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PREVIEW

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**Characteristics of selected local chapters of Parents and Friends  
of Lesbians and Gays that have been identified as strong or  
successful**

Durgin-Clinchard, Jean Eileen, Ph.D.

The University of Nebraska - Lincoln, 1993

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PREVIEW

CHARACTERISTICS OF SELECTED LOCAL CHAPTERS OF  
PARENTS AND FRIENDS OF LESBIANS AND GAYS THAT  
HAVE BEEN IDENTIFIED AS STRONG OR SUCCESSFUL

by

Jean Eileen Durgin-Clinchard

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College in the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: Interdepartmental Area of Community and  
Human Resources

Under the Supervision of Professor Erwin H. Goldenstein

Lincoln, Nebraska

December, 1993

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CHARACTERISTICS OF SELECTED LOCAL CHAPTERS OF  
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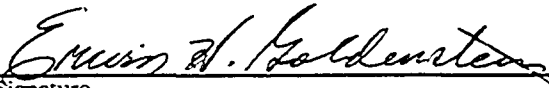
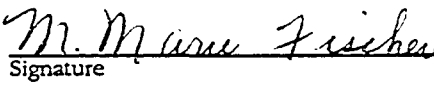


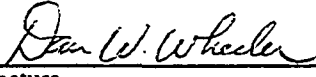
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CHARACTERISTICS OF SELECTED LOCAL CHAPTERS OF  
PARENTS AND FRIENDS OF LESBIANS AND GAYS THAT  
HAVE BEEN IDENTIFIED AS STRONG OR SUCCESSFUL

Jean Eileen Durgin-Clinchard, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska, 1993

Adviser: Erwin H. Goldenstein

Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (P-FLAG) is a national Federation of over three hundred Contact persons and Chapters in the United States. P-FLAG goals are to: (1) support parents, families, and friends as they learn about their gay loved ones; (2) educate both their members and the public about homosexuality; and (3) advocate for the civil rights of their children and friends. Understanding the complex nature of these groups and identifying the ways in which Chapters, selected because of their apparent effectiveness, were able to function provides valuable insights into the functioning of these groups.

The literature describing research into the effectiveness of self-help groups has focused primarily upon the efficacy of the groups in meeting the needs of individuals rather than the effectiveness of the group in meeting its overall goals. This is the first study of the effectiveness of P-FLAG Chapters.

A pool of several local P-FLAG Chapters was identified by national P-FLAG Board members. Five were selected by the researcher based on geographic locations and overall feasibility. The Board members were



asked for their definitions of a successful or strong chapter from which a checklist of the attributes of an effective chapter was derived. The checklist was used in the examination of the data obtained from visitation at the Chapters.

Qualitative methodology consisted of interviews with a variety of individuals at each site, participant observation, and review of locally generated documents. The total of 79 people interviewed, inclusive of 20 individuals in two group settings, consisted of core group family members, "new" parents, gay people, and individuals peripherally connected to the Chapter. Their varied perspectives were taken into account in analyzing the data. Ten propositions were derived from the findings, implications and recommendations for further research were drawn, and suggestions for individuals involved in Chapter development and leadership training were offered.

## DEDICATION

To all my children, KC (Marvin) Chase-Lambert, LauraLee, Daniel, and Calvin and Jen Clinchard, and my grandchildren, Kiersten, Khalil, and Sera, that they may live in the realization and knowledge that the world can be a better place, not only for gay, lesbian and bisexual people, but for all of us who know that any form of discrimination is simply wrong and not to be tolerated. We have but to take action. And a special dedication to James Cameron (JC) Chase-Lambert, my son's partner in life and lover, who died of complications from AIDS on July 18, 1992, just one week before his forty-fifth birthday.

JC's father said of him, "What can you say of a loving son? He made me proud."

My son wrote of JC to friends, "He touched your life; he strolled out to gossip or trade opinions with you; he marched out to scold at you; he helped you unionize; he worked with you to heal the injured and disturbed; he pranced at your parties; he shared your joy in gardening; he thanked you for a thankless job well done; he admired your birds; he touched you in ways I can't imagine. . . . If you are moved, I ask that you tell someone you usually wouldn't that you you knew someone who died of AIDS and he was a good man."

JC was a good man. He was my cheerleader and gadfly. Wherever he is I know he is smiling to know that I have finally finished this dissertation. We miss him. He will not be forgotten.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to the members of my committee, Dr. Erwin H. Goldenstein, M. Marie Fischer, Dr. Birdie H. Holder, Dr. Helen Moore, and Dr. Dan Wheeler, for their contributions and support of my work. Dr. Goldenstein gave unstintingly of his time and was unfailing in his patience, through many delays and false starts.

I owe a debt of gratitude to the many people who gave their time and stories to paint with words pictures of the meaning of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (P-FLAG) in their lives. The leaders of the Chapters I visited were generous in providing me with information, direction, and logistical support while in their cities, adding their insights to this research.

Many hours of tape recorded interviews were faithfully and accurately transcribed by Jolene Boshart. Suzie Sybouts worked closely with me to meet deadlines and provide me with a professionally finished product.

Members of the Lincoln P-FLAG Cornhusker Chapter volunteered for extra duties and encouraged me, with only a little nagging, to finish this study. The confidence that many friends in the gay, lesbian, and bisexual community had that I would finish rekindled my spirits when I was low and not sure I would finish. My thanks to all of you.

J. E. D-C.

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PREVIEW

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PREVIEW



## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

"United in Love, We Are a Family." "Listening, Loving, Learning." These words bespeak the themes of the last two national conventions of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. These themes express the focus on support and sharing of stories and learnings about the children and friends who are gay. P-FLAG President, Paulette Goodman, supporting this focus of the Federation of Parents, said, "Essentially, Parents FLAG is a family support group. A lot of us parents were totally ignorant of homosexuality when we first were told about our own family members." Such themes are congruent with the notion of self-help and support groups; but Goodman's next words were, "After we wake up many of us become advocates" (Bossart, 1989).

Another voice from the history of parent involvement was that of Jeanne Manford. She was the first parent to march and carry a sign in a Gay Pride Parade, with her son Morty, as early as 1972. Manford said, "Someday we will fight for the rights of our children. We will become political. We will have a national organization. I remember thinking that at the beginning. But the immediate thing was to talk to parents and help them come to terms with the fact that they had a gay child and that this was nothing to be ashamed of" (Marcus, 1992).

Elinor Kirby Lewallen, former P-FLAG President, said, "Parents FLAG also has legislative goals. The families want civil rights for their gay and lesbian children, condemnation of the violence against their

children, a more public response to the AIDS crisis, the formation of programs to provide counseling for gay and lesbian teen-agers and gay-related teen suicide and substance abuse" (Bossart, 1989). It is evident that the organization known as the Federation of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (P-FLAG) is not simply another self-help or support group. It is also a social action group.

### Context

P-FLAG is an international organization made up of chapters, groups, and individual contact persons located around the world, but predominantly in the United States. P-FLAG is an all volunteer non-profit organization, with the exception of two half-time paid staff persons in 1989, that grew to a paid staff of five by 1993. It is not affiliated with any religious, ethnic, or economic group. It has been in existence for twelve years as a federation and has held twelve national conventions. P-FLAG is a grass-roots support/self-help group which came into existence to serve the needs of parents and friends of gay men and women who were having difficulty understanding and dealing with the sexual orientation of their children, other relatives, and/or friends, to educate themselves and others, and to seek equality for their gay and lesbian children.

Until 1987 there were no paid staff persons, and all the maintenance and logistical work of the organization was accomplished by volunteers working in teams in the President's living room. The strength of this organization and its survival, growth, and continuing development are directly proportional to the dedication of the people working at the local

level, inclusive of the gay men and lesbians who are involved in varying degrees. P-FLAG is a fully incorporated and tax exempt educational organization with a national board of directors, consisting of the usual officers and a varied number of regional directors to provide geographical representation. The number of regional directors varies from year-to-year according to the needs for geographic distribution of leadership.

The processes by which individuals become local officers is often one that, in essence, is the official recognition of informal and emergent leaders. They are assigned titles associated with the tasks they feel comfortable doing and for which they are willing to assume the responsibility. As a national organization the officers' positions are filled in a similar way. The geographical regions have changed almost every year, depending upon the "strength" found in particular chapters. The boundaries have been re-drawn several times to accommodate the sites of strong chapter leaders. According to the by-laws, which were established in 1981 as part of the incorporation process in the State of California (see Appendix A), the regional directors are elected in caucus by the chapter representatives from that region in attendance at the national conventions. In practice, the regional directors are generally recognized by the fact that their particular local P-FLAG affiliate has shown itself to be particularly strong, and a particular person has emerged as a leader in that region. They are approached by a national board member, recognized by a consensus of their caucus, or volunteer themselves within the caucus.

The concept of a "strong" local chapter seems to have common utility for the process of identifying local chapters that appear to

accomplish more in the sense of community involvement; are perceived (by the national board members) to be larger in membership and local gay community support; have members who are willing to move beyond supportive functions and into more open educational roles in relation to the community outside the group; and which may, as a group, have moved into public policy influencing roles. What is not known is what drives some local P-FLAG chapters to demonstrate the characteristics mentioned.

### Purposes of the Study

The purposes of the study were to identify the variables which appeared to contribute to the effectiveness of selected local chapters of P-FLAG; to attempt to determine other variables which served as constraints on that growth and strength; and to examine the kind of group(s) represented by these selected chapters.

The initial questions of importance to this study were:

1. What do national P-FLAG leaders consider an effective local chapter?
2. What are the observable historic, environmental, and internal procedures, stated beliefs, inferred processes, and other variables that exist among the selected P-FLAG chapters from their initial formation to the present?
3. What are the variables in common across several selected P-FLAG chapters that have been identified as strong and/or successful?
4. What differences exist among selected P-FLAG chapters that have been identified as strong and/or successful?

5. What seems to account for the similarities and differences among the selected chapters?

6. What kind of theoretical propositions can be drawn from answers to the above questions?

### Definition of Terms

Advocacy. As in social advocacy in which a group, through its leaders, makes its aims known to the community and takes action steps to promote social change.

Federation of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (P-FLAG). The national organizing body consisting of all the affiliated but autonomous P-FLAG chapters and headed by an elected board of directors that includes the officers (president, five vice-presidents and a chair of the board) and ten regional directors. A non-voting secretary and treasurer are appointed by the president with the approval of the board.

Gay. Homosexual, male or female.

Heterosexism. The belief or attitude that it is inherently superior to be heterosexual rather than homosexual; akin to the terms racism and ageism.

Homophobia. The irrational fear or dislike of homosexual persons.

Lesbian. Homosexual woman.

Mutual aid. The key to the definition for this term is "mutuality." There is cooperation and reciprocity between and among people who are not necessarily biologically related, but who come together in a relationship with one another because of a common need. It is more of an

overall concept than a single entity. It goes beyond help for self to include helping others (Silverman, 1986; Wasserman & Danforth, 1988).

Parents. Used as defined in the national Parents FLAG by-laws.

The term "parents" may refer to a person who is a sibling, one who has the primary responsibility for raising a person who is gay, e.g., grandparent, adoptive parent, or to persons who are gay themselves and are also the parents of a gay child.

P-FLAG. Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays.

P-FLAG chapter. A local group which calls itself P-FLAG or has P-FLAG in its name and is officially affiliated with the National Federation of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. Such affiliates have at least a minimum amount of formal organizational structure, in that they must have a set of by-laws when they go through the affiliation process. The only other requirements are that a majority of the board members must be non-gay, the presiding officer must be a parent of a gay person, and the local chapter members state they support the purposes of the national organization.

Self-help. In response to the stresses of life there is often need for an individual to seek support, additional information, and education. Groups formed on this basis are not professionally led, may or may not be formally structured, and usually arise out of some failure on the part of the system, the members' social network, or lack of a common experiential base within the usual social structures for the particular individual suffering from a particular set of events. The self-help group provides for

these needs either in the long-term or short-term (Gartner & Reissman, 1984; Koop, 1987).

Support group. This term refers to a process of providing help in acute, chronic, or transitory stressful life events to people in need of varying levels of support. Inherent in the term is the assumption that for the moment, at least, there is some pathology or deviance or the potential for it. The group is usually professionally led or initiated and is seen as one part of a continuum of service to be provided to "clients."

Voluntary associations. These are service clubs, fraternities and sororities, social societies, unions, political parties, professional organizations, and so on. They provide for the coming together of persons with common interests, either for recreation, socializing, or to achieve some common end (Gordon & Babchuk, 1959).

#### Assumptions

1. Parents FLAG chapters are not unique from other self-help groups in their basic formation and functioning.
2. Some Parents FLAG chapters are mixed groups of advocacy-oriented members and those whose focus is on providing support.
3. Education and information form an integral part of the functioning of the Parents FLAG chapters.
4. The effectiveness of P-FLAG chapters can be determined, at least in part, by qualitative means.

### Delimitations

1. The population included in this study was limited to selected P-FLAG chapters affiliated with the Federation of P-FLAG in the continental United States.

2. The sample was drawn from those chapters which were most frequently named by the federation board members and which were geographically separated from one another.

3. The focus of the study was on various aspects of the groups under study and the perceptions of individuals of the effectiveness of the group.

4. The design of the study was qualitative, utilizing minimally structured interviews, observation, and collection of print data from the chapters and community sources.

### Limitations

1. The conclusions of this study are applicable only to the Parents FLAG chapters studied.

2. The intrapersonal, psycho-social dimensions of individual members of Parents FLAG chapters were not the focus of this study.

3. The nature of this study was such that the current status and history of the selected P-FLAG chapters were examined; hence the conclusions drawn are reflective only of the chapter as it was at the time of the researcher's observations.

4. The findings of this study are of limited generalizability, but yield hypotheses for further investigation.