


# Trauma, Recovery, and Community: Perspectives on the Long-Term Impact of Anti-LGBT Politics

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## Abstract

Research conducted since the early 1990s has suggested that elections designed to delimit the rights of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals carry the potential for significant negative psychological consequences. Research has also suggested that some LGB people use these elections as opportunities for positive individual and social change. Virtually all of the research on the psychological impact of anti-LGB elections has focused on the immediate aftermath of these political events. This article reports results from a qualitative study designed to explore community members' perceptions of the longer term impact of the full cycle of Colorado's Amendment 2, including the campaign, election, and judicial reversal. The results from interviews with a purposive sample of LGB and heterosexual informants offer commentaries on the enduring impact of Amendment 2 at the levels of individuals, the LGBT community, and the broader community.

## Keywords

anti-LGBT politics, LGBT community, resilience, trauma

Recent years have seen more than 100 elections addressing the rights of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB)<sup>1</sup> people in the United States (Gamble, 1997). Most of the early elections focused on efforts to exclude sexual orientation from municipal and state laws outlawing discrimination (Donovan, & Bowler, 1997). Most of the recent elections have focused on banning same-sex couples' access to civil marriage and, in some cases, to couple-based benefits in general (Ball, 2006).

Research on the psychological consequences of these elections suggests that they constitute significant events for LGB people. Whereas some research has described the impact of these elections in explicitly trauma-related terms (e.g., Russell, 2000), other research (e.g., Riggle, Thomas, & Rostosky, 2005) has used a minority stress framework (Meyer, 2003, 2007). The trauma framework suggests that anti-LGB elections represent stressful and sometime explicitly traumatic experiences for LGB people (Russell, 2000; Russell & Richards, 2003). The minority stress framework focuses on the chronic stress associated with an individual's ongoing efforts to manage a stigmatized identity. Within this latter framework, anti-LGB elections add particularly strong challenges to efforts to manage LGB identities (Rostosky, Riggle, Horne, Denton, & Huellemeier, in press). Finally, Root's (1992) concept of insidious trauma, which refers to the repetitive and cumulative impact of having limited control over one's access to

resources, provides a relevant backdrop to this research. From this perspective, anti-LGBT political events contribute to the sense of powerlessness and risk evoked by pervasive homophobia and heterosexism. Collectively, these three approaches provide a broad framework or a set of "sensitizing devices" (Gergen, 1973) that help give meaning to the experiences of LGB people facing such events.

Two main groups of studies have examined the consequences of anti-LGB elections. Studies exploring the processes associated with these consequences, conducted largely by communications scholars, sociologists, and political scientists, indicate that the negative impact of such elections derives from the nature of the rhetoric underlying the campaigns. Specifically, elections about LGB rights tend to polarize communities. Each side provides starkly negative portrayals of the other (e.g., Douglass, 1997; Esterberg & Longhofer, 1998; Herman, 1993, 1997; Smith & Windes, 1997, 2000; Stern, 2001; Wiethoff, 2002), and appeals to

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simplified moral constructs are common (Conrad, 1983). Campaign rhetoric routinely objectifies LGB people (Eastland, 1996) and activates old stereotypes (Bullis & Bach, 1996; Donovan & Bowler, 1997; Douglass, 1997; Whillock, 1995). In many cases, grossly inaccurate information about LGB people is disseminated, often without opportunity for rebuttal (Herek, 1998).

The product of these rhetorical practices is reflected in the psychological aftermath of anti-LGB politics; research regarding these effects has been conducted primarily by psychologists. In the first such study, Russell (2000) employed a survey with both quantitative and qualitative elements to assess the impact on 663 LGB Coloradans of Amendment 2, an anti-LGB amendment to the state constitution, which was passed by that state's electorate in 1992. The purpose of Amendment 2 was to prohibit legal recourse for LGB people who encountered discrimination based on their sexual orientation. Russell's sample retrospectively reported increases over the course of the campaign in symptoms associated with depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorder. Qualitative responses from 496 members of the respondent sample described a host of reactions to the passage of Amendment 2, including shock, anger, fear, hopelessness, and alienation. Somewhat paradoxically, respondents also reported positive responses to the election, including increases in coming out, an increased sense of community with other LGB people, a stronger analysis of political change, and a personal commitment to work toward change. Both quantitative and qualitative data suggested that negative and positive responses to the election were orthogonal; respondents frequently reported both positive and negative reactions. The presence of both negative psychological consequences and posttraumatic growth is a phenomenon familiar to trauma researchers and clinicians (e.g., Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995).

In a research project conducted shortly after the 1996 U.S. Supreme Court ruling that found Amendment 2 unconstitutional, Russell and Richards (2003) used the Russell (2000) findings as the basis for a survey study of 316 LGB Coloradans. This factor-analytic study identified five factors describing the stressful elements of respondents' experiences of Amendment 2, and a second group of five factors describing elements of resilience in respondents' experiences of the amendment. The five factors that generated stress included encountering homophobia, divisions within the LGB community, making sense of danger, the failure of family members to support LGB people, and the internalization of negative messages about LGB people. The five factors that contributed to resilience included viewing the election as one part of a long and broad movement for civil rights, confronting and challenging the validity of internalized negative messages, using active coping strategies, being aware of supportive heterosexuals, and being connected to the LGB community.

Subsequent research in this area took a different direction as the nature of anti-LGB politics changed. The U.S. Supreme

Court decision overturning Amendment 2 combined with judicial gains for the rights of same-sex couples in Vermont and especially in Massachusetts shifted the primary focus of anti-LGB politics. Many states saw legislative and electoral efforts to ban civil marriage between same-sex couples; some efforts were designed to limit or prohibit other partnership-based rights, as well. By the end of 2009, voters had passed anti-same-sex marriage constitutional amendments in 29 states; 11 states have statutory laws restricting marriage to one man and one woman (Human Rights Campaign, 2009).

In the face of this deluge of initiatives, Riggle and Rostosky (2007) used a minority stress framework to argue that policies restricting same-sex relationships affect the health and well-being of these families. The authors pointed out that these policies affect health through three avenues: by creating a stigmatized family form whose members must deal with discrimination, by constructing a legal status that institutionalizes vulnerability, and by perpetuating rhetoric rooted in fear and bias.

Arm, Horne, and Levitt (2009) interviewed supportive family members of LGBT people to investigate whether the psychological impact of anti-same-sex marriage policies extended beyond LGBT people to members of their families of origin. These authors found that anti-LGBT policies affect family members in areas such as their personal relationships, mental and physical health, perspectives about their country and its government, and hopes for the future. For some, the effect included changes in personal identities and beliefs. Collectively, the effects of anti-LGBT policies required family members to negotiate their connection to their LGBT family members and their experiences.

Rostosky et al. (in press) conducted a content analysis of the responses of 300 participants to a national online survey just after the November 2006 elections. These investigators found seven themes in the responses from LGB participants in the study: indignation about discrimination; distress over negative campaigning; fear and anxiety about protecting their relationships and families; blaming institutionalized religion, ignorance, conservative politics, and the ineffective strategies used by LGBT organizers; hopelessness and resignation; and hope, optimism, and determination to fight for justice and equal rights.

Rostosky, Riggle, Horne, and Miller (2009) conducted a national online survey of 1,552 LGB adults to assess the psychological impact of elections focusing on same-sex marriage in 2006. Rostosky et al. found that minority stress factors—including exposure to negative conversations, negative amendment-related affect, internalized homophobia, and LGB activism—were associated with increased psychological distress. Although LGB people around the country showed these effects to some degree, those living in states that had passed anti-marriage amendments reported higher levels of negative amendment-related affect that, in turn, had more pronounced effects on psychological distress.

Levitt et al. (2009) conducted an interview study with 13 lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender participants from Tennessee, exploring their experiences with the 2006 election that resulted in the passage of a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage in that state. Results indicated that respondents felt a need to find a balance between engagement with the election and a self-protective withdrawal from it. Qualitative clusters associated with this central finding were consistent with some of the stressor and resilience factors reported by Russell (2000) and included constant reminders of being seen as less than human; the need to manage anger, pain, hurt, and fear; and the importance of supports for LGBT identity. In addition, individual differences emerged based on the personal salience of marriage-related issues.

## The Present Study

The current study was undertaken to gather the perspectives of a purposive sample of informants on the impact of Colorado's Amendment 2 from the vantage point of a decade and more after the passage of the amendment. We employed qualitative methods to explore how LGB people and their heterosexual allies looked back over the years subsequent to that Amendment. This methodology allowed us to capture respondents' personal assessments of the impact of an anti-LGB election and its aftermath. The methodology speaks to respondents' *views* of this impact rather than to the actual impact *per se*. Indeed, given the multitude of factors that inevitably influenced changes in LGBT individuals and communities during the period of interest, it would not be possible to enumerate, much less to evaluate, all the factors that contributed to change. This qualification notwithstanding, the current study extends the growing body of research on the psychological impacts of anti-LGB politics, emphasizing three points in particular.

First, whereas previous research has focused on the short-term impacts of anti-LGBT events, this study extended the timeframe for looking at the aftermath of anti-LGB politics to a decade postelection. This vantage point provided an opportunity to understand more about how participants viewed the full cycle of an anti-LGB election, including the campaign, the election, the judicial challenge to that outcome, and the ultimate overturning of the amendment by the U.S. Supreme Court.

Second, although the earliest research on this topic (Russell, 2000; Russell & Richards, 2003) clearly indicated that some LGB people reported positive changes from exposure to anti-LGB politics, the majority of studies have emphasized negative sequelae of these events for LGB people. Resilience has often been underplayed in psychology in general, and the absence of its careful consideration in LGB psychology has been especially problematic (Russell, Bohan, & Lilly, 2000). This inattention to resilience is particularly important in view of the observation that LGB politics tend

to include a "roller-coaster" effect in which losses give way to gains, and gains often have their own downsides (Russell, 2000).

Third, the current study shifted the focus from the exclusive impact on individuals to exploring the impact on broader systems as well as on individuals. Although the initial Amendment 2 study (Russell, 2000) was designed to focus on individual outcomes, when given the opportunity to respond to an open-ended question about the impact of the amendment, respondents repeatedly made references to both the LGB and the broader communities. This assertion of the importance of community for LGB people inspired the more direct approach to these issues in the current study.

## Method

### Interview Schedule

We conducted interviews to gather more in-depth information about the informants' longer-term perspectives on the aftermath of Amendment 2. We began the interviews in 2002 and continued with interviews during the subsequent 2 years. Using a modified grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2005), we analyzed interview data as we gathered them. We conducted two interviews beyond the saturation level, that is, the point at which no new themes emerged in the analysis.

For each interview, we used a semistructured interview schedule that focused on primary areas of emphasis while also providing flexibility to pursue the details and the implications of respondents' comments. The central question in all the interviews was: What changes have you seen in the aftermath of Amendment 2 for yourself personally, for the LGB community, and for the community at large? Interviews lasted from 1 to 3 hours. All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. A team of three researchers analyzed the data using a consensus coding approach (Russell, 2000). We read the transcripts together and collectively enumerated themes that were directly responsive to the three levels of change we had identified in the interview schedule: the individual, the LGB community, and the broader community.

### Participants

Participants in this study comprised a purposive sample. Our aim in selecting respondents was not to gather a random sample of informants from whom we might generalize, but to explore in more depth a variety of perspectives on Amendment 2 and its long-term consequences, with particular emphasis on the perspectives of individuals who had been intimately involved in the election and/or its aftermath and/or who occupied specific roles in the contemporary LGBT community that provided them with broad-based vantage points on these issues. The majority of the interviewees were from the Boulder area, and therefore, many of their comments referred to events in that community.

**Table 1.** Themes Identified Through Qualitative Analysis of Interviews

Changes at Individual Level	Changes at LGBT Community Level	Changes at Broader Community Level
Individuals harmed	No lasting changes in LGBT community	Changes folded into existing institutions
Individuals empowered	Changes in LGBT community present but dormant	Activism created entirely new institutions
	LGBT activism continues, but in new forms	Allies became more involved in LGBT activism
	LGBT activism strong among youth	Subtle homophobia and heterosexism remain

We interviewed 18 people; 14 were women and 4 were men. All but 2 were White; these others were an Asian-Pacific Islander woman and an African American woman. Fourteen identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual; the remaining 4 identified as heterosexual. We opted to include heterosexuals in our pool of informants for two primary reasons. Before the election, but especially in its aftermath, some heterosexuals played very prominent roles in the political events surrounding Amendment 2. Indeed, many of our early informants observed that collaborative work between LGBT people and heterosexual allies increased dramatically around Amendment 2 relative to any prior time. More broadly, we approach qualitative research within a framework that values a multiplicity of viewpoints and that explicitly acknowledges the benefit that ensues from considering the perspectives of informants who speak from a variety of standpoints (e.g., Oleson, 2005). The interviewees represented different backgrounds and occupations; they included activists, psychologists, administrators, teachers, attorneys, and retirees. Their ages spanned more than four decades, from the early 20s to the mid-60s. The youngest participants barely had any memory of Amendment 2, but they were selected for interviews after other participants stressed the emerging role of LGB youth in the community in the wake of Amendment 2. Some informants had been involved in the Amendment 2 campaign; the rest had become involved in LGBT activities after the election. All but one participant had been in Colorado in 1992 when Amendment 2 passed. (The participant who did not live in Colorado in 1992 had an occupational role within the LGBT community at the time of her interview that afforded her a uniquely broad perspective on the LGBT community.)

## Results

From the comments of interview participants, we were able to discern several themes or perspectives that provide a range of insights into the lasting impact of Amendment 2. The themes were woven across respondents' answers to the three questions we posed: What effects did Amendment 2 have for the interviewee personally, for the LGBT community, and for the community in general. Table 1 identifies these themes, organizing them by levels at which respondents suggested that the change occurred.

### *Effects at the Individual Level*

Participants reported a range of ways in which Amendment 2 affected their personal lives, some of which were decidedly positive and others were more problematic.

*Some individuals were hurt in lasting ways.* Because a decade had passed since Amendment 2, we did not expect lingering negative sequelae of the election. This expectation was consistent with research suggesting that such sequelae are not long lasting (Rostosky et al., 2009). However, we found that at least some LGBT people in Colorado still experienced negative consequences from the election fully a decade later. Several respondents identified specific trauma-related symptoms in either themselves or others, symptoms in both avoidance and reexperiencing categories. The enduring sense of disempowerment expressed by some respondents is reminiscent of Root's (1992) discussion of the disempowerment created by insidious trauma. These reactions are particularly noteworthy given that Amendment 2 was overturned, so one might argue that the outcome was a victory. Clearly, political victories do not always compensate for feelings of personal victimization. Variables other than the electoral loss contributed to these participants' negative experiences with regard to Amendment 2.

Some participants who had been very active in the campaign against Amendment 2 had found themselves targets of criticism and hostility from within LGBT community, especially immediately after the amendment passed. The phenomenon of criticism of community leaders by other members of the LGB community was reported in the earliest research on Amendment 2 (Russell, 2000) and has shown up in subsequent elections elsewhere (Rostosky et al., in press). These painful experiences left these informants personally saddened and injured; they were "shocked" and felt betrayed by the community they had worked hard to help, and for some the pain remained over a decade later. One woman who had been very active in the campaign withdrew from active political work; another returned to political activism but avoided working on LGBT issues. One participant described what seemed like an "activist exodus" as those who had worked on the campaign left LGB politics—and sometimes, the state.

*Some individuals felt empowered.* Although Amendment 2 left some people damaged in its wake, the same election empowered many LGBT people and allies toward greater

visibility and activism. In fact, although some people retreated into (or farther into) the closet in response to the election, a greater number of people seemed to come out or become more active (Russell, 2000). One participant opined, “if everyone who came out after Amendment 2 passed had just come out before the election, it never would have passed!” According to some respondents, Amendment 2 provided a clearer view of what was at stake, of what could so easily be lost, and of the costs of remaining silent. In the words of a lesbian participant who remained closeted during the campaign but came out in very public ways after the amendment passed, the postelection period was “a second chance to do what was right.” The 1996 U.S. Supreme Court decision overturning the Amendment was seen by some as validating their decision, encouraging them to be out and to work actively for LGBT rights. Many of those who took the lead in subsequent structural changes discussed below first became active in support of LGBT rights as a direct result of Amendment 2. “Amendment 2 had everything to do with coming out,” said one informant, and it gave her the opportunity to engage in activism that “was and is enormously rewarding work.”

### *Changes at the LGBT Community Level*

Perspectives on lasting changes at the level of the LGBT community were quite varied. Some of this variation depended in part on one’s position within the community; some depended on how participants defined “community.” Alternate views included the following.

*There is no lasting, visible change.* An initial comment from several interviewees was that there was no lasting change; LGBT activism and community had virtually disappeared once the Amendment was ruled unconstitutional. One individual who was very involved in the campaign opined that there was no community 10 years later because the need to be together “in the streets” had disappeared. The movement, this participant suggested, became “splintered, parceled out into other activities.” The amendment had served to galvanize the community, but when it was overturned by the Supreme Court, this position asserted, the activist community dissolved. There was no need for collective activism and, hence, no identifiable community.

*Activism and LGBT community are still present, but they are dormant.* An alternative understanding of the comparative political quiescence of a decade after Amendment 2 suggested that there had been major changes; they were simply dormant and hence not readily observable. Amendment 2 was responsible for the creation of numerous organizations, institutional structures, and networks, which—though they may not be readily apparent a decade later—could be “mobilized instantly,” in the words of one person, should the need arise. Many of these groups are largely social or educational in their aims, but they represent an infrastructure that could be called on

for political activism. An important element of this infrastructure, these respondents indicated, is that LGBT people are in connection with one another, and those connections can be activated as necessary. Some noted that this quiescence had a positive side: the sense of security that made “street activism” less necessary. “In a sense,” said one participant, “this is exactly what we were fighting for.”

*Activism still exists, but it is outside the vision of traditional LGBT activism.* This perspective suggests a redefinition of activism. Although it may be true that there is less street activism and less organizing directed at specific issues of LGBT rights, the change engendered by such activism has become, in the words of one informant, part of “the fabric of daily life.” It is not that the LGBT community has vanished; rather, it has become so integrated as to be unremarkable.

For many LGBT people, this has meant a lessening of the separation between the LGBT community and the broader society. Because homophobia and heterosexism are less virulent, LGBT identity does not matter as much and there is less need for a distinctive subculture. “The comfort level has changed,” one informant said, “there’s more of a blending, we’re more assimilated, more integrated.” Some suggested that LGBT-specific events are less important because it has become easier to transform other events into occasions for connecting with members of the LGBT community, and doing so in a relatively public way.

Many respondents suggested that Amendment 2 changed the social landscape for heterosexual allies, as well. The number of visible allies grew noticeably in the wake of Amendment 2. One heterosexual ally, the attorney who argued the case against Amendment 2 before the Supreme Court, noted this change: “Before 1992, you could count the visible allies on one hand. After 1992, allies were everywhere.” Interviewees who acted as heterosexual allies in opposing Amendment 2 indicated that the election provided an opportunity to distance themselves from the overt homophobia that the amendment bespoke, and the identity of “ally” gave them a place to stand in solidarity with an LGBT community under attack. As one participant put it, speaking in the collective voice of the many allies with whom she worked in her role at the university, “I’m not part of those [anti-LGB] folks. Of course we want to do this. Of course we want to make it possible for lesbian and gay couples to live in family housing.” Some allies we interviewed saw the Supreme Court decision as confirming and validating their decision to take a stand, and some found new opportunities to give voice to their support for LGBT people and their rights. Many allies played a part in the structural changes discussed below, and many allies retained close friendships with LGBT people they met during the campaign.

For straight people who were not active allies, changes wrought by Amendment 2 meant a shift in social norms. It was “no longer considered acceptable to be overtly homophobic,”

in the words of one activist, and public discourse changed. The intense focus on LGBT issues was replaced by a more “don’t ask, don’t tell” approach, characterized by subtle but noticeable differences in how LGBT people and their issues were addressed. One interviewee who has a long history of activism and who ran an independent bookstore noticed changes in the ease with which the mail carrier, the UPS driver, greeting card salespeople, service people, and drop-in customers related to her as the owner of a bookstore that has a visible LGBT focus and clientele.

More broadly, some participants, both LGBT and allies, described a world that is simply less frightening. One ally noted the greater visibility of same-sex couples who were obviously couples, and contrasted this with pre-Amendment 2 days when couples would rarely express any emotional connection in public as if same-sex relationships were “horrible, mysterious, and never happen except in weird situations.” Institutional changes became less fraught, too. For instance, the local chapter of Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), formed shortly after Amendment 2 passed, initially kept their meeting location secret, accessible only by phoning a PFLAG representative to learn the unpublished location. Ten years later, PFLAG advertised its meetings widely and had become very active in a broad range of community events.

*Activism is still happening, especially among youth.* The suggestion that youth carry much of the activist energy around LGBT issues came largely from adults who worked directly with youth. These respondents reported that “amazing” things are happening among youth, although they believed that many adults are unaware of these activities. Many LGBT youth are remarkably at ease with their identities. They appear to be moving beyond the old narratives of LGBT identity as suffering and lonely and creating more empowered and empowering scripts. According to those working with youth, young LGBT people tend to be much more visibly out and feel far more entitled to that visibility than earlier generations of LGBT people. Many youth are “way advanced,” according to those who work with them. They have been involved in LGBT activism for some time; they *expect* empowerment and can become impatient with adults who do not assume it is their right. Clearly, some of these changes among youth are a result of the remarkable transformations in the lives and possibilities of LGBT people that have emerged in recent years. However, in the view of some of our respondents, the lasting impact of local politics also plays a role. One youth worker who is closely involved with these teens told us that the greater local awareness and cultural changes caused by Amendment 2 have “affected kids who were not even alert at the time of Amendment 2.” These observations were echoed, though typically without an explicit historical perspective, by the youngest participants in the study.

### *Changes at the Broad Community Level*

From the vantage point of study participants, Amendment 2 also had a variety of effects on the broader community and its institutions. Among the perspectives on such changes were the following.

*Activism for LGBT rights has been folded into extant institutions.* The decline in overt activism noted by some participants may reflect, in part, systemic changes triggered by Amendment 2 that diminish the necessity for grassroots organizing. Many interviewees remarked on the enduring structural changes stimulated by Amendment 2, changes that have altered long-standing institutional systems. Significantly, these changes have become ingrained elements of institutional structures and therefore no longer rely on LGBT activism. For example, in response to the atmosphere of the Amendment 2 campaign, the University of Colorado at Boulder appointed a task force to address the climate for LGBT people on campus. This task force issued a set of 10 recommendations to the university administration, including a permanent standing committee to advise the administration on LGBT issues, a nondiscrimination policy, equal access to family housing for same-sex couples, domestic partner benefits for students and employees, and other changes. Just more than 10 years later, all 10 recommendations had been enacted. In the words of one member of the standing committee, “Amendment 2 inspired us more than anything could have to work, to sacrifice in some cases, and to get these recommendations fulfilled.” And it was not just the committee members but also the university that stepped up. As the informant who served on the committee argued, “Without Amendment 2, we would not have had the commitment, much less the success on those 10 recommendations.”

Some participants suggested that similar phenomena occurred in the city of Boulder and in local community systems. Immediately after Amendment 2, Boulder developed a city-sponsored and city-funded antihomophobia training program, in part because of the vitriolic rhetoric that characterized the campaign around Amendment 2. This program, which sent LGBT and heterosexual antihomophobia trainers to local businesses, churches, and organizations, continued for many years and was described by one informant as “a huge source of support” for its members as well as for the LGBT community. The city of Boulder also established a domestic partner registry and expanded its antidiscrimination policy (which already included sexual orientation) to include transgender people.

At the community level, in response to Amendment 2, the local Community Foundation, which offered funding for efforts at community improvement, instituted a program to provide funding for programs explicitly serving LGBT people. At least one local church began a multiyear process of becoming an open and affirming congregation (i.e., one that

actively supports and advocates for LGBT people within the congregation); this church now serves as a premier venue for LGBT-related community events. According to one participant who had connections to the local library, following Amendment 2, the public library increased its holdings on LGB issues, initiated a bibliography of LGB holdings, and began to sponsor a wide range of LGB-related educational and cultural events—all moves inspired by Amendment 2.

*Amendment 2 fostered the development of new institutional structures.* Institutional changes were not limited to those that were folded into existing institutions; many respondents commented that entirely new institutions also emerged in response to Amendment 2. For example, local citizen groups in Boulder established the Boulder Valley Safe Schools Coalition, which has developed materials related to LGBT issues for use at the elementary, middle school, and high school levels. The Coalition provides trainings for teachers and administrators in the school district, serves in a consulting role regarding LGBT issues in the schools, and has been represented on hiring committees for positions such as a new superintendent and an administrator in charge of diversity issues.

At the community and state levels, a variety of new institutions were created, and respondents attributed many of these to the impact of Amendment 2. A Boulder chapter of PFLAG was formed shortly after Amendment 2; the chapter remains one of the primary sources of education and advocacy regarding LGBT issues in the community. A local activist founded an independent LGBT/feminist bookstore, Word Is Out, to “create a larger sense of community” and to meet the need for an institution that provided a range of books and resources and a gathering place for Boulder’s LGBT and feminist communities. Founders of both the local PFLAG chapter and the bookstore drew direct and causal links between Amendment 2 and their decisions to establish these community resources. And it was not just Boulder: a gay man who was very involved in PFLAG and other organizing efforts described how PFLAG chapters “sprouted up” around the state after Amendment 2, growing in number from five or six chapters before 1992 to 13 in the year following Amendment 2.

Even at the national level, Amendment 2 has had a lasting institutional impact. The Boulder attorney who argued against Amendment 2 before the Supreme Court, a heterosexual ally and a long-time activist in many domains, reported that the framing of the 1996 U.S. Supreme Court decision overturning Amendment 2 has had a profound and lasting impact on legal discourse. Subsequent legal writings portray LGBT people very differently, with “a lot more respect” than had characterized legal discourse since the anti-LGBT *Bowers* ruling of 11 years earlier. The ruling overturning Amendment 2, she said, sent “such a dramatic signal that it has been felt throughout the country.”

*Amendment 2 increased the involvement of allies in LGBT activism.* Several respondents pointed out that broad community

and institutional changes such as these reflect activism not only by LGBT people but also by heterosexual allies. Indeed, certain individuals were identified as “gatekeepers,” heterosexual allies in influential positions within governmental or institutional structures who stepped up to advocate for LGBT-positive institutional changes. With the help of allies, one activist reported, “changes can be institutionalized without much of a fight.” The result, as she pointed out, is often that “it’s so smooth, it looks like not much is happening.”

Clearly, allies have been instrumental at all levels in creating and maintaining these institutional structures; indeed, in terms of sheer numbers, it is apparent that many allies must be actively engaged for such changes to occur. For many of these allies, the desire to work toward changing institutional structures was an explicit response to Amendment 2.

*Despite major changes, subtle forms of institutionalized homophobia remain.* The sensitivity to homophobia and heterosexism forged by Amendment 2 has made some interviewees keenly aware of lingering, more subtle forms of anti-LGBT bias. For example, one ally reported that she continues to see homophobia in her community work but that it now takes less explicit forms. She no longer sees overt discriminatory policies; instead, what has been termed “modern homophobia” is more the rule—more subtle, more difficult to identify and define, more difficult to oppose. The “don’t ask, don’t tell” quality noted above as a positive change can also be seen in this light as a more ominous signal that fundamental changes have not occurred in people’s attitudes—or at least not as broadly and deeply as might be hoped.

## Discussion

This study focused on examining the varied perspectives of a purposive sample of 18 LGB and heterosexual observers of the full cycle of Colorado’s anti-LGB Amendment 2, including the campaign, election, judicial challenge, and eventual U.S. Supreme Court decision against the amendment. Interviews with these respondents yielded multiple perspectives on how the experience had affected individuals, the LGBT community, and the broader community in the decade following the passage of Amendment 2. Some of these perspectives overlapped, and some were conflicting. In all but a few cases, respondents subscribed to more than one of the perspectives described.

Which perspective on the lingering impact of Amendment 2, we might ask, is accurate? The simple answer: all of them are. These differing perspectives represent not simply individual standpoints but alternative realistic appraisals of what happened in the wake of Amendment 2. Viewed collectively, the perspectives of these informants suggest the varieties of ways that individuals understand and make meaning of events that touch them deeply in negative ways (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). These perspectives also suggest the variability in what

resources individuals bring to bear in managing their responses to very troubling events. Many of our respondents straddled several of these perspectives and have had correspondingly broad options for how they have managed the crisis and its aftermath. Others were more limited in their perspectives, with a correspondingly narrower range of options. Some have thrived in being guided by their views of these changes; others have struggled to maintain or regain equilibrium in the face of them. All the responses reflect the critical need to consider the interplay between personal and community factors in understanding and working with the aftermath of a crisis whose very roots have to do with matters of identity (Brown, 2008; Russell & Bohan, 2007).

At the level of the individual, it is particularly significant to note how distinctly the data from this study echoed the stressor and resilience factors generated by the study of LGB people in Colorado conducted just after Amendment 2 was declared unconstitutional in 1996 (Russell & Richards, 2003). These two sets of findings provide dual vectors that come together in identifying key responses to anti-LGBT politics. For instance, one resilience factor reported by Russell and Richards emphasized the importance of being active in promoting change, which corresponds neatly with these interviewees' spontaneous discussions of the empowerment that derived from working toward institutional changes in the wake of Amendment 2. In a parallel manner, the stress of divisions within the community (one of the stressor factors reported in the earlier study) was reflected in interviewees' reports of the struggles experienced by some activists who bore the brunt of community distress at the passage of Amendment 2.

Individuals who were very active (a resilience factor) and who also felt damaged by the electoral process (a stressor factor) embody both the positive and the negative potentials of anti-LGB politics. The potential for such complicated outcomes and their implications for mental health professionals are worthy of further exploration. Mental health professionals should be aware that clients who work against anti-LGBT politics are adopting, in their activism, an active coping strategy, standing up for themselves and others, which might result in feelings of empowerment. At the same time, they are operating from a position that might make them the targets of attacks from within and outside the LGBT community.

In the particular case of Amendment 2, it may be that the activists we interviewed were especially vulnerable to attacks from within the LGBT community because this election gave Colorado the dubious distinction of being the first state to pass an anti-LGB constitutional amendment by popular vote. In the absence of a clear political analysis and in the face of preelection polls suggesting that Amendment 2 would be defeated, many LGBT Coloradans were stunned by the outcome and transformed their shock and dismay into assigning blame to activists for "losing the election" (Russell, 2000). Since 1992, many states have passed anti-LGB amendments, and the defeats are no longer so shocking. One might hope

that LGBT people would now not be so quick to blame campaign workers for such losses; however, recent research by Rostosky et al. (in press) suggests otherwise. In any case, mental health professionals should be attentive to activists' need to find a balance between the positive effects of being active and the negative effects of heightened exposure to anti-LGBT campaign messages, both from official campaign sources and from less formal sources (Levitt et al., 2009), and to hostility from some members of their own community.

Colorado served as a test case for political actions of this sort, and its "clones" and variations proliferated in its wake, to be followed by the same-sex marriage debate. The fact that Colorado's Amendment 2 was overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court did not serve to protect either Coloradans or other LGB people around the country from subsequent anti-LGBT political attacks. Studies of the impact of such elections, the majority of which were conducted soon after the associated elections and with no hope of their reversal, have consistently shown psychological consequences similar to those noted here. Furthermore, the negative and positive consequences suggested by respondents in this study mirror those found in earlier research on the psychological impact of Amendment 2 that was carried out prior to the Supreme Court ruling (Russell, 2000). However, it remains an open question how Colorado's LGBT and ally community might have responded in this follow-up study had Amendment 2 not been overturned; and conversely, how other LGBT/ally communities might respond over the longer run when such actions remain in force, as will be the case for the foreseeable future with constitutional amendments forbidding same-sex marriage. This is a fruitful area for future research, and findings such as those presented here may serve a useful purpose in guiding such research.

### *Public Policy Implications*

Taken as a whole, research on the psychological consequences of anti-LGBT politics underscores the negative impact of elections in which the rights of a group of people are the focus of public debate and vote. Clearly, the optimal public policy action would be to eliminate such votes in the first place. That move is not likely to occur in the near future, however.

Nonetheless, steps could be taken in the public realm to help delimit the negative impact of anti-LGBT elections when they do occur. The first approach involves inoculating LGB people and their communities against the effects of such campaigns and elections by labeling the nature and source of the threat (Root, 1992) and demystifying the often-painful emotional responses to such events, as well as suggesting specific steps that LGBT people can take to reduce the likelihood of negative impact. These steps also include priming LGBT people to be aware of the potential for very positive outcomes of these elections (even when they are electoral losses) represented by the findings in the current study, as well as resilience factors suggested by earlier research (Levitt



et al., 2008; Rostosky et al., 2009; Russell, 2000; Russell & Richards, 2003). Interventions of particular promise include LGBT community gatherings, efforts to highlight allies and make them visible to LGBT communities, workshops for dealing with homophobia, education in media literacy to foster resistance to campaign rhetoric, and providing activities that are associated with active coping. Public education components of these undertakings could take advantage of online social networking resources as well as in-person gatherings. Such efforts could be undertaken under the auspices of state mental health associations, professional organizations, educational institutions, and community groups.

### Implications for Mental Health Providers

The data from the current study also carry implications for what mental health professionals can do within the context of individual or group therapy with LGBT clients and/or their friends and family who are affected by anti-LGB politics. A now-substantial body of research demonstrates that anti-LGBT political actions carry significant potential for positive growth as well as significant social and psychological challenges for LGBT people. These observations underscore the importance of mental health professionals' addressing the negative consequences of such events while simultaneously priming LGBT clients to make use of the positive potential that these events also bear.

Mental health professionals are well advised to help clients to identify the nature of sexual prejudice and its impact on their lives, to adopt positive coping strategies in the face of those influences, to cultivate an awareness of the presence of supportive heterosexual allies, to work with the grief associated with having family members and others vote against their interests, to adopt an explicit political analysis that recognizes anti-LGBT politics as one event in an ongoing movement for equal rights, to confront the potential for internalizing negative messages proffered by homophobic campaigns, and to make use of the safety, resources, and validation to be found within the LGBT community. Mental health professionals would do well to incorporate these considerations in their work with individuals and with groups. It is also important that they recognize the healing contexts and activities that exist in the community, as well as those that are found in individual and group therapy (Russell & Bohan, 2007).

Certain limitations to these data should be mentioned. The sample for the interview data, while chosen to represent key informants rather than to be a random sample, comprises mostly White people. It was purposely drawn from Boulder and, to a lesser degree, from Denver in an effort to elicit in-depth data about a circumscribed geographical area that was of key importance in the Amendment 2 election. As with most interview studies, these findings should not be taken to be generalizable to other groups or locations. It is quite possible that this wide range of perspectives about the long-term impact of

anti-LGBT elections might not exist in places that are characterized by either more homogeneous or more conservative culture and politics. These findings may best be understood, like the theoretical frameworks mentioned in the Introduction, as sensitizing devices (Gergen, 1973)—that is, as indicators of the range of sequelae that might emerge over time in locations where anti-LGB elections occur. The merit of these results lies in the fact that a qualitative exploration of the variety of perspectives expressed by interviewees provides a level of nuance not possible through quantitative analyses alone.

### Note

1. In general, these elections have emphasized the rights of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) people; this was the case in Amendment 2, which is the focus of this study. Although transgender people have certainly been stigmatized and made targets of discrimination, they have only very recently become the specified targets of political discrimination in the electoral realm (Marimow, 2008). Thus, except for those transgender people who also identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, transgender people have not been included in the present or earlier studies focusing on the psychological consequences of anti-LGB campaigns and elections. Hence, in most of this article, we use the acronym *LGB* as a collective term for this group. However, in the qualitative data reported here, respondents routinely referred to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community. Therefore, in that section we use the inclusive acronym, *LGBT*. We also use the latter, more inclusive acronym in reference to contemporary communities and in discussing the implications of this research, as it is more appropriate to current events.

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