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Coming out in Asian American Culture

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Coming out in Asian American Culture

The purpose of this project is not to speak on the experience of all lesbian Asian Americans, but only the experiences of three lesbian Asian Americans: Sam, Jesse, and Sophie. The experiences of three individuals cannot be applicable to all lesbian-identified Asian Americans as their stories do not provide full understanding of the influential culture sanctions. This essay is merely an attempt to bring the invisible stories of these three women to the forefront, thus allowing the stories to become accessible so others can recognize that identifying as lesbian is not a betrayal of Asian American culture and identity. “Coming out” can manifest in whatever way feels natural, and the bond of family can help assuage the internal struggle of desegregating sexual and racial identity.

Introduction

As visibility of the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer (LGBTQ) community and culture increases, the importance of understanding lesbian Asian American identity increases as well. The concept of “coming out” is an intricately interwoven aspect of American culture. The pervasiveness of American culture manipulates cultures brought from other countries as people emigrate. Not only does American culture dominate and absorb appealing or sellable aspects of other cultures, it forces those who wish to maintain their traditions or culture to manipulate, modify, or adapt their traditions or culture so it may be acceptably practiced in America.

The increased visibility of LGBTQ identities affects those who are considered a part of the racial majority. In American LGBTQ culture, there is a heavy importance placed on “coming out of the closet.” The action of “coming out” can be simple or difficult, as many factors, such as familial ties, media, peers, and autonomy, can be influential. Because those who identify as Asian American are often labelled as the “other,” it is important to understand how the term “coming out” is defined, as well as how Asian American identities are formed in relation to a lesbian identity. In this paper, I interview three cis-gendered⁸ women: Sam, Jesse and Sophie⁹. They are all first generation, born in America, and identify as lesbian and some variation of Asian American.

Coming Out

“Coming out is a complicated, life-long process” (Pak, 2011, p. 339). This can be understood to be true regardless of ethnic identification. Although coming out is a process, there is a standard sought-after result. Author George Chauncey (1994), in *Gay New York*,

⁸ Born with the anatomy of the gender they identify with.

⁹ Pseudonyms are used to maintain confidentiality.

claims it was not until the 1960s that the term “coming out” was applied to gay society. Until then, “coming out” was used to reference debutants, or young women, coming out as being of courting age (Chauncey, 1994). The term “coming out” seems fitting and applicable to LGBTQ society. When people come out, they are “coming out” to LGBTQ society.

In the article, “Ethnic/Racial Differences in the Coming-Out Process of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Youths: A Comparison of Sexual Identity Development Over Time”, authors Margaret Rosario, Eric Schrimshaw, and Joyce Hunter (2004) break the term “coming out” into two parts: “identity formation” and “identity integration.” They define “identity formation” as the period when LGB individuals “become aware of their developing sexual orientation, and begin to question whether they may be LGB” (Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2004, p. 216). As a result, they “explore their emerging sexual LGB identity by engaging in sexual activities” (p. 216). This precedes “identity integration,” or when one accepts their LGB identity. Examples of one accepting their LGB identity include: “adopting more positive attitudes toward homosexuality, feel more comfortable with others knowing about their sexual

identity, disclose that identity to others, and become involved in LGB social activities” (Rosario et al., p. 216). This process seems linear and restricting; in other words, not everyone engages in sexual behavior as a means to explore their homosexual identity. Essentially, coming out is about grounding one’s sexual identification in some form of deviation from heterosexuality, and can be understood to be a process that unfolds over time.

Asian American Identity

“Asian American” remains an umbrella term as Asia contains various countries, locations, and cultures. This is important to remember as the Asian American identity is researched and becomes more visible. The cultural representation or experience of one or a few people who are classified as “Asian American” can lead to the misrepresentation, and therefore, wrongful generalization of all who can identify as Asian American. There are commonalities among Asian American and racial minority existence.

Tradition and family continue to be a strong influence to the foundation of many Asian American cultures. In northeastern Asia, Confucianism taught the lesson of putting the needs of others before one’s own needs and desires (Ho, 1994/2004). Although

many are not practicing Confucianism, Confucian beliefs have influenced the inherent perspectives of etiquette and propriety for generations. Because of the socioeconomic status of many in Asia, children are often needed to help support the family. Therefore, “the independence of the child is not functional (thus not valued), because an independent child may leave the family and look after his or her own self-interest when he or she grows up” (Kagitcibasi, 2005, p. 411).

Despite being born in America, many Asian American children have parents who were born and raised in Asian countries. This usually means the children will be raised straddling two cultures -- the culture of their parents, and the culture of their country. Western culture values the pursuit of the individual and, since suffrage, has made strides to empower the individuality of women. Traditional Asian culture grounds a woman’s identity in the relationships she has with men, father, brother, husband, son, and in her familial roles (Chan, 1987). When a woman merges lesbian identity with Asian American identity, she can be perceived as deviating from her traditional Asian culture. This is because “homosexuality is perceived as the result of decadent, Western urban society” (Tremble, Schneider, &

Appathurai, 1989, p. 260). It is assumed that the woman is attempting to “fit into white culture” (Tremble et al., 1989, p. 260). In a sense, she is abandoning her racial identity in pursuit of developing her sexual identity. Often, this is irreconcilable. However, studies have shown that the pressure to maintain family, which Asian Americans lesbians have internalized, also is true for the entire family unit (Tremble et al., 1989). In many cases, the family will aim to reintroduce the lesbian-identified woman into the family because the need to maintain the familial bond is stronger than the need for the woman to maintain a traditional gender role.

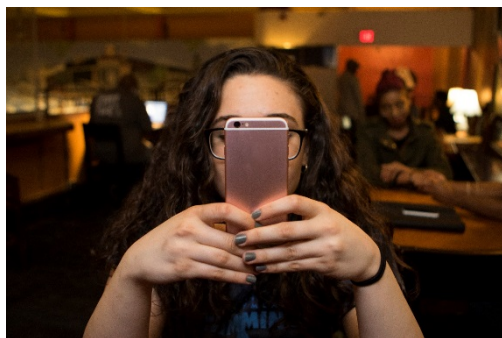
Who are They?

Sam:

On a windy day in winter I met with Sam. She is 25 years of age. She was born, raised, and currently lives in Rochester, NY. While she maintains a close relationship with her mother, she and her father are rather distant. Sam’s mother is half Chinese, half Vietnamese. Both her mother and father emigrated from Vietnam. When asked, Sam identifies as a cis-gendered Asian American lesbian. Between the ages of nine and 19, Sam started to question her heterosexuality. At the age of nine, Sam met a girl online who

confided her love for another girl. At this point, Sam realized it was possible to be interested in girls. Although this experience did not cause Sam to think of herself as a lesbian, it did inspire her to question the heteronormative rules of sexuality imposed upon her.

She began to research homosexuality online through chats and forums. She came out to her online friends before coming out to anyone else. During this time, Sam became acutely aware of the stance her father and brothers had on homosexuality. When Sam was young, her brothers speculated about her sexuality. Because they thought she was lesbian, they would beat her up. She also grew accustomed to homophobic remarks from her father and brothers. Sam says these experiences influenced her discomfort in being open about herself with her family. Despite this, they did not hinder her from acknowledging her sexuality. However, they helped frame her belief that homosexual relationships should be



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normalized and not need proclamation. Today, Sam wonders why anyone should care who she is in a relationship with (personal communication, 2017).

Jesse:



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Writing, journaling, and literature have always been grounding points for Jesse. Jesse is 24 years of age. Her birth parents are divorced and remarried. For the sake of this paper, her stepfather is referred to as “father” and her birthfather is referred to as “birthfather.” Her mother emigrated from Korea. Her birthfather, and many generations of his family, were born in America. When Jesse’s mother was with her birthfather, Jesse recalls her mother striving and pushing to provide better lives for the family. Her mother used *Hooked on Phonics* so that Jesse could become fluent in English. *Hooked on Phonics* delivers educational materials to facilitate learning the English language through phonetics. Her mother provided the main source of income,

while Jesse’s birthfather was content filling the role of stay-at-home dad. Therefore, her mother made the majority of the financial decisions.

Her mother imposed the expectations of an Asian household, but the stereotypical role of “submissive Asian housewife” was not fulfilled. There was an understood expectation that Jesse would succeed academically. Despite this, Jesse’s mother would not ask for Jesse’s report card. Instead, the message of Jesse’s academic success was so ingrained in her that she would automatically present her report card to her mother. After Jesse’s mother and birthfather split, her mother married another man. He had emigrated from Vietnam. Jesse recalls the behavioural changes that occurred for her mother. Jesse’s mother opened a restaurant however, it was in her father’s name. There was a transitional period. Jesse recalls much of the financial responsibility being transferred to her father while her mother took on a supportive role. Despite this, her mother was still very involved in the labors of the restaurant. Growing up, Jesse cannot recall a time when her mother made homophobic comments. In fact, Jesse recalls an incident when her mother commented on a very attractive woman who came into the

restaurant her family owned (personal communication, 2017).

Sophie:

“There is something soothing about being immersed in water. To feel yourself glide though the water. Faster and smoother. Swimming is why I’m still here.” Sophie jokes that she has been swimming since before she would walk. She never claims to be the fastest or best swimmer, just that she can out-swim most people. She is 29 years old and relocated to New York some years ago because of her partner at the time. They have since split however; she remains here to test herself. She says staying here is the hardest thing she has ever done. She has a very close relationship with her family and talks to her mother every day. She makes a point to visit her family yearly and sends photo messages often. Life was not always this easy. Sophie vividly recalls almost 10 years of navigating a strained relationship with her family.



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Her father was born in Hong Kong and immigrated to Hawaii when he was a teenager. He did not move to the mainland until college, and recalls having close friendships with native Hawaiians and other Chinese-born children who had emigrated with their family. Despite this, he was taught to renounce his Chinese heritage and told that America is where one could find power. Sophie’s father was taught to blend in so he could beat the Americans at their own game. To be successful, he was to speak English and excel at his studies. Sophie says there are many ways her father is obviously and behaviourally Americanized. He prefers to speak English and readily admits his wife is more financially savvy, thus relinquishes all his earnings to her, and typically defers major household decisions to his wife. These are just a few ways Sophie recognizes her father is not “typically Chinese.” But as they both age, she recognises the subtle ways that he maintains his Chinese culture. It is less about his behaviour and more about his perspective.

Sophie says that most people think Chinese fathers raise their daughters to be useless, but she points out it is important to understand where in China that person was born and what the socioeconomic status of the family is. Her father’s family worked for the

government. Sophie believes this moulded his perspective that she should not only be successful academically, but she should be self-sustaining. He taught her to change her car oil, build a fire, read, think strategically about her spending, and most importantly, drink quality whiskey.

Sophie's mother was born in Mexico. Her family emigrated when she was 11 years old. She was raised by her grandmother and grew up surrounded by her aunts, uncles, and cousins. She speaks Spanish fluently and often cooks Spanish food. Sophie and her mother talk frequently with her mother's family. Growing up, Sophie's family never mentioned anything pertaining to homosexuality. In fact, Sophie is certain she had not heard the terms homosexual or lesbian until she was in high school (personal communication, 2017).

Only White People are Lesbian

Much research has been done on the Asian American identity and lesbian identity from a theoretical framework that is influenced by western culture. Intersectionality covers much ground, however for this paper, it is the theoretical framework that establishes the existence of and studies "the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities" (McCall,

2005, p. 1771). In other words, intersectionality encourages research to recognize that people experience life in ways that touch upon their identity. In any situation, a person perceives what is happening based on their multifaceted identity. Gender, race, class, age, sexuality, etc., all have an influence. This is important to apply to lesbian Asian American identity. The way one develops sexual identity will be influenced by their racial identity, just as the way one develops racial identity will be influenced by their sexual identity.

All three participants expressed an internalized impression that homosexuality is a "Western" concept or lifestyle not applicable for Asian Americans. This sentiment is evident in other research as well. Tremble et al. (1989) state, "homosexuality is perceived as the result of decadent, Western urban society" (p. 260). This is problematic as lesbian Asian Americans identity exists. As stated above, it is assumed that Asian American women will live their lives finding meaning from their roles according to their families and the men they will marry (Chan, 1989). Despite this, all three women in my study expressed that their families imposed upon them a pressure for academic success. They did not understand academic success as a means of empowerment, but as a means

of “saving face” or their contribution of bringing honor to the familial unit. Pursuing education is acceptable because it can be utilized for financial success within the American culture, whereas embracing their lesbian identity would be received with negative reaction because it does not directly lead to financial success. Instead, it is seen as an attempt to “fit into white culture” (Tremble et al., 1979, p. 260). In a sense, all three women believed they would abandon their racial identity in pursuit of developing their sexual identity.

Sam:

“Being white and lesbian is simple, the only problem with the person is they are lesbian. But being Asian and lesbian, there’s two things wrong with you. You know what I mean?” Sam jokes (personal communication, 2017). She tells me that not only is the person lesbian, but as an Asian American, she is betraying her culture and heritage.



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Because there are limited examples of lesbian Asian or Asian American representation, one must forge her own path to consolidate her identities. Sam believes developing a lesbian identity becomes another aspect of life one must juggle. Sam says she is lucky because she does not perceive this pressure from her mom, but knows others who feel the pressure to choose between their Asian American identity and their lesbian identity.

Growing up, Sam thought she was asexual. She wasn’t interested in boys and assumed her interest in girls was friendship. She spent a bit of time on the internet in various chatrooms. One day Sam’s internet friend expressed being attracted to a girl. It was this moment that Sam realized the feelings she had for certain girls were the same feelings her school friends expressed having for certain boys. She did not understand this to mean that she was a lesbian. At the time Sam did not understand what identifying as a lesbian could mean. Sam developed a community through the internet which not only accepted her sexuality, but encouraged her to admit her sexuality to herself. Despite this, Sam did not engage in sexual activities with women until she entered college. She thinks this is because she was too close to home, and while at home, it was important for

Sam to behave in ways that her family deemed appropriate. Sam decided she would abide by the rules imposed upon her, but would continue to like whomever she liked.

Jesse:

A group of Jesse’s childhood friends taught her and her other friend about terms like “gay”. When she was younger, Jesse’s friend and neighbor would kiss her. They kept it a secret, almost knowing they would be frowned upon if anyone knew what they were doing. Jesse recalls that her friend used to come sleep over. She slept in Jesse’s bed or they made a fort together on the floor. Initially no one thought anything of it because it is common for girls to share a bed in most Asian cultures. But in the night when everyone was sleeping, Jesse and her friend would kiss. She recalls that she was not opposed to it and grew to like it.

In time, Jesse’s friend’s brothers explained that “gay” was bad, and when



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they called something “gay”, they were actually implying that something was undesirable. Jesse began to think about her and her friend. One night, when her friend came over, she tried to kiss Jesse. When Jesse hesitated, her friend told her that people cannot be gay until they are 10 years old. Jesses says that this made sense to her at the time because she enjoyed kissing her friend and did not want to stop. She thinks of this enjoyment as what set her apart from most girls. Instead of chasing boys, she was chasing the girl next door.

Sophie:



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“High school ruined everything. Actually, let me clarify. It ruined everything I knew and created something unfathomable” (personal communication, 2017). Sophie remembers her relationship with her mom before the issue of girls, boys, and sexuality became a topic of conversation. She says she was carefree and felt whole. Despite being a reserved

child, Sophie told her mom everything and life seemed easier. Everything changed in high school. Sophie attended a Roman Catholic, all-girl high school. Although she was never particularly religious, she was required to attend mass, read and write essays about scriptures, and take religion courses.

Sophie remembers the first day of high school. She walked into her homeroom English class and dropped her books. She says she spent the remainder of the school year sitting in front of the most beautiful person she had ever seen. Until that moment, dating and relationships were just something that occurred in television shows by people who looked much older than high school age. By no means were those people in homosexual relationships. As far as Sophie was concerned, dating and relationships involved a boy and a girl. At the time, Sophie hadn't heard of homosexuality, but in that moment, all Sophie knew was the feeling of catching her breath and the numbness in her arms.

Fast-forward a year later. Sophie was going steady with a boy, but she recalls thinking often about the girl from her English class. She made a point to befriend this girl, and that was when she knew what fuelled the discontent

she felt in her current relationship. After some messy experiences, Sophie's mother discovered the relationship between Sophie and the girl from the English class. She forbade Sophie from seeing her. Sophie recalls her mother telling her that white people are lesbians and because she and her family are not white, Sophie could not be a lesbian. To convince her family that she was not a lesbian, Sophie started dating a different boy. He was a very good friend of hers. Shortly after the relationship began, she knew she wasn't interested in a romantic relationship with him. She also knew her mother was not fully correct. Sophie was not white, but she certainly was a lesbian.

Who Decides that We Must Come Out?

Adrienne Rich (2003) writes about "compulsory heterosexuality" in her article "Compulsory Heterosexuality and the Lesbian Experience." Rich says that compulsory heterosexuality is the assumption that women and men are inherently sexually drawn to the opposite sex. This assumption is littered throughout literature and social sciences, and results in the perception of lesbian identity as deviant, abhorrent, or invisible (Rich, 2003). It is also problematic as it assumes that gender identity is consistent with sex, and

subsequently, sex establishes sexual orientation. In other words, a child born with female genitalia is inherently sexually attracted with a person born with male genitalia, and vice versa. However, research is showing this not *always* to be true, as there are a variety of factors, not simply the sex of the individual, that contribute to the development of sexual orientation (Perrin, 2002). This has resulted in the need to research and raise awareness that gender should be unlinked from anatomy and that anatomy should be unlinked from sexual identity (Frankowski, 2004). The action of coming out can be understood as an answer to the increased need for visibility of identifications that deviate from compulsory heterosexuality.

Coming out via proclamation results in both positive and negative outcomes. Coming out can produce positive outcomes as it raises people's awareness that heterosexuality is just one of many sexualities, and it enables people to make a personal connection; people will personally know someone who does not identify as straight. However, these positive outcomes are contingent on the "assumption that coming out has an empowering effect on the individual" (Benozzo, Pizzorno, Bell, & Koro-Ljungberg, 2015, p. 293). Should her social circles deem homosexuality

negatively, the individual is empowered because proclaiming her sexuality enables her with the possibility to inspire a change in perspective (Benozzo et al., 2015). She becomes a pioneer for justice in the gay rights movement. But is the action of proclaiming one's sexuality helpful? This way of coming out is a performative act that reinforces heteronormativity (Butler, 1990).

In the paper "Coming Out, But into What? Problematizing Discursive Variations of Revealing the Gay Self in the Workplace", authors Benozzo et al. (2015) reference Butler's (1990) argument that coming out is performative because one is never simply comes out once. "Performativity", defined and coined by Butler, is a series of repetitive performances comprised of stylised actions and behaviors with the intention of expressing one's understanding of the dominant conventions of gender. Butler argues "the act that one does, the act that one performs is, in a sense, an act that's been going on before one arrived on the scene" (Butler, 1988, p. 526). Society expects people to adhere to specific gender roles through behaviour, actions, and language. It is a repetitive action that must be completed multiple times and in various social settings (Benozzo et al., 2015).

The repetitive nature of coming out reinforces heteronormativity because it establishes the *need* for one to establish sexuality as something other than the assumed heterosexual sexuality (Benozzo et al., 2015). Not only does it reinforce the notion that those who do not identify as heterosexual are different, it creates a hierarchal system which pits those who will not come out against those who do come out (Benozzo et al., 2015). Finally, it upholds the presumption that sexuality is a fixed and unwavering aspect of one's identity (Benozzo et al., 2015). It is important to think about the reasons we choose to come out and to who we choose to come out to. In the stories that follow, all participants came out to friends or family because they needed to come out to themselves. They have been selective about who they disclose their sexual identity, not out of fear, but because they simply did not feel it necessary to come out to everyone.

Sam:



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From there, she told me she loved me, and will always be by my side. And I don't have to have kids and to be happy, and enjoy my life. Because I don't need a man to be happy (personal communication, 2017).

Sam first told her online friends that she was interested in girls. This was how Sam learned about lesbian identity. Since Sam started identifying as a lesbian, she only felt the need to tell her mom. Otherwise, she has not felt the need to disclose her sexual identity to anyone else. She did not understand what was accomplished by the disclosure. Because of the homophobia she experienced from her father and brothers, she was fearful that the people she would tell would treat her the same way they had. But she was emboldened by the community she gathered online.

Later, she decided to tell her high school friend. At this point, Sam was less fearful about how people would react and more unassuming. Sam says she did not expect a positive or negative reaction when she decided to tell her friend. Nevertheless, her friend was happy. Since then, Sam has been in a few of relationships with women. These happened by chance. At the age of 19 she was kissed for the first time by a girl at a nightclub. Despite being a bit taken aback, Sam agreed when the girl asked if she wanted to go on a date. The current year is 2017 and only eight

months ago Sam came out to her mother. From Sam's perspective, despite this, her mother was ecstatic when she came out to her. She had already suspected Sam was a lesbian. Sam does not overtly tell people she is a lesbian. Instead, she is out to herself and engages in lesbian relationships openly. People can see or find out that she is a lesbian because of this. If asked, or during conversation, Sam will use the pronoun she/her when referring to her girlfriend.

Jesse:



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If there is not a lot of visibility, then we should probably organize. Because it's way more difficult to come out when you're alone, as opposed to a group. Right, it's easier to come out now as opposed to 30 years ago, because of the LGBT community that exists (Jesse, personal communication, 2017).

Jesse came out to her mom while they were repainting her mom's restaurant. Shortly before this moment, Jesse recounts a story of a Christmas party

with her birthfather. At this party, her aunt confronted her about a Facebook dialogue between Jesse and her friend. Jesse interpreted this as being outed by her aunt. She believed the news would reach her mother eventually. Although Jesse did not feel the need to come out about her sexuality, she identifies two reasons why she decided to tell her mother. The first was because she cares for her mother and wanted to be the one to tell her. The second is because Jesse did not want to lie through omission to herself or anyone else.

Jesse says that she chose to tell her mom while they were repainting the new restaurant as a power play. They were undertaking this difficult task during the hot, sweltering summer months. Jesse knew her mother would not hire anyone to help and therefore she would not turn Jesse's assistance away. By choosing this setting, Jesse figured her mom would be required to extend acceptance of Jesse's sexuality. She told her mother that she was visiting her roommate's family for holiday. When her mother asked why, Jesse said she and her roommate in college were "together." Her mom responded neutrally, saying she knew because Jesse did not adhere to gender roles and exhibited attraction to girls at a young age. According to Jesse, her mother does not particularly condone

the relationships she has with women and has expressed a notable happiness when the relationship ends. She interprets her mom's happiness when relationships end as a glimmer of hopefulness that the demise of the relationship indicates the possibility that she will date a man.

In the present time, Jesse makes a point not to hide her sexuality. She has not directly come out to other members of her family and believes proclaiming her sexuality is unnecessary. She is out in other aspects of her life and does not intentionally hide her relationships. Jesse has left a company because she did not feel the company was supportive of homosexuals. During the hiring interview with her current employer, she intentionally slipped in a story about her and her girlfriend of the time.

Jesse identifies as a lesbian. She made a point to be clear that she does not identify as queer. Jesse claims that visibility is important, and as more women identify as queer, the strong lesbian identity gets washed away in the perspective of those who do not understand the complexities of sexuality and sexual identification. For Jesse, coming out is important, but it must be done in ways that normalize lesbian identity. Proclamation is best done when subtly slipped into conversation.

Sophie:

Over tea, Sophie tells me, "I don't think I actually really came out to my parents. I told my mom 'I like women,' but I never clarified what that meant. And she never asked." Sophie decided to tell her mother because she foresaw her life spiralling out of control. She no longer excelled in school, did not have goals to strive for, and simply, she felt like a stranger to herself. Leading up to that moment, Sophie's friends were trying to convince her that her life was out of control because she was hiding her sexuality from her family. They told her that family should accept her sexuality. If they did not, then they never loved her to begin with.

She recalls sitting on the curb and hesitantly calling her mother to say she wanted to tell her father everything. She remembers the pause then alarm in her mother's voice. According to Sophie, that was the moment she realized that she never wanted to come out. By telling her mother she liked women, she



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made a promise to herself only to sleep with men if she wanted to, not because she wanted to be straight. At the time, Sophie knew her father would require her mother to choose between the family and her daughter. She still believes this to be true, but is less bothered by it.

Sophie dated her ex-girlfriend for about five years. During that time, her girlfriend was welcomed into the family. Sophie understands it as a very don't-ask, don't tell situation, but is not bothered by it. She does not see herself as a publicly affectionate person and did not have the desire to be affectionate with her girlfriend while around her family. She believes coming out via proclamation is not the only way to come out. Sophie grew up in a household influenced by Asian culture because her father was born and lived his youth in Asia. She believes the stress of the importance of family, coupled with the minority status of Asian Americans, means Asian American youth do not feel they can leave their family unit. This results in the need to understand that while sexual identity is important, it is not always the primary way a person identifies.

Family Bonds Us

The article, "Growing Up Gay or Lesbian in a Multicultural Context", by

Bob Tremble, Margaret Schneider, and Carol Appathurai (1989), addresses three conflicts that children of immigrants experience when coming out. "They are in conflict with: (a) themselves, (b) their family, and, (c) their culture, or, in the case of ethnic youngsters, tied to the New World by such things as school system, two cultures" (p. 256). According to Tremble et al., all these conflicts intersect with each other, however a person's culture has a strong influence on whether a person is accepted as homosexual within family. The coming out process established by Rosario, Schrimshaw, and Hunter (2004), identify formation and identity interrogation, have been deemed the "standard" progression indicators of the coming out process. It is assumed that the progression for racial minorities may be slowed due to "cultural factors" (Rosario et al., 2004).

There is widespread assumption that one's relationship with their family will be a large factor in delaying lesbian identity formation. In Asian culture, a large emphasis is placed on familial connection. It is assumed this conflict is irreconcilable. However, studies have shown the pressure to maintain family Asian Americans have internalized, is also true for the entire family unit (Rosario et al., 2004). In many cases, the

family will aim to reintroduce the lesbian identified woman into the family because the need to maintain the familial bond is stronger than the need for the women to maintain a traditional gender role.

The article "Autonomy and Relatedness in Cultural Context: Implications for Self and Family" (Kagitcibasi, 2005) establishes that "autonomy" is defined in two dimensions. The first, "interpersonal distance" is defined as separating one from other through well-defined boundaries and barriers, however, there remains a degree of connectedness (Kagitcibasi, 2005). The second, "agency", is defined in terms of who is ruling or has command over you (Kagitcibasi, 2005). Kagitcibasi (2005) equates agency to autonomous morality, when one is ruled or governed by oneself and heteronomous morality, and when one is ruled or governed by another or an external entity. The difference in the latter is establishing distance from an external influence whereas the former is establishing distance within connection and relationship with other. By separating autonomy into two dimensions, "interpersonal distance" and "agency," one becomes able to identify as an autonomous being on two different spectrums. It becomes possible to want and establish distance within

relationships, but remain bound to the beckoning of family. This allows one to develop an individual identity and simultaneously maintain the collective identity; "the family is a team working together to build family honour" (Li & Orleans, 2001, p. 75).

Everyone contributes individually to the success of the family name. By blending the two dimensions, the understanding of autonomy becomes singular "feminist theory crossed over the two dimensions, defining autonomy as separateness and contrasting the female development toward relatedness with the male development toward autonomy" (Kagitcibasi, 2005, p. 405). Although this example specifically refers to gender, this is relatable to lesbian Asian American identity because it identifies how a singular definition of autonomy is detrimental to lesbian Asian Americans. In Western culture, establishing and developing queer identity implies the need for autonomy. If autonomy is solely defined as "separateness," the development of queer identity becomes homogenized. This is not relatable to lesbian Asian Americans as they may request and enforce non-traditional boundaries to allow space to develop their lesbian identity, however they remain loyal in the broader ways to their families.

Sam:



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I was different in school, more outgoing than I was at home. I think it's because school was less restrictive than school and around my friends. This made me realize something. At the time, I didn't know what it was, but I think it was just that I felt sort of stifled, you know, with the way my brothers and dad were.

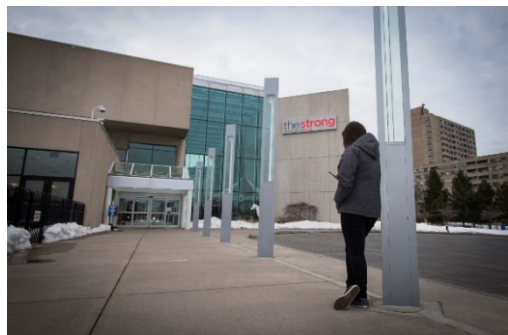
Sam attributes her coming out to a couple of factors. The first is the realization that her behavior was different when in school compared to around her family. The second is the sense of independence she experienced since entering college. Looking back, Sam notices her behavior in school was much more extroverted when compared to her behavior around her family. She speculates this is because the school environment, and the relationships she had with her friends and peers were not as restrictive as the environment at home and the relationships she had with her family. Upon entering college, Sam discovered that people not only did not care about

her attraction to women, but they congratulated her.

Sam thinks she felt restricted in her home setting because her brothers and father were not supportive of homosexuality. Despite her father and brother's perspective, Sam's mom has always been supportive. Sam moved away for college but maintained a close relationship with her mom. Sam visits her mom for weekly dinners. This is important to her. She believes time away from home enabled the development of her identity outside of her family's expectations of her. It helped her maintain the connection she has with her mom and was vital for Sam to consolidate her racial and sexual identity.

Jesse:

Jesse maintains a relationship with her mother. Although she and her mother do not talk directly about Jesse's relationships with women, her mother knows. Jesse believes that this is



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something her mother is getting used to. In many ways, Jesse's mother has inspired her to be successful as she strives for accomplishment in her work. Soon, she will go to school for her Master degree. Sometimes Asian American children will do a trade-off. They will trade financial and/or educational success for relationship freedom.

Jesse remembers the day she waited for a girl she liked. It would be her first relationship where they dated for a bit before entering a relationship. She was nervous and anxious, but excited. It did not matter that her mom may express happiness if or when the relationship would end. What mattered was Jesse knew what she was doing, her mom knew what she was doing, and neither tried to stop it from happening.

Sophie:

If I hadn't learned to listen, I don't know how things would be. And some would say 'well why did you have to learn to listen and not your parents?' Which is



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fair, but someone must start; I guess I just happened to have more of the skills to do it. I'd like to think that my demonstration was beneficial for my family to learn to do it too (personal communication, 2017).

Sophie cannot recall the number of men she slept with in the hope and intent that one of them would help her become straight. But she can recall her second year of college and promising herself that she would not sleep with men unless she desired to do so. This was when Sophie believes that she started to pick up the pieces of her life. She said relations were estranged between her family and her for many years. In fact, she recalls at least five years when her family did not speak to her. Those were the hardest years. She moved home because her mother fell ill. She lived there for just over a year. Sophie describes this time as when she had to acknowledge and lose her ego.

Growing up, she was good at listening and following directions. But to hold an emotional space of someone else, when you are screaming inside, is a different way of listening. Instead of railing against her family, she realized they saw her as more than her sexual identification. She started to see herself as more than her sexuality as well. This enabled her to listen to her mom about why her mom did not want her to be

with women, it enabled her to have level conversations, and most importantly, to have conversations with her family about non-controversial issues. In the end, Sophie is convinced doing this showed her mother that she was not a rebellious or deviant child. It gave her mother faith to let Sophie establish her own life.

Sophie and her parents are very close. She is in a healthy and happy relationship and vaguely discusses it her mother. Although she has never told her father, he knows of her girlfriend. He believes they are only friends and is welcoming. Sophie recognises that not everyone is this lucky; she believes that most families love their children. Unfortunately, they are taught their children should be heterosexual. She thinks the hardest part is when parents realize that someone is changing the terms on them. And, like with most people when change occurs, it is hard, though possible, to adapt when someone else initiated it.

Conclusion

Racial and sexual identity are not mutually exclusive. As each develops, they interact and intersect with the other, creating a complex interwoven fabric that is the foundation for perception and identity. It is important to recognize this when researching

lesbian Asian American identity. The culture of Asian American identity typically maintains the values and traditions, because many Asian Americans either emigrated from Asia or are first born to parents who emigrated from Asia. They place a heavy weight on the maintenance of familial bonds; subsequently, everyone does their part to bring honor or shame to the family. Often, this strong connection can be viewed as stifling to an Asian American woman's lesbian identity formation. This is because many Asian cultures maintain the expectation that their daughters will marry men and bear children. Obviously, this expectation is not always filled.

There is a Chinese saying roughly translated to, "A bad thing may become a good thing under certain conditions." It is told to people who experience unfortunate events. For some, having a daughter who is lesbian, or being a girl who realizes she is lesbian, can be considered an unfortunate situation. The daughter is viewed to be rebelling against her family by embracing white, Western culture. The second half of the saying implies that blessings can be birthed from these unfortunate situations. It is most important that those experiencing the unfortunate event are open to the possibility of

change. In this instance, familial bonds remain important; they simply adapt.

Essentially, “cultural sanctions are not fixed values. They are perceived and interpreted by individuals, families, communities, and are modified in application by the perceived characteristics of the individuals involved” (Tremble et al., 1989, p. 257). The Chinese saying, “one radish, one hole” implies that everyone in the family plays their role. Because of the

importance of family, maintaining connection with one’s family allowed Sam, Jesse, and Sophie to consolidate their racial and sexual identity. It also enabled them to combat the myth that only white people are lesbians. As a result, they manifest Asian American identity in a way that does not require a constant proclamation. Instead, they live their lives as if lesbian identity is the norm.

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