LGBT CONCEPTS OF AND RELATIONSHIPS TO FAMILY IN THE 1950-60S

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The legality of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered (LGBT) families has recently come to national political attention, but LGBT individuals have dealt with relationships and attitudes toward their natal families and the creation of their own for a much longer time, beginning after World War II when the option to identify as LGBT solidified. My research this semester was in preparation for Dr. Elizabeth Clement’s upcoming book dealing with the historical development of both societal and individual attitudes toward the concept of LGBT families from the 1950s to the 1990s. I have focused my efforts this semester on the 1950s and 60s, discovering that mainstream papers created a panic about homosexual criminality, alleging an epidemic in sexual abuse of children by gay men, thus making homosexuality a clear threat to families and children. I have focused my efforts on isolating LGBT individual’s comments about this threat in primary source documents, and I documented several accounts of other personal obstacles that LGBT people experience in relation to family such as “coming out,” obtaining custody of their children after the dissolution of a heterosexual marriage, and obtaining joint house insurance for their nontraditional families.

I found these cases in the journals of the first gay rights organizations. The Ladder by the Daughters of Bilitis, and One by Mattachine, in personal memoirs such as The Coming Out Stories and Making History, to mention a few. I have documented several cases of LGBT individuals, ranging in experience of those who created heterosexual families to please natal families to youth who were denied a place in their natal families who found “family” in shelters provided by gay rights activists, from families who were torn apart by organizations “outing” them, to evidence of individuals who publicly defied prescriptions for dealing with the “illness” and defined their friendships and relationships as “family,” to a mother who formed PFLAG when she discovered her son was gay, the first gay rights organization for families of LGBT individuals.

I have discovered that the heightened public hysteria about homosexuality and its’ subsequent criminality led homosexuals to pursue very different tactics for securing the legitimacy and harmlessness of their preferred familial structure than arguments used today. My research in this field has been personally enriching, and I hope that my research for Professor Clement’s subsequent book will help raise readers’ consciousness about the history of discrimination towards gay and lesbian individuals, the importance of familial acceptance, and above all, contribute to social change.