. It is just that.”

Nicolas agreed and said, “Never! Never!”

Optimism. The second sub-discourse highlights how participants focused on what was working for them rather than solely focusing on their needs, wants and wishes. Participants concentrated on enjoying each other in present time rather than spending time fearing future separation. Alejandro emphasized, “We have learned to live one day at a time.” Ricardo agreed and commented:

One day at a time is right. We appreciate each other as a couple so much and we try to enjoy every minute that we have together. I am so appreciative of Alejandro. And I can feel his appreciation for me as well. So we try to squeeze every bit of juice out of our relationship. You know? We make an effort to try to live in the present moment and enjoy who we are as a couple as much as we can. Because we know that the future brings with it heartbreak and very tough decisions that we need to make together as a family.

Even though Bob and Nicolas were exiled being forced to leave the United States, they have learned to see Canada as their home. Bob shared, “Looking back, even in bad moments I have never thought—Ugh, I have to go back to the U.S. You know? It has not even crossed my mind that it is an option.” They see Canada as a safe and welcoming environment where they made good friends. Nicolas indicated, “I mean, somehow, we are lucky that Canada gave us good friends and a bunch of other stuff that has helped.” Nicolas and Bob’s optimism is evident in this quotation from Bob:

We have been very lucky. A lot of couples when they go through this turmoil is that things just have not worked for them when they move. We have met a lot of couples that have done what we have done, but they didn’t make it. And it is because it didn’t work out, maybe the luck. For us things just worked out—I got to keep my job, Nicolas…we sent him to school and he started a career here in Canada as a chef, I sold my house in
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New Jersey right before the market died. So we skipped a lot of stressors that other couples are facing. We have been very lucky despite the circumstances. We have thrived.

Similarly, when Rebecca and Lori were asked how they managed to cope with stressors induced by sexual prejudice, they responded by saying that they did not feel like they needed to cope. They explained that they were simply moving forward regardless of the stressors. Lori explained:

Yeah. I do think. Um, I don’t hate the word coping. I use it all the time with my clients as well. The idea of coping... I don’t think we are necessarily in that space like of hiding by putting ourselves in strictly people who accept gay people. So it is not a hiding thing. I feel like coping has to do more with a negative feeling. I don’t feel like our situation is negative. Or that is like trauma or something. So, it is hard to think that those solutions were about coping. And it is not necessarily about that. Does that make sense? We are kind of optimistic people. If you have noticed.

Rebecca agreed:

Yeah. We don’t need to cope. We are just living our lives. I mean, of course there have been challenges. There have been stressful times. And figuring it all out. And it would have been easier if those hadn’t existed. Um, but yeah. As far as our day to day life, it is very normal. We are not hiding anything; we are not struggling with things. We’ll figure it out. We have options. And...

Safe environment. The third sub-discourse highlights participants’ choice to live in inclusive and LGBT friendly areas. For Rebecca, Lori, Ricardo and Alejandro, living in affirmative areas has served as a tool that has helped them thrive. In addition, establishing relationships with individuals who support the policies that benefit their binational relationship has helped participants feel more comfortable. Ricardo explained:

I also have to say that we are also very smart about where we live, who we hang out with, and who we share our story with. As much as we would like to share our story with everyone, sometimes it is not the safest thing to do. To give you a concrete example (pause) --- When we decided to move-in together, it soon became clear to us that it was safer to live in South Austin rather than North Austin because it is more liberal, younger, and significantly much more gay-friendly. So sometimes, making small but wise decisions like those, help us avoid unnecessary stressors.

Rebecca claimed:
While we are here...I mean, we are lucky to live in New York. And now we are out in Brooklyn. We have a five minute delay from the biggest probably lesbian community.

I think when we first started... I didn’t notice people staring or making comments. So, I didn’t see it (see sexual prejudice). And now, obviously where we live, we are able to be who we are. And not be looked down to. I think we made it a point to put ourselves in locations and around people that don’t judge. It helps.

Lori added:

Well, I think I want to answer your original question-What do we do day to day that helps us survive? And that is definitely a part of it. We have created a big space, a safe environment for ourselves... um, that has made us feel comfortable both in physical space and being close to people who do support it and would support policy like this. And to stress it out further, in NY in general no one cares; literally. They don’t care. You can do what you want. You could be who you want to be here. And to be honest, I keep talking about running away from Texas. But that is partly why I left Texas. So that I could be myself. It wasn’t a safe space. To further that, my job, the place where I work, serves the LGBT community. I mean that is like 90% of their clients. So, I have created like an entire life that is safe.

Rebecca concluded by saying, “With my job they have always been incredibly supportive. We are lucky to be living in this safe world.”

Support

The sixth linking discourse presents the different sources of support for these participants during their journey.

**Seeking help.** The first sub-discourse points to how participants reached out for help during a period of tribulation. Bob and Nicolas sought psychological treatment for depression.

The couple had been exposed to difficult events including going to court every six months. They understood that seeking counseling would be helpful. Bob shared:

We went to counseling and got some medication too. The first year that we were in Canada I was on anti-depression pills. I needed some. I had to really deal with being depressed. And Nicolas did as well (omitted Interviewer’s commentary). I started them right before I was about to move. I actually carried them into Canada to get me through the hurdle. And then, it got me through the hurdle and I felt great. So my advice to other couples in this situation is- “don’t ever, ever, feel like you can’t ask for help”. When we moved to Canada things weren’t perfect because we were having trouble listening to each other. And the counselor said, “Ok Bob what do you want? And Nicolas what do you
want?” That is how I found out that Nicolas wanted to be a chef. And that is why we did...we sent him to chef school.

Support from family. The second sub-discourse points to how participants benefited from friend and family support. Bob indicated:

You know, it is funny. Sometimes I don’t get it. Because my dad...it is funny, before I didn’t get along with my dad. He is now our biggest supporter. I guess my family saw that I was in love for the first time. You know, that this was real, and they loved him too. So they both got on board.

Similarly, Ricardo described how inclusive friends have facilitated thriving. He indicated:

Friends have been supportive. We try to surround ourselves with intelligent and inclusive friends... and thank God Austin has a lot of well-informed individuals who have the strength to counteract the strong wave of homophobia that is sometimes experienced here in Texas. We try to avoid hanging out with individuals who oppose the policies that would allow us to continue living together.

Alejandro added, “Exactly. Because the truth is, it would hurt us to know that our good friends oppose the legalization of same-sex marriage or the passing of a new immigration reform.” For Alejandra and Rebecca, support from family was critical. Alejandra shared how she is blessed by friends and family. She explained, “What has kept me going has been the strong support of my family and friends. I have been blessed with a strong support system. They always know how to make me smile even during dark moments.” Paulina echoed Alejandra’s sentiment and said:

Fortunately, the love from family has kept me from crashing and falling. My friends have been there for me every time I feel desperate or lonely. The idea that I will one day be able to be with her again, is worth moving forward. It is definitely worth the fight! When you have found the one for you, you just have to keep walking. You can’t ignore who you are meant to be with and abandon them. It is just meant to be. My family understands that. My friends constantly call me, invite me out to dinner with them, Facebook me, really anything they can do to make me feel in good company. My parents have served this country and love this country. They cannot understand how their own government, the government that they fought for, discriminates against their daughter. So they constantly remind me of how much they love me and how I deserve living with my fiancé.

Rebecca described how her family, an understanding system, accepted and celebrated her relationship and wedding with Lori. They welcomed Lori into the family instantly. She stated:
We have been very lucky. Obviously it was something very new for my family. And um, I think Lori was more nervous about me telling them than I was. I approached my sister first and she was just very-- normal about it. Well not normal about it. (Omitted Lori’s commentary). She was very excited. I think she was a bit more proud than we are. She was really helpful when I told my parents...And we spoke on the phone. And then, she made sure that she was at their house afterwards to see if she could answer any questions. And it was...We were only together probably about a month after this all happened. Just really supportive. I am sure that it has taken some time on their side. But never once did they give an indication that they were disappointed. Or anything, I mean, they love Lori.

When Lori was asked about her family, she added:

My family is divorced and half of the family is very supportive and the other half isn’t so much but they are growing. So it is a process. I mean they have been supportive. I mean monetarily. Just all around. But specifically, you know? I mean...I don’t know if you know this. But even when I had cold feet right before the wedding, my mom said, “you couldn’t find a better woman to marry”. Like all of this stuff, and if she was really at some point concerned that I was marrying I woman, she could have easily told me to back-out because I had cold feet. And even at that moment she was like “You are crazy, there is no other better woman for you.” I think she even said “person” like you couldn’t find “anyone” better. Like almost, it doesn’t matter.

Support in each other. The third sub-discourse presents how participants benefited from their interactions with each other. Bob explained that sharing time with each other and establishing their relationship as their top priority has created a fruitful and supportive friendship that has strengthened their partnership. He stated:

We are best friends, and that is really important because we genuinely love to be together. And we always say- “You are my favorite person in the whole world”. Because we just are to each other. We don’t necessarily enjoy the same things, but we enjoy sharing things together. So, you know like pottery last night. That was more of a Nicolas thing. But Bob went. It was all about being together, and of course I felt miserably. But you know, it has always been that we are number one on each other’s lives. Above everything- above friends, above family...He is the most important thing in my life. We are just best friends.

Lori argued that they demonstrate each other support by creating an environment where open communication is used as an everyday tool. She stated,

So day to day, we definitely spend time creating this, um, environment. Even within our home, with communication and openness about what happened today...“Are you feeling ok?” And if that happens to be part of the topic that comes up (referring to immigration difficulties), we definitely deal with it.
In addition, Rebecca talked about how as a result of Lori’s support and their helpful interactions as a couple, she has managed to grow on a personal level. She commented:

I don’t know, but that just reminded me. When I was back in England. Two weeks ago, my sister told Lori that I was always grumpy until I met her. And it wasn’t that I was a terrible person before. Um, or incredible unhappy. Which I don’t think I was. But they could see the difference in me around Lori versus anybody else that I had ever been with. And it was obvious to them. And I think that helped them a lot. Not that they needed a lot of help becoming ok with it because they are very open minded people. But the happiness in me that they saw, made it easier.

The Dream

The seventh linking discourse involves participants’ vision of their preferred future, a future with immigration equality and laws that recognize same-sex loving relationships. When asked what their life would look like if their relationship were to be recognized by the federal government, Alejandro described:

In some ways, we feel like we are walking on egg shells right now. That would be gone. Instead, we would feel like we matter to others. The feeling of being recognized by others as an actual couple with rights, would validate our love and our commitment to each other. Ricardo would lose all fear of being deported. He would be able to drive five miles past the speed limit without feeling like he is going to get pulled over (laughter). I would feel comfortable holding his head on my shoulder without worrying about being policed.

Ricardo added:

The uncertainty, fear, frustration, desperation and terror would be gone. We would become preoccupied by the ordinary things that other couples worry about, like---Oh, you squeezed the toothpaste the wrong way. Rather than being worried about constantly being hunted by immigration. You know? I would be able to have a job and help Alejandro with home and everyday expenses which would relieve a lot of stress. That would be amazing! And we could start planning a baby.

Alejandra who was separated from her fiancé by immigration, described her preferred future as a world without geographical borders. She exclaimed with emotion:

If we were granted equal immigration rights, my whole day would change from day to night. I would burst with joy and I would thank God for blessing me with that gift every day. I would have better mental and physical health- from the basic stuff like eating and sleeping habits. They would improve. If we were granted equal immigration rights, I
would run to her and we would be able to have ordinary lives. We would go to movies together, visit the lake, barbecue together. We would be able to plan a future together!

Paulina echoed Alejandra’s sentiment and imagined her preferred future to take place in the United States:

If we were granted equal immigration rights, it would mean that God heard my prayers. My life would be a life. Like it was supposed to be. The loneliness would not exist. The resentment towards my government would be gone. Instead of rushing through the day to forget about being in a difficult situation, I would want to be aware and present in the moment. I would not want to move fast! I would want to make every minute last. I would have her in front of me and I would be able to hold her hand. We would watch comedy DVDs until falling asleep. Fear would be replaced with peace.

The chronological organization of participants’ narratives into skeleton plots as well as the organization of the various skeleton plots into linking discourses across participants facilitated my understanding of participants’ shared realities and collective stories. The previous quotations, suggest that narrative interviewing can help empower participants to find their voice of authorship.
CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

Despite the vast amount of sexuality and immigration scholarship, no researchers had previously studied how families managed to succeed when they were denied marriage and immigration rights under DOMA. This dissertation studied the specific psychological and sociopolitical issues that same-sex binational couples struggle to overcome. Participants’ shared how under DOMA, the United States government failed to recognize non-heterosexual binational couples as families. Participants endured hardship and psychological stress when a non-citizen family member was unable to legally remain in the country. Nevertheless, the primary intention of this study was not to present the wide variety of stressors and demands that these families had to endure. Instead, this study explored the commonalities among participants’ stories regarding how they managed to overcome risks demands and stressors. This study supports previous positive psychology literature on LGBT mental health that explores the resilient qualities of non-heterosexual individuals (Cohn & Hastings, 2010; Riggle, Whitman, Olson, Rostosky & Strong, 2008; Russell & Richards, 2003). In 2008, a positive psychology online survey found that over 500 gay and lesbian participants considered the following to be positive aspects of having a non-heterosexual lifestyle: 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) (Riggle, Whitman, Olson, Rostosky & Strong, 2008). Like previous research, results in this dissertation described how within a heterosexist society, non-heterosexual bi-national families helped protect their family from crisis, breakdown, or separation in a non-supportive society.
Just like informal conversations and dialogue can shape new realities, so can interviewing. When individuals talk about their lives, they select specific sections of their story to share. These selections often depend on who the audience is and what the expected social norms are in the context in which the story is being told. Because non-heterosexual binational families are aware of heteronormative understandings, sexual prejudice and nativism in society, many have chosen to keep significant sections of their story to themselves. With that in mind, this study created an inclusive and affirmative space where participants told, shaped and constructed their stories in their own terms. Narrative interviewing was used as a method to help empower participants to find their voice of authorship. With the understanding that beliefs and ideas are created through human interaction, each participant was interviewed with their partner. The narratives that were gathered in the context of my interview, involved more than understanding participants' experiences. Participants' stories resonated in ways that changed their experience and living conditions permanently. A couple of months after all interviews were conducted, the United States Supreme Court struck down Section 3 of the federal Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) which prohibited the federal government from conferring benefits to married same-sex couples. In this historical ruling, the court made it possible for lesbian and gay Americans to apply for green cards on behalf of their foreign national spouses. All interviews in this study were conducted when that provision of the law made it impossible for lesbian and gay couples to receive immigration benefits, including green cards. It was because of brave LGBT couples that public opinion shifted drastically over the last year regarding same-sex marriage. Perhaps, the courageous participants in this study contributed to such societal changes through their own storytelling and ability to speak out. Three out of the four couples indicated that it was
the first time that they had shared their binational story from beginning to end. Their victory over heterosexist immigration policies is evidence of their strength, courage, and resilience.

Participants trusted me to share their stories in ways that would portray their actual experiences. My adoption of an open, curious, and not-knowing stance during the interview process allowed me to make sense of each family’s unique experience. Through data collection, I was first able to organize these families’ experiential worlds to allow for a comprehensive understanding of their stories. However, for purposes of data analysis, I had to deconstruct their stories into narratives and skeleton plots, and then reconstruct their stories into linking discourses. It is important to add that through these deconstructions and reconstructions, meanings were altered as they were later written about from this researcher’s perspective and worldview.

Research Questions

First Research Question

In this study, I began by asking the question “What are the challenges that non-heterosexual binational couples and families experience in the face of discriminatory laws and sexual prejudice?” Because family unity was not at the heart of American immigration laws and policies, participants reported experiencing shock, stress, guilt, pain, loss of control and financial hardship. The notion that same-sex couples could not enjoy immigration benefits even when married was difficult for all participants to process. The first observation during the interviews was that each participant had unique experiences. While they all experienced the stress that was generated by sexual prejudice and heterosexist laws, no two couples had identical stories. All stories however, were powerful and diverse.
A second observation was that although all couples experienced hardship, couples that suffered deportation experienced extreme levels of psychological and financial hardship. It appeared as though the closer a couple was to facing deportation and/or family separation, the more hardship the couple experienced. Bob, Nicolas, Paulina and Alejandra suffered from severe depression, anxiety and stress as a result of deportation. For instance, Nicolas and Bob were treated like “second-class citizens” during their stressful asylum process; a time when they were forced to endure “cruel” court proceedings. Eventually, they were forced into exile which aggravated existing levels of stress. Similarly, Paulina and Alejandra described feeling devastated after Alejandra was deported. Because they have had to live apart and in two different countries, extreme pressure, loneliness, and financial hardship tested the strength of their relationship. To a lesser degree, Ricardo, who did not suffer deportation but lived in the United States with undocumented status, constantly feared action against him. Rebecca and Lori who continued living together in the United States with legal status (employment visa), reported manageable levels of stress. Because Rebecca and Lori feel optimistic about Rebecca’s visa renewal, they remain hopeful and confident about building a successful future together. This is not to say that couples who did not face deportation had low levels of stress. However, couples who continue living in the United States together confirmed this observation by saying that if their foreign national partner were to face deportation, their stress experience would be intolerable.

The third observation was that American citizen participants who understood how immigration policies affected the LGBT community prior to their relationship with a foreign national, felt like they were ready and prepared to deal with immigration when they first learned about their partner’s immigration troubles. American citizen participants who were unaware of
such policies before they began their relationship, reported experiencing disbelief and shock when they learned that they would be unable to sponsor their partner for United States residency. Overall, all participants reported that it was difficult for them to deal with the reality that their family could not enjoy immigration benefits even when married. Although some U.S citizens felt a higher level of readiness, all participants felt a loss of control because their efforts and hard work could not help their partner acquire legal permanent status in the United States. Thus, readiness did not appear to prevent loss of control.

The fourth observation involved specific family communication patterns to same-sex binational families. All U.S citizens reported experiencing pain and frustration seeing their foreign partner struggle with immigration. Frustration emerged among American citizens when they realized that working tirelessly to fix their partner’s immigration status, resulted in no legal solutions. All foreign nationals on the other hand, reported experiencing guilt seeing their partner in pain and affected by a situation that they believed they had produced. It appeared as though the pain and frustration American citizens experienced, interacted in a recursive way with the guilt experienced by foreign national participants. Although American citizen participants attempted to make their partners feel better by focusing on fixing the problem, their pain maintained the levels of distress experienced by the foreign national.

The fifth observation was that participants experienced “loss of control” over their future. Unable to establish long-term goals because of incertitude, couples were pressured to put dreams on hold. To a degree, participants felt like their future was not theirs to plan. They believed that immigration clouded their vision of the future. Because of Ricardo’s undocumented status and fears related to his deportation, Alejandro and Ricardo decided to put on hold their decision to adopt a baby. Lori and Rebecca desire to move to California; however, because Rebecca’s visa is
sponsored by her employer in New York, they are unable to move until Rebecca finds a new employer in California who is willing to sponsor her employment-visa. Although Bob and Nicolas have dreams of traveling to the United States to spend holidays with Bob's family, Nicolas was banned from re-entering the United States because of a ten year ban associated with his exile. Suffering from that same ban, Alejandra is unable to move back to the United States to be with her fiancée. This makes it difficult for them to achieve their goal of one day raising their future baby in the United States.

Second Research Question

The second question I asked was “How does a couple or family cope with the potential or present threat of family separation?” Participants explained that keeping family as their number one priority, speaking out about the stressors affecting their families and reframing obstacles as motivators, were all factors that helped participants thrive.

All participants in this study believe their partner to be a “life partner” rather than a simple romantic relationship. Convinced that their partner is the person that they are supposed to spend the rest of their lives with, participants saw immigration as a strong inconvenience that made them work harder as a family rather than as an obstacle that made it impossible for them to have a future together. Although most couples in this study considered immigration policy to be a threat; they were confident that immigration would never interrupt their family unity. Even in the midst of the cultural and social stresses, family unity remained their top priority. Thus, American citizen participants saw their partner's removal or possible removal from the United States as physical separation from the country in which they started their relationship, not as the end of family unity. They saw keeping their status as a couple as “a win” over the American government and their discriminatory policies. All families were convinced that immigration
would never be the cause of divorce or separation for as long as they were able to keep their status as a couple, they were willing to endure stress and pain. Even in the case of Paulina and Alejandra, where distance was a difficult barrier, both members invested time, effort, and energy to make it work. Understanding that their relationship was a commitment of love and respect to each other, these families worked arduously to prevent outside forces from interfering in their interactions. Rather than allowing sexual prejudice to come between their family, participants’ focused their frustration on fighting the policies that oppressed and marginalized them. In essence, the conviction that family separation would not be an option for them helped these families cope.

Participants used “speaking out” as a coping mechanism. They effectively communicated their needs and the needs of other binational families to other people including friends, family members, mental health professionals and the larger society. They became knowledgeable and educated on the topic of LGBT immigration issues and used their knowledge to explain to others how their families were being affected. All participants asserted themselves through advocacy; they all used their voices as a critical instrument in their fight for family unity. Bob and Nicolas for example, are respected as pioneers in the movement for marriage equality and immigration rights. Bob explained how his participation in this movement transformed him from a shy young man in his twenties to an empowered man with a voice. Alejandro and Ricardo indicated that the injustice they had experienced gave them a sense of purpose. They believed that advocacy on behalf of immigration equality was their “Call,” a “Call to fight for what was given to us by God...which is freedom.” Alejandra and Paulina attended multiple Gay Pride Events (prior to Alejandra’s deportation) where they educated people about the Uniting American Families Act.
In the same manner, Lori and Rebecca saw their marriage in a New York court as a tool that
gave voice to their beliefs and helped them exercise equality for same-sex couples.

Instead of looking at obstacles imposed by immigration as barriers that hindered their
success, participants saw their “fight for family unity” as a motivator. Participants were
motivated by their desire to live in a society where laws could validate their same-sex loving
relationships. Dreaming about a day in which they would be recognized by others as an actual
couple with rights encouraged them to continue their pursuit for immigration equality. Their
desire to live in a time in which geographic borders could no longer separate them, where both
members in the partnership could legally work, where there would be no resentment towards
their government or fear of getting deported, motivated them to continue moving forward hoping
that immigration equality would come one day. Alejandra argued that being re-united with her
fiancée gave her life a sense of meaning and purpose. Paulina explained that this battle has
helped her show Alejandra how much she cares and loves her. Rebecca, who is able to be in the
United States with her partner because of an employment visa, feels motivated to have an
outstanding performance at work to convince her employer that her sponsorship should be
renewed. Nicolas and Bob saw their public fight against immigration as a vehicle through which
they could help make important contributions to the community of same-sex binational families.
Ricardo and Alejandro as a result of this battle are confident that their relationship is strong and
ready for the coming of their child. Their strong desire to adopt a child motivates them to help
change immigration law through advocacy.

Third Research Question

The third question I asked was, “What kind of activities, resources and support systems
do binational families utilize to thrive in a heterosexist nation?” Support from friends, family,
mental health professionals, and their inclusive communities helped participants thrive. As a couple, their relationship with each other was the single most valuable piece of their support system. Taking a team approach to problem solving, participants viewed support from their partner as meaningful and crucial. Couples invested time with each other engaging in activities that both members in the partnership enjoyed doing. For Bob and Nicolas it was pottery, for Ricardo and Alejandro it was walking the dog, for Rebecca and Lori it was playing basketball, and for Paulina and Alejandra it was viewing movies together. Through these shared activities, couples created a shared identity establishing traditions that facilitated their thriving. In addition, their network of friends, who supported the policies that benefited their binational relationship, helped participants feel comfortable and supported. Some of the participants in this study found support in mental health professionals when they reached out for help during a period of tribulation. Additional support came from the communities in which these families chose to live. Participants chose to live in inclusive and LGBT friendly areas in order to avoid sexual prejudice and discrimination. These neighborhoods provided the context in which these families thrived.

Participants indicated that good communication was a resource that helped them grow as a couple. Although they understood that challenges and conflicts were a normal part of any relationship, they kept ordinary everyday life problems from escalating into arguments about their immigration troubles. American citizens talk tactfully about immigration issues and stay far from blaming their foreign national partner for the stressors they encountered including financial hardship. It became evident during the interview that these couples used praise and encouragement when speaking to each other. They listened attentively, talked openly and felt safe verbalizing their concerns when struggles came up.
A second resource was the use of optimism. Interpreting situations in the best possible light, participants focused on what was already working for them rather than solely focusing on their needs, wants and wishes. In other words, couples tended to emphasize the good things about their relationship and each other instead of closing their attention on the things that were not going right. Focusing on the things they could control and influence, participants were able to cope better. Although they could not directly control the decisions of immigration officials, they acknowledged that they had control over their household environment, their partnership, their relationship with friends and family, and their health etc.

**Implications for Practice**

In this dissertation I made the argument that families are complex and existing in multiple forms. Because psychologists increasingly will be collaborating with LGBT immigrant families, understanding the notion of diverse family households is imperative. In this study I provide counseling professionals with legal, historical, socio-cultural, and psychological information that may increase their understanding of non-heterosexual binational families. Because counseling professionals may encounter clients who have suffered emotional damage as well as physical persecution and torture, it is important for these professionals to understand the socio-cultural context in which these families are situated. Results associated with the first research question in this study (What are the challenges that non-heterosexual binational couples and families experience in the face of discriminatory laws and sexual prejudice?) will help professionals understand some of the difficulties these families have had to face.

Practitioners might find it useful to empower and embolden same-sex binational families to celebrate their differences and to perform, that is, engender the narratives that they prefer around the rich uniqueness of their lives (Freedman & Combs, 1996). Adopting the notion of
family as a social construction can create a space for practitioners to understand these families within the context of their own heroic worldviews, and independent from heteronormative understandings. I believe that the results of this study point to how binational families can benefit from a strengths-based approach to counseling that views their members not as victims of society, but as empowered survivors fighting for their rights, hopes and dreams. With that said, in order to help empower these families, practitioners may find it helpful to use a strengths-based systemic approach that focuses on the protective factors, inherent strengths and resiliencies that help non-heterosexual binational families survive and thrive despite the stressors induced by sexual prejudice (Walsh, 2003; Walsh, 1996). Influenced by the Family Resiliency Framework (Walsh, 2003), I advise practitioners working with non-heterosexual binational families to: (a) challenge the myth that the Standard North American Family (i.e., white intact nuclear family headed by father) is healthier than any other family; (b) elicit and amplify family strengths under stress; (c) seek to understand the socio-cultural context in which non-heterosexual families are situated; and (d) promote the idea that families have the resources to recover and grow from adversity.

In addition, this study stimulates professionals to help advocate for LGBT couples in states that have not legalized same-sex marriage. Most states today, continue to adopt prohibitions of same-sex marriage or “defense of marriage” language that defines marriage as the valid legal union between one man and one woman. Practitioners should keep in mind that LGBT couples continue to face discrimination and prejudice without DOMA. Institutional discrimination continues to exist in states that subscribe to definitions of marriage that exclude same-sex loving relationships. In addition, immigration reform is still important for LGBT people. Immigration reform would provide a pathway to citizenship for those who are in the
United States without lawful status, many of them whom are LGBT. Practitioners interested in advocating for immigration reform that would benefit both heterosexual and non-heterosexual immigrant families should consider becoming familiar with the 2013 Comprehensive Immigration Reform (CIR) bill (Border Security, Economic Opportunity, and Immigration Modernization Act, S.744, 2013). Although the U.S Senate has passed the CIR bill, it is facing obstacles in the House of Representatives.

**Limitations**

In conducting this study, there were some inherent limitations. One of the first limitations I encountered with this study was the small amount of research on the topic of same-sex binational families. Although researchers had previously studied resiliency factors in gay and lesbian families, I could not find any studies examining resilience in the context of same-sex binational families. Previous research tended to focus on sexuality or immigration; however, no psychological research has examined, until today, how families manage to succeed when they are denied marriage and immigration rights. While the scarcity of research provided an ideal opportunity to close an important gap in psychological research, it provided little guidance during the evolution of this study.

A second limitation involves the fact that the sample size was small and with limited diversity. The size and homogeneity of the sample inherently limits generalizability to other populations. Although I had three Caucasian and five Hispanic participants, there were no African or Asian American individuals in my sample. The age group had a restricted range; all participants were between 25 and 40 years old. Moreover, all participants in this study lived in inclusive and LGBT friendly areas. It is possible that participants' experiences are not representative of participants living in more conservative areas. Future recruitment should
consider enlisting members from various ethnic, racial, age groups and geographical regions as a means of gaining a more diverse sample. Had the research expanded to include differences in population, the unique needs of families across ethnic and age groups could be explored. Nevertheless, this study provides a useful beginning for further research.

In 2006, researchers working for The Immigration Equality and Human Rights Watch found that non-heterosexual binational couples suffered from emotional hardship as a result of the “forced confidentiality” that came with threats of facing family separation or deportation. The report found that same-sex binational families perceived invisibility as a defensive coping strategy that protected binational families from facing separation. Because participants have had to navigate the persistent tension between recognition and protection, it is possible that they were forced to make important determinations about disclosure when interacting with this interviewer. Perhaps, these families did not fully disclose given the nature of their legal case.

In the process of recruitment, I distributed e-mails and announcements to four different agencies working with same-sex binational families. Unfortunately, announcements did not reach the intended number of individuals due to a lack of response from two of the contacted agencies. In the end however, participating families were recruited using the criterion method of sampling (Creswell, 2007). Because four families had to be chosen to represent four different immigration scenarios, participants had to meet some predetermined criterion of importance. Couples interested in the study but whose immigration scenario represented that of a couple already selected for participation, were not recruited. It is possible that couples who wanted to participate but were not selected, had different stressors, protective and resiliency factors and coping mechanisms than chosen participants. A larger sample would have given voice to the issues faced by individuals who were not selected by this researcher.
The method of telephone interviewing and Skype (without video) may have allowed the participants to express their feelings more openly and decrease fears related to loss of confidentiality. Nevertheless, behaviors, non-verbal behaviors and posture could not be observed during telephone interviewing. The use of behavioral observations could have added data triangulation to the study.

**Future Research**

To date, there is no published psychological research that studies the impact of the repeal of DOMA on same-sex binational couples. In Chapter I of this dissertation, quoting Margot Canaday (2009), a question was asked “What exactly does it mean (to LGBT people), to be written out of the nation’s ideas altogether—to be deprived of what the historian William Chafe has called the “legal rights” to full citizenship?” (p. 261). Today, in a post-DOMA world, researchers can ask a different question—“What exactly does it mean to LGBT people to be written into the nation’s ideas, to be given federal legal rights? Building from this present study, future research can address the following broad questions: Now that they are eligible for the whole range of immigration benefits, how has life changed for same-sex binational families? And will all LGBT individuals regardless of nationality be able to join their American partners equally?

One possible area that future research can explore is the relationship between same-sex binational families and sexual prejudice in a post-DOMA world. Investigators can help answer the following question, “Now that married same-sex families are receiving the same respect under federal law as heterosexual families, how has their experience with sexual prejudice changed?” Asking what it means for an American citizen to now be able to submit a green card application for his/her same-sex spouse can help psychologists understand the role that sexual
Discussion 100

prejudice plays in the systemic interactions of these families. Perhaps, this question can help answer how the systemic interactions of these families evolved once sexual prejudice in the law could no longer threaten their family unity. Exploring how the recent shift in public opinion on same-sex marriage helped change these families' encounters with sexual prejudice, psychologists can become better informed about the contexts and variables that help these families feel greater security and confidence.

A second possible area that future research can explore, is how the overturn of DOMA and the government's legitimization of same-sex binational relationships, has influenced these families' psychological health and well-being. For instance, same-sex binational families in my study reported experiencing social and economic disadvantages because of DOMA. When viewed through a social class lens, privilege and power as a result of governmental policy was often conferred to heterosexual individuals. However, the repeal of DOMA promises to address the inequities in access to federal benefits that same-sex couples previously endured. For example, many couples will have access to some of their spouses' government and employer benefits, they will be able to jointly file their federal tax returns, and they will have rights to certain workplace benefits mandated by the federal government. Exploring how financial and social advantages improve the psychological health of same-sex binational families after the overturn of DOMA, can help psychologists understand how the relationship between sociocultural and economic advantages and mental health impacts same-sex binational families.
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Appendix A: Recruitment through LGBT Immigration Equality Rights

Dear XXXX:

My name is Daniela Dominguez and I am currently working on my doctoral dissertation; A Qualitative Study of how Non-heterosexual Binational Families Thrive in a World of Sexual Prejudice and Discriminatory Immigration Policies. I was browsing through IM EQ's web-page (LGBT Immigration Equality Rights) and came across the blog in which you shared your family's story and your struggles with immigration policy. I am in the process of recruiting four families for my dissertation study and I was wondering if you and XXXX would be willing to share your story with me. The purpose of my study is to explore ways in which non-heterosexual binational families survive and thrive despite facing heterosexist immigration laws and sexual prejudice. I believe that this study will help psychologists and other helping professionals advocate on behalf of binational families who are in need of equal immigration rights.

I also understand that confidentiality plays a significant role; therefore, if you are willing to participate, your information will be kept confidential.

The selected participants will be those who have stated interest in communicating by phone, electronic mail, Skype and in person. The requirements will be the following:

- Self-identified gay or lesbian couple with or without children.
- Ages 25 and up.
- One person in the relationship must be a foreign national and the other person must be a U.S. citizen.
- Should be at least in a 3 year committed relationship.
Please feel free to let me know your thoughts and feedback.

Daniela G. Dominguez, M.S., LPC
Appendix B : Recruitment through Organizations

Dear XXXX:

My name is Daniela Dominguez and I am currently working on my dissertation; A Qualitative Study of how Non-heterosexual Binational Families Thrive in a World of Sexual Prejudice and Discriminatory Immigration Policies. I am looking for support from organizations that advocate for equal immigration rights for same-sex binational families. I am in the process of recruiting participants for my study and was wondering if your organization would be willing to share contact information with me regarding families who would be interested in participating in my study. I understand that confidentiality plays a significant role. With that said, I would love it if your organization could point me in the direction of families who would feel comfortable sharing their stories with me. The purpose of my study is to explore ways in which non-heterosexual binational families survive and thrive despite facing heterosexist immigration laws and sexual prejudice. I believe that this study will help psychologists and other helping professionals advocate on behalf of binational families who are in need of equal immigration rights.

The selected participants will be those who have stated interest in communicating by phone, electronic mail, Skype and in person. The requirements will be the following:

- Self-identified gay or lesbian couple with or without children.
- Ages 25 and up.
- One person in the relationship must be a foreign national and the other person must be a United States citizen.
- Should be at least in a 3 year committed relationship.

Please feel free to let me know your thoughts and feedback.

Thank you kindly, Daniela G. Dominguez, M.S., LPC
Appendix C: Recruitment through Division 44

Hello Division 44 Members. My name is Daniela Dominguez and I am a counseling psychology doctoral student at Our Lady of the Lake University.

I am currently working on my doctoral dissertation; A Qualitative Study of how Non-heterosexual Binational Families Thrive in a World of Sexual Prejudice and Discriminatory Immigration Policies. My study has been approved by Our Lady of the Lake University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB# XXXX-XX-XX-XXX). I am in the process of recruiting participants for my study and was wondering if your organization would be willing to share contact information with me regarding families who would be interested in participating in my study.

The purpose of my study is to explore ways in which non-heterosexual binational families survive and thrive despite facing heterosexist immigration laws and sexual prejudice. I believe that this study will help psychologists and other helping professionals advocate on behalf of binational families who are in need of equal immigration rights.

The selected participants will be those who have stated interest in communicating by phone, electronic mail, Skype and in person. The requirements will be the following:

- Self-identified gay or lesbian couple with or without children.
- Ages 25 and up.
- One person in the relationship must be a foreign national and the other person must be a United States citizen.
- Should be at least in a 3 year committed relationship.

Please feel free to let me know your thoughts and feedback.

Please feel free to e-mail me if you have any questions. Thank you kindly,

Daniela G. Dominguez, M.S., LPC
## Appendix D: Immigration Visas

### Purpose of Travel to U.S. and Nonimmigrant Visas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose of Travel to U.S. and Nonimmigrant Visas</th>
<th>Visa Type</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Athletes, amateur &amp; professional (compete for prize money only)</td>
<td>B-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Au pairs (exchange visitor)</td>
<td>J</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian professional specialty</td>
<td>E-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Border Crossing Card: Mexico</td>
<td>BCC</td>
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<tr>
<td>Business visitors</td>
<td>B-1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Crewmembers</td>
<td>D</td>
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<tr>
<td>Diplomats and foreign government officials</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic employees or nanny -must be accompanying a foreign national employer</td>
<td>B-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employees of a designated international organization, and NATO</td>
<td>G1-G5, NATO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exchange visitors</td>
<td>J</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign military personnel stationed in the U.S.</td>
<td>A-2 NATO1-6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign nationals with extraordinary ability in Sciences, Arts, Education, Business or Athletics</td>
<td>O</td>
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<tr>
<td>Free Trade Agreement (FTA) Professionals: Chile, Singapore</td>
<td>H-1B1 - Chile</td>
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<td></td>
<td>H-1B1 - Singapore</td>
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<td>International cultural exchange visitors</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intra-company transferees</td>
<td>L</td>
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<tr>
<td>Medical treatment, visitors for</td>
<td>B-2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Media, journalists</td>
<td>I</td>
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<td>NAFTA professional workers: Mexico, Canada</td>
<td>TN/TD</td>
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<td>Performing athletes, artists, entertainers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Physician</td>
<td>J, H-1B</td>
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<tr>
<td>Professor, scholar, teacher (exchange visitor)</td>
<td>J</td>
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<tr>
<td>Religious workers</td>
<td>R</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialty occupations in fields requiring highly specialized knowledge</td>
<td>H-1B</td>
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<tr>
<td>Students: academic, vocational</td>
<td>F, M</td>
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<tr>
<td>Temporary agricultural workers</td>
<td>H-2A</td>
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<tr>
<td>Temporary workers performing other services or labor of a temporary or seasonal nature.</td>
<td>H-2B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tourism, vacation, pleasure visitors</td>
<td>B-2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training in a program not primarily for employment</td>
<td>H-3</td>
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<td>Treaty traders/treaty investors</td>
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<td>Transiting the United States</td>
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<td>Victims of Human Trafficking</td>
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Appendix E: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1) Where are you both from?

2) How did the non-citizen partner end up living in the U.S.?

3) How long have you both been in a committed relationship?

4) Are you both married, in a civil union, domestic partnership or other?

5) Do you have children?

6) What is your immigration status at this time?

7) Would you mind sharing the story about how and where you met?

8) When did you realize that you could not provide immigration rights to your partner?

9) *American Citizen:* What does it feel like to know that you are unable to offer your partner sponsorship for citizenship in the United States as an American citizen?

10) *Foreign National:* What does it mean to you that you are unable to be in this country legally because you are in a same-sex relationship?

11) What are the challenges faced by same-sex binational families?

12) How do you survive from day to day despite the stress generated by United States immigration policies and sexual prejudice?

13) What role have friends and family members played during the course of your journey?

14) What would your life look like if you were granted equal immigration rights?
These interviews will focus on participants' perceptions of personal, relationship and community/social factors that support resiliency in their family.
Appendix F: Informed Consent

A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF HOW NON-HETEROSEXUAL BINATIONAL FAMILIES THRIVE IN A NATION WITH HETERONORMATIVE IMMIGRATION LAWS

Background:

You are being invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to explore the ways in which non-heterosexual binational families survive and thrive despite facing struggles with immigration laws and sexual prejudice in society. This form will help you make an informed decision regarding your participation.

Study Procedure:

Each person who agrees to participate will be asked to complete an interview with the researcher. This interview will last about 1-2 hours and will be conducted in written format or audio and video recorded. The interview will be scheduled at a time and location that is convenient for you.

Risks:

Possible risks to participants include feeling strong emotions during the interview as a result of the information being discussed. These emotions might be similar to those felt when talking to a close friend, family member, or counselor. If the researcher or the participant feels that it would be helpful for the participant to receive the services of a counselor or support group, information will be made available for the participant.
Benefits:

Possible benefits to participants include being able to, as a result of your participation, increase society's understanding of non-heterosexual binational families. Additionally, your participation may help psychologists understand how to better serve LGBTQ immigrant families. You may also remember positive experiences or have emotions regarding your loved family members. An additional benefit is your contribution to a body of research designed to better understand how to advocate on behalf of non-heterosexual binational families.

Confidentiality:

All information disclosed during the interview will remain confidential, except in cases where the law requires that the authorities be notified (danger to self or others, child or elder abuse). You will be allowed to choose a code name to be identified by in the transcript of your interview and your information will be disguised so that you cannot be identified. Code names will also be used to keep the immigration status of foreign national participants strictly confidential. Information that you provide will be kept in a locked cabinet at Dr. Bernadette H.
Solorzano’s office (supervisor), and any computerized files will only be kept by the researcher. Once the final research is completed, any remaining information will be properly destroyed.

Contact Persons:

If for any reason you need to contact the researcher, you may call Daniela G. Dominguez, M.S., at (210) 304-9830 or email ddominguez3997@ollusa.edu. You may also call the researcher’s supervisor, Bernadette H. Solorzano, PsyD., at (210) 434-1054 or email bsolorzano@ollusa.edu. You can also contact Howard Jones at the Our Lady of the Lake Institutional Review Board at 434-6711, ext. 2766 or email jonesh@lake.ollusa.edu

Voluntary Participation:

Participation in this study is completely voluntary and you can stop the interview or withdraw your participation at any time without any negative consequences.

Costs to Participate:

There is no financial cost to participate in this research study. However, you will be volunteering 1-2 hours of your time to participate in the interview. I understand that your time is
a most precious commodity and I will make every effort to schedule the interview at a time and location that is convenient to you.

Consent:

By signing this form, I acknowledge that I have read the above information and I agree to participate in this research study. I have also been given an opportunity to ask any questions concerning the study and the primary investigator, Daniela G. Dominguez, M.S., has been willing to answer. You will be given a signed copy of this consent form to keep, and the researcher will also keep a signed copy.

________________________________________

Participant’s Printed Name

________________________________________

Participant’s Signature  Date
Daniela Domínguez, M.S., LPC