

*THE FOSTERS: SAME-SEX COUPLE REPRESENTATION ON TELEVISION*

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines depictions of a same-sex couple, on the fictional television show *The Fosters*. Specifically, a discourse analysis of seasons one through three was conducted, to explore hegemonic and counterhegemonic messages in this family drama. Findings indicate that same-sex couple portrayals reflect characteristics of traditional male-female television relationships. At the same time, this show challenges stereotypes through language choices and its normalizing messages about same-sex couples. Such research suggests that *The Fosters* is part of the evolving LGBTQ television representations and may help with acceptance of same-sex couples. These implications are especially important with recent legislation that promotes marriage equality.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In June 2015, the Supreme Court of the United State (SCOTUS) ruled in favor of marriage equality with its decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges* (Murray, 2016). This landmark victory enabled the LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) community to legally marry, thus obtaining the emotional and legal benefits that accompanies legal union. While this ruling has certainly encountered opposition, same-sex couples continue to exercise their right to marry.

It is impossible to ignore the role television plays in shaping people's worldview and opinions. Television often helps a society accept people and places that are unfamiliar. LGBT characters have been depicted on television to encourage acceptance of the community. For example, shows like *The Golden Girls*, *Roseanne*, *Friends*, *Will and Grace*, *Grey's Anatomy*, and *Glee* included LGBT characters, helping to promote tolerance and acceptance (Kroll, 2013). In addition, television helps viewers accept marriage equality by viewing same-sex marriages as part of an already existing show. For example, in a 1995 episode of *Roseanne*, Leon, a reoccurring character, marries his partner Scott (Kroll, 2013). *Grey's Anatomy* featured the wedding of the fictional couple Callie Torrez and Arizona Robins in 2011 (Kroll, 2013). Likewise, *Glee* included several same-sex marriages in the aptly-named episode "A Wedding" (Gomez, 2016). It is important to study television messages about same-sex couples because television can influence public opinion on marriage equality.

Research conducted on gay or lesbian characters is scarce and has room for expansion. Several studies suggest that LGBT characters are often portrayed as exploring their sexuality or are less significant characters in the show (Brown & Groscup, 2009). A

2014 study conducted by Bond suggests that it is vital for LGB[T] youth to see their community positively represented in media. Several existing studies on LGBT characters and relationships suggest that LGBT representation on television is negative or the character is not very significant to the plot of the show. With the legalization of marriage equality, it is particularly significant to study representations of same-sex couples to ascertain if and how television's depictions have shifted.

LGBT representations in past television shows have helped pave the way for the same-sex relationships in contemporary programs. Little study has focused specifically on same-sex relationships in television. In 2013, the family drama *The Fosters* premiered on television, featuring the interracial same-sex couple Stef and Lena. With its depictions of the same-sex couple and their multicultural family, this program provides an excellent opportunity to expand existing literature on LGBT portrayals. Thus, this study uses a discourse analysis to explore same-sex couple representations and stereotypes in the first three seasons of *The Fosters*. This show is selected because not many television shows represent women in same-sex relationships as leading characters; therefore, it is significant to develop this research (Bond, 2014). This study examines episodes depicting the same-sex relationship between main characters, Stef and Lena, to make meaning of same-sex stereotypes that are perpetuated, challenged or both. The show is unique because it is a diverse interracial family that successfully overcomes the oppositions that accompany non-traditional families (or families that do not consist of a husband, wife and their children). This study does not focus on the diversity among the family; rather, the purpose of it is to analyze the same-sex relationship depicted between Stef and Lena

because research indicates a need for more studies on same-sex portrayals on television (Joyrich, 2014).

### **Literature Review**

When analyzing literature for this study, it is evident that further studies may be needed to see if there is a shift in television representation of gay and lesbian couples. The majority of literature on this subject is more than five years old, and has often focused on negative stereotypes of gay and lesbian individuals. There is a clear opportunity to see if there are shifts toward positive representation of the LGBT community. For this study, it is important to look at an already established same-sex couple since this aspect lacks television representation. Many studies are older and do not reflect current LGBT interests on television shows.

Early studies suggest that representation of the LGBT community will probably remain negative. In a study by Kielwasser and Wolf (1992), there is evidence that mainstream media will always portray negative characteristics of gay and lesbian people, so that society will think of homosexuality as a curse or joke (Kielwasser & Wolf, 1992,). Hegemonic ideology has advanced in tolerance for gay and lesbian characters on television since Kielwasser and Wolf's (1992) study.

Likewise, Reed (2009) discusses the negative association of lesbianism as a potential threat to "normal heterosexuality" ideologies. Reed (2009) states that lesbian personalities like Ellen DeGeneres and Suze Orman are defined first as successful women and then defined as homosexuals. She also mentions that lesbianism challenges the perspective of the male gaze, which views women through a masculine perspective and as objects of viewing pleasure. The male gaze theory was introduced and defined by

Laura Mulvey (2003) in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. According to Mulvey (2003), the male gaze occurs when viewing pleasure on physical attraction captivates the audience, thus objectifying the female characters (Mulvey, 2003). Reed (2009) discusses the female gaze theory as depicting female characters' and viewers' perspectives as subjective. This represents a literary perspective of viewing female characters on television beyond physical appearance alone. Each perspective is a form of viewing television or any other work of art.

Holz, Ivory, Gibson, & Ivory (2009) investigate gender roles within heterosexual and homosexual relationships to discover that homosexual relationships are similar to heterosexual relationships because people assume one partner is more dominant, while the other is more submissive. There are some expectations in homosexual relationships that one partner practices the traditional masculine assertive role and the other a more feminine submissive role. Holz Ivory, Gibson, & Ivory (2009) claim that it is not always true to assume that same-sex relationships adhere to this role playing because many same-sex couples value equality within their relationship. They find that television is slowly making progress when it comes to same-sex representation, but more progress needs to be made to reinvent positive portrayals of same-sex couples.

The majority of studies conducted on television representation of the LGBT community discuss the negative aspects of stereotypes portrayed through entertainment television (Brown & Groscup, 2009; Hart, 2000; Holz Ivory, Gibson, & Ivory, 2009). Brown and Groscup (2009) found that most people's thoughts toward gay and lesbian people are changing because society accepts gay and lesbian stereotypes but only negative ones. In their study they found that homophobic individuals tend to believe

heterosexual relationship are more significant than homosexual relationships. Even though homophobia exists, the study found that people are becoming more tolerant of homosexuality.

A previous study conducted by Lee and Myers (2010) looks at one of the first popular series that depicted lesbian women called the *L – Word*. Lee and Myers (2010) also use discourse analysis to interpret the meaning of findings in the *L – Word*. The study argues that even though a same-sex couple and single homosexual individuals are becoming more visible on television, the *L – Word* itself, does not challenge homophobia or those who do not accept homosexuality.

Bond's (2014) study focuses on those who identify as lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB). For many youth in the LGBT community, their opportunity to experience a real-life LGBT role model can be scarce. Like many young people who do not have someone to look up to, turn to television to fulfill this void. In the past, not many LGBT television shows were appropriate for younger viewers. Bond analyzes suicide rates among lesbian, gay and bisexual youth, concluding that adolescents who identify as LGB rarely have first-hand contact with a LGB role model (Bond, 2014). This is a reason teens make strong connections with television characters and personalities to try to understand LGB norms through media outlets. However, the study suggests that gay males are targeted more in regards to talking about sexual relationships on television than women. The study states that this could isolate female teens seeking answers to sexually related questions (Bond, 2014).

Even though depictions of the LGBT community have increased over the last few years, there is still a need for more realistic television examples. Joyrich conducted a

study, in 2014, looking at television as the mainstream medium. This study looks at the term “queer” as being different and “queer” as people who identify as LGBT. This study suggests that television is evolving and showing more LGBT characters than before (Joyrich, 2014). This 2014 study still argues that even though LGBT people are being depicted in media, there still is not enough illustration.

The absence of literature on this subject may be explained by the scarcity of same-sex representations. With the recent passing of marriage equality in 2015, it is possible that there will be more same-sex couples represented on television. To fully conduct a study analyzing the representation of same-sex couples, there would need to be more literature to analyze. *The Fosters* is significant because it is a television series on prime-time television, which depicts a lesbian couple that is the main couple on the show. In the future, this study could be expanded to encompass the family dynamic and diversity as hegemonic culture accepts the LGBT community as vitally contributing to society.

## CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study focuses on the significances of the same-sex couple and how their relationship is represented. This study's purpose is to explore how *The Fosters* represent a same-sex couple through a prime time television show about family. According to several television studies, gay and lesbian portrayals often perpetuate stereotypes abstract messages that help people understand the world around them (Dyer, 1977). For example, in a same-sex relationship, even though both partners are of the same sex, typically one is considered feminine and portrays woman-like characteristics. The other partner is considered masculine and portrays toughness regardless of being female. Stereotypes are observed in this study to explore feminine and masculine roles fulfilled by the same-sex couple. Richard Dyer (1977) says, "Types are instances which indicate those who live by the rules of society (social types) and those who the rulers are designed to exclude (stereotypes)" (p. 29). In other words, the stereotyped group is often a secondary societal group who is stereotyped by the dominant or ruling group. Minority groups rarely define other groups unless they over rule and become the new dominant group. Usually the authorities and ruling opinion leaders define and enforce stereotypes on others who are classified as a minority group. Stereotypes can be accurate some of the time, while others are inaccurate, offensive, and misrepresent stereotyped groups like gay and lesbian people. Dyer (1977) said, "We regard a person in the *role*, we are thinking of them purely in terms of the particular set of actions (which is taken to include dress, speech and gesture) that they are performing at the moment we encounter them" (p. 27). If gay and lesbian culture is foreign to people, how they are portrayed on television can assist people in understanding gay and lesbian culture. Stereotyping is the theoretical framework for

this study because it looks at how the LGBT couple, specifically the lesbian couple, is portrayed on *The Fosters* by observing dress, mannerisms, and how the couple interacts with each other and their family. Dyer (1977) defines a “chief” lesbian character as smarter, wiser, wears unflashy accessories, dressed nice in slacks and non-figure fitting tops. “Chief” lesbians wear women’s clothes designed similar to men’s clothes (Dyer, 1977). This study discusses, the lesbian couple, Lena and Stef’s characters as it reflects this television stereotypical lesbian portrayal of dress, speech and gestures.

To fully grasp this study in context, it is important to look at representation of Dyer’s concepts in the context of hegemony as it relates to the show *The Fosters* and society. Stuart Hall (1997) studies representation and the meaning and codes behind each abstract concept. He said, “Representation is the production of meaning of the concepts in our minds through language” (Hall, 1997, p. 3). In this paper, representation refers to concepts that cannot be seen, touched, or felt physically; rather, it is more abstract. Hope, love, and friendship are examples of representation that cannot be touched or physically seen. This type of representation discussed is referred to as a ‘system of representation’ because, according to Hall, it uses similarities and differences to understand the relationship between concepts (Hall, 1997). Representation is a portrayal of something using context clues to ignite the mind to recall the likeness of what is being represented. Not everyone understands the concepts exactly the same, but all understand the broad idea and meaning of what the image is in other people’s minds (Hall, 1997). A common language structures symbols, signifiers and signs so people understand the concepts that cannot be seen or touched (Hall, 1997). Overtime these concepts can change, but people

develop an understanding of the signs and relationship between the things being compared.

Images and links to abstract definition in our minds are types of hegemonic representation because a sign indicates a recollection of the meaning of something defined by someone else. Those in a position of power are the ones who define the abstract understandings in our minds, such as, when people are asked to recall a tree and they envision an image of a tree in their mind (Hall, 1997). According to Gramsci (2009), hegemony is the domination of one group over another that is divided by power or status. Particular groups of people struggle ideologically to gain approval from more dominant groups of higher status in the hopes that their group will eventually be considered of higher status. Hegemony cannot be absolute because progressively hegemonic ideologies change with those who replace old hegemonic ideologies (Gramsci, 2009). For example, a pointer finger and middle finger that is pointing out of a fist represent two fingers. The hegemonic meaning differs because the same two fingers pointed outward in the 1950s was considered a symbol for victory and years later a symbol of peace (Hall, 1997).

In addition, Gramsci's theory of hegemony is relevant to this study to understand the sub-class and sub-culture within a dominant culture. Gramsci's theory consists of dominant classes and cultures that create labels for others from sub-groups, such as, the homosexual group labeled by the dominant heterosexual group discussed in Dyer's theory (Gramsci, 2009). For example, a white male is associated with being part of a hegemonic group whose opinion matters based on his position in life. There are several other factors that have to fall in line for the male to be considered part of the hegemonic group outside of his sex, sexual orientation and race. Therefore, if the white male is

homosexual and associated with a minority groups, his hegemonic influence in society is different and is less significant than if he identified as part of the majority group (Gramsci, 2009). If the sub-group of homosexual males is to change political society's ideology, there must be a struggle emerge by the counter-hegemonic group to take power from those who currently define them. Then, the sub-group becomes dominant and redefines their position in society. When change occurs for a sub-group, such as the (SCOTUS) Supreme Court of the United States ruling in favor of marriage equality in 2015, same-sex couples that fought for counter-hegemony in the efforts to redefine their social group in a more positive way achieved this goal. Often, there are both acceptance and rejection of counter-hegemonic changes depending on if this change now threatens the old hegemonic influence and their ideologies (Gramsci, 2009). When older ways of thinking become stationary, new norms emerge in society to evolve, change and move forward.

### **Research Questions**

*The Fosters* is about a lesbian couple who is middle class, interracial, and raising a blended family of their own. These two research questions guide the research in this study.

1. How is the same-sex couple represented on *The Fosters*?
2. Are stereotypes challenged, reproduced, or both?

### CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This study examines same-sex couple and how their relationship is represented through discourse analysis. Discourse is the study of written, verbal, social communication and its authority to characterize, convey principled beliefs and ideas (Shweder and Much, 1987). A discourse analysis is a method used to study signs of significant verbal and nonverbal communication (Brown & Yule, 1983). This study looks at the message that is conveyed through *The Fosters* about the same-sex couple, and how its message reflects a hegemonic change for the LGBT community as it relates to society (Fairclough, 1992). The analysis focuses on cultural change because heterosexual norms are challenged, and new standards for what is socially acceptable evolve to include the LGBT community.

Discourse analysis is used to understand this text because the study analyzes the message on *The Fosters* beyond its entertainment purpose by analyzing interactions between Stef and Lena. Discourse analysis is used to make meaning of same-sex representation on television to understand what it means to society at large (Hall, 1997), (Fairclough, 1992). Lesbian stereotypes are used on *The Fosters* to give viewers an idea of how same-sex couples interact, what they do and look like based on Stef and Lena's characters. *The Fosters* is a prosocial television show addressing many issues traditional, non-traditional and blended families face today, such as typical teenage drama, addiction, rape, sex, bullying, aspects of interracial families and several other issues. This study focuses on the discourse of the relationship between the two women, Stef and Lena, and their relationship in regards to stereotypes and gender roles as it relates to hegemony and representation.

Since SCOTUS passed same-sex marriage, social change is currently evolving for the LGBT community. *The Fosters* is arguably an example of the hegemony shift in equality for the LGBT community. Discourse analysis explores the show's meaning as it relays this shift in social change in a hegemonic society (Fairclough, 1992). The analysis looks at the social practice of the same-sex couple and their relationship to societal structure (Fairclough, 1992). The progression from description to interpretation and vice versa allows for a better understanding of the societal changes through discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1992). The study examines certain scenes on the show and attempts to interpret its meaning. The LGBT community is reflected in the television show as having similarities and differences to traditional male and female television couples. Even though established same-sex couple representation is limited, same-sex relationships are not new. Same-sex couples have lived lives similar to the same-sex couple on *The Fosters*. This concept is nothing new; however, discourse has been limited in depicting an already established same-sex couple as main characters on prime time television shows (Fairclough, 1992). The study examines scenes between Stef and Lena to determine if same-sex stereotypes are perpetuated, challenged or both by answering the research questions in the findings and discussion.

Ideologies, equalities, and inequalities are already established by hegemonic society as part of the discourse analysis. In many examples from *The Fosters*, negative aspects of same-sex couples are challenged and redefined. Most television family shows represent a traditional family with a father and mother raising their children together. In *The Fosters*, two mothers raise a family, as opposed to the traditional mother and father depicted in television. This reinforces the idea that children need parents in their lives,

but hegemony is challenged because two females are building a family together successfully.

This analysis examines what is being said about same-sex couples in general and draws from assumptions and preconceptions about same-sex couple. *The Fosters* portrays situations many viewers can relate to regardless of sexual orientation. This study examines the research questions through Dyer's definition of a "chief" lesbian, who typically is superior and more masculine than other lesbians represented in the example (Dyer, 1977). This stereotype is associated with negative stereotypes of gay and lesbian people. The study examines the direction of the discourse to see if change occurs in the societal opinion of the LGBT community. It is important to see if *The Fosters* reinforces negative stereotypes or challenges stereotypes of the LGBT people to interpret what this means. This study looks at what messages is said about the same-sex couple on *The Fosters* by examining the relationship between Stef and Lena Adams Foster.

### **Description of the Sample**

*The Fosters* is a contemporary prime time show about an interracial lesbian couple, Stef and Lena, who are raising a multicultural, blended family. This study analyzes the 62 episodes of the first three seasons of *The Fosters*, focusing specifically on the relationship between the main couple, Stef and Lena. The couple is already established and "out" (or acknowledging their own sexual orientation and sharing it with others) on the show as an established and functioning family unit. The first season premiered on ABC Family, June 3, 2013 through March 24, 2014, with a total of 21 episodes. ABC Family renewed the network to Freeform, which was created to reach a target audience of young women ages 14 – 34 (freeform.com, (imdb.com), (Lynch,

2016). The second season began June 16, 2014 and ended March 23, 2015 with 21 total episodes. The third season aired June 8, 2015 until March 28, 2016 and included 20 episodes.

Stef and Lena's family consists of Stef who is Caucasian and her interracial biological son, Brandon, from a previous marriage to Mike Foster, who is Hispanic and her ex-husband. Mike is also Stef's partner at work on the police force. He assists in parenting Brandon along with Lena and Stef. Lena, a multi-racial African and Caucasian American, is Stef's partner, co-parent, and vice principal at the charter school their children attend. Stef and Lena adopted Hispanic twins, Jesus and Mariana. This part of the family is already established before the first episode of the first season. During the "Pilot" episode, the couple gains two additional children as foster children, a Caucasian brother and sister, Callie and Jude. Later, Jude and Callie become adopted children too. The Foster family faces several unique challenges similar to the challenges faced by other blended or non-traditional families (families not created directly and entirely by biological means with the same father and mother). It is important to understand the background and target audience when reading this study.

The couple is unmarried at the beginning of season one, but marry in season 1 episode 10, "I Do". Their family faces various challenges that non-traditional and interracial families understand. Lena and Stef are in a romantic relationship and raise a blended and multicultural family, similar to many blended families in the United States.

### **Operationalization of the Sample**

This study examines the representation of same-sex couples on the prime time television drama, *The Fosters*. Currently, this sample is among the few prime time

dramas featuring an interracial same-sex couple as main characters on a show. The study examines old and new stereotypes of same-sex couples as represented on television, by looking at the relationship between Stef and Lena Adams Foster. Dyer's theory of stereotyping is used to observe media messages about the same-sex couple portrayed through already existing stereotypes of lesbian couples within a discourse analysis. It should be noted that although race is a key factor in the dynamic of the show, it is outside the scope of this study.

This study looks at the messages conveyed through the television series *The Fosters* in regards to the same-sex couple represented on prime-time television. Some of the questions examined are: what message is being conveyed about the same sex-couple? What type of roles and stereotypes are presented on the show? Is one partner portrayed as more masculine or feminine than the other? How are Stef and Lena's femininity portrayed? What challenges do the couple face that traditional families do not? Is one partner more domestic than the other? What are their children's opinions about being part of a same-sex household? Do their children face challenges because of their family dynamic? What cultural and social changes are presented on *The Fosters*? These questions guide the study in answering the research questions: how is the same-sex couple represented on *The Fosters*, and what stereotypes are challenged, reproduced or both? Dyer's theory of stereotypes accompanied with Antonio Gramsci's Hegemony theory, and Hall's representation theory are used to interpret the illustration of same-sex couples through a discourse analysis.

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section discusses the evidence found on *The Fosters* seasons 1 – 3. At the beginning of the show, the characters in the same-sex relationship are Stef and Lena. The “Pilot” episode establishes their roles, and maintains consistency within that role assigned to the individual partner. When observing the sample some themes emerged within the research questions, one that reinforced stereotypes of lesbian couples and another that challenges the stereotypical ideology of lesbians. These contrasts can be found throughout the first three seasons.

### Traditional and Same-Sex Couple Parallels

The same-sex couple in *The Fosters* exemplifies many traits of traditional television couples (male and female relationships) through dress, body language and dialogue. For example, Stef wears a police uniform or clothing similar to men’s clothing tailored for a feminine body. In contrast, Lena wears feminine attire and is presented womanly. In season 1:1, “Pilot,” Stef and Lena are in the bedroom. Stef kisses Lena and asks her to get off of her side of the bed. Lena responds, “Okay mamma tiger,” (Bredeweg & Paige, 2013). Tiger is a pet name often reserved for men. It is fitting for Stef’s character to be referred to as a masculine pet name. In addition, Stef is not timid when it comes to using a firearm, but Lena does not like this aspect of Stef’s job. In the episode, “Consequently,” Lena tells Stef, “to be honest, I just keep thinking about seeing you and Brandon in that house with a gun,” (Bredeweg & Paige, 2013). This is a conversation wives typically have with their husbands on television. These parallels help to clarify similarities between traditional couples and *The Fosters*. Viewers can pick up very quickly that Stef is the masculine partner and Lena is more feminine. In “Take Me

Out,” Stef voices concern about Lena applying for the principal position because she thinks the position is too stressful for Lena during pregnancy. Lena agrees, but argues, “It’s a terrible time, but jobs like this don’t come around very often. Especially, when I have the inside track, so I want it,” (Bredeweg & Paige, 2014). Stef wants Lena to be happy and to be successful in her career, but she has reservations about Lena’s health and stress level since she is pregnant. Stef’s concern is often similar to male characters in traditional couples depicted on television. Stef is strong, values discipline, quick to speak and is caring. Meanwhile Lena is material, soft spoken and open minded. Both prefer to have calm and caring discussions about their concerns for each other and their family.

*The Fosters* represents the same-sex couple in a sophisticated way because Stef and Lena are successful and resort to nobility when faced with challenges. They are conscientious in their reactions to homosexual criticism because they want to be good role models for their children. In season 3:7, “Faith, Hope, Love,” their daughter Mariana wants to become the godmother of her biological baby sister. However, she cannot become the godmother because she is not baptized. Mariana tells Stef and Lena that getting baptized seems like a good insurance policy and her biological grandfather is worried he will not see her in heaven (Bredeweg & Paige, 2015). Lena disagrees and Stef supports Lena because they do not believe in heaven and hell; rather, they believe in a greater power driven by love toward others. Like traditional parents and other same-sex parents, Stef and Lena seek to instill their family values into their children’s lives (Bredeweg & Paige, 2015). Stef and Lena decide to support Mariana in baptism and attend the church service for it. Before the baptism, Mariana decides that she cannot become part of the Catholic Church because she does not agree with their beliefs

(Bredeweg & Paige, 2015). Stef and Lena resemble traditional parents who may not agree with their children's decision-making, but they support their children's freewill to make their own decisions. The show discusses some of the struggles that same-sex and traditional couples face such as the religious example provided.

Stef's body language toward Lena represents a more stereotypical portrayal of television dads. For instance, in the first episode when Stef walks through the door, she kisses Lena, greets their children, and grabs a drink from the refrigerator (Bredeweg & Paige, 2013). This type of behavior has been reproduced in prime time family television dramas for decades by the fatherly role in the family. When Stef follows this same pattern as she enters the scene, it reproduces the same message; she is the character who represents masculinity in the relationship role. To further support Stef's role of masculinity, she is dressed in a black police officer's uniform that covers up her body and her hair is pulled back. In contrast, Lena is wearing feminine business casual attire showing her neckline and wearing jewelry. The feminine and masculine roles are also being established through dress in the first episode. Stef's role is established as more masculine than Lena's role to define a working partnership between two people of the same-sex.

### **Gender Construction through Lena and Stef**

The differences between Stef and Lena's characters help determine constructions of gender roles assigned to each partner. Similar to traditional couples, one partner is more dominant than the other. Stef and Lena are a unified team more often than not, but Stef is quick to make decisions, while Lena likes to process before committing to a decision. In addition to personality differences, cultural context clues help guide

understanding about Stef and Lena's image. For example, Stef is often wearing her police officer uniform or collared shirts similar to men's attire. Lena is usually in feminine blouses with lower collars showing her neckline (Bredeweg & Paige, 2013 – 2016). From this example people can make inferences that Lena is more feminine and Stef is more butch, meaning she is a masculine woman.

Hall suggests that representation refers to concepts that cannot be seen, touched, or felt physically; rather, it is more abstract (Hall, 1997). With these abstract concepts people make assumptions about the world around them to understand it (Hall 1997). For example, when the theme song ends there is a short clip of bed sheets and two women hold hands. This leads the mind to assume that the couple is lying in bed together, but all that is seen is the couple grabbing and holding each other's hands on top of bed sheets. According to Hall, this only represents two people holding hands in bed without any other meaning other than that, until cultural and contextual cues are added. When this happens in context of the show about two women in a committed romantic relationship it reinforces the relationship between them as romantic and challenges dominant heterosexual hegemony. The two women's hands being held at the end of the show demonstrates that there is more than a friendship between them. It clearly defines this is a romantic relationship between two women who are holding hands in bed together. This is one way to use an image to help viewers make meaning of the show's same-sex relationship.

Throughout the three seasons, Stef and Lena's clothing choices help in representing each person's role in the relationship. Stef is seen wearing her police uniform often, which has historically been associated as a masculine career. In contrast,

Lena wears more feminine clothing and is a school principal, which has historically been associated with feminine career paths. In the first few minutes of the show, it is clear that *The Fosters* represents the couple in distinct roles that are necessary for viewers to understand what the show is about and who it is about. When looking at representation alone, there are several nonverbal cues that suggest Stef and Lena are in a relationship. Nonverbal messages are confirmed in the show by the verbal messages that support the dress and mannerisms. For example, when the couple disciplines the children, Lena is very lenient and wants the children to feel safe and comfortable telling her anything. She remains calm and supportive when the children mess up. On the other hand, Stef represents the masculine television dad figure because she often expresses anger and reprimands the children for their actions. Stef wants to help her children learn the difference between right and wrong and accept the consequences for wrongdoing.

*The Fosters* perpetuates stereotypes that help define the relationship between Stef and Lena as romantic. For example, when the plumbing goes out in their bathroom Lena wants to get several quotes before deciding on a contractor. In the third episode of season three, Carl is one of the contractors giving Lena a quote and asks if he should send it to her husband. As he says this Stef, walks into the kitchen and Lena introduce Stef to Carol. He asks, "So, are you two sisters or..." Lena interrupts that thought and answers, "Nope, she's my wife," (Bredeweg & Paige, 2015). Stef and Lena laugh at his assumption that they are sisters, not a couple.

When Lena and Stef refer to their attraction to each other it is often subtle. For example, in episode 3:18, "Rehearsal," Stef feels unattractive because she was diagnosed with breast cancer and had to get a mastectomy (Bredeweg & Paige, 2016). Stef and Lena

are discussing Stef getting implants because Stef is afraid of what people will think if she chooses to remain flat chested after the surgery. Stef fears she will appear too masculine without breasts. Lena assures her that she finds her attractive and Stef does not need breasts to be attractive. Stef is not convinced as she said, “A cop with a flat chest, I can hear the comments now, people already think I am butch.” Lena quickly replied, “Who cares what they think,” (Bredeweg & Paige, 2016). Stef feels very unattractive and less of a woman without her breasts. If the show only reinforced and did not challenge stereotypes, it would seem more natural to see the more masculine partner, Stef, losing her breast. Stereotypes are challenged when Stef finds out she has to remove her breasts and becomes upset about it. This is the first example of Stef’s attachment to her femininity even though she is more masculine. The show portrays her connection to her femininity because she feels connected to her feminine side even if she does not express it often. Stef feels less of a woman without breasts (Bredeweg & Paige, 2016). Stef may be portrayed as “butch,” which is a more masculine woman or lesbian; however, it is clear that she is attached to her femininity too. Stef enjoys being a woman and being feminine even though she is portrayed as the more masculine partner. When she needs to get the mastectomy, Stef decides to get breast implants because she struggles with feeling less of a woman without them. Stef says, “Breast and long hair do not make me a woman. And what the hell do I care if people think that I am butch because they have an idea of what a women is supposed to look like...I just want to look the way I want to look,” (Bredeweg & Paige, 2016). Lena supports Stef and lets her know that she loves the way she looks with or without breasts. Lena is very encouraging during this difficult time for her partner. The couple faces several challenges that is personal such as cancer,

pregnancy and a miscarriage. The couple has their disagreements, but through everything they exemplify love and support toward each other.

To further support the construction of gender, Stef's hair is long and pulled back most of the time if she is working and wearing her police uniform. Stef cuts her hair in a short pixie and discusses with Lena how she was afraid to cut her hair before having breast cancer for fear of appearing too butch (Bredeweg & Paige, 2016). Lena likes the short hair and finds it attractive on Stef. Sometimes Stef dresses feminine in pink tops and jeans, yet it has traits of masculinity attached to it. Stef could be wearing a pink shirt, but it is a button up similar to a man's collared shirts. When Stef is portrayed in a feminine way, like in "Quinceanera" of season one, she is wearing a dark green dress that is simple, but still elegant. Stef is never seen more feminine than Lena. However in this scene Lena is wearing a white dress pantsuit that has a sequin part at the top. The way they dress on the show help to reiterate the position each person has in the relationship. These are some examples of how the show reiterates lesbian stereotypes to depict and help make meaning of the same-sex couple through *The Fosters* (Bredeweg & Paige, 2016).

When Stef is diagnosed with breast cancer, she reevaluates her life priorities and struggles with redefining her femininity. She finds it difficult to share the disappointing news that she has breast cancer with Lena, but she is supportive once Stef does. Stef discovers what makes her happy and begins a new chapter personally and within her relationship with Lena. Stef is presented as strong and this situation creates vulnerability, which changes some of the dynamic in her relationship with Lena and Stef's character. Stef allows Lena to be her strength throughout her breast cancer journey, and Lena arises

to the opportunity, even if it makes Stef uncomfortable. Stef realizes she cannot protect Lena from this reality; rather, she relies on Lena who rises to the opportunity to support Stef and is strong for her in helping decide which treatment is best.

Later in the 18<sup>th</sup> episode of season three, Stef enters the kitchen where Lena is doing dishes alone and Stef says, “I decided to get the implants,” (Bredeweg & Paige, 2016). When Lena turns around, she is taken away by how much she is attracted to Stef’s new short haircut (Bredeweg & Paige, 2016). Lena says, “I love it, it’s so sexy; what inspired this change?” Stef said, “It is my symbol of confidence, I always wanted to cut my hair really short... I have been struggling with the way people are going to look at me without breasts, as if I am less of a woman or less feminine. But breasts and short hair do not make me less of a woman...I want to look the way I want to look” (Bredeweg & Paige, 2016). After the cancer diagnosis, Stef’s attitude changes, and she wants to cut her hair short as a symbol of freedom. Facing breast cancer reveals Stef’s femininity since she is often portrayed as masculine. Stef finds courage to be more like Lena and follow her own desires without caring about the judgment of others. Stef may appear masculine, but she is still feminine and enjoys the way her body looks. She admits to Lena she was insecure before to cut her hair short because she did not want to be seen as too butch (Bredeweg & Paige, 2016). Stef realizes she has been following assigned stereotypes even when she does not agree. This is one example of how a subgroup can take steps to become part of changing hegemony. Stef declares that her femininity can look more masculine, and that it should be acceptable. Lena is impressed with the new look and attitude. Lena is proud of Stef for being brave enough to be who she wants to be.

Having cancer gives Stef a new life perspective. She stops worrying about social norms as much and what other people think a woman should look like. Stef found confidence to be feminine in the way she views femininity, rather than being concerned if someone is going to think she is too masculine. Lena is very supportive of Stef's change in appearance and newfound confidence. Lena is happy that Stef found inspiration through breast cancer to be comfortable in her own skin. This example draws the couple closer together because Stef and Lena look to each other and their relationship to establish their identity and draw strength. Stef has been crippled by hegemonic lesbian stereotypes and allowed this to stop her from being who she wants to be. Lena views Stef's confidence as an attractive quality and admires her for it.

Stef also tells Lena she wants to have a breast implant procedure when she recovers from having her breasts removed because she enjoys the way she looks with breasts (Bredeweg & Paige, 2016, 3:18). Stef makes this decision based on what she wants and not based on what others think of her. Lena is excited to hear that Stef made this decision for herself. Lena does not care how feminine or masculine Stef looks. She wants Stef to see that she is still feminine and beautiful no matter how masculine she appear. Through this difficult season of the couple's lives, they grow as a couple through vulnerability and honesty.

Traditional couples of a man and woman typically represent the man as masculine and the woman feminine. *The Fosters* depicts reproduction of ideologies about the same-sex couple. If the roles are reversed in traditional couples, the show gives viewers clues to clearly communicate the role reversals. Similarly, *The Fosters* signals viewers to make connections that Stef is more masculine because she is typically wearing her police

uniform. To further support the stereotypes in her dress, Stef also has a fearless attitude. Lena is often dressed in feminine clothing and is more nurturing than protecting. Lena portrays a softer side as a compassionate figure for the children. The show reproduces lesbian stereotypes to communicate necessary characteristics of each partner's position in the relationship.

Television couples tend to follow roles whether it is gender roles that are socially assigned or roles people naturally obtain because of skill. Stef and Lena acknowledge that they are equal partners in their relationship and as parents. However, Stef is presented as the more masculine of the two women. Her role is to protect the family in more heroic and masculine ways than Lena. For example, season 1:9 "Vigil," Lena is at home and Stef is working (Bredeweg & Paige, 2013). The foster daughter Callie tells Lena that her little brother is in a very abusive home and he needs to be removed soon. Stef goes to the house with her police partner Mike, and tries to take the child out of the abusive home. The person harming Callie's little brother Jude shoots Stef in the process (Bredeweg & Paige, 2013). This portrays Stef as seizing opportunities to protect her family from harm without fear in masculine ways. Later, Lena voices her concerns about the dangers of Stef's job after she recovers from the gunshot wound (Bredeweg & Paige, 2013). Stef provides comfort to Lena and assures her that she will be safer when entering into someone's home armed at work. This reflects Lena's tender side that does not like to think about the realities of her lover being a police officer. This is the second time in season one that Lena has shared her fears with Stef about the dangers of her job.

Additionally, Stef's dominant role in the couple's relationship is observed in "Hostile Acts," (Bredeweg & Paige, 2013). Her ex-husband Mike, Brandon's father,

challenges Stef's authority as the dominant parent by asking Brandon to move in and live with him on a regular basis without asking Stef first. When Brandon presents this offer to Stef they argue about it. She strongly opposes the idea; meanwhile, Lena sits silently, allowing Stef to speak for them both. Stef, like most dominant characters because she does not like the idea of Mike challenging her authority. When the conversation between Brandon and Stef come to an escalating halt, Brandon walks out of the door and Stef walks away in the opposite direction. Lena stands up to prevent Stef from stopping Brandon from leaving and says, "Stef, Stef, let him go he needs to cool down...and so do you," as Stef walks away from Lena (Bredeweg & Paige, 2013). Like many female roles in family dramas, Lena is acting as the peacemaker in the family when she stands in between Stef and the door where Brandon made his exit.

Several conflicts arise on the show, but the couple is depicted as always supporting each other and working through marital and parenting issues. Each of the examples interprets the couple's relationship and reveals that they experience conflict, love, support, and resolves offenses even if it will take time. The couple is very busy and does not have much time alone. This is something many 21<sup>st</sup> century couples face with children. *The Fosters* reiterates the importance of taking a time out for themselves and their partnership to strengthen their relationship.

### **Stef and Lena an Established Couple**

The couple is already established when the first episode begins. Therefore, viewers do not see their coming out (Stef and Lena are comfortable with their sexuality enough to share with others.) phase, and both women already strongly identify as lesbian women in a same-sex relationship and in episode 1:10 "I Do." the couple marries. Before

the show begins both Stef and Lena have experienced their coming out phase, and have already identified to themselves and others that they are lesbian women. Now they are busy building their own family with their oldest son Brandon, from Stef and Mike's previous marriage, adopted twins, Mariana and Jesus, and Jude and Callie. The couple's relationship is depicted as a romantic relationship between two women who want to instill family traditions and values in their children.

As in real life, Stef and Lena cannot get legally married at the beginning of the show June 3, 2013 because Proposition 8 was not repealed until June 26, 2013 (Matthews, 2013). Proposition 8 was repealed on June 26, 2013, and the couple decided to get married in season one episode 10 called "I Do," which aired August 5, 2013 (Matthews, 2013). The storyline of the show is timely and responds to LGBT news at the time. When the couple gets married, Lena expresses more excitement than Stef about their wedding, which is stereotypical since Lena is portrayed more feminine than Stef. To reiterate that Stef is not into feminine things, she has a negative attitude toward planning a wedding. She does not care what flowers are picked or what decorations are used. Stef's mom bought a dress she wanted Stef to wear, but she is set on wearing pants and not a dress. Stef's mom asks, "Please tell me you will wear this dress?" Stef replies, "We have been through this mom," (Bredeweg & Paige, 2013). Since Stef's mom knows she cannot change Stef's mind about the dress, she agreed to stop asking her to wear it. Stef is also nervous that her Dad, who does not agree with same-sex marriage, will not support her marriage to Lena. Stef goes to their room where Lena is reading a book and she admits that the lack of support bothers her, but Stef assures Lena she wants to marry her. Stef comes from a more conservative family and Lena grew up in a more open-

mindful household. When the scene ends, the couple is in bed under the sheets. Like most of the intimate moments Stef and Lena share, their children quickly interrupt this moment. Throughout the show there are several examples of the couple's struggling to find time to spend alone together.

### **Relationship Development and Differences**

Throughout the show, the couple's relationship grows, and they experience some differences that cause conflict in their relationship. For example, Stef is not as interested in symbols of closeness, such as their marriage ceremony or when Lena wants to have a baby in season one. Lena is very determined to have a baby, and she decides to start prenatal vitamins before discussing it with Stef. Lena asks a co-worker and friend to donate sperm before discussing it with Stef (Bredeweg & Paige, 2014). Stef reluctantly agrees to have a baby with Lena. Stef did not want to know the sperm donor, but since Lena already asked a co-worker and friend, Stef focused on the positive aspect of knowing the donor. Even though Stef and Lena become excited about having a baby, in season two episode "Mother," Lena has complications with the pregnancy and miscarries (Bredeweg & Paige, 2015).

Stef represents aspects of television masculinity because she is more concerned about losing Lena than the baby when complications arise (Bredeweg & Paige, 2015). Lena represents a maternal television mother because she is more concerned about losing the baby. In season two, "The End of the Beginning," Lena miscarries and feels disconnected from her family (Bredeweg & Paige, 2015). After struggling with her relationship with Stef, Lena tells Stef she thinks she has been struggling with depression since the miscarriage. Lena says, "After talking with Anna about postpartum...I think I

have been depressed too,” (Bredeweg & Paige, 2015). The miscarriage causes marital strife for Lena and Stef, but their relationship develops as they work through their loss.

In “The End of the Beginning,” Lena needs to talk to someone about how she feels about what is going on with her and Stef’s relationship (Bredeweg & Paige, 2016). Lena senses distance and represents stereotypical television feminine desire for connection with her partner, while Stef tends to dismiss Lena’s efforts to make connections with her. For example, in “Wreckage,” the twins were in a hit and run accident. Stef disregards Lena’s concern that Stef is working too closely on the case to find out who crashed a car into the car the twins were riding in (Bredeweg & Paige, 2016.). Even though the case is closed as a hit and run, Stef keeps digging for information until she figures out the driver is Mike’s foster child’s older brother. Stef dismisses Lena’s concern about her obsessing over this case and Stef pushes Lena away by keeping this secret. Lena begins to act as a woman who is not valued in her relationship and seeks advice from a friend. Stef realizes when Lena brings it to her attention, that she leaves Lena out of decision making for the family and tries to correct this mistake. Stef avoids sharing issues that could worry Lena with every detail, which is a difficult habit for Stef to break. Stef realizes her attempts to protect Lena from stress causes more stress for Stef and creates tension in their relationship. This represents the typical struggles many couples face in reality.

In season three episode, “Faith, Hope, Love,” Lena admits that she has been feeling depressed over the loss of their child, Frankie, and states that she hates the tree they planted in her honor. With tears in her eyes, Lena admits to Stef, “I think, I have been depressed ever since we lost Frankie... I’m just not over it yet,”(Bredeweg & Paige,

2016). When Stef realizes this could be part of the reason the couple has been miscommunicating and having issues, she supports Lena in grieving over their lost child. Stef listens and looks at Lena in a subjective manner as Lena shares her pain and grief. This supports the feminist female gaze theory, valuing feminist perspective and inner exposure rather than appearance. An example of this is Lena's depression during the loss of their child (Mulvey, 2003). Stef attempts to comfort Lena, in "Faith, Hope, Love," "That's awful love, and it's messy, and it sucks, and takes as long as it takes. You feel it, ride it out, and I am going to be here for as long as it takes, every step of the way... I promise," (Bredeweg & Paige, 2016) When the couple prioritizes communication and honestly share their feelings with each other, they begin to get along better and grow in their relationship (Bredeweg & Paige, 2016). The couple may not have many moments to share their feelings like this since they are busy working and parenting, but it is critical for their success as a couple, parents and family. In this scene Stef is strong so that she can help build Lena up and offer her support to get through a difficult time.

Changes that occur in a relationship and in the family dynamic can be difficult and present challenges for all families. In season two episode three, "Play," Stef and Lena plan a baby moon to enjoy a night of romance and togetherness away from their children before the new baby is born (Bredeweg & Paige, 2014). During this episode Lena and Stef argue because it is clear that Stef is not happy about having another child, and Lena is excited about it. This is easy to see in Lena's facial expression because she looks down and discouraged that Stef is unhappy and scared to have another baby (Bredeweg & Paige, 2014). The trip is miserable for the couple because they argue and bicker the entire time, but the couple communicates to resolve their problems. Lena expresses that she

misses the connection she had with Stef and that she feels like they are too busy for one another. Stef apologizes to Lena for not being more supportive and taking on the stress of the entire family (Bredeweg & Paige, 2014). This conflict resolution between Stef and Lena is often depicted between television parents. Once again roles and stereotypes are used in this scene to exemplify that Lena is more feminine in dress and mannerisms. When the couple makes up in this scene, Lena walks to Stef and sits in her chair and on her lap. Stef holds Lena, and they kiss and make up. Stef represents protection and stability, which are masculine characteristics of the masculine lesbian (Dyer, 1977).

### **Stef and Lena's Different Parenting Styles**

Couples that have children often come from different backgrounds. Sometimes this is problematic and frustrating for parents. It is important to be on the same page when it comes to standards, family values and discipline as partners. Stef and Lena have different upbringings and have different parenting styles. Lena is more nurturing and gracious than Stef overall. Lena is presented in a feminine way, not only in dress but also in action. For example, in season two "Truth Be Told," their son Brandon experiments with eating marijuana brownies with friends, and instead of calling Stef, he calls Lena to come pick him up (Bredeweg & Paige, 2014). He knew he would be in trouble either way, but Lena would be less harsh on him for making a mistake. In season 2 episodes 14, "Mother Nature", Stef and Lena finds out that their son Jesus tattooed his girlfriend's name to his side (Bredeweg & Paige, 2015). Stef and Lena begin to lecture him and questioning him about the tattoo. Lena is clearly upset, but not as upset as Stef. Lena tries to calm Stef down. Stef said to Lena, "Please stop making me feel like I have to be the disciplinarian dad in this family," (Bredeweg & Paige 2015). Clearly Stef believes that

Lena is too easy on the children because she called Lena, “the easy mom and that’s why they come to you instead of me first,” (Bredeweg & Paige 2015). Lena calls Stef out for her “heteronormative” thinking, and said, “you police them and do not parent them,” (Bredeweg & Paige, 2015). This is an example of Stef’s traditional father figure role and Lena’s role as being more lenient and motherly. In this episode, Stef desires to be more lenient, but wants Lena to become harsher. If Lena were to do this, it would challenge Stef’s position as “chief” lesbian (Dyer, 1977). The show follows stereotyping theory because their can only be one “chief” lesbian that lead the group or family (Dyer, 1977). Instead, this repetitive argument between the couple is Stef’s cry for help from being overwhelmed as protector, provider and disciplinarian. Lena admits that she does not like conflict and avoids it. She also admits that Stef is the strength of their family. Stef shows her feminine side because she desires to nurture their children too, but feels as though she cannot fulfill that role because Lena takes it. Stef sees herself as the balance of the family and assumes the role as disciplinarian, which is easily paralleled to her profession as a police officer. Stef naturally assumes this role, but she also desires to relax and have fun with her family.

Stef and Lena’s different parenting styles are one of the conflicting themes between the couple throughout the show. In “Kingdom Come,” Stef and Lena find out that their oldest son Brandon is dating someone older than him. He is 17 and his girlfriend is 21 with a two-year-old child of her own (Bredeweg & Paige, 2016). Stereotypically, Lena is the more lenient of the two parents. After Lena and Stef talked to Brandon about not having sex with his girlfriend, Lena thought it was best to give him some slack and not push him away. Lena does not like the idea of their son dating

someone older as much as Stef, but Lena has a softer approach when disciplining their children. On the other hand, Stef takes a more stern approach with Brandon and lets him know that it is their house and he has to follow their rules. She tells Brandon he cannot date the older girl and in turn she pushes him away. Brandon decides to move in with his girlfriend.

Stef and Lena represent two different people in their approaches to resolving conflict. Stef is seen as strict in character and in dress because she is often seen in her police uniform. She also provides stability and security in the relationship. Lena is more laid back in her approach and looks for a deeper more significant meaning behind behavior. This is depicted through Lena's career choice as a principal. Lena enjoys learning and growing experiences where Stef thrives in a structured and ordered environment. Each role is significant for the relationship between Stef and Lena's television presence to help make meaning of same-sex relationships through the use of LGBT sub-culture, dialogue, signs and imagery, which is represented on *The Fosters*.

### **Lesbian Couples as Masculine/Feminine**

Stereotypes may not be accurate all of the time, but it can help guide understanding of people and places that are unfamiliar. The stereotypes in the first three seasons of the show are full of examples that depict Stef and Lena's differences. One example is found in season 2:14 "Mother Nature." The family is going camping and Stef decided to put Lena and Stef's tent further away from the kids because Stef insinuates she would like to have sex with Lena. They become very flirtatious with each other, but Stef's initiative is what Dyer refers to as the dominant lesbian (1977). Stef initiates and sets the tone for the expectation between her and Lena in this episode (Bredeweg &

Paige, 2015). Stef views Lena as a respectable co-partner to their family, but Stef also portrays Dyer's example of domination of one lesbian partner over another because Stef smacking Lena on the butt in a flirtatious way (1977). This sends the message that Stef is dominant and Lena is not, later on in the episode "Mother Nature," Stef references herself as being the dad disciplinarian of the family (Bredeweg & Paige, 2015). This is an example of Stef and Lena walking in line with the stereotypes assigned to them by heterosexual hegemony.

Same-sex stereotypes are used on *The Fosters* to help portray the relationship between Stef and Lena by drawing conclusions using stereotypes pointing to Stef as the masculine partner and Lena the feminine partner. Once again, even their clothing signifies these typical stereotypes. Stef wears women's clothing that resembles men's clothing styles. She is often in a button up and jeans, or in her police uniform. Meanwhile, Lena reflects the ideal feminine role because she becomes pregnant and is typically wearing feminine clothing that fit complementary to her figure, and is not masculine in nature.

Some scenes reinforce same-sex stereotypes because the more dominant parental figure does most of the confronting and initiating of the child. Lena is portrayed as passive and submissive, while Stef is dominant and does not shy away from any situation even when Stef is wrong. Most couples, traditional or same-sex, has one spokesperson for the unit when in more professional settings, such as school meetings or meeting other parents. The male traditionally occupies this role, but on *The Fosters*, Stef takes on this role more often than Lena.

Like most television series, *The Fosters* begin with introducing the main characters of the show. In addition everyone's role is established through reproducing stereotypical behaviors. In season 1 episode 1, "Pilot," within the first six minutes of the show, roles are established in the relationship between the same sex couple, Stef, the cop and Lena, the school principal (Bredeweg & Paige, 2013). It is important that the show communicates this right away. These roles help viewers understand the dynamic on the show because Lena plays a more feminine role and Stef plays a more masculine role. These roles are even emphasized based on their occupation. Stef is a police officer, which is an image of authority and bravery. A school principle requires patience and understanding. The example comes from the following dialogue in the "Pilot" episode,

(Lena) – "Hey honey.

(Stef) - Hi.

It smells great.

Lasagna.

Delicious. Thank you.

(Lena) - How are you, honey?

(Stef)- Good, how are you? Hi babies!

(Callie scoffs at Stef's entrance)

(Jesus) - What? Nobody told you our mom's a cop?

(Mariana) - See, this is why no boys ever want to come over.

(Stef) - As it should be.

(Callie) - So, you're dykes.

(Jesus) - They prefer the term "people," but yeah, they're gay," (Bredeweg & Paige, 2013).

This scene is very important because Callie negatively confronts the couple's relationship with lack of acceptance. She is the new foster daughter in the home, and she has not met Lena's partner Stef yet. Callie has only learned seconds ago that Lena and Stef are in a same-sex relationship. Callie represents stereotypical homophobia by assigning a negative reaction toward the couple without knowing anything other than

they are a lesbian couple. Jesus combats this attitude when he says gay people are people too.

### **Same-Sex Relationships as Normal**

It is possible to use stereotypes to convey a positive message about same-sex couples. *The Fosters* portrays Stef and Lena as hard working individuals that work together to raise a successful family. Stef and Lena's relationship is not viewed as taboo; rather, it is represented as a norm to be in a same-sex relationship between two women much like that of a more traditional couple. For example, in the season three episode "Déjà vu," Lena shares with Stef that she was experiencing déjà vu with AJ, a temporary foster child staying for dinner and staying the night. Lena reflects on the first time Callie ate dinner with their family. Stef laughing said, "What, you mean when she called us 'dykes,'" (Bredeweg & Paige 2016)? Once again the term dyke is dismissed as a laughable insult. Stef and Lena dismiss the term dyke all together as an ignorant outdated term. This conversation could be used to signify a shift in hegemonic ideology as same-sex marriages become socially acceptable. The episode aired June 22, 2015, and marriage equality passed in the Supreme Court days later on June 26, 2015 (De Vogue & Diamond, 2015). *The Fosters* represents accepting change in hegemony that same-sex couples are equal to traditional couples. This television example dismisses the term "dyke" as dated, old and laughable because of its lack of relevance. Before, Stef and Lena were stunned in season one when Callie referred to them as "dykes," but in season three, their attitude toward the term discredits its original intent to hurt or demean lesbian women. This is a powerful representation for the LGBT community.

Lena and Stef's daughter Callie represented resistance toward acceptance of the LGBT community in the first episode. As the seasons progress, Callie accepts the same-sex couples and parents because they have shown her love and acceptance that she never received from other foster families she had in the past. Callie's character represents hegemonic changes and acceptance not only on screen, but off screen too. In reality, this mirrors the changes and acceptance extended to same-sex couples in the United States. This message is important because same-sex couples have been perceived as funny or side characters in the past (Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002). *The Fosters* challenges the hegemonic representation of ideologies that define successful television family shows as having a father and a mother. The portrayal of the two moms redefine what family looks like in the 2010s. The Adams Foster family means that two mothers can raise their children in a supporting environment as two parents of the same sex.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study focuses on the significance of *The Fosters*' same-sex characters in regards to how their relationship adds meaning to the show and the LGBT community through stereotypes, hegemony, and representation theory. The study examines scenes depicting the same-sex relationship between Stef and Lena to determine that same-sex stereotypes are perpetuated and challenged in the pilot episode. Because stereotypes of masculine and feminine dress are emphasized in *The Fosters*, Callie is quick to use the word "dyke" in an offensive way. Jesus dismisses the term as ignorant rather than offensive when he tells Callie that his mothers are gay, but focuses on the fact that they are people too (Bredeweg & Paige, 2013). Jesus' perspective is similar to what Reed (2009) discusses when referring to the female gaze. Jesus shares his perspective on Stef and Lena's relationship, and presents his mothers in a personal subjective way when he corrects Callie's perspective of his mothers as "people" rather than "dykes" (Bredeweg & Paige, 2013). This paper discovers that both reinforced and challenged stereotypes are used to understand the same-sex couple as compared to traditional couple parallels, gender construction, masculine/feminine stereotypes, and norms. This study is significant because television in general plays a role in developing the way people perceive same-sex couples and controversial topics such as marriage equality.

The show within itself challenges hegemony because it is about an interracial same-sex couple raising their multi-cultural blended family. In the past, shows about same-sex relationships have not focused on depicting a strong couple; rather, shows focus on the LGBT character's internal issues, or as a side story to the main storyline (Bond, 2014). Over time, ideologies evolve, as *The Fosters*, and other television shows, become

more popular and acceptable. This reflects a change in American's social structure reflecting tolerance and acceptance toward gay and lesbian couples. This controversial issue is normalized on the show to depict how a same-sex couple interacts and raises a family of their own. Dyer says that many media portrayals of gay or lesbian characters focus on the individualism of gayness and that character's individual solutions to gayness (Dyer, 1977). Stef and Lena portray a lesbian couple that are already established and do not focus on the individual as much as the couple as a whole (Bredeweg & Paige, 2013 – 2016). Dyer also mentions member types that describe the culturally oppressed group members of gay and lesbian communities, and what they face when in opposition to hegemonic society (1977). Stef and Lena experience opposition because they are a same-sex couple, but in contrast, the show does not only represent LGBT issues. The show also portrays several different issues other than LGBT issues that could be researched and expanded upon in future studies, such as, the interracial marriage and family, same-sex family issues, blended families, adoption, foster care, raising teenagers, raising homosexual and heterosexual children, learning disabilities, sex, and, bullying (Bredeweg & Paige, 20013 – 2016). *The Fosters* does not fit into the stereotypical media portrayal of homosexual characters; rather, it pushes boundaries to include LGBT couples as normal. The show uses several stereotypical context cues to illustrate and identify characters.

The stereotypes used in the first three seasons of the show help people understand those who are unfamiliar. *The Fosters* is full of examples that depict Stef and Lena's differences. This study indicates that Stef is a masculine lesbian who learns to be comfortable with her feminine identity even though she appears masculine. Lena is represented as the feminine partner and does not struggle as much as identifying

feminine. The study suggests there is a shift in hegemonic ideology and television representation of same-sex couples. Through analyzing Stef and Lena's relationship, there is evidence that same-sex representation on television is becoming socially acceptable. This change in society at large is exemplified in the SCOTUS passing of marriage equality in June of 2015 (DeVogue & Diamond, 2015). *The Fosters* represents accepting change in hegemony because the same-sex couple is illustrated as equal to other traditional couples on television. In every relationship, society assigns roles that are gendered or stereotyped based on a person's appearance, sex and general make up (Dyer, 1977). For this reason, Stef is more masculine and represents what Dyer (1977) refers to as the "chief" lesbian because she is more dominant than Lena. On the other hand, Lena is portrayed as being more feminine, so that people understand her role is different in contrast to Stef's role. Even though Stef and Lena are two women in an equal partnership, they possess different roles within the relationship.

Through discourse analysis stereotyping, hegemony, and representation theory, the study supports evolving ideologies that include same-sex couple representation. *The Fosters* aired during the marriage equality movement, Proposition 8, and the legalization of same-sex marriage (DeVogue & Diamond, 2015). The show is timely because the episodes are relevant to the real world timeline in the United States regarding marriage equality. For this reason, further research should be conducted as same-sex representation on television increases. Some of the limitations of the study are that it focuses on one couple rather than several same-sex television couples. Other limitations to this study is that it focus' on one show. *The Fosters* is chosen because of the diversity within the family. Future studies on *The Fosters* could focus on the fact that the couple is interracial,

and so is their family. For this study, and its time restriction, it is significant to focus only on the same-sex relationship between Stef and Lena. Several studies could build upon this research to analyze multicultural families, adoption and foster care. Another limitation to this study is that the show is still on going, but due to time restriction, the study only focused on seasons 1 – 3. In addition, *The Fosters* is selected because it targets an audience of young women ages 14 – 34 (2017, freeform.com). According to Bond's (2014) study, it is important for young people to see positive representation of themselves on television in various roles. During Bond's (2014) study, it found that young lesbian women lacked television exposure when it came to discussing sex and relationships. *The Fosters* is significant because it targets a young female audience that Bond found to be underrepresented on television (Bond, 2014). It is significant to mention this study supports the importance of young LGBT viewers seeing positive LGBT characters represented on television. There is a need for more studies to develop this literature on same-sex representation on television.

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