Odd Couples

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WE ARE FAMILY

I would like for Monique and I to live closer together, because we are family. We are each other’s chosen family, and to me that’s more significant than your biological family, ’cause we’re choosing that. . . . We’re implementing our power of choice. You don’t choose your brother or your mother or your father; that shit is, like, handed to you whether you like it or not. . . . So that makes it even more important and meaningful, you know, that someone would choose to stick with you through thick and thin.

—Jesse, a thirty-one-year-old gay Latino

BRENDA AND DAN

Brenda is a thirty-seven-year-old white self-described “butch” lesbian who is the mother of a nine-month-old daughter. Dan is a forty-one-year-old straight white man who is married with two children. Brenda and Dan have maintained a close friendship for nearly twenty years. They met at John F. Kennedy Airport in 1984. Brenda was wearing her university sweatshirt in the hope that it might be a conversation starter with other travelers. Dan approached her, identifying himself as a student at the same university. After chatting for a few minutes, they discovered that they had volunteered to work on the same kibbutz (Jewish communal farm) for the summer. At some point during their flight between New York and Israel, they decided that, after their stint at the kibbutz ended, they would travel around Europe together. Several months later, the pair returned home unsure about whether or not their friendship would continue once they resumed their lives as university students. In a matter of days, however, Brenda and Dan ran into each other on campus and continued their friendship, which is based on shared intellectual curiosity and interests such as Judaic law and basketball.

When Brenda and Dan met, they both considered themselves straight. A year later, Brenda confided in Dan that she was very excited about a woman she had met and wanted to
date her. Fifteen years have passed, and Dan now has trouble remembering his reaction to the news but, he says, he “definitely didn’t go through a crisis.” They became housemates after Brenda and her girlfriend broke up; having no place to live, Brenda took up residence on Dan’s sofa. The two friends have lived together off and on since that time and have played important roles in each other’s lives. For example, Brenda was the “best man” in Dan’s wedding ceremony.

Five years ago, the pair bought a house together, along with an equal contribution from Dan’s wife, Rosie. Thus, Brenda, Dan, Rosie, and their respective children, all currently live in a collective household and maintain a familial connection. Brenda explained the conscious steps they took to establishing a family bond:

At the time we bought this house, it was something mutual we were buying, and [I knew] we would eventually raise our kids together. . . . I said at the time that I wanted us to think of ourselves as more like family. I used to do a lot of traveling, and I always needed rides to and from the airport, and we sort of switched to thinking of us as family, which just symbolized for me, you know, I don’t want to ask my friends to take me to the airport. Like, if Dan goes on a trip, it’s obvious that Rosie is going to pick him up, right? So when I go to and from the airport, one of you is going to pick me up. You know? That’s family.

The trio share household responsibilities and operate as a family unit. Brenda admits that in many ways she is now closer to Rosie than to Dan; she is more likely to confide in Rosie about her feelings and difficulties. Brenda also has attended family events with Dan and Rosie, including a trip to Southern California to visit Rosie’s family for the holidays.

Most of Dan’s and Brenda’s conversations now revolve around household matters. The only one-on-one time they spend together is during trips to buy groceries. Still, Dan characterizes Brenda as knowing him better than anyone else. Likewise, Brenda considers Dan her best male friend and declares, “He may be my favorite male on the planet.”

There is a pervasive cultural belief that family connections are the most salient and stable bond between individuals. These beliefs are reinforced through customs, rituals, and laws that privilege familial relationships over others and determine who may be defined as family. The term “family” is itself a construct that is so deeply centered in heterosexuality that disentangling heterosexist ideas from any discussion of family is a challenging task. Discussing family structures that do not abide by normative standards requires a set of qualifiers: we talk about “lesbian” families, “chosen” families, and “fictive kinship,” but
very rarely do we have to provide any further description beyond “family” to indicate a straight relationship network, because it is the assumed norm for relational life.2

As experienced, family life often occurs in varied structures, including single-parent households, households that include extended family members, and foster families, as well as countless other configurations. Intersectional friendships further expand our understanding of contemporary family life by providing an example of how lesbian, gay, and straight individuals become integrated into a kinship system. In particular, many participants in this study mutually experienced friendship as family in close intersectional friendships. Prior research about family relationships with non-kin serves as a foundation to these findings. Through discourse (Gubrium and Holstein 1990) and practice (Stack 1974), friends often are defined as family. For many gay men and lesbians, friendship and family are combined into chosen family networks (Weston 1991) that typically comprise not only other gay men and lesbians but also some straight people (Oswald 2002; Weston 1991) who presumably deem gay men and lesbians family, as well.

This chapter explores the ways in which the intersectional friends in this study enact family ties and experience their friendships as family relationships. The introductory section of the chapter discusses the definitions of friendship and family in U.S. society, with a focus on chosen families. I then use the lens of family to examine how the individuals in the study experience their intersectional friendships as family, including the roles that they play in navigating life transitions such as marriage and parenthood. At the conclusion of the chapter, I discuss how gay men in the study voice greater vulnerability in the family connections they share with intersectional friends, a point that emphasizes how heterosexual privilege differently shapes perceptions among the individuals in these friendships.

FAMILY: FORM VERSUS FUNCTION

Considerable overlap exists in the functions that friends and family serve (Fehr 1996). Trust, respect, caring, and intimacy have been identified as attributes of friends, family, and romantic relationships (Wilmot and Shellen 1990). Friendships are less regulated than romantic relationships by social norms, receive less time, are less exclusive, and are easier to dissolve (Wiseman 1986; Wright 1985); thus, friendship is at once the most flexible and most tenuous of social relationships. In contrast, family is a regulated social institution that is ex-
pected to provide material and social care and connection to its members (Cherlin 2002). Although definitions of family are socially and legally contested, the functions that families serve are similar regardless of who performs the tasks. That is, various forms of work, including emotional support, financial assistance, and care throughout the life course, lie at the center of family life (Carrington 1999; Hartmann 1981; Hochschild and Machung 1989). These functions are important to the extent that people who lack or are alienated from desired family support often build fictive kinship networks (Weston 1991).

The pervasive notion that there is only one definition of family has been challenged by contemporary studies of kinship (Stacey 1996, 1998a; Weston 1991). For instance, chosen family structures of gay men and lesbians typically comprise partners, former partners, and friends and may also include biological family members (Nardi 1999; Weston 1991). These structures provide social and instrumental support in a reciprocal and voluntary manner (Carrington 1999; Nardi 1999; Stacey 1998a). Chosen family networks are important for gay men and lesbians, who historically have had compromised access to families of origin because of rejection or geographic distance resulting from a move to live in lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) communities (Chauncey 1994; Nardi 1999). Gay men and lesbians also have constructed alternative family forms to challenge normative conceptions of “the family” (Weeks, Heaphy, and Donovan 2001) in favor of kinship structures that promote a more progressive egalitarian connection (Clarke 2002; Clarke and Kitzinger 2005). Moreover, restrictive laws limit gay men’s and lesbian women’s full participation in legally sanctioned forms of family life that emerge from marriage and parenthood, which often leads to the construction of chosen family relationships.

Prior studies show that straight people also form chosen family relationships when their ties to nuclear family are limited (Lindsey 1981). The previous research focuses on communities that are marginalized with regard to age (MacRae 1992), race (Chatters, Robert, and Jayakody 1994; Stack 1974), or country of origin (Ebaugh and Curry 2000). For example, in black and recent immigrant communities, fictive kin often are added to an extended family unit, which increases the number of people who participate in a family network (Chatters et al. 1994; Ebaugh and Curry 2000; Stack 1974). Fictive kin and chosen families have in common an expansion of resources through informal support. In general, non-marginalized straight people who have access to nuclear families are not expected to rely on chosen family bonds, despite wide historical variations in family life (Coontz 1992; Lindsey 1981). Similar to gay
men and lesbians, however, straight individuals who are alienated or geograph-ically distant from their families of origin, as well as lifelong straight singles, sometimes turn friends into chosen families (Rubin 1985; Stein 1981). Changing demographics also contribute to straight adults’ contemporary creation of chosen families. Many people remain single well into adulthood; in the year 2000, one in four individuals age thirty-five and older had never been married (Egelman 2004). Similarly, single and widowed older adults often rely on support from friends whom they view as family members (MacRae 1992). Hence, many singles form networks to fulfill family functions.

Research about chosen families has focused either on gay men’s and lesbians’ networks (Carrington 1999; Nardi 1999; Stacey 1998b) or on straights’ fictive kin arrangements (Chatters et al. 1994; Ebaugh and Curry 2000; MacRae 1992; Stack 1974). As a result, there appears to be little overlap in these networks. The fact that straight friends are identified as part of lesbians’ and gay men’s chosen families (Weston 1991), however, suggests that choosing kin may bring gay, lesbian, and straight people, same and cross-gender, together in family networks (Oswald 2002; Tillmann-Healy 2001). Prior research also does not address potential feelings of tenuousness in chosen family bonds. In the idealized cultural perceptions, family ties are unconditional and indelible, even though we know that alienation, estrangement, and divorce regularly occurs in family life. The participants in this study showed not only that intersectional friendships were contexts in which friendship and family became one and the same, but also that these ties felt more tenuous for some individuals than for others.

A TRUE FAMILY

Throughout the course of the interviews, individuals defined their friends as family, indicated the ways that their intersectional friends were better or truer forms of family than their families of origin, and used the family vocabulary as a means to characterize their friendship. In fact, many of the interviewees used the term “chosen family” to describe an intersectional friend and named a gay male or lesbian friend as family in reference to their inclusion in important life events, such as holidays and celebrations. As Rubin (1985: 16) notes, “The idea of kin is so deeply rooted within us that it is the most common metaphor for describing closeness.” Indeed, many straight, gay, and lesbian participants characterized their intersectional friend as family as a way to denote importance. Monique, a thirty-one-year-old straight white woman, discussed her
relationship with Jesse, her thirty-one-year-old gay Latino friend: “(It’s) as important as my relationship with my husband and more important than my relationship with both of my parents, who I’m not very fond of anyway. If I lost him, I would be devastated. It would be the same as losing a spouse, or a brother, or something like that.”

Bruce, a thirty-four-year-old straight Asian American man, also explained the importance of his chosen family: “Well, I think my friends are closer than my family. It’s not that my family is not close, but I feel like my friends are the family I’ve chosen for myself. And in some ways, my commitment to them is a little greater.” Bruce’s recognition that he is more committed to and has closer relationships with his friends than his family of origin suggests that he subscribes to a definition of family that resembles the chosen family networks more common among gay men and lesbians.

Other participants distinguished the differences between their chosen families and biological families. For example, Patrick said of Emily: “I totally would invite her to Thanksgiving, and it would feel like having another family member. Probably more. I’d probably be happier to see her than some of my blood-family members.” On a similar note, Jill, a thirty-one-year-old mixed-race lesbian, illustrated her complex understanding of family in relation to her friendship with Paul, a thirty-seven-year-old straight white man: “I definitely consider him part of the family—part of the family that’s a non-judging person. My family is very, I think, judging, and he’s not that way. He’s very open-minded. So, yeah, he’s definitely part of the family.” In her statement, Jill identified Paul as a part of her family but in a way that differentiated him as a more desired family member than those in her bio-legal family. Both Patrick and Jill classified their intersectional friend as family in a way that simultaneously characterized the friendship as being superior to biological family ties and used the language of the natal family to imply the ultimate level of closeness.

Many participants defined their intersectional friendships as being the truest form of family. Ruth described her relationship with Scott: “I really think that close friends are a deeper bond for me than even family. And I think most people, if they really thought about it, would say that, too, because you can’t choose your family. You can choose your friends . . . but you cannot choose your family. I mean, I love my family, but a lot of that is culturally prescribed. You have to love your grandmother. You have to love your brother. You know, if I knew my brother on the street without being my brother, I wouldn’t even interact with him at all, ever. So, you know, it’s interesting, I think of Scott as a
true family member.” In his interview, Scott said that he also considered Ruth and her daughter his family. Ruth’s comments acknowledged the complex understanding of family shared by many participants. On the one hand, Ruth accepted that friends, not family, are determined by choice. On the other hand, Ruth recognized that family is a socially constructed institution, and despite the cultural prescriptions that define families of origin as the most authentic form of connection, she insinuated that Scott is a truer family member than biological kin. Such contradictory perceptions were voiced throughout the interviews.

The identification of these significant friends as family likely was, in some part, related to strained relationships with families of origin. This aligns with Townsend’s (1957) principle of substitution, which notes that when people lack traditional family bonds, they create chosen family members of their friends. Many participants reported alienation from families of origin or a lack of access to a traditional family unit. There were no clear differences in the tendency to create families from close friends with respect to sex and sexual orientation. In other words, the gay men and lesbians in the sample did not construct intentional families because they were alienated from families of origin any more than straight participants did.

The characterization of intersectional friendships as a more significant or truer form of family was also common among all types of participants. In fact, chosen family was described as being more important than family members of origin for a large portion of the sample. This shuffling of the traditional hierarchical ordering of friends and family might reflect unmet expectations in immediate family connections. According to Rubin (1985: 22), “Friends choose to do what kin are obliged to do.” In situations where biological family members were perceived as shirking their kinship responsibilities or not meeting the idealized image of family, a chosen family member’s willingness to perform familial duties was even more meaningful.

**Chosen Parents and Siblings**

Another way that the participants characterized their bonds as familial was to compare friends to sibling, parental, and other family relationships, as is consistent with prior research (Nardi 1999; Rubin 1985; Werking 1997; Weston 1991). Some participants characterized aspects of their friendships as parental. Cristina, a thirty-year-old straight Latina, stated that her friendship with her gay friend Mark, who is mixed-race and twenty-one, provides her with the oppor-
tunity to act maternal. And although he is five years older than his thirty-year-old roommate, Carrie, Ken described Carrie as being like a “stabilizing mom.”

Another common characterization of intersectional friends was to identify them as like siblings, especially when they were age peers (born within a few years of each other). For example, Debbi, a thirty-nine-year-old white lesbian, described her forty-three-year-old straight white male friend Carl as a brother. Often, participants described their friends as siblings at least partly to emphasize the platonic nature of the bond. Cassandra, a twenty-nine-year-old white queer woman, employed this strategy when asked whether she had ever had sex with her thirty-five-year-old white friend Stuart: “That would be a big N-O. [Stuart’s] like my brother.” Ethan, a twenty-three-year-old Latino gay man, was very surprised to be asked whether he and his Iranian American friend, Leyla, twenty-four, had ever been sexually involved: “That is so far from where our friendship is. . . . I kind of view her more as a sister, so I’m more protective of her in terms of, you know, people that may want to make advances on her and things like that. So I would never go down that road with her, just because [she] is just like my sister, and that would just be wrong.”

Likewise, Leyla said that her future children would know her friend as “Uncle Ethan.”

FUNCTIONS OF CHOSEN FAMILY

Many of the participants stated that their friends served the functions that are expected of family. In particular, they provided financial and emotional support.

Financial Support

One element that distinguishes friendship from family is the provision of financial support. In particular, lending money and negotiating the feelings in such lending, is typically considered kin work, which is a responsibility of family members (Carrington 1999). Connor, a thirty-seven-year-old white gay man, previously provided financial support for his thirty-year-old straight Iranian American female friend, Nadia. “Connor has gotten me out of some binds,” she said. “He’s been like a lifesaver to me at times. I really owe him a lot that way. He really, really has, better than any brother or dad I could have come up with or any friends. I wasn’t working once for almost eight months and stuff like that, and he’s really helped me out.” In other cases (e.g., Carrie and Ken, Brenda and Dan,
Crystal and Derek), the friends who provided kin work were housemates who shared resources, such as food, cars, and professional advice, which also is consistent with previous findings about chosen families (Weston 1991).

It should be noted that the act of giving and taking financial support was gendered for intersectional friends in the study, with the gay and straight men in these dyads assuming provider roles, at least in an economic sense. This pattern is noteworthy because in many cases, being housemates suggests that friends equally rely on each other financially—perhaps not in the lending of money, but in the sharing of resources. Such actions would not seem to invoke gender differences, yet they did in the context of these relationships. Ruth and Scott recalled leaning on each other in leaner years, but Scott currently assumes the male provider role because he is the more fiscally secure member of the pair. He described his concern about Ruth’s well-being: “I’m always trying to get her stable in her life. I’m always worried about her finances and everything and worried about her getting a [retirement plan] going. I’m worried about her when she’s seventy and all that stuff, so I want her to own real estate. . . . The scheme was OK: I’ll sell this condo, and we’ll use all that money for a down payment on a bigger condo, and [Ruth and I] can get a condo together, and [she’ll] have real estate.”

Emotional Support

Although financial support was normatively gendered in these friendships, the conditions of emotional support were more complex. Many of the gay men in the study identified their straight female friend as a crucial source of emotional support. For instance, Ethan described his reliance on Leyla: “I can literally say that without our friendship, I probably would not be alive today, ’cause she’s helped me through some really, really dark times. And she’s the only person, [of] even my very, very close friends, [who] I feel 100 percent comfortable with. I don’t have to worry about, you know, how I come off. I don’t have to worry about how I act or what I say. She’ll always be there, and she’ll always stand behind me.” Ethan’s comfort with Leyla illustrates what Rubin (1985) describes as the ability for friends to share a level of self-disclosure and an anticipated acceptance that greatly differs from immediate family relationships. In her interviews, she found that “almost all talked spontaneously and at length about the issue of self-disclosure—about how much more easily they can share important parts of themselves with friends than with kin, about how much less
judgmental friends are about how they live, what they think, indeed even who they are” (Rubin 1985: 18). This finding is notable because it contradicts previous research, which showed that the more extensive and personal help that is required, such as Leyla’s role in maintaining Ethan’s feelings of stability, the more likely people were to use primary kin for assistance (Allan 1989). In terms of gender, emotional support was not the sole domain of women in these friendships. Monique, who is straight, said that Jesse is the first person she calls to discuss relationship problems. And Ming often turned to Ben to talk about issues with her parents.

Financial and emotional support intertwined several years before the interviews took place when Paul, who is straight, convinced his friend Jill to make dramatic life changes. “[Paul said,] ‘Don’t worry about it, go for it, we’ll figure it out, you can move in with me,’” Jill explained. “And everything sort of happened so quickly. Next thing I know, I’m living with Paul. I broke up with my girlfriend, and he was so supportive. I didn’t have any money; I was scared to death of starting [a] management position and had never been a manager before. He was just a solid person in my life, and that was a really tough time, and he made it . . . a good experience. I had no worries. I mean, basically he paid the bills for a really long time until I could get things figured out. . . . He was totally there for me.” Here, Paul’s financial and emotional assistance provided the security that helped Jill take personal and professional risks and, ultimately, make positive changes in her life. These two types of support—financial and emotional—are benchmarks on which the chosen family connection is built.

Navigating Life’s Transitions Together

A variety of issues emerged in how the dyads navigated or planned to travel through life transitions together, another process in which family support is expected. The specific transitions that arose throughout the interviews were growing old together, heterosexual marriage, and parenthood. Only rarely did the intersectional friends express attitudes that critically challenged traditional ideas about family; rather, throughout the interviews, the straight participants described attempts to modify their friendships to fit the standard meanings and practices of family. Yet the participants’ intentions to incorporate friends into family provided evidence that in their eyes, the family does not have a fixed definition but is pliable according to individual and community needs and desires.
Growing Old Together

Many of the participants described their plans to grow old together. Even though they are only in their mid-twenties, Leyla and Ethan, who have been friends for thirteen years, cannot imagine growing old without each other. Leyla characterized their bond: “Thirteen years is just a small step; I think it’s going to be going on probably until the day we die. I have no doubt—we talk about long-term stuff all the time. [We talk about] getting old together. And he says I’m gonna wear those flashy muumuus, and it’s gonna be his job to tone it down!” Although Leyla may not have considered the realities of aging, she clearly views her friendship with Ethan as enduring. Bruce also discussed his desire to continue his bond with Vanessa: “That’s one of the things I wrote in [a] note to her is like—that I would like to grow old with [her], and we’d sit on the porch and scare all of the little kids on the block and play dominoes and just be loud old people.” Both Leyla’s and Bruce’s ideas of older people relied on stereotypes, with Leyla envisioning herself in muumuus and Bruce sitting on the porch with Vanessa being loud and scaring children. Still, both communicated a clear intention and desire to maintain the closeness of their friendship bond throughout life’s transitions.

In addition to providing company through the twilight years, families are the most likely individuals to provide care to aging and ailing adults (Wolff and Kasper 2006). Most individuals expect spouses or other family members to provide care and companionship as they age, a finding that is consistent with prior work about the social networks of older adults (Adams, Blieszner, and de Vries 2000; Antonucci and Akiyama 1987). Those in intersectional friendships adopted the expectation that their friendships would persist and fantasized about plans to grow old and retire together much in the same way married couples do. Interestingly, these dreams of growing old together rarely incorporated any discussion of a potential spouse; rather, the friendship was imagined as a self-sufficient and insular dyad. Such plans may have been situated in the myth that older people are not interested in romance and sex (Calasanti and King 2005). Thus, intersectional friendships—most of which were intimate, but not sexual—were thought to mimic the perceived marital relationship of older people. In any case, intersectional friends discussed their mutual plans for old age.

An example of intersectional friends who plan to retire together are Ruth and Scott, both forty-six years old. This pair uniquely identified a romantic
partner’s role (Scott’s longtime partner, Bradley) in their retirement plans, as Scott and Bradley own their retirement property together. Ruth and Scott mutually supported each other during financially difficult times and cared for dying friends at the height of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s. This history of providing financial and emotional support appears to have influenced their future plans. “We do have future plans for when we’re old,” Ruth said about the plans she and Scott had to retire together someday. “He bought this place in [a nearby riverfront town]. It’s this beautiful place; it’s on this hill and right below it there’s this little cottage [laughs]. That’s where I’m going to live.” Ruth’s and Scott’s plan for the future seemed feasible. Their long-standing friendship of twenty-five years, combined with understanding of illness and other life challenges, seemed to provide them with a clear perspective about caregiving as part of their family connection.

Heterosexual Weddings

Another life transition poised to affect intersectional friends in a tangible way is heterosexual marriage. In heterosexual weddings, social and familial roles are clearly articulated and highly gendered (Oswald 2000); the way that these established roles might be adopted or altered as same-sex marriage is legalized and becomes more commonplace is unknown. Typically, those who are invited to participate in the wedding ceremony are family or close friends of the couple (Rubin 1985); thus, being asked to serve as part of the wedding party is an act of inclusion (Oswald 2000). According to Ingraham (1999: 4), a wedding is also “one of the major events that signal readiness and prepare heterosexuals for membership in marriage as an organizing practice for the institution of heterosexuality.” Hence, in both the practices within the ceremony (e.g., a bride being “given away” to a groom by her father) and the broader act of legally marrying, heterosexual weddings reinforce norms of gender and sexuality.

While weddings and marriages are heteronormative, they also are significant and meaningful events for the individuals involved; hence, many of the participants incorporated their intersectional friends into their wedding ceremonies. In some cases, the desire to include a gay friend in a heterosexual wedding ceremony caused familial conflict because of the challenge it posed to conventional norms. Ming was determined to have her gay best friend Ben as her “man of honor” in her wedding ceremony, which caused a battle with her future in-laws:
My mental picture of our wedding ceremony is me; Adam, my husband; Ben on my side; and somebody else. So Ben has always been in the picture, you know? But he’s a guy, Adam’s family is Catholic, so being man of honor, that might be a problem. When I talked to Ben, of course he wasn’t too happy, and I cried, but he supported me through this whole hoopla. Ben was still supportive throughout the whole thing, but I just felt so uncomfortable for quite a few months. And I finally decided, you know, I was fighting with Adam every day about this, I was just not happy. So after a few months, I finally said, “You know, we can’t do this without Ben.” Because the first image was me and Ben and Adam, you know, I can’t shake it. Basically, I just need this guy to be my man of honor.

The man-of-honor conflict also had an impact on Ben, who recalled: “She was under pressure from the groom’s family side—they wanted to have a female maid of honor. So originally she said she felt most comfortable on her wedding day having me stand right beside her, but then somehow there was a big discussion, and she decided to have someone else. I was sort of hurt by that, and she was very hurt, and she was having fights with her fiancé. I’m like, ‘Don’t fight.’ I didn’t want to ruin the friendship and the rest because of this. . . . But eventually, things worked out. I became her man of honor again.” By insisting that Ben play a role in her wedding that is generally occupied by a (presumably) straight woman, Ming challenged convention. In this instance, the argument against Ben’s being the man of honor appeared in both accounts to lie more in his gender than his sexuality. Ben’s being gay was not discussed as an issue in his standing up with Ming in her Catholic wedding; only his being male.

Several straight interviewees discussed the role that a gay male or lesbian friend had played in her or his heterosexual wedding ceremony without mentioning controversy. Nadia, who is straight, asked her gay best friend Connor to walk her down the aisle and give her away during her wedding ceremony. Dan’s heterosexual wedding featured his lesbian friend, Brenda, as his “best man.” In each case, the straight interviewee asked her or his gay male or lesbian friend to play a significant and symbolic familial role in their wedding ceremony. Still, a wedding is arguably a cultural tradition that serves to reinforce the family as a heterosexual institution based on legal marriage, to which same-sex partners have been denied equal access. Weddings connect the personal decision to marry with heterosexual privileges, such as social, legal, financial, and religious
benefits (Oswald 2000). For example, because they cannot legally marry in most states in the United States, same-sex couples are not eligible for Social Security survivor and spousal benefits and tax protections on shared property and inheritance from partners (Cahill, South, and Spade 2000). Hence, straight members of these friendship dyads include their gay and lesbian friends in a ceremony that, by virtue of formalizing marriage in its currently exclusionary form, reinforces heterosexuality as a social norm. Yet none of the straight interviewees who planned weddings to include their gay male or lesbian chosen family members in the ceremony recognized (or, at least, acknowledged) that such an action equated to asking the friend to participate in an activity that reinforces heterosexual privilege.

Some study participants planned to subvert social norms in their wedding ceremonies by including an intersectional friend. Monique, who at the time of her interview was planning a formal wedding in the Catholic church, expected Jesse to play an important role in her ceremony: “It’s going to be a riot, because here’s gonna be this big fag walking me down the aisle.” Monique recognized that Jesse’s walking her down the aisle in the Catholic church (a faith that condemns homosexuality) is a transgression of cultural norms. Yet she failed to recognize the irony in having Jesse stand beside her in a ceremony that reinforces her heterosexual status and the accompanying privileges and, as such, actively participating in and reinforcing the institution that excludes him as a gay man.

Monique’s and Ming’s insistence that their gay male friend play a central role in their weddings is not entirely without consequence. Symbolically, the inclusion of gay male and lesbian friends in straight weddings subverts the ideal of the family as heterosexual by definition. Unfortunately, this inclusion occurs within the context of a social institution that reinforces traditional heterosexual norms about family.

Links to (Compulsory) Parenthood

Along with cultural rituals that regulate the family, family life is often defined by the expectation of raising children (Morell 1994). Although increasing numbers of lesbians and gay men are parenting, they still face many obstacles in their efforts. For instance, to follow strict legal terms, a lesbian who wants to inseminate artificially is urged not only to find a donor to become pregnant, but also to use a medical intermediary to limit the donor’s paternity claims (Arnup 1994). In addition, laws are already in place that limit adoption practices for gay
men and lesbians. States such as Mississippi and Utah have laws that explicitly prohibit gay men and lesbians from adopting children (Human Rights Campaign [HRC] 2011). Only nine states and the District of Columbia have made second parent adoption available, a practice that provides gay men and lesbian couples the equivalent of stepparent adoptions, allowing both members of a couple to become the legal parents of any children they may raise together (HRC 2011). Even with the passage of laws that facilitate adoption for same-sex individuals, gay men are reliant on either a surrogate or on adoption to have a child.

Gay men most frequently said that their friendship with a straight woman increased the possibility that they would have a close experience with children and heterosexual family life. Specifically, several gay men in the sample noted that they anticipated being part of the lives of children born to their straight female friends; there were no similar discussions in the lesbian–straight man dyads. Scott explained that, through his twenty-five-year friendship with Ruth and her daughter, who is now a teenager, he was able to experience childrearing: “I mean, I felt like [Ruth’s daughter] was kind of like mine. Me and Ruth used to talk about having a baby together until we found out I was HIV-positive, so I’ve always had this sensation [that her daughter] was kind of mine.” Similarly, Seth identified his straight friend Shayna as his primary connection to straight family life: “I’ve been thinking about this lately, too. . . . She’s also my connection to like to kids—to, like, families. You know what I mean? . . . She’s gonna be the person in my life that’s going to set up a family—it’s just the closeness with her, the fact that our friendship can be so close—I’m going to be part of her little family, which I don’t think other friendships would give.”

Several straight women in the study recognized the challenges that their gay male friends would face in becoming parents; understanding their potential capacities to assist them, they indicated willingness to serve as surrogates for their close gay male friends. Interestingly, most of the gay male participants had not asked about surrogacy or even expressed interest in being parents. Such was the situation for Crystal, a thirty-year-old straight Latina, who explained that she would consider having a baby for her white gay friend Derek, age thirty-two: “I don’t really necessarily want to have children, but I’m not ready to tie my tubes or anything, and I’ve thought about the possibility of having a child for someone else. I have other gay friends, and I thought that maybe I would do that for them.” In his interview, Derek explained that he has briefly thought about becoming a parent but is still too busy raising himself to give it serious consid-
eration. Cristina, a straight woman, also commented that she has considered having a child for her gay male friend Mark and his future life partner. In his interview, Mark discussed wanting to become a parent but indicated that he wanted to adopt and did not consider co-parenting with Cristina or asking her to have a baby for him.

Marriage also influenced the ways that straight women thought about having a child with or for a gay male friend. One married straight female interviewee, who asked not to be identified with this comment, stated: “Even though [my gay male friend] has never asked, I’ve actually thought about this before but don’t tell him. If he ever asked, ‘Can you bear my kids?’—like, if he and [his partner] wanted to have kids of their own—I would say yes. I don’t know what [my husband] would think about the whole thing, but I would have no problem with it.” The interviewee’s comment suggests that, while she still considered having a baby for her gay male friend a possibility, her marriage has altered her ability to discuss whether or not she would serve as a surrogate freely.

Expectations of normative family life seemed also to color thoughts about serving as a surrogate. Nadia explained how being married complicates her thinking about bearing a child for Connor:

Now that I’m married, it is different, but I always told both him and [another close gay male friend] that if they wanted a baby, I’d have one for them. When I would say, “I’d have a baby for you,” it was because I would assume they were with a partner and they have their life and they want a baby. I always assumed that if I was going to have children, I would be married and this and that, because I do not want to raise a child alone, so I never really thought of it that way—co-parenting, I mean. I would be a part of the baby’s life, . . . but I wouldn’t be co-parenting, really. I have no idea what my husband would think if I wanted to have a baby for Connor. He’d probably not go for that very well, you know?

Nadia’s statement reflects a dual-parent, heterosexual model of ideal parenthood; she expected to have her own children within a heterosexual marriage and would act as a surrogate for Connor if he and a partner wanted to parent a baby. Now that she is married, Nadia recognizes that having a baby for Connor is complicated by the expectations of marriage. Historically, marital customs were founded on expectations of monogamy for the purpose of knowing the rightful parent of a child (Ingraham 1999). These customs persist into contemporary family life, with laws enforcing parental support of biological children and
marital fidelity (Ingraham 1999). Marriage presents a challenge to becoming a friend’s surrogate because our social norms place the marital relationship at the top of a relationship hierarchy. Marital status affected these women’s thoughts about having a child with or for their gay male friends; however, the women still indicated potential willingness to have children for their friends, despite being married. At the same time, the women consistently prioritized their marital relationships over their friendships, which reinforces normative family life. The straight women in the study indicated that they had a degree of freedom to build non-normative family structures so long as they were not married.

A second issue inherent in the straight women’s comments is that they appeared to universalize the desire to have children. For instance, Nadia thought that Connor might someday want a baby; however, in his interview, Connor stated that he had no desire to become a parent. This was true for many of the gay male participants. In assuming that their gay male friends would want to parent, many of the straight female participants placed onto their gay male friends the desire to parent. The voiced willingness of straight female participants to bear children for gay male friends is both generous and transgressive in that it not only challenges traditional gender norms of motherhood, which equates procreation with parenthood, but also contests beliefs that gay men should not be allowed to parent. Yet in assuming that their gay male friends aspired to the same family constructs that they do, the straight women falsely conflated the familial desires of gay men and straight women—or, at least, assumed that their friends’ family lives would align with their own perceptions of family.

In the cases of both heterosexual weddings and surrogacy, the actions or attitudes of the straight women challenged the cultural norm of family being defined by blood ties. Most of the straight women in the study, however, were never overtly critical of social regulations that dictate who can be a legally recognized family; rather, many appeared wholeheartedly to accept the primacy of the heterosexual family structure, including marriage and parenthood within marriage, and to view it as ideal. This is not to say that the act of forcing the intersectional friendship into a normative family frame had no effect; doing so suggested that the family is a pliable construct. In addition, by viewing gay men as potential parents, straight women divorced conceptions of gender and family as mutually constitutive and grounded in reproduction within a heterosexual union. While this does not necessarily challenge the norms of gay male identity, it poses a challenge to accepted definitions of family.
AN ANXIOUS FAMILY BOND

Despite the clear indications of how important they are to their straight female friends, some of the gay men I interviewed expressed concerns that the bond would change once their intersectional friend settled into a traditional family life. Rubin (1985: 23) addressed the unsettled dimension that creates anxiety in constructing family structures out of friends: “It’s this very quality of friendship that is at once so powerfully seductive and so anxiety-provoking, indeed that is both its strength and its weakness. To be able to choose is to be free; to be chosen is to feel loved and admired. But in this, as in other arenas of living, freedom exacts its price in our sense of security and certainty. For what is given freely can be taken away with impunity as well. If we can be chosen, we can also be ‘unchosen.’”

It is important to note that only the gay men articulated anxiety about the possible dissolution of their chosen families. Connor, who walked his friend Nadia down the aisle at her wedding, voiced his concerns: “[Nadia’s] going to make me an uncle one day—well, depending on where they’re living, although that’s what I worry about, too, just because people change. Being gay in a gay relationship, you sort of stay the same as your other gay friends, but when you’re married, things are different. Then you have kids, and your life goes in other directions.” Here, Connor identified his anxiety over his chosen family status as being rooted in Nadia’s heterosexual marriage, which he viewed as qualitatively different from a gay relationship. While Connor’s comment suggests that he welcomed being an uncle to Nadia’s future child, he simultaneously braced himself for the possibility that heterosexual married life would stand in the way of his continued chosen family relationship. Likewise, Ben, the man of honor at Ming’s wedding, also expressed concern about what would happen to his role in Ming’s life once she had children. At the time of their interviews, both Connor and Ben were very satisfied with the current state of their friendships, but they understood that the roles that heterosexual family demands from mothers could interfere with their chosen family relationships.

Such fears may be well grounded. Previous research shows that when a woman marries, her friendships become more peripheral to her romantic relationship (Pogrebin 1987; Werking 1997). Cultural scripts determine that the romantic relationship is the most valued (Rubin 1985), particularly in heterosexual relationships that have the possibility of childbearing (Nardi 1999). This may be one of the primary ways that a chosen family differs for heterosexuals.
and gay men or lesbians: a straight person may not be as reliant on his or her chosen family to meet familial needs and can live normatively, marrying legally and having the potential to procreate without intervention. Although a straight friend may never intend to dissolve her chosen family, the possibility that she will enter into heterosexual family life may cause the gay male friend perpetually to question whether or not a bond will remain familial. The same may also be true for friendships between lesbians and straight men, although the possibility of lesbians’ being able to bear children in a way that is not equally available to straight men may alter the dynamic. In any event, straight men and lesbians did not discuss the tenuousness of their friendship bond vis-à-vis heterosexual coupling, marriage, or childbearing.

In this context, the gay man occupies the role of what Collins (1991) described as the “outsider within,” or the position of an oppressed person experiencing a situation in which dominant cultural norms are acted out and insiders fail to notice, much less question, the subjugation (Collins 1991; Ebaugh and Curry 2000; Oswald 2000). Thus, both Ben and Connor were active participants in their friends’ family lives but recognized that their position might be supplanted by the norms of straight married life and eventual parenthood. According to Collins, as the outsider within, an oppressed individual understands the power relations behind those rules and what alternative realities they obscure. Just as Ben and Connor acknowledged that they saw their positions in their friends’ families as tenuous because they counter normative family life, Nadia and Ming, the straight female halves of each dyad, were unaware that their participation in normative family life could jeopardize the chosen family connection they have with the gay male friend. While the straight friends did not voice any intention to alter the chosen kin relationships, the pressures toward normative family life may be difficult to resist. Indeed, in this sample the intersectional friendships that sustained the longest and most rewarding familial-type bonds were those in which the straight friend remained unmarried or committed to a life that defied heteronormative conventions, such as residing in communal households or maintaining radical political ideologies about gender and family.

TRANSGRESSION OR CONVENTION?

Almost all of the interviewees described either the overall character or particular aspects of their friendship as familial. This finding begs the question of whether the conceptualization of friends as family was more a metaphor than
an actual feeling of kinship. In his study of gay male friendship, Nardi (1999: 59) investigated this point and concluded that “for most [gay men and lesbians] friends are like their ideal families and on a daily basis are more likely than is a biological family to provide material and emotional assistance, identity, history, nurturing, loyalty, and support.” Whether the same is true for straight individuals is difficult to ascertain. The word “friend” can encompass a wide range of relationships of varying intensities, from casual bonds to the most significant relationships. Hence, the interviewees’ use of family terms to describe their bonds is a way to identify the importance of the relationship, as others have suggested (Ibsen and Klobus 1972; Nardi 1999). The use of metaphor also addresses what is unstated in this situation—that is, there is no sufficient social script to guide or characterize non-biological and platonic, yet emotionally intimate and socially reliant, relationships between close friends. This being the case, individuals involved in such bonds may default to characterizing their friendships in terms of family relationships, which are easily understood as being a meaningful connection.

The assumption that participants characterized friendships as family simply as a metaphor, however, is a disservice to their strong connections. Such an assumption reinforces the idea that family is limited to bio-legal ties, which thus denies many individuals’ experiences. Indeed, in acknowledging that family is a largely constructed phenomenon (Carrington 1999), it would seem that, to a certain extent, acting as family would be sufficient criteria to be classified as family. While not all close friendships necessarily approximate a familial connection, Carrington’s (1999: 5) suggestion that “any family is a social construction or set of relationships recognized, edified, and sustained through human initiative” allows the definition of family to include a multitude of experiences. Such a perspective is consistent with Thomas’s (1967: 331–36) conceptualization of the “definition of the situation,” which asserted that circumstances perceived or defined as real to the individual are real in their consequences. In the case of close intersectional friends, the individuals who defined their friendships as familial have experienced and defined their relationships as real, rather than metaphorical, family ties.

Another important issue to address is the theoretical usefulness of comparing gay and lesbian chosen families to straight families. Weston (1991) cautioned against the assumption that gay male and lesbian chosen families represent variations of traditional kinship structures. A more useful theoretical model required viewing such chosen families as historical transformations
rather than derivations of heterosexual family structures. Such a perspective reflects the argument that chosen kinship is transformative rather than derivative of other kin relationships. As Rapp (1987: 129) explained: “When we assume male-headed, nuclear families to be central units of kinship, and all alternative patterns to be extensions or exceptions, we accept an aspect of cultural hegemony instead of studying it. In the process, we miss the contested domain in which symbolic innovation may occur.” Indeed, based on the interview data, my suggestion that intersectional friendships often constituted chosen families aligns well with Rapp’s position that the chosen kin relationship may be transformative of family life. The degree to which intersectional friends transform normative conceptions of family, however, remains to be seen. Including straights, gay men, and lesbians in one’s family structure certainly challenges heterocentric definitions of the family. Yet ultimately, reinforcing the heterosexual family as the ideal norm fails to adequately revolutionize meanings of the family to incorporate the experiences of lesbians and gay men, as well as those of other people who do not have access to traditional family ties.

Another issue to consider is whether or not, for political reasons, friendship and family should be viewed as separate entities. Some have argued that because common conceptions of the family are based on an oppressive dimension of relational life that historically negates homosexuality as a viable identity, viewing friendship as family undermines the role of friends in the lives of gay men and lesbians (Weeks et al. 2001). Moreover, some individuals construct chosen kinship structures to contest normative definitions of family by placing non-romantic and non-bio-legal ties at the center of relational life (Weinstock 2000); the conflation of friendship and family negates this challenge. Conversely, expanding the definition of family to include a multiplicity of relations can also be a political act, as it offers an alternative to the monolithic ideal of family life as nuclear and bio-legal.

The participants in the study present a complex understanding of family life. Despite some of the individuals’ strained relationships with families of origin, for example, they persisted in identifying their friendships in familial terms. Simultaneously, this strategy reflected the intimacy and importance of friends and overlooked the inconsistencies in identifying the “family” relationship with chosen kin as positive and that with natal family as negative. Perhaps the distinction lay in favoring the families they chose over the ones they were born into, at least discursively.

While most of the participants identified their intersectional friends as cho-
sen family, the occurrence of the chosen family for straight people differed from that of gay men and lesbians, because in many cases it lacked the same sense of necessity. Although the degrees of privilege that heterosexuals experience with regard to family structure varies, family life still is not equally available to lesbians and gay men through laws, policies, and practices. Nonetheless, these friendships exist as mutually beneficial and meaningful chosen families. Contrary to conservatives’ allegations that gay men and lesbians threaten family life, it seems that family life may be growing through the voluntary bonds of friendship and reflect the state of the postmodern family arrangements as various and fluid (Stacey 1996). Indeed, the contemporary family, bio-legal or chosen, may be in a constant state of flux, adding and losing members while adapting to the social context at hand.