

# A Phenomenological Exploration of the Experiences of Dual-Career Lesbian and Gay Couples

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■ Dual-career lesbian and gay couples face unique struggles as they encounter relational and workplace discrimination. This phenomenological study explored how relationship and career intersect for lesbian and gay couples. Three themes emerged that described how couples successfully blended relationship and career: planfulness, creating positive social networks, and shifting from marginalization to consolidation and integration. The implications of these results are discussed regarding practice and research.

A central model for career counseling has been the trait and factor approach with its emphasis on matching people and work. Zunker (2006) noted that this approach severely limits factors that can be considered in an individual’s career. He emphasized the need for career counseling to integrate personal and career concerns. As a result, contemporary career counselors have incorporated a broader developmental framework.

Similarly, Niles and Harris-Bowlsbey (2005) encouraged career practitioners in the 21st century to empower clients by integrating the meaning of their life experiences into appropriate occupational and life choices. Croteau and Hedstrom (1993) suggested that effective career counselors consider the complexities of a client’s whole life. This holistic paradigm of career counseling is shared by increasing numbers of counseling professionals (Gelso & Fretz, 2001; Schultheiss, 2000; Sharf, 2006; Zunker, 2006).

As much as the nature of career counseling has changed, so has the concept of family. Stoltz-Loike (1992) indicated that the prevalent pattern of family life has shifted from the single-earner couple to the dual-earner couple. By 1992, there were more than 3 million dual-career couples in the United States, and that figure has steadily increased. This population faces conflict based on changing roles, limited resources, and a desire to maintain high standards for career satisfaction, while striving for quality family relationships (Spiker-Miller & Kees, 1995).

A current trend in career counseling stresses the importance of understanding the needs of minority clients. This view has been extended to include the role of sexual orientation (Herr, Cramer, & Niles, 2004; Sharf, 2006; Zunker, 2006). Lonborg and Phillips (1996) and Pope (1995) recommended that researchers examine dual-career and multiple-role issues for lesbian, gay, and bisexual people.

## ■ Dual-Career Couples

Stoltz-Loike (1992) found that both members of dual-career couples were highly committed to their careers and viewed

work as essential to their sense of self. Dual-career couples view employment as part of a career path that progressively involves greater responsibility, power, and financial remuneration.

The number of dual-career couples in the workforce represents approximately 60% to 70% of current employees in major U.S. corporations, and this percentage is expected to rise to 80% within a decade (Johnson, 1990). Therapists who work with couples have reported that nearly one third of those cases involve issues associated with work–family balance (Haddock & Bowling, 2002).

Dual-career couples represent a large segment of the U.S. workforce. Research focusing on work–family conflict assumes that maternal employment is associated with stress, overload, and negative outcomes for families (Haddock & Rattenborg, 2003). Marshall and Barnett (1993) labeled this perspective the *scarcity hypothesis*, noting that additional responsibilities create tension and overload for dual-career couples because the sum of human time and energy is finite. Counselors who hold this perspective focus their interventions primarily on the interpersonal problems experienced by these couples as they struggle to balance demands between work and family.

A second perspective on dual-career couples is the expansion hypothesis, which suggests that one role, either relationship or work, can serve as a buffer for stress in the other role (Barnett & Marshall, 1992; Barnett, Marshall, & Sayer, 1992; Zimmerman, Haddock, Current, & Ziemba, 2003). Conflicts become opportunities to increase intimacy and strengthen the relationship. Benefits derived from multiple responsibilities are used to counterbalance the costs of managing those roles (Haddock & Rattenborg, 2003).

Work is an important aspect of the multidimensional roles that define human development because it is embedded within all other aspects of a person’s life (Jepsen, 1990). Super’s (1990) Role Salience Model highlighted the multidimensional nature of life-span development. Few studies have been

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designed that identify the costs and benefits for dual-career lesbian and gay couples.

## ■ Career Counseling for Lesbians and Gay Men

Patterson (1995) found that national survey data suggest that between 7 and 15 million Americans have exclusive same-sex attractions. He concluded that at least 50 million Americans are most likely either attracted to the same sex or have a family member who is. Career counseling is important for lesbian and gay individuals because it can improve the quality of their lives (Hetherington, Hillerbrand, & Etringer, 1989). Furthermore, many lesbian and gay individuals recognize the interdependence of relationship and career in identity development (Browning, Reynolds, & Dworkin, 1991).

Descriptive and explanatory studies are useful for examining the career development of special populations. This approach extends prior research by involving individual factors common to sexual orientation and includes factors unique to being lesbian or gay (Croteau & Hedstrom, 1993). Pope (1996) encouraged counselors to acquire knowledge of the special career development needs of lesbian and gay clients to more effectively serve this population, including the application of an identity development model (Pope, 1995). Croteau and Thiel (1993) believed that career counselors must explicitly affirm and enhance lesbian and gay identity development within the context of career counseling.

The importance of attending to the realities of antilesbian and antigay stigma in the workplace has been emphasized (Croteau & Thiel, 1993). Croteau (1996) concluded that discrimination was pervasive in the workplace experiences of this population. Eight forms of work discrimination have been identified by Chung (2001) on the basis of personal attributes that are irrelevant to job performance and result in negative treatment of workers or job applicants. Discrimination has significant ramifications for dual-career lesbian and gay couples because it has considerable influence on career development and decision making.

## ■ Counseling for Dual-Career Lesbian and Gay Couples

It is estimated that between 45% and 80% of lesbians and 40% and 60% of gay men are in romantic relationships (Peplau, Veniegas, & Campbell, 1996). Sperry (1993) noted that the number of dual-career lesbian and gay couples will increase. Mock and Cornelius (2003) found that “studying same-sex couples is important to understand diversity among couples and families as they face the challenges of family and work in modern life” (p. 275).

Dual-career lesbian and gay couples share common relationship and career experiences with dual-career heterosexual couples, such as time management, multiple roles, and divi-

sion of labor (Mock & Cornelius, 2003; Zimmerman et al., 2003). Nevertheless, lesbian and gay couples encounter additional issues, such as workplace homophobia, whether to openly acknowledge the relationship, how to characterize the couple’s relationship, how to introduce one’s partner, and how to deal with social events (Hetherington & Orzek, 1989).

Pope (1995) noted that the most recommended intervention for both lesbian and gay couples was to work on dual-career issues with both individuals in a relationship. Despite these initial research findings, a gap remains in the professional career counseling literature regarding this population. Qualitative research that reveals approaches and strategies used successfully by dual-career lesbian and gay couples to blend relationship and career could provide intervention guidelines for counselors.

## ■ Research Approach

According to Creswell (2007), “qualitative research keeps good company with the most rigorous quantitative research” (p. 40). Some researchers believe that qualitative research is best used to discover themes and relationship at the case level, whereas quantitative research is best used to validate those themes and relationship in samples and populations (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), qualitative inquiry uses an emergent perspective in which meanings and interpretations are negotiated with participants to develop an emic perspective. Moustakas (1994) believed that phenomenology offers a way of interrelating subjective and objective factors in the individual’s experience by using description, reflection, and imagination.

## ■ Method

### Data Collection

The methodological framework for this study was based on naturalistic inquiry and phenomenological methods (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and the more specific guidelines recommended by Moustakas (1994). Recent suggestions by Choudhuri, Glauser, and Perego (2004) were used as guidelines for reporting the results.

This study was designed to ascertain the essential structure in which relationship and career intersect for dual-career lesbian and gay couples. It was organized around the overarching research question, “How do relationship and career intersect for dual-career lesbian and gay couples?” Research questions were designed and a pilot interview was conducted to validate the approach, design, and overall quality of the interview questions (Gall et al., 2007).

Audiotaped interviews of the couples were coconducted by the researchers (i.e., first and second authors), who both took part in all but one interview. One researcher (second author) was unable to participate in an interview, and it was decided that it was best for the lead researcher (first author) to

conduct the interview rather than reschedule. The decision to continue with the interview was made because of high inter-rater reliability. One researcher (first author) was the primary interviewer, whereas the other researcher (second author) observed and took process notes. Five open-ended questions and probes were designed to elicit couples' experiences dealing with workplace issues (see Appendix A).

### Participants

Snowball sampling was used (Berg, 2001) to identify participants with relevant characteristics. Initially, participants were identified, interviewed, and then asked to provide the names of other couples to participate in the study. To be selected as participants, couples had to have been in a committed relationship for more than 1 year, and both partners had to have identified themselves as being highly committed to their careers (Stoltz-Loike, 1992). Participants had to have a willingness to recall and describe their experiences. The study involved 5 lesbian couples and 4 gay couples.

Purposeful sampling is used in qualitative research to select participants who can provide a description of the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2007). To enhance the understanding of the "lived experiences" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 55) of dual-career lesbian and gay couples, the researchers selected participants who represented a range of ethnicity, culture, and age. Two participants were members of ethnic minorities, and 2 couples were interracial. Age of participants ranged from the early 20s to the mid-50s. All participants were college educated and were employed in, or preparing to be employed in, careers requiring advanced study. Most participants were involved in community projects. Several were leaders in the larger community, as well as the lesbian and gay community. The majority of participants described strong connections to extended family. One lesbian couple had adult children, whereas another lesbian couple was currently raising a family. Couples had been together from 1 to 18 years, with the majority having been together for more than 10 years.

### Verification

Verification procedures described by Creswell (2007) were used to enhance credibility. Verification requires that the researchers include a narrative of their own background and that they bracket any bias that may interfere with the data analysis. In this case, both researchers had backgrounds with career development, lesbian and gay studies, and qualitative research. Both researchers had considerable backgrounds in counseling, consulting, and advocacy. They had experienced both privileged and oppressed statuses (Croteau, Talbot, Lance, & Evans, 2002).

The researchers used triangulation by making use of multiple sources and data. An audit trail was developed, the researchers served as peer debriefers, and member checks were completed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As the final step in the verification process, an outside audit was performed.

### Description of the Inductive Approach

The aim of this study was to describe participants' experiences regarding the intersection of relationship and career for dual-career lesbian and gay couples. Interviews were conducted over a 6-month period until saturation was reached. The recursive analysis occurred in cycles in which the researchers worked independently and then worked together as a team. Initially, all transcripts were read, and the researchers individually coded and categorized the text. Next, the researchers together engaged in phenomenological reduction in which each experience was considered in its singularity, in and for itself (Moustakas, 1994). Finally, the researchers individually engaged in the process of horizontalization, listing significant nonrepetitive statements. From those statements, invariant constituents were determined. The researchers verified 16 invariant constituents. Using phenomenological reflection and imaginative variation, the researchers constructed three major themes and 10 subthemes.

## Results

The dual-career couples in this study described their experience of relationship and career as a complex process defined by three major themes. Within each major theme, subthemes emerged that further illuminated the intersection of relationship and career. The three major themes of planfulness, creating positive social networks, and shifting from marginalization to consolidation and integration should be viewed as overlapping, developmental, and multidimensional (see Appendix B).

### Theme 1: Planfulness

All participants identified the need to carefully weigh decisions. Planfulness is a mind-set used by dual-career lesbian and gay couples to manage the relational and vocational aspects of their lives. Planfulness becomes a primary method for coping with daily dual-career situations that become time consuming and energy draining. The majority of couples described the complexity and importance of this planning process. As one couple explained,

there's a certain amount of freedom that we don't have. Every decision is weighted. It's not like, every decision is colored, maybe it's a little bit better. It's not like we can just say, do we want to? Do we not want to? It's not that simple. Or, I don't want to but you can. There is a political layer that is necessary you know. There's some things you just have to appear at whether you want to or not and part of that has nothing to do with our orientation but even once you make that decision, the next level always has to do with that. Do we both go? Do I go? Do I introduce her? How do I introduce her? Who do I introduce her to? Once the decision is made to attend, everything after that is complicated. Everything.

Participants also described the three subthemes of strategies, decision making, and introductions.

*Subtheme 1.1: Strategies.* Maneuvering through work and social situations is not a casual process because strategies carry consequences. A couple described the complexity of the strategizing process as “very calculated” and “planful.” Another couple described the complexity of developing strategies to respond to stigmatization, intolerance, and lack of recognition in the workplace. They stated that when

navigating the social milieu you have to make decisions about how much are you out. For instance, if we’re having a conversation and we’re talking about, whatever . . . the experience might be a little bit different for me, I can nod and smile at the other couple or I can say something and frankly I usually choose in the workplace to nod and smile. Just go along and it works better for me. I’m more accepted.

*Subtheme 1.2: Decision making.* Other couples identified the decision-making process as a method to protect their relationship and career. This process was evident as the couples described decisions about attendance at workplace functions. One couple expressed a need for constant vigilance in making decisions:

I think as a gay or lesbian couple you’re much more conscious about stuff. A married couple wouldn’t even give it a thought of whether you invite your spouse to something. You know, you just wouldn’t even . . . the thought process would never even occur, it would just happen. I think that we have to think through every decision: there’s an event . . . who’s going to be there and all that stuff.

Another couple described the decision-making process that protected the relationship while promoting their careers:

I struggle with who needs to know and who doesn’t need to know. I’m pretty forthright. I don’t like hiding but I also know I don’t want to hang myself politically either, and so I have to balance that. Plus I have to worry about protecting our relationship at the same time. So, it’s just something that is always there, and there is always pressure around it. Every decision. Do I go? Do I go with my partner? Do I go alone? All this has ramifications, and so there’s a lot of pressure about that. About making the right decision.

*Subtheme 1.3: Introductions.* The majority of couples viewed the act of introduction as acknowledging and authenticating the relationship, reducing their sense of alienation, and increasing the couple’s sense of inclusion. The following narrative describes a dual-career couple’s emotional reaction to an introduction by a coworker who minimized the relationship:

I would think surprise at first because this is a coworker. I always think those who are educated should know better. Especially those that are in more of a higher education area should know better. And it seemed like it was okay and I think I was surprised. And then I was angry because here I am having to defend my relationship. We’re not friends. This is not my buddy; this is the person that I share my life with. I just feel a sense of alienation. It’s devaluing because if someone is introducing his or her spouse they have a ready-made label and they say that.

Decision making and strategizing enable dual-career lesbian and gay couples to maneuver through the social milieu of the workplace. Introductions are one of the first steps couples use to develop a social network. They are the building blocks for creating positive social networks.

## Theme 2: Creating Positive Social Networks

Couples recognized that supportive social networks contain protective factors central to their sense of well-being. Four interrelated subthemes emerged that described the importance of social networks. The four subthemes of workplace barriers, people inside my circle, affirmations’ impact on normalcy, and duality came together to describe how the reciprocal nature of relationship and career operates in the social milieu of the workplace.

*Subtheme 2.1: Workplace barriers.* The first subtheme, workplace barriers, described issues relating to the social context of the workplace and barriers unique to lesbian and gay couples. Some couples viewed social networks as “necessary evils.” Participants experienced pressure from the “mental gymnastics” needed to manage the social aspects of the workplace. All “the decisions about what to say and what not to say, and when to disclose, and when not to disclose, when to push it and when not to push it” were grounded in uncertainty that interfered with productivity. Anxiety was prominent for a couple who described that uncertainty while learning the unstated rules concerning revealing personal information: “All the nuances that you have to be able to pick out in order to still stay . . . within socially acceptable, socially appropriate. . . . When do you do it? When do you not?”

*Subtheme 2.2: People inside my circle.* The next subtheme, people inside my circle, influenced the way couples managed uncertainty. Workplace stress was reduced when couples could confide in, feel support from, and problem solve with coworkers. Those coworkers were viewed to be inside the couple’s personal circle. As one couple suggested,

we’re able to maybe reduce some of the stressors that we have in each of our jobs by knowing that we have someone that we can confide in, that we can talk to on a regular basis. Someone who seems to be able to provide other insights, other support, maybe something we didn’t even think about. Just knowing that that’s there is very beneficial and very heartfelt.

Another couple emphasized the advantages of supportive social networks:

You know, as a couple that it wasn't just me, it was us, and coworkers. I had coworkers that I can share my life with when we had those conversations around the watering station, or in the morning before you get started. So, yeah it was just great, it was really liberating.

Emphasizing the effects of positive social networks, a member of another couple stated, "It becomes an issue when I have to go outside of that really close circle."

*Subtheme 2.3: Affirmations' impact on normalcy.* Affirming workplace relationships created by bringing trusted people into their "circle" allowed couples to "move forward and grow." Although couples had difficulty saying specifically why affirmations were important, participants, such as the following couple, emphasized the power of affirmations in helping lesbian and gay couples build a sense of normalcy: "I don't know why people need outside affirmations, but you do I guess. And so . . . I think you get more from other gay couples, but I think it's more powerful . . . from a straight couple." Another couple further described this sense of normalcy as follows:

Two people in a committed, loving relationship are just after a lot of the same things that everyone else is: happiness, security, and quote, unquote the American dream. There's really no difference between heterosexual couples and homosexual couples in that respect.

Affirmations laid the foundation for a more authentic interplay between personal and work worlds.

*Subtheme 2.4: Duality.* Duality, the fourth subtheme, described the movement between the couple's personal and work worlds. Moving between those two worlds creates a dichotomy of real versus pretend. The following excerpt portrays how a couple experiences this dynamic, with both participants revealing this dichotomy.

*Participant 1 (P1):* So, one is real and the other one is not.

*Participant 2 (P2):* It is pretend.

*P1:* Yeah, one is real and the other is sanitized.

*P2:* Big time.

*P1:* One is flexible, and like breathing, and is natural, and for me I would use words like *full of life giving and spirit filled*.

*P2:* It is like a comfortable pair of jeans or something. And the other one is somewhere mighty dressy. Film in the eyes you know. That is my feeling. One you feel whole and one is just half of you.

*P1:* One is true and one is not true.

*P2:* Fake. Right. One is right.

*P1:* And one is oh so wrong.

Both the positive and the adverse interplay between the four subthemes is revealed in the following narrative:

But her department, they all know and they are great. I go to almost everything that you do with them now because now that she's been in the department I have built a loyalty up with them. So, the small talk and the stuff is a lot easier with them because I already have a history. So, I can say, "How's Jane?" "How's your cat?" Because we've had a history together. At other functions where it's other management people or directors it feels like a white, hot light on your neck the whole time you're there. Not only am I an introvert but now I'm guarded because I don't know what I can say to who. So yes, it affects it that way. Our relationship isn't really the same as at home. In those situations you take it to kind of a different space.

### Theme 3: Shifting From Marginalization to Consolidation and Integration

The third major theme described the development of the couple's relationship in response to the challenges of the workplace. It describes a shift in the couple's relationship as they refocus an identity linked to the workplace to one derived from a sense of being a couple. The themes of planfulness and creating positive social networks allowed couples to consolidate and integrate the personal and career aspects of their lives. Couples described a process that strengthened their relationship and mitigated challenges in the workplace.

*Subtheme 3.1: Marginalization.* The first subtheme, marginalization, described a process in which individuals struggled to blend their personal and work lives because of discrimination and occupational risks. One couple described the importance of marginalizing their relationship from the workplace:

It [the workplace] had its positives from the standpoint that it was nice to work with somebody from whom I didn't have to hide. But at the same time it was negative because the misconceptions this person had were at a point where I felt more comfortable not sharing [about my life], because I didn't want to have to deal with her misconceptions and her comments, that would just frustrate me, and I couldn't change.

The couple also described the emotions that accompanied marginalization: "Disappointment, frustration, probably early on some shame because you let that rub off on you a little bit and you suddenly find yourself acting to protect yourself from that shame, in many situations."

Partners concentrated their initial efforts on securing their roles in the workplace. They kept their relationship separate from their work world.

*Subtheme 3.2: Teaming up.* Couples described teaming up as a stage in which they maintained their work identities while solidifying their relationship. Some couples described a struggle consisting of anxiety, frustration, discomfort, being mad at the system, added stress, and vulnerability. One couple described the teaming-up process this way:

It’s a lot more work for gay and lesbian couples than it is for straight couples. I really believe that. It is a lot more work and there are a lot more risks involved and it is a lot more challenging. I think it requires us as a couple to be stronger than a comparable straight couple to get to that same comparable recognition.

Couples described bringing their personal and work worlds together. According to one couple, the strategies used in teaming up “really kind of solidified us. I think it’s made us stronger too.” Teaming up reduced marginalization of the relationship. One participant noted that “one of the things we’ve learned is that we’re both strong people and we have to protect each other.”

*Subtheme 3.3: Consolidation and integration.* The third subtheme, consolidation and integration, represented a stage in which couples’ sense of marginalization was minimized as they felt increased safety and confidence in their relationships. This phenomenon was described by one couple as follows:

It doesn’t matter if it is a work function or not. I think that’s a real big one, in a sense of safety, too. I mean it doesn’t matter where we go, really, if we’re together. There’s a sense, for me, a deep sense of safety, and we’ll deal with whatever gets thrown at us and it will be fine.

The consolidation process increased the strength, stability, and depth of the relationship as individuals overcame barriers in the workplace. Integration occurred as couples presented their relationship more authentically. Couples viewed consolidation as empowering. One member of a couple commented,

In the last few years I just really don’t care anymore. I just want to be ourselves and I want people to know him and for him to participate in things that I participate in at church and work. I think it’s not as big of a struggle for me and it’s getting easier and easier.

## Discussion

The narratives of these 9 couples offer a vivid presentation of the complex dynamics involved in ending the personal-career dichotomy. The three themes of planfulness, creating positive social networks, and shifting from marginalization to consolidation and integration were the pathways for the intersection of relationship and career.

Regarding planfulness (Theme 1), couples stressed the importance of intentionally using strategies (Subtheme 1.1) to manage the relational and career aspects of their lives. They described the complexity of strategizing as “very calculated” and “planful.” This need for planfulness for lesbian and gay individuals is consistent with earlier findings (Chung, 2001; Croteau & Thiel, 1993; Hetherington & Orzek, 1989).

Pope (1996) identified the important role that networking plays in the career development of lesbian and gay individuals. Couples identified the positive role social networks (Theme 2) played in creating a sense of empowerment and affirmation. Couples felt exhausted when viewing social networks as “necessary social evils.” Positive social networks contributed to the couples’ ability to be authentic. Selecting individuals from the workplace to “bring into their personal circle” (Subtheme 2.2) increased the couples’ sense of genuineness, contributing to a meaningful relationship. Selective networking allowed increased time and energy for relational needs. Couples described “affirmations by other couples, both gay and straight, as powerful” for creating a sense of normalcy (Subtheme 2.3).

The shift from marginalization to consolidation and integration (Theme 3) was similar to the coming-out process for lesbian and gay individuals who “redefine themselves, not only in terms of relationships and romantic attraction, but also in other spheres of identity such as education and career” (Mock & Cornelius, 2003, pp. 282–283). Initially, couples separated their relationship from their work world (Subtheme 3.1). Couples needed to marginalize their relationship for “protection” and from “misconceptions.” As couples experienced themselves as increasingly authentic, they constructed their roles through an integrative process described as “teaming up” (Subtheme 3.2). Couples described a sense of “safety” and reassurance through the blending of relationship and career (Subtheme 3.3). This finding is consistent with previous studies (Barnett & Marshall, 1992; Barnett et al., 1992; Haddock & Rattenborg, 2003; Zimmerman et al., 2003), which showed that relationships are strengthened when couples effectively blend relationship and career.

### Transferability of the Results

The findings of this study need to be evaluated for their transferability because qualitative research is not generalizable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Denzin and Lincoln (1998) noted that “generalization can occur when the mix of social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender circumstances and values is similar across settings” (pp. 212–213). It is the researcher’s task to provide the overall essence of the lived experience of the participants, whereas “readers of the study must determine transferability to their contexts” (Croteau et al., 2002, p. 249).

The implications of this study should be addressed within the context of the study’s limitations. One limitation is that

all participants had achieved at least a bachelor's degree and maintained a middle-class socioeconomic status. Consequently, these themes may not apply to people of different educational and socioeconomic levels. Another limitation is that most participants' ages ranged from the mid-20s to the mid-50s. These results may not describe the experiences of couples of other ages. Interviews were conducted in two mid-size cities in the Midwest. As a result, these findings may not reflect the lived experiences of people in other geographical locations. This study provides a snapshot of the experiences of lesbian and gay couples and should not be considered to apply to bisexual or transgender couples because of their unique struggles and needs.

### Implications for Counseling

Phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994) uses a process that opens possibilities for awareness, knowledge, and action. As a result, we offer ideas and illustrations of potential applications in the three themes that emerged. Planfulness was the primary first theme. A starting point for counselors could be to assess the couple's planfulness in response to the complexities of the workplace. This suggestion is consistent with previous studies (Chung, 2001; Croteau & Thiel, 1993; Hetherington & Orzek, 1989) in which counselors were encouraged to help lesbian and gay clients weigh options and risks regarding issues such as coming out in the workplace, coping with antilebian and antigay stigma, and managing discrimination. Because the workplace becomes more complex for lesbian and gay couples, more time may be needed for decision making. Counselors could assist lesbian and gay couples develop strategies to cope with work situations. The importance of decision making about introductions in social situations might be emphasized.

The second primary theme concerned the importance of creating positive social networks, which were identified as being central to a sense of well-being. Affirmations from social networks reduced stress and were described as "empowering." Defining the criteria for selecting individuals and couples to bring "inside their circle" helps create positive social networks. Learning how to deal with the nuances of the workplace and understanding the unstated rules of negotiating the work system were benefits derived from connections to positive social networks. Isolation and disconnection are detrimental to a couple's integration of the personal dimension of career (Croteau & Thiel, 1993).

The third primary theme, shifting from marginalization to consolidation and integration, described the integration of the personal with the couple's work world. Assessment of the degree of integration of the couple's relationship into the work environment could inform counseling interventions. Couples reported feelings of disconnection, fear of disclosure, frustration about concealing their relationship, and feeling ashamed about being inauthentic. By helping couples construct mutu-

ally supportive roles, counselors facilitate the teaming-up process used to strengthen relationships. The teaming-up process is similar to the expansion hypothesis described earlier (Barnett & Marshall, 1992; Barnett et al., 1992; Haddock & Rattenborg, 2003; Zimmerman et al., 2003).

### Future Research

In this study, we have attempted to describe the experiences of dual-career lesbian and gay couples. It was a first attempt at gaining a deeper understanding of the blending of relationship and career for dual-career lesbian and gay couples. The following potential areas of research, discernible from the qualitative themes, are recommended.

Planfulness was the first theme to emerge. The need to be planful was viewed as a way to protect the relationship. All couples discussed the importance of decision making and strategizing regarding introductions in the workplace. This finding is consistent with previous research (Hetherington & Orzek, 1989). Future studies might explore what factors play into decision making and strategizing about introductions and which factors were given the most weight in the planning process. Researchers could explore how dichotomous couples experience the decision-making process. Future researchers could explore more specific strategies that help couples engage in planfulness. Additional studies could clarify the most critical issues in the decision-making process and the use of the strategies suggested by Chung (2001) in dealing with discrimination.

The second theme, creating positive social networks, suggested the important role that positive social networks play for dual-career lesbian and gay couples. Researchers could examine criteria used by couples to create positive networking opportunities. Another area of research lending itself to qualitative and quantitative inquiry would examine how positive social networks have a cushioning effect on workplace barriers. Studies could more thoroughly identify specific stressors and the shielding effect that affirmations by other couples have on reducing those specific stressors.

Future research might explore the stage-related tasks in the developmental process of the third theme, shifting from marginalization to consolidation and integration. Researchers could compare issues couples face in each stage of the developmental process. Future research could identify specific ways that consolidation and integration strengthened the couple's relationship. Both quantitative and qualitative studies could provide a more extensive understanding of the variables that contribute to a couple's successful blending of relationship and career.

Future studies could include a more inclusive sample of dual-career lesbian and gay couples. A limitation noted in the study concerned the exclusion of bisexual and transgender couples. Lonborg and Phillips (1996) recommended that researchers examine dual-career and multiple-role issues for individuals

who are bisexual. The unique struggles and needs that those dual-career couples face merit discrete investigations.

An additional avenue to explore might involve couples' positive and negative experiences with counseling. This type of research should include some of the ways counselors have been helpful or not helpful in addressing dual-career issues.

## Conclusion

A current trend in career counseling stresses the importance of understanding the unique needs of minority clients. A more inclusive approach is called for when counselors clearly understand the unique needs of dual-career lesbian and gay couples. Such an approach is consistent with that of Lonborg and Phillips (1996), who recommended that researchers examine dual-career and multiple-role issues for lesbian, gay, and bisexual people.

The three primary themes that emerged from this study, planfulness, creating positive social networks, and shifting from marginalization to consolidation and integration, support the need for further research regarding the challenges that dual-career lesbian and gay couples face. By reducing the ambiguity about the ways that dual-career lesbian and gay couples blend relationship and career, future researchers can use these three themes to inform counselor interventions for this population.

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## APPENDIX A

### Interview Questions for Eliciting Dual-Career Lesbian and Gay Couples' Experiences Dealing With Workplace Issues

1. As a lesbian or gay couple, how has the experience of dealing with each other's workplace environment affected you?  
 What did you discover about your relationship as a result of these experiences?
2. As a lesbian or gay couple, what sacrifices have you made in order to promote each other's career?  
 From a lesbian or gay perspective, how did each of you personally experience this process?  
 What do you remember feeling? Describe your emotions around that.
3. As a lesbian or gay couple, what thoughts and feelings stand out for you when you think about your involvement with social networks in the workplace?  
 How do you introduce yourselves as a couple in these situations?  
 Describe what that experience is like for each of you.
4. Describe an experience that has been helpful to you as a lesbian or gay couple regarding career.  
 How did the experience affect your relationship?
5. As a lesbian or gay couple, what dimensions, incidents, and people intimately connected to your career experiences stand out for you?
  - Family
  - Friends
  - Community
  - Society

## APPENDIX B

### Themes and Subthemes of How Dual-Career Lesbian and Gay Couples Blend Relationships and Career

- Theme 1: Planfulness  
 Subthemes  
 1.1 Strategies  
 1.2 Decision making  
 1.3 Introductions
- Theme 2: Creating positive social networks  
 Subthemes  
 2.1 Workplace barriers  
 2.2 People inside my circle  
 2.3 Affirmations' impact on normalcy  
 2.4 Duality
- Theme 3: Shifting from marginalization to consolidation and integration  
 Subthemes  
 3.1 Marginalization  
 3.2 Teaming up  
 3.3 Consolidation and integration

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