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Coming Out, Coming Together, Coming Around: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Families' Experiences Adjusting to a Young Family Member's Disclosure of Non-Heterosexuality

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Coming Out, Coming Together, Coming Around: An Interpretative Phenomenological

Analysis of Families' Experiences Adjusting to a Young Family Member's Disclosure of

Non-Heterosexuality

by

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A Dissertation Presented to the
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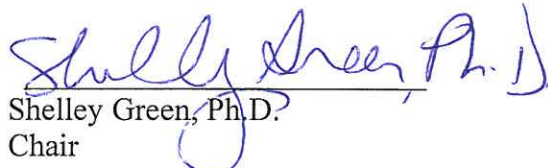
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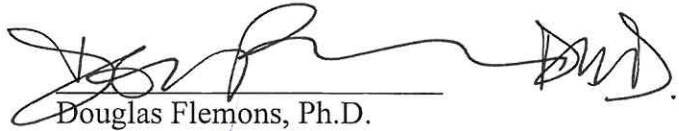
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This dissertation was submitted by Denise Fournier Rodriguez under the direction of the

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Thank you, Dr. Douglas Flemons, for the many insights you have shared with me throughout my journey in this program. The conversations we had during our supervision sessions will rema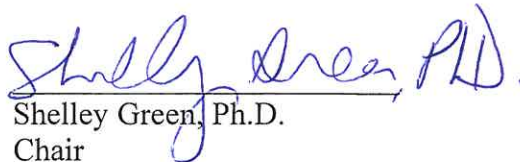in with me forever; I treasure your indelible imprint on my work as a clinician. Dr. Martha Marquez, thank you for inspiring me with your presence, your brilliance, and your consummate professionalism. I have loved getting to interact with you in the many capacities in which we have done so over the past several years, and I thank you for everything you have contributed to my work and life.

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Abstract

Young people who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) are disclosing their sexual identity—or *coming out*—at progressively younger ages, making it more important than ever for the general population to understand, tolerate, and accept diversity in sexual identity. This study was designed to fill the gap in the existing literature about how the coming out process affects LGB young people's families of origin. Three LGB young people participated in the study, along with a member of each of their families. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with each of the participants, as well as a conjoint interview with each of the three families.

The findings of this interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) study illustrate the many ways in which a young person's coming out reverberates within the family system, offering a relational understanding of the coming out experience. The results of the study emphasize the process-oriented nature of coming out and the means by which that process is influenced by and influences family relationships and overall family dynamics. Centered on the various ways in which LGB young people prepare to disclose their sexual orientation to their families and how their family members adjust to the disclosure, the study offers a historically and culturally situated overview of the coming out experience in the family. Based on the results of the present study, the researcher offers suggestions for future studies on this subject and presents the implications of the study for LGB young people, their families, and family therapists working with this population.

Keywords: coming out, family adjustment process, LGB young people, queer identity, interpretative phenomenological analysis

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

A Shifting Cultural Context

Within the last several decades, the cultural climate of our nation has shifted, shedding light on the issues faced by the millions of Americans who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB). Since the Stonewall Riots of 1969, which set in motion the gay liberation movement in the United States (Jagose, 1996), many efforts have been made to raise awareness about what it means to be a sexual minority in this country. The cultural values and morals within our society seem to be transforming, and national conversations about sexual orientation and sexual diversity are increasingly more common. In particular, the gay equality movement—which has taken the form of legislative initiatives like the repeal of Don't Ask Don't Tell (Human Rights Campaign, 2011) and the passage of marriage equality in 32 states, plus Washington DC, at the time of this writing—has captured our nation's attention, encouraging millions of people to engage in spirited dialogue and debate in many forums.

The increased visibility of LGB individuals and the evolution of discourse about sexual orientation have led to greater acceptance of non-heterosexuality; they have also spurred a fervent "backlash in the form of religious fundamentalism, violence, and legal intervention designed to 'protect' traditional marriages and families" (Stone Fish & Harvey, 2005, p. 1). For the millions of LGB adults in this country who have spent years fighting for acceptance and equality, even the most vicious attacks do little to dampen their determination. However, there is a new generation of LGB young people coming of age in this contentious climate. For them, the process of identifying as non-heterosexual is a high stakes gamble that immeasurably influences how they make sense of who they

are and how they fit within their families, their peer groups, their communities, and their society.

Young people who identify as LGB are disclosing their sexual identity at younger ages than ever before (Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003; Stone Fish & Harvey, 2005). The visibility of non-heterosexual role models, the accessibility of helpful information and resources, and the ability to be part of supportive communities all contribute to the process of identity development for LGB young people—a process that occurs at both an individual and relational level. Identifying as LGB and disclosing this identity, or, *coming out,* is typically preceded by a great deal of introspection and anticipation. It is a process that takes place over time, and one that is unique to each individual. For young people who identify as LGB, decisions about when, how, and to whom to come out are often difficult (Legate, Ryan, & Weinstein, 2012). Perhaps most difficult is the choice these young people face about whether and how to disclose their sexual identity to members of their families (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008).

Coming Out at Home

Before making the decision to come out at home, LGB young people must balance the desire to be recognized and understood with the need to remain safe, secure, and protected. They must take into account their family environment and assess whether sharing an essential aspect of who they are with family members is worth the risk of being misunderstood, ignored, or rejected. As Stone Fish and Harvey (2005) articulate, "Coming out to relatives does introduce sexual behavior as a topic, but mostly it demands the negotiation or renegotiation of family connections" (p. 66). Although the process of coming out within the home environment is different for every LGB young person, it is a

universally significant step in the developmental process for both the youth and their families.

Parents, siblings, and other relatives of young people who come out as LGB are, in many cases, profoundly impacted by the disclosure. Finding out about a family member's non-heterosexual orientation means having to accept a new family identity—one that has significant implications for how the family operates within the larger social and cultural systems in which it is embedded. A number of factors contribute to the process by which families integrate, or fail to integrate, the disclosure of non-heterosexual identity by one of its members.

When young people come out as LGB within their families, they often assume a minority status within the home environment. In the absence of previous exposure to sexual minorities, family members may struggle to make sense of the disclosure and will likely rely on cultural assumptions to process it. Because our culture is largely characterized by heterosexism, "a belief upheld by most societal institutions that only heterosexual relationships are normal or natural" (Elisason & Hughes, 2004, p. 638), families may be inclined to assume their newly identified LGB member is abnormal or unacceptable in some way. Families that are embedded in contexts marked by homophobia, a feeling of "discomfort, disgust, and/or anxiety produced by social contact with a person believed to be gay or lesbian" (Holtzen & Agresti, 1990, p. 391), may face even greater challenges following the disclosure. When families are able to assimilate their member's LGB sexuality into the family's identity, they can become a buffer against the potentially damaging impact of heterosexism and homophobia (D'Amico & Julien).

For LGB young people, the meaning of family and home are crucial. When they are acknowledged and respected at home, they are free to be who they are and thrive in an environment that supports the totality of their young existence. When they are ignored or rejected, the fear and shame they may already feel as a result of being different is compounded in a devastating way. LGB young people who experience rejection from their families frequently internalize feelings of shame and self-hatred. This internalized shame—or, as it is often referred to, *internalized homophobia*—can have a profoundly negative impact on the LGB individual's life, potentially resulting in depression, violence, self-harm, substance abuse, homelessness, risky sexual behavior, or suicide (Just the Facts Coalition, 2008; Ray, 2006). For some LGB young people who disclose their identity to their families, home becomes a haven; for others, it can become a hell.

From Acceptance-Rejection to Adjustment

The existing literature on LGB young people and the experience of coming out within their families is largely centered on a dichotomous acceptance-rejection paradigm. A number of studies have been conducted to examine the consequences that rejection from family members has on LGB individuals throughout their lives (Hunter, 1990; Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998). Other studies have focused on the variables that result in either rejection or full acceptance from family members following the disclosure (D'Amico & Julien, 2012; Gorman-Murray, 2008; Green, 2000). Furthermore, as Heatherington and Lavner (2008) point out, "The vast majority of studies focus on initial family reactions to disclosure, and few address the processes and outcomes of longer term family adjustment" (p. 329). Although previous studies are useful and can certainly help family therapists work with families of LGB young people, a more nuanced and

inclusive understanding of the adjustment process for families following the coming out of one of its members is needed.

Viewed systemically, families are, at once, both cohesive units and the amalgamation of multiple, distinct parts. Accordingly, the way in which information is received within a family system depends not only on the general context of that family—which is comprised of cultural, religious/spiritual, geographic, historical, economic, and other factors—but also on the varied individual responses of the members of the family to that information. When an LGB young person comes out within his or her family, the effect of the disclosure has a systemic impact, affecting each individual in the family, the many relationships within that family, and the family unit as a whole (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008). As Stone Fish and Harvey (2005) articulate, "because family members are dependent upon one another, any change in family membership or change in one member affects the others in the system, causing relationships to 'heat up'" (p. 16).

Often, when a young person comes out to his or her family as non-heterosexual, the status quo is disrupted. In many ways, the home becomes a political environment, and family members are challenged with assimilating the LGB identity of their loved one into their own sense of self. How family members initially respond to the disclosure—with compassion, confusion, guilt, indifference, disgust, relief, outrage or any other range of emotions —is influenced by their ideas about sexuality, gender, love, and family. Their reactions are also largely informed by their cultural assumptions, religious beliefs, family traditions, and relationship history (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008).

Parents, in particular, may go through a period of mourning following the disclosure (Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998). Many "have internalized our culture's

associations of homosexuality with illness and sin, and they have to grieve the loss of a future most parents project for their offspring: heterosexual marriage [and] perhaps children of their own" (Tillman-Healy, 2001, p. 188). Some families may respond to the disclosure with grief or confusion, some with shame, and others with pride. Families' responses to their loved ones' coming out are as unique as the families themselves. This study aims to tell their stories.

Some researchers have talked about the adjustment by families to the disclosure that one of their members is LGB as the *queering* of the family (Gorman-Murray, 2008; Stone Fish & Harvey, 2005). Because this study is informed, in part, by queer theory (Jagose, 1996) and, in general, by a family systems perspective, this concept will help guide the study. Queer theory is the acknowledgement and exploration of the powerful potential in the marginalized and disallowed aspects of all people (Jagose, 1996; Stone Fish & Harvey, 2005). The word *queer*, once used to denigrate sexual minorities, has been reclaimed as a term used to refer affirmatively to non-heterosexual individuals. Accordingly, the term *queer young people* will be appear throughout the study and will be used interchangeably with the terms *LGB young people*, *sexual minority youth*, and *non-heterosexual youth*. The term *queer family* will be used to refer to families undergoing the adjustment process following the coming out of one of its members.

It should be noted that in families in which the LGB young person is rejected, the queer family identity is likely never assumed. Therefore, this study focuses exclusively on those families that choose to brave the challenge of adjusting to their new identity as a queer family. While family rejection is not expressly explored in the proposed study, the study's exploration is also not exclusive to families that readily and unconditionally

accept their LGB member immediately following the disclosure. Rather, the study explores the family adjustment process and the many factors that contribute to its evolution over time.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the ways in which families are impacted when one of their family members comes out as non-heterosexual. Using the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach as my methodological framework, I examined how LGB young people and their family members make sense of their coming out experiences (Smith, Flowers, Larkin, 2009). Although the term *non-heterosexual* tends to be used to refer to individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT), I chose to limit the focus of this study to LGB individuals. This is because the process of identifying as transgender and disclosing this identity within one's family is distinct and, in many ways, dissimilar to the process of identifying and disclosing a lesbian, gay, or bisexual orientation (Ashton, 2013; Bockting & Coleman, 2007; Zimman, 2009).

Research suggests that the primary concerns for transgender young people have to do with their gender identity, not their sexual attraction or orientation (Benson, 2013; Bockting & Coleman, 2007; Zimman, 2009). This influences the coming out experience for transgender individuals, as it involves unique conversations and results in different responses from loved ones. As Ahston (2013) points out, "while transgender individuals are often linked with the LGB community, many identify as heterosexual, and need resources and policies that support their gender journey" (p. 36). Further emphasizing this point, Zimman (2009) explored the coming out experiences of transgender individuals

and found "no evidence for patterns like those found by previous researchers who have examined the coming out experiences of lesbians [and] gay men" (p. 57).

It has also been found that while coming out as gay, lesbian, or bisexual is a single process that takes place over time (Savage & Miller, 2011), the coming out experience for transgender individuals occurs in discrete episodes relative to whether and how the individual declares a transgender identity and transitions to the preferred gender (Zimman, 2009). There continues to be a need for more research on the coming out experiences of transgender individuals; however, based on the literature reflecting the uniqueness of the coming out experience for transgender individuals, I have chosen not to include those voices in this study.

Because the coming out process is fraught with vulnerability and, at times, emotional intensity for the individuals involved, I chose not to conduct the study with young people under the age of 18. Instead, I recruited participants between the ages of 18 and 24, along with any individuals from their families who were willing to share their experiences of adjusting to their family members' disclosure of LGB identity. Furthermore, I chose to specifically include young people who disclosed their LGB identity to members of their nuclear family, and who had been out for at least one year at the time of our interviews. My intention in specifying these inclusion criteria was to conduct the interviews with families that remember the initial disclosure vividly but have had time to process the information and can both reflect on their initial responses and describe their current perspectives and relationships.

This study was guided by the following research question:

How do LGB young people and their families adjust following the young person's

disclosure of non-heterosexual identity?

To answer this grand tour question, I also explored the following sub-questions:

- What are the factors that contribute to how, when, and to whom the LGB young person discloses his or her identity within the family?

- What are the influences that affect how the family processes the disclosure?

- How are the various relationships within the family impacted by the disclosure?

- How has the family adjustment process evolved over time?

- What individuals, information, or resources have aided in the family's adjustment process?

- What additional resources would contribute to the advancement of the family adjustment process?

The findings from this study are expected to support family therapists working with LGB young people and their families. By capturing the voices of these families, I have illustrated both the unique and general aspects of the coming out process for the LGB young people and the family members to whom they disclose their sexual identity. The unique perspectives of the participants in this study have important implications for future research and clinical practice, offering valuable information about what it means to be a queer family in our current social, cultural, political context.

Position of the Researcher

As a family therapist and the relative and close friend of a number of LGB individuals, I feel compelled to explore the unique, diverse experiences of the families of LGB young people. Though previous studies have shed some light on the adjustment

process for these families, very few have shared the voices of both the youth and their families, and none have been conducted in our current sociopolitical context, in which what it means to be an LGB individual—or the relative of an LGB individual—is quite different from what it meant even 15 years ago. With our relational focus and our ability to respectfully attend to multiple realities, we family therapists are perfectly positioned to respond to the evolving needs of LGB young people and their families. To do so effectively, we must understand both the general and unique aspects of the coming out process within the family sphere.

As a heterosexual female, I felt it important to maintain an awareness of my privileged position and stay cognizant of how my perceptions about my research participants were filtered through my own experience as part of the dominant culture. It was also essential for me to examine my assumptions—based not only on my heterosexual identity, but also on my personal experiences with having friends and family members disclose their non-heterosexual identity to me—and separate them from the new information I obtained from my participants. By engaging in this reflexive and reflective process, I was able to produce a distinctive piece of research that reflects the unique lived experiences of the participants in this study.

It is important to note that as the researcher in this study, I do not promote full acceptance as the optimal response from families following the coming out of one of their members. Having the personal experience of processing a disclosure of non-heterosexual identity in my own nuclear family, I know firsthand that the expectation of full acceptance among all family members is, at least initially, unreasonable. Although family members frequently share values and beliefs, they each hold distinct views, biases,

assumptions, and understandings that influence how they make sense of the disclosure. Some family members may move quickly to full acceptance of their LGB loved one, and others may never arrive there. This can mean that while the family, as a whole, remains engaged in the adjustment process—perhaps getting more comfortable over time—full acceptance may never take place. Therefore, I sought to explore the nuanced experiences of the families who participated in this study without holding the expectation that all families should endeavor to achieve full acceptance of their loved one's non-heterosexuality.

Through my personal experience, I have come to understand that family members often respond to their loved one's disclosure of non-heterosexuality in largely unpredictable ways. Many of my long-held assumptions about my family were challenged during our process of adjustment, and I continue to be surprised and amazed at how uniquely each person in my family has made sense of the disclosure. This makes me curious and eager to understand the experiences of other families. By presenting a thorough review of the existing literature on LGB young people and the process of coming out within the family, and by interviewing families that have gone through this process, my hope is to provide an understanding of how these families experience and make sense of this complex phenomenon.

Definitions of Key Terms

In order to understand the existing literature on LGB young people and the family adjustment process, it is important to review the definitions of several key terms that will appear throughout the study. These definitions are expected to provide a framework for

the review of the literature presented in the next chapter, as well as to offer important context for the exploration being conducted in the proposed study.

- Ally – The term *ally* is used to identify individuals who do not identify as LGBT but who support, protect, and defend members of the LGBT community. Family members and friends of LGBT individuals, particularly those who belong to organizations such as Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), often identify themselves as allies. The term is also commonly used in schools to identify students who take a stand against anti-LGBT bullying (Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network [GLSEN], 2012).

- Biphobia – This term refers to negative attitudes that stem from an irrational fear of bisexuality. It includes "the specific ways in which bisexual identities are tabooed, marginalized, attacked, discouraged or stigmatized" (Diamond, 2008, p. 5). Research has indicated that biphobia is as common in gay and lesbian communities as it is in the heterosexual community.

- Bisexual – The word *bisexual* is used in reference to "self-identified women or men who have sexual and emotional connections with women and men" (Eliason & Hughes, 2004, p. 630). Although the definition of bisexuality is commonly agreed upon, there is ongoing debate among researchers and laypeople within the LGB community about the nature of bisexuality. While many argue that it is a "legitimate sexual identity," others contend that it is "a temporary stage of denial, transition, or experimentation" (Diamond, 2008, p. 5). Still others assert the view that bisexuality is "a strong form of all individuals' capacity for sexual fluidity" (Diamond, 2008, p. 5).

- Coming Out – The term *coming out* is frequently used to describe the experience of disclosing one's identity as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. It is understood as having both individual and relational aspects: people first come out to themselves by identifying their non-heterosexual identity, and then come out to other people in their lives (D'Amico & Julien, 2012). The term evolved from the colloquialism *coming out of the closet,* which refers to removing the veil of shame and revealing one's true sexuality (Seidman, 2002). Coming out is best viewed as a process rather than an event. As Gray (1991) articulates, the term refers "not to a single moment or event but rather an ongoing revelation and performance of self that comes into play each time someone new, or perhaps familiar (re)enters a queer person's life" (p. 21).

- Gay – The word *gay* is most commonly used to refer to "a self-identified man who has his primary sexual and emotional connections with other men" (Eliason & Hughes, 2004, p. 630). However, the term is not used exclusively to refer to men. Some non-heterosexual women prefer the term *gay woman* over the more politically charged label *lesbian,* which they are typically assigned. Some women believe that lesbian is a sexist category and, therefore, make the personal decision to refer to themselves as gay in solidarity with the rest of the LGBT community (Stein, 2012).

- Gender – In this study, the word *gender* is used to refer to socially and culturally constructed expectations about how individuals should demonstrate their membership in the class of males or females (Delphy, 1993; Drescher, 2009; Scott, 1986).

- Gender Expression – This term is used to refer to a person's way of communicating his or her gender identity to others (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays [PFLAG], 2013).

- Gender Identity – The term *gender identity* refers to "one's internal sense of self as male or female, masculine or feminine . . . a vital and powerful combination of the internalization of the social construct of gender and the discernment of where one fits or feels most at home" (Stone Fish & Harvey, 2005, p. 36).

- Heteronormativity – This term encompasses a set of assumptions based on "automatic unconscious beliefs and expectations that reinforce heterosexuality and heterosexual relationships as the ideal norm" (McGeorge & Carlson, 2011, p. 15).

- Heterosexism – Heterosexism is "a systemic process that marginalizes LGB individuals based on a set of beliefs and assumptions that heterosexuality is the only valid way of living and, therefore, the preferred norm" (McGeorge & Carlson, 2011, p. 15).

- Heterosexual – This term is used to refer to individuals who have romantic, emotional, and sexual feelings toward members of the opposite sex (PFLAG, 2013).

- Homophobia – The term *homophobia* refers to "a fear of homosexual people, thoughts, feelings, and actions" (Stone Fish & Harvey, 2005, p. 27).

- Lesbian – The word *lesbian* is used to refer to "a self-identified woman who has her primary sexual and emotional connections with other women" (Eliason, 2000, p. 314).

- Queer – The word *queer,* which was formerly used in a denigrating way to refer to sexual minorities, has recently been reclaimed by members of the LGBT community. It is a self-assumed label that "embraces one's difference and rejects the notion that the norm of heterosexuality is one to which we all aspire" (Stone Fish & Harvey, 2005, p. 27). As Jagose (1996) emphasizes, "queer posits a commonality between people which does not disallow their fundamental difference" (p. 112).

- Sexual Identity – This term is used to describe "one's internal sense of a whole, sexual self, which may include one's gender identity, gender role, and sexual orientation" (Stone Fish & Harvey, 2005, p. 35).

- Sexual Orientation – While many definitions of sexual orientation exist, for the purposes of this study, the term will refer to "the constellation of affective, cognitive, and behavioral characteristics that constitute an individual's sense of self as a sexual and intimately relational being" (Fassinger & Arseneau, 2007, p. 30). Sexual orientation is understood to have emotional, romantic, and sexual dimensions.

- Transgender – In this study, the word *transgender* is used as "an umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from the sex they were assigned at birth" (GLAAD, 2013, para. 2).

Summary

This chapter provided a foundation for the proposed study, articulated the purpose of the study, and outlined the research questions that will guide it. In Chapter II, I explore the existing literature on LGB young people and the coming out process within families

to further establish the foundation for this study and identify the gap in the existing

literature. Chapter III introduces the research methodology that I employed in conducting

the study and explains my rationale for utilizing an IPA approach. In Chapter IV, I

present the findings from the study and illustrate the themes and sub-themes I derived

from my analysis. In Chapter V, I review the strengths and limitations of the study, offer

suggestions for further research, and discuss the implications of this study for LGB young

people, their families, and family therapists.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

In order to support my exploration of the family adjustment process following a young family member's disclosure of LGB identity, it is important to first establish a foundation for the ideas presented in this study, based on extant research studies. This chapter provides a review of the scholarly literature pertaining to sexual minority youth, the coming out process for these youth, and the issues relevant to their families' adjustment to that process.

The LGBT Population in the United States

Recent estimates suggest that 3.4% of the United States (US) population identifies as LGBT (Gallup, 2012). For a number of reasons, it is difficult to determine whether this figure accurately reflects the percentage of individuals who identify as LGBT. First, the estimate is based on the survey responses of 120,000 US adults, so LGBT identified individuals under the age of 18 are not included in the percentage. Also, when asked to provide demographic information for the purposes of a poll or survey, many individuals may choose not to disclose their non-heterosexual identity for fear of being stigmatized or marginalized on the basis of their sexual orientation (Gallup, 2012). Therefore, it is likely that many individuals who identify as LGBT are not represented in the 3.4% estimate. Furthermore, for the purposes of its survey, Gallup (2012) grouped together all LGBT Americans, thereby not providing information about the individual percentages of gay men, lesbian women, bisexual individuals, and transgender individuals who responded to the survey. It is common for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender

individuals to be grouped together, which leads to some erroneous assumptions about LGBT people that are important to explore.

The acronym LGBT became widely used in the West in the 1990s as a replacement for the previously used term *gay community*—a term that was not inclusive of everyone who contributed to the expanded visibility of sexual minorities (Drescher, 2009). While the LGBT acronym certainly provides a succinct way to refer to members of the sexual minority population, it also serves the purpose of arbitrarily grouping together gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people. This often leads to the mistaken assumption that LGBT individuals represent one uniform group.

Heterogeneity of the LGBT Population

LGBT individuals represent a heterogeneous group of people who differ from one another as much as—and, in some cases, more than—they do from individuals not described by the acronym (Bepko & Johnson, 2000; Bidell, 2005; Eliason, 2000; Eliason & Hughes, 2004; Long & Serovich, 2003; McNaught, 1993; Whitman, 1995). As Fassinger and Arseneau (2007) point out, there are "diverse manifestations of distinctiveness within and between" members of the LGBT community (p. 43). Members of this community represent various ages, races, ethnicities, education levels, geographic locations, and income levels. They also differ in terms of their sexual orientation and gender.

Sexual Orientation and Gender

The grouping together of sexual minority individuals into one category often leads to the conflation of sexual orientation and gender. It is commonly assumed, although increasingly less so, that gay men and lesbian women desire to live as the

opposite gender. This is apparent in the stereotypes that all gay men are feminine and all lesbian women are butch. Although some gay men and lesbian women do "conspicuously break from accepted gender norms" (Fassinger & Arsineau, 2007, p. 28), it is erroneous to assume that a person's sexual orientation can be defined on the basis of his or her gender expression.

The notion that all transgender individuals are non-heterosexual is also somewhat common (Drescher, 2009; LaSala, 2010; Sanders & Kroll, 2000). This assumption is mistaken, however, because a person's identity as "transgender does not in any way indicate [his or her] sexual orientation: trans people can be heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual" (LaSala, 2010, p. 159). Non-heterosexuality and transgenderism are two distinctly different phenomena. Additionally, sexual orientation and gender both represent socially constructed categories, which have been reified in particular ways in Western society (Delphy, 1993; LaSala, 2010; Scott, 1986; Stone Fish & Harvey, 2005).

The socially constructed nature of gender and sexual orientation. While sex refers to "the biological differences between male and female" (Oakley, 1985, p. 16), gender is a culturally situated construct that dictates particular roles for men and women (Delphey, 1993; Scott, 1986). Gender is essentially "a social category imposed on a sexed body" (Scott, 1986, p. 1056). Drescher (2009) asserts that in the West, beliefs about gender are based on a gender binary; it is insisted upon that "every individual be assigned to the category of either man or woman at birth and that individuals conform to the category to which they have been assigned thereafter" (p. 432). Any transgression against gender expectations is considered deviant.

Sexual orientation is also a social construction, and the notion of labeling one's sexual identity "is a modern phenomenon in Western society" (LaSala, 2010, p. 145). Although sexual orientation is a wide-ranging phenomenon, LaSala (2010) posits that "social forces have pushed people to develop primary and static identities, which would not happen if society accepted the full array of sexual expression" (p. 145). Society dictates that sexual orientation is a *thing* to be identified and named; such self-labeling "can be a sociopolitical act of policy—an act within a social context that will have implications for status, power, and conflict" (Lee, 1977, p. 54).

Like gender, sexual orientation has traditionally been thought of in terms of a binary, with homosexuality and heterosexuality considered mutually exclusive categories (Bernal & Coolhart, 2005; Jagose, 1996; Mosher, 2001; Potariak, 2007). However, "this polarization is problematic because . . . endless variations of sexual behavior exist that cannot be neatly packaged into [two] categories" (Bernal & Coolhart, 2005, p. 129). The notion of sexual orientation as existing on a continuum, which will be discussed in the next section, is becoming increasingly more common; it reflects the fluid nature of sexual orientation and allows for a more flexible conceptualization of sexual identity, behavior, and expression.

A fluid understanding of sexual orientation. In the middle of the 20th century, Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin (1948) proposed a theoretical model that defined sexual orientation by the nature and frequency of an individual's erotic fantasies. To support this claim, Kinsey et al. developed a sexual orientation continuum—which ranged from exclusively heterosexual to exclusively homosexual—on which individuals could plot themselves on the basis of their sexual fantasies and behaviors (Kinsey et al., 1948;

Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin & Gebhard, 1953; Storms, 1980). Kinsey et al. tested their

revolutionary continuum model by surveying thousands of US adults to obtain

information about their sexual fantasies, behaviors, and experiences. The notion of sexual

orientation as existing on a continuum challenged the longstanding notion of a

homosexual-heterosexual binary and generated public discourse about non-heterosexual

orientation.

Based on the responses to their survey, Kinsey et al. (1948, 1953) estimated that

approximately 10% of the US population at the time was lesbian, gay, or bisexual.

However, because of their exclusive focus on fantasies and behaviors, the researchers are

believed to have grossly overestimated the percentage of LGB Americans (Allen &

Demo, 1995; Drescher, 2009; Gates, 2012; Mosher, 2001; Stone Fish & Harvey, 2005).

Furthermore, while Kinsey et al.'s research was groundbreaking, the definition of sexual

orientation has changed significantly since the time of their study.

The American Psychological Association (APA) defines sexual orientation as an

enduring pattern of "emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attractions to men, women, or

both sexes. Sexual orientation also refers to a person's sense of identity based on those

attractions, related behaviors, and membership in a community of others who share those

attractions" (American Psychological Association [APA], 2008, para. 2). According to

Floyd and Stein (2002), sexual orientation is determined on the basis of "sexual

attraction, sexual behavior, sexual fantasies, emotional preference, social preference, self-

identification, and lifestyle preference" (p. 176). These definitions of sexual orientation,

though much broader than the one proposed by Kinsey et al. (1948, 1953), are still

complex and open to interpretation. As Gates (2012) aptly points out, "emotional,

romantic, and sexual attractions are all very different things" (p. 695). For example, it is possible for an individual to be emotionally attracted to members of the same sex while engaging exclusively in sexual behaviors with members of the opposite sex, or for someone to have romantic attraction to members of the same sex and sexual attraction to members of both sexes. The intersections among attraction, behavior, fantasy, and identification yield a multitude of variations on sexual orientation.

Sexual orientation is typically assigned labels such as *straight*, *lesbian*, *gay*, and *bisexual*. However, some individuals consider their sexual orientation to be fluid and mutable over time (APA, 2008; Fedders, 2006; LaSala, 2010). Additionally, many people choose not to identify their sexual orientation at all, preferring instead to define themselves on the basis of other aspects of their identity (LaSala, 2010). Young people, in particular, are more commonly "eschewing labels and unapologetically acting on their sexual and romantic feelings without adopting specific sexual identities" (Savin-Williams, 2005, p. 44). Regardless of whether or not people choose to label their sexual orientation, individuals who are anything other than exclusively heterosexual represent a minority—and often marginalized—population in our culture.

The Sexual Minority Population as a Non-Ethnic Minority Group

Like other minority groups in the US, sexual minorities are "subject to stigmatization, discrimination, unequal treatment, and oppression by those in power" (Bieschke & Matthews, 1996, p. 244). However, "unlike most ethnic minority individuals, the vast majority of [non-heterosexual] individuals are raised in families and communities that do not share their minority status" (Israel & Selvidge, 2003, p. 86). Furthermore, while members of ethnic minority groups are often identified visually,

sexual orientation is not as readily apparent, so sexual minority individuals tend to become classified as minorities only after they have come out as such (Bieschke & Matthews, 1996; Garnets, Hancock, Cochran, Goodchilds, & Peplau, 1991; Israel & Selvidge, 2003). The coming out process for non-heterosexual individuals is both personal and political (Downs, 2012; Grierson & Smith, 2005); it can be been viewed as "a potent means of social transformation" (Jagose, 1996, p. 31). To better understand the social and political significance of coming out, it is important to briefly examine the movement that influenced our current cultural climate with regard to non-heterosexuality.

The Gay Liberation Movement in the US

As mentioned previously, definitions and labels pertaining to sexual attraction, sexual orientation, and sexual identity have only become part of the dominant discourse in the US during the last century (Jagose, 1996; LaSala, 2010; Stein, 2012). With the recognition of non-heterosexuality as a possible sexual identity came the emergence of what are commonly referred to as homophile organizations, which began forming in the 1950s in attempts to "advocate assimilation" and "present images of homosexuality that would be acceptable to mainstream society" (Jagose, 1996, p. 31). Despite the conciliatory efforts of these groups to effect social change, non-heterosexuality remained marginalized. In 1952, the first *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (*DSM-I*) was published; it listed homosexuality as a "sociopathic personality disturbance" (Drescher, 1990, p. 435). When the *DSM-II* was published in 1968, homosexuality was reclassified as a "sexual deviation" (Drescher, 1990, p. 435). The American Psychiatric Association's classifications of homosexuality as pathologically deviant served to promote and maintain the prevalent notion at the time that non-heterosexuality was sick and perverse.

Because of the generally anti-homosexual climate in the US during the middle of the 20th century, establishments that were welcoming of non-heterosexual people had to operate clandestinely out of fear of being raided or shut down. On June 28, 1969, police raided the Stonewall Inn, a popular bar in New York City that catered to LGBT clients. The patrons fought back against the police, inciting an impassioned and violent riot. Paradoxically, "for all of its socioaesthetic emphasis on the value of hypermasculinity, the Stonewall rebellion was led by a group of exasperated drag queens" (Haldeman, 2007, p. 77).

The resistance to homophobic aggression displayed during the Stonewall riots marked the beginning of what is commonly referred to as the gay liberation movement in the US. It brought together gay men, lesbian women, and transgender individuals in a unified effort to be recognized and respected. Through this movement, gay liberationists banded together through a commitment to challenge the status quo. They promoted the idea that non-heterosexuality is "potentially a transformative identity that must be avowed publicly until it is no longer a shameful secret but a legitimately recognized way of being in the world" (Jagose, 1996, p. 38).

After the Stonewall riots, the gay liberation movement continued taking shape, building moment, and garnering increased attention. Gay pride parades and festivals sprung up throughout the country, and gay activists came together to promote the inclusion and acceptance of non-heterosexuality. In 1970 and 1971, gay and lesbian activists disrupted the annual meetings of the American Psychiatric Association, speaking out against the stigmatization of homosexuality. These demonstrations prompted the

eventual removal of homosexuality from the *DSM* in 1973, ending the American classification of non-heterosexuality as an illness (Drescher, 2009).

The gay liberation movement in the US laid the foundation for the current efforts to promote the full equality of LGBT individuals. It forced Americans to recognize the non-heterosexual community and invited us "to view the politics of sexual identity as part of a larger network of sexual and social conflicts" (Seidman, 2002, p. 16). This brief history of the gay liberation movement and its impact on our current discussions about sexuality is intended to establish a foundation for understanding the complexity associated with coming out as a sexual minority.

<div align="center">**A Shifting Cultural Climate**</div>

A New Wave of Change

When considering how family members—particularly parents and grandparents— might make sense of a loved one's disclosure of non-heterosexuality, it helps to take note of the many ways in which the views of the dominant culture have shifted throughout the years. Even the last five years have brought a number of momentous changes with regard to the acknowledgement and acceptance of non-heterosexuality. President Barack Obama, who was first elected in 2008, has contributed significantly to the changing cultural context in the US. Since taking office, he and his administration have publicly acknowledged non-heterosexual individuals, relationships, and families. More than any US president in history, he has committed to accomplishing greater equality for the LGBT community. The Obama Administration publicly supported the Supreme Court's striking down of the Defense of Marriage Act. In addition, it helped pass the Employment Non-Discrimination Act, which prohibits workplace discrimination on the basis of sexual

orientation or gender (The Human Rights Campaign, 2014). All of these efforts have shifted the status quo in the US, thereby altering the meaning of claiming an LGB identity.

In 2012, President Obama established the HIV Care Continuum Initiative to redouble national efforts in the fight against HIV/AIDS, which has been waged for over 30 years in the US (The White House, 2013). In the 1980s, when the epidemic first began claiming millions of lives, being diagnosed with AIDS was seen as a death sentence, and rates were disproportionately high among gay and bisexual men (Crary, 2013; The Human Rights Campaign, 2014). Advancements in the treatment of HIV/AIDS now allow people who are diagnosed to live longer and experience a better quality of life; however, family members of gay and bisexual young people who lived through the terrifying AIDS epidemic may still respond to their loved one's coming out disclosure with sadness and fear (Grierson & Smith, 2005; Young, 2013).

Adding to the recent social and political changes in Western culture, there has been a marked shift in the relationship between religion and non-heterosexuality. The most notable change has come from the current leader of the Roman Catholic Church, Pope Francis, who has publicly advocated a stance of compassion and non-judgment toward non-heterosexual people. In doing so, he has persuaded religious devotees around the world to open their hearts and minds to LGBT people (Grindley, 2013). Further contributing to the transforming views of non-heterosexuality, many religious organizations have assumed an *LGBT-affirming* stance (GALIP Foundation, 2013). Churches and places of worship that include and welcome non-heterosexual people help to create an atmosphere of visibility and acceptance; most importantly, they challenge

widely held beliefs within religious communities that non-heterosexuality is immoral and sinful.

Greater Visibility of LGB Individuals

The shifts in our culture, particularly those that have taken place within the past few years, have significantly increased the visibility of sexual minorities in the US. Organizations such as The Human Rights Campaign (HRC), a national organization working for equal rights for LGBT Americans; GLAAD, the LGBT media advocacy organization; and Lambda Legal, a national organization committed to achieving full recognition of LGBT individuals' civil rights have been largely responsible for shifting the cultural climate in the US (Movement Advancement Project, 2012). These groups have mobilized sexual minorities of all stripes and seized the attention of the general public, spurring discussion about what it means to be a sexual minority in this country.

The entertainment industry has been another substantial contributor to the increased visibility of non-heterosexual individuals. The presence of non-stereotypical LGB characters in television and film has increased significantly, and more celebrities and public figures are publicly disclosing—and celebrating—their non-heterosexual identities than ever before. The convergence of LGB visibility in politics and pop culture has created a cultural setting in which people who are questioning their sexuality, or who have already come out to themselves as non-heterosexual, can more freely explore the possibility of coming out to others and living openly as LGB Americans. Additionally, movements such as the It Gets Better Project (Savage & Miller, 2011)—which has gained national popularity, and even garnered public support from President Obama—have made significant contributions to the more accepting culture climate by encouraging,

supporting, and giving hope to young people who identify themselves as non-heterosexual.

A young person who recognizes that he or she is non-heterosexual can turn to almost any media source and find examples of out, happy, and successful LGB people. Recently, professional basketball player Jason Collins made history by being the first person to come out while still being an active player in a major American team sport (Beck & Branch, 2013). His disclosure prompted many other athletes, both retired and active, to come out as well. In Hollywood, actors including Neil Patrick Harris, Jane Lynch, and Ellen DeGeneres have maintained illustrious careers while publicly celebrating queer sexuality. The list of publicly out popular figures—such as internationally acclaimed personal finance expert and author Suze Orman; award-winning journalist and television host Anderson Cooper; New York City Council Speaker and former mayoral candidate Christine Quinn; and popular recording artist Frank Ocean—continues to get longer, sending the message to LGB young people that it is possible for non-heterosexuality, happiness, recognition, and achievement to coexist (Greenfield-Sanders, 2013).

Greater Acceptance Than Ever Before

For many young people who are beginning to identify as non-heterosexual, exposure to LGB popular figures seeds a desire to form relationships with other young people who share their sexual identity. Many of these youth "use the Internet to forge friendships and romantic relationships, some of which become manifested in the offline world" (Mustanski, Newcomb, & Garofalo, 2011, p. 217). Others seek resources or organizations in their communities through which they can learn about LGB issues and

connect with other young people with whom they can identify (Fedders, 2006). Some LGB youth assert their non-heterosexual identity in the school setting and form relationships with peers who support them.

Although research suggests that many young people who are out as LGB at school are the targets of bullying and harassment, there is also compelling evidence that LGB youth who are accepted at school experience increased confidence and resilience (GLSEN, 2011; Goldman, 2008; Sanders & Kroll, 2000; Savage & Miller, 2011). One way in which this acceptance takes place is through school-wide anti-bullying policies and programs, which send the message to LGB students that they are safe and supported (GLSEN, 2011). Another important source of support for LGB youth comes through Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs), which are becoming increasingly more common in schools (Fedders, 2006; GLSEN, 2011; Sanders & Kroll, 2000).

Through GSAs, queer students and their allies come together to support one another; create a shared safe space; educate their community about sexual orientation and gender identity issues; and address discrimination, harassment, and violence in schools (GSA Network, 2009). The increased prevalence of groups like GSAs is indicative of the shifting cultural climate, and bodes well for the future. Yet despite this ongoing shift, non-heterosexual individuals remain sexual minorities, and heterosexuality predominates as the "natural, pure, and unproblematic state which requires no explanation" (Jagose, 1996, p. 17).

The Heteronormative Status Quo

In spite of the shift toward greater acceptance of non-heterosexuality, the culture in the US remains predominantly heteronormative; and since heteronormativity operates

relatively covertly in our society, even the most "well-intentioned individuals [tend] to ignore the needs and realities of LGB individuals and relationships" (McGeorge & Carlson, 2011, p. 15). Heteronormative assumptions lead people to presume that everyone is heterosexual unless identified as otherwise, and while heteronormativity operates largely outside of most people's awareness, its impact is insidious. The combination of heteronormativity and heterosexism creates a climate in which anything other than heterosexuality is seen as marginal, at best, and abominable, at worst.

When deciding whether and to whom to come out, LGB young people are greatly influenced by the cultural messages they receive. As Goldman (2008) points out, in order for LGB young people to come to terms with their non-heterosexual identity, "they must first come to terms with the idea that a segment of society dislikes them" (p. 15). In most cases, these young people are acutely aware of "society's negative reactions to same-sex sexual attractions and their expression" (D'Augelli, 2005, p. 116), so their personal examination of their identity takes on political dimensions.

In the context of a generally heteronormative society in which heterosexist beliefs abound, LGB young people face several critical challenges. Among the most significant of these challenges is dealing with "social stigma, which involves overcoming the societal expectation of heterosexuality, rejecting the negative view of homosexuality, and creating a positive sense of one's queer self" (Stone Fish & Harvey, 2005, p. 31). The "social opposition to the diversity of sexual orientation" (Carrion & Lock, 1997, p. 371) that still exists in our society serves to influence the ways in which LGB young people understand themselves, their relationships, and their future. It also profoundly influences their sense of safety and wellbeing.

Resistance to Diversity: The Backlash Effect

One of the many detrimental consequences of living in a generally heteronormative and heterosexist society is that LGB individuals are often victimized on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender expression. The increased visibility of LGB individuals, the initiation of nationwide policy changes, and the efforts of popular figures to generate greater acceptance of non-heterosexuality have inspired robust opposition from individuals and institutions promoting the belief that any expression which deviates from the heterosexual norm is aberrant, immoral, abominable, and unacceptable (Stone Fish & Harvey, 2005; Tillmann-Healy, 2001). The many advances that have been made in the US to acknowledge and accept LGB sexuality have, in many ways, fueled the fire for adversaries of such change, resulting in tragic circumstances.

On October 7, 1998, a 21-year-old man named Matthew Shepard was offered a ride home by two men whom he met in a small lounge in Wyoming near his university. The men, who recognized that Matthew was gay and believed he was flirting with them, drove him to a remote field, tied him to a fence, and pistol-whipped him multiple times. He remained on the fence for 18 hours before being found and taken to the local hospital, where he died five days later from head trauma (Sanders & Kroll, 2000; Tillmann-Healy, 2001). Hate crimes like the one committed against Matthew Shepard occur with regrettable frequency throughout the US. On May 19, 2013, a 32-year old man named Marc Carson was shot to death while walking down a Greenwich Village street with his partner. Witnesses to the crime claimed that the gunman yelled anti-gay slurs at his intended victim before shooting his weapon (Barron, 2013). This shooting took place in the midst of a cultural climate that appears, on the surface, to be much more accepting of

LGB sexuality than it was when Matthew Shepard was killed. Furthermore, the crime was committed in a part of the country known to be diverse and LGB-friendly. These severe forms of violence committed against LGB individuals are an extreme example of heteronormativity, heterosexism, and homophobia, as well as a backlash effect of the progress that has been made.

In addition to the violence committed against non-heterosexual individuals, there is also a great deal of anti-LGB rhetoric intended to further marginalize and stigmatize members of this population. Followers of groups such as the Westboro Baptist Church, a virulently anti-gay organization, publicly promote hateful messages under the auspices of following "God's law" (Anti-Defamation League, 2013, para. 1). Such groups that make anti-LGB claims on the basis of religious principles create a polarized climate that, for many people, makes religiosity and non-heterosexuality seem mutually exclusive (LaSala, 2010; Savage & Miller, 2011). Despite the many gains that have been made since the start of the gay liberation movement in the 1960s, queer young people today must continue to grapple with cultural messages that tell them their "impulses, feelings, and ways of being are unacceptable" (Stone Fish & Harvey, 2005, p. 97). For this, and many other reasons, the process of coming out is often fraught with a great deal of confusion and uncertainty.

The Coming Out Process for LGB Youth

Research suggests that LGB young people are coming out at increasingly younger ages (Matthews & Salazar, 2012; Mustanski et al., 2011; Scherrer, 2011; Shilo & Savaya, 2011). This decrease in the age of first disclosure among LGB youth can be attributed, to some degree, to the shifting cultural climate and the increased access to supportive

individuals, groups, and organizations available today. However, LGB young people's disclosure to others typically comes after an extended period of time during which they attempt to negotiate the potential benefits and risks of sharing this aspect of themselves with others.

Coming Out as a Personal and Relational Experience

According to Matthews and Salazar (2012), "the median age LGB adolescents become aware of their same-sex feelings is somewhere between 13 and 15 . . . although many are aware of being different from others long before that" (p. 97), and first disclosure tends to occur around age 16 (Shilo & Savaya, 2011). Floyd and Stein (2002) contend that bisexual young people experience their same-sex attractions later than their gay and lesbian peers do, because their "bisexual identity often follows after the establishment of a heterosexual identity" (pp. 170-171). Nevertheless, bisexual young people follow the same identity development process as lesbian and gay young people, whereby they first become aware of their same-sex feelings, then experience a "period of identity confusion" (Floyd & Stein, 2002, p. 71), and finally disclose their non-heterosexual identity to other people.

Young people face two painful possibilities when deciding whether and how to come out to others: "one is an active vocal denigration and ridicule . . . the second is a process of silencing—being ignored, not seen or heard" (Stone Fish & Harvey, 2005, p. 107). These youth must decide whether they are willing to compromise safety and security in their pursuit of integrity and acknowledgment. As Matthews and Salazar (2012) explain, "efforts to establish a sense of identity in relation to self, others, and society—characteristic tasks of adolescence—can be especially challenging for LGB

youth in a predominantly heterosexual society" (p. 96). This process of establishing an identity takes place over time for LGB youth, and research suggests that it tends to follow a fairly reliable trajectory.

The Typical Trajectory for Coming Out

Savage and Miller (2011) point out that "coming out is a long process, not a single event" (p. 2). Because the majority of LGB young people are embedded in social systems that may not openly accept their sexual identity, they "must decide on a daily basis the degree to which they will disclose their sexual orientation" (Morrow, 2000, p. 54). Once they come out to themselves, LGB youth must come to terms with the reality that "neither family nor peer support can be presumed if they divulge their feelings" (D'Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington, 1998, p. 367) and share their non-heterosexual identity. However, most LGB young people's desire for connection and integrity outweighs their fear of rejection, so they ultimately make the decision to come out—"a decision that is worth losing everything in order to fully be themselves" (Bernal & Coolhart, 2005, p. 32).

Research suggests that LGB young people tend to come out first to supportive friends, next to members of their peer groups, then to members of their nuclear families, and finally—although not always—to members of their extended families (Beals & Peplau, 2006; Campos, 2005; Mustanski et al., 2011; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003). Youth who are accepted by their loved ones after coming out have been shown to experience greater self-acceptance and wellbeing (Bernal & Coolhart, 2005; D'Augelli et al., 1998; Elizur & Ziv, 2001; Matthews & Salazar, 2012). However, not all LGB youth experience acceptance, and those who are not accepted—or who suspect that they will

not be, and accordingly keep secret or deny their non-heterosexual identity—face a number of significant risks.

Risk Factors for LGB Youth

According to Padilla et al. (2010), "Gay, lesbian, and bisexual adolescents face many of the same developmental challenges as do heterosexual adolescents, but they must also deal with a stigmatized identity" (p. 265). The challenges and stress these young people face result from a number of factors. First, LGB young people struggle with the recognition that their sexual identity is generally considered socially inferior to heterosexual identity (Heron, 1995). Secondly, decisions about whether, how, and to whom to come out cause a great deal of tension and confusion that compound the difficulties typically associated with adolescence. As Elizur and Ziv (2001) articulate, "in the absence of disclosure [LGB youth] remain isolated and deprived of support, while disclosure may bring about a negation of their feelings, estrangement and rejection" (p. 129). When they do come out, many LGB youth are ridiculed and harassed, leading them to contend with the results of an "impermeable barrier" (Saltzburg, 2007, p. 66) that forms between them and those significant people in their lives who view their sexual identity as unacceptable.

Violence Against LGB Youth

Hunter (1990) conducted a study with 500 gay and lesbian young people in New York and found that 40% of them had experienced violent physical attacks related to their sexual orientation. Although Hunter's study took place over two decades ago, its results remain relevant. A more recent nationwide study revealed that LGB young people who lack support systems are "disproportionately the victims of harassment and violence,

including rape" (Ray, 2006, p. 3). Similarly, Cramer, McNiel, Holley, Shumway, and

Boccellari (2011) found that compared to their heterosexual counterparts, sexual minority

youth are at increased risk of sexual assault and violent crime, leading them to experience

higher rates of hypervigilance, anxiety, and panic. Savage and Miller (2011) point out

that many LGB youth are "deprived of information, resources, support, and positive role

models" (p. 3), so they do not know where to turn when they become victimized or

harmed on the basis of their sexual orientation. According to D'Augelli et al. (1998),

because of the victimization and violence LGB young people experience, "reluctance to

disclose is warranted" (p. 368).

School Problems

A great deal of the harassment and violence LGB youth experience takes place in

the school environment. Despite increases in LGBT-inclusive policies and programs in

schools, many non-heterosexual young people are the victims of bullying (Savage &

Miller, 2011). Each year, the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN)

conducts a survey to track the progress of the nation's schools in reducing "levels of bias

and violence experienced by lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students" (Kosciw,

Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2012, p. ix). Data from the most recent survey,

conducted in 2011, revealed that 63.5% of the 8,584 young people in the sample felt

unsafe because of their sexual orientation. The majority of the youth in the study (81.9%)

were verbally harassed, which was defined as being called names or being threatened;

38.3% were physically harassed, which was defined as being pushed or shoved; and

18.3% were physically assaulted, which included being punched, kicked, or injured with

a weapon. Furthermore, the survey showed that over half of the students in the sample

(55.2%) experienced cyberbulliyng, which was defined as "electronic harassment via text messages or postings on Facebook" (Kosciw et al., 2012, p. xv).

The data from the GLSEN's *2011 National School Climate Survey* (Kosciw et al., 2012) underscores the need for adults to be aware of the bullying of sexual minority youth. For LGB youth, bullying by school peers often leads to decreased self-esteem, mental health issues, and school dropout (Padilla et al., 2010). The GLSEN survey also revealed that students who have access to supportive adults to whom they can report instances of bullying or harassment not only remain in school, but also show higher rates of attendance, a greater sense of inclusion in their school community, and higher grade point averages (Kosciw et al., 2012).

Other Risk Factors

LGB young people have a number of other risk factors in addition to the rejection, harassment, and violence many of them experience. According to Elizur and Ziv (2001), LGB youth "are at greater risk for major depression, generalized anxiety disorder, conduct disorder, substance abuse and dependence, multiple disorders, suicidal behaviors, sexual risk-taking, and poor general health maintenance than are their heterosexual peers" (p. 126). Approximately 26% of LGB young people are kicked out of their homes after disclosing their sexual orientation, and it has been estimated that sexual minorities make up between 20% and 40% of all homeless youth (Fedders, 2006; Lambda Legal, 2012; Ray, 2006). A 2012 study found that approximately 45% of queer youth are involved in the juvenile justice system, and those who are report higher rates of verbal, physical, and sexual assault than their heterosexual counterparts (Lambda Legal, 2012). Perhaps most shockingly, LGB young people who experience rejection or struggle

to cope with other risk factors associated with their non-heterosexual identity are up to seven times more likely than heterosexual young people to attempt suicide (Savage & Miller, 2011; Stone Fish & Harvey, 2005; Suicide Prevention Resource Center, 2008).

It is important to understand that the increased risk factors among LGB youth do not result from their sexual orientation per se, but as a consequence of the heterosexist and homophobic climate in which they live. However, heterosexist assumptions coupled with the prevalence of these risk factors leads LGB youth to be largely "ignored by the professional community. . . . If not ignored, they are often viewed as abnormal, pathological, and dysfunctional" (Matthews & Salazar, 2012, p. 97). Many LGB youth who feel denigrated begin to feel that their non-heterosexual identity is "shameful and must be denied, hidden, and repressed—at great cost to their own self-esteem" (LaSala, 2010, p. 5).

Internalized Homophobia and Shame Among LGB Youth

As members of a minority group, LGB young people have the experience of being "*the Other*" (Pharr, 1997, p. 58). These youth are predominantly raised in heterosexual contexts, and many of them have witnessed or experienced manifestations of heterosexism and homophobia. As a result, many LGB young people internalize homophobia by "taking outward messages and turning them inward onto themselves" Matthews & Salazar, 2012, p. 102). Youth who internalize these messages see themselves as "abnormal, deviant, inferior, marginalized, not 'right'" (Pharr, 1997, p. 58). Many feel disgusted by their non-heterosexual feelings; as a result, they may act out against known LGB peers or make attempts to convert to heterosexuality (Fedders, 2006).

Those LGB young people who internalize "*homosexual stigma . . .* through which homosexuality is denigrated, discredited, and constructed as invalid relative to heterosexuality" (Herek, Chopp, & Strohl, as cited in LaSala, 2010, p. 5) frequently experience shame (Armesto & Weisman, 2001; Downs, 2012; Stone Fish & Harvey, 2005). Stone Fish and Harvey (2005) define shame as "the mechanism used to help us conform to cultural mandates" (p. 97). According to Brown (2006), "shame often produces overwhelming and painful feelings of confusion, fear, anger judgment, and/or the need to hide. It is difficult to identify shame as the core issue when trying to manage these intense feelings" (p. 46). It is also difficult for LGB young people to realize that their feelings of shame stem from "internalized beliefs and assumptions regarding what it means to be LGB" based on "the voices of the wider social discourse" (Saltzburg, 2007, p. 47) that relegates all non-heterosexual identities to the category of *other*.

The task of disentangling homophobic cultural messages from personal worthiness is nearly impossible for LGB young people to accomplish alone, yet it is critical to their ability to accommodate their non-heterosexuality into their sense of self, and "grow up being more than just their sexual identity" (Stone Fish & Harvey, 2005, p. 176). Internalized homophobia and shame can "increase the challenges of the coming out process for LGB youth" (Matthews & Salazar, 2012, p. 102); however, support and acceptance from loved ones can protect LGB young people from the effects of shame and internalized negativity about their sexuality.

Support and Acceptance as Buffers Against Shame

Research has shown that LGB young people who receive support from loved ones are less likely to suffer from shame and more likely to develop a positive sense of self,

which includes acceptance of and pride in their non-heterosexual identity (Bernal &

Coolhart, 2005; Bregman, Malik, Page, Mayken, & Lindahl, 2013; D'Amico & Julien,

2012; Gorman-Murray, 2008; Matthews & Salazar, 2012; Mustanski et al., 2011; Padilla

et al., 2010; Sanders & Kroll, 2000; Stone Fish & Harvey, 2005). Referring to the role of

supportive loved ones in the lives of LGB young people, Mustanski, Newcomb, and

Garafolo (2011) explain that "a great deal of evidence supports their role as buffers

against negative sequelae of stressful experiences" (p. 206).

Research suggests that for many LGB young people, close friends serve as the

primary source of support; these friends often encourage the young people to ignore

deprecating messages, accept their non-heterosexuality, and come out to family

(D'Augelli et al., 1998; Legate, Ryan, & Weinstein, 2012; Mustanski et al., 2011; Savin-

Williams & Ream, 2003). As Shilo and Savaya (2011) articulate, for LGB youth,

"friends' support makes a distinctive contribution to the public-social coming out

process" (p. 326). By coming out and being accepted by close friends, LGB young people

become better able to value their non-heterosexuality as integral to who they are and can

begin to form "a secure, solid, prideful sexual identity" (Bernal & Coolhart, 2005, p. 32)

with which they can more adeptly navigate the process of coming out to family members.

Coming Out in the Family of Origin

As the previous sections have illustrated, there is a great deal of complexity

associated with claiming an LGB identity. Identifying as non-heterosexual has personal,

political, and relational implications; therefore, LGB young people are faced with a

number of difficult decisions when it comes to sharing their sexual identity with others.

Despite the great strides that have been made to alter the generally heteronormative

climate in the US, there is still a great deal of risk associated with being a sexual minority in this country. And while coming out to friends can protect LGB young people from some of these risk factors, coming out to family members is a far more precarious and daunting task. The following sections explore the existing literature on the multifaceted process of coming out within the family of origin.

The Developmental Implications of Coming Out to Family

According to Scherrer (2011), contemporary LGB youth are expected to follow a normative trajectory of identity formation and come out "when they are developmentally still deeply embedded in families" (p. 5). Research on the identity formation of LGB youth indicates that coming out to family members is associated with "successful and healthy development" (Padilla et al., 2010, p. 274). As Floyd and Stein (2002) explain, disclosure to family members "indicates that the individual is working toward integrating his or her sexual orientation identity with the heterosocial world of the family" (p. 169). It also suggests that the adolescent is willing to jeopardize family support in order to merge his or her personal and public identities (Maguen, Floyd, Bakeman, & Armistead, 2002; Stone Fish & Harvey, 2005).

Research has shown that the decision to come out to family members "depends upon viewing the benefits of disclosure as greater than its costs" (Waldner & Magrader, 1999, p. 86). While an LGB young person "is always in relationship with others, she or he is also learning about the self in relationship to his or her own identity" (Stone Fish & Harvey, 2005, p. 54). Therefore, the reactions of family members play a crucial role in how LGB young people develop and mature. LGB youth who are rejected by their families often internalize feelings of unworthiness; those who are accepted, however, are

generally freer to experience autonomy in their identity formation while remaining connected to their primary support system. Despite the variations in family responses, the existing literature elucidates a universal experience of shifting relationships and family dynamics that result from a young person's coming out.

The Impact of Coming Out on Family Relationships

When an LGB young person comes out to members of his or her family, a number of factors contribute to how the message impacts the family system and the relationships among family members. The coming out process "affects all members of the family, as well as dyadic and triadic relationships within the family, and the family unit as a whole" (Willoughy et al., 2008, p. 74). Because the family is particularly central to the wellbeing and survival of young people, the shifts in family relationships that occur during the coming out process are important to explore. These shifts, whether positive or negative, have a significant influence on the family system. As Gorman-Murray (2008) articulates, "changing interrelationships between family members actively generate difference from *within*, constituting new ways to 'do' and 'be' family" (p. 40).

Pre-existing family relationships have been shown to influence the LGB young person's disclosure as well as inform the ways in which relationships shift following the disclosure (Beals & Peplau, 2005; D'Amico & Julien, 1999; Green, 2000; Maguen et al., 2002; Scherrer, 2011; Waldner & Magrader, 1999). For example, D'Amico and Julien (2012) and Beals and Peplau (2006) found that LGB young people are more likely to come out to their parents when they perceive their parents to be generally supportive of them. However, other researchers (Maguen et al., 2002; Waldner & Magrader, 1999) have found that LGB young people who have close relationships with their parents are

actually more hesitant to come out to them for fear that they may lose their support and be rejected. The results of these studies reflect the difficult negotiation process that LGB young people undertake when determining the costs and benefits of coming out within their families.

In many cases, once family members—especially parents—find out about their loved one's LGB identity, they mourn the loss of certain expectations they had for the child to grow up heterosexual, which invariably has an effect on family relationships (Tillmann-Healy, 2001; Waldner & Magrader, 1999). Saltzburg (2007) found that some of the individuals in his study reacted to their LGB loved one's coming out with "a very real sense of estrangement born out of believing that their inherent differences related to sexual orientation and identity would create an impermeable barrier in their relationship" (p. 66). As a result of this, LGB young people and their family members may create distance from one another after the initial disclosure as a way to assimilate the new information into their sense of personal and family identity. However, the distancing and estrangement that occurs in some families is typically transitory (LaSala, 2010; Saltzburg, 2007; Stone Fish & Harvey, 2005). For example, in their study of the coming out process in families, Baptist and Allen (2008) found that "individual coming out experiences caused strain in family relationships before progressively improving as the family bonded" (p. 99).

Previous studies have revealed that in some families, the honesty that characterizes the coming out process actually reinforces and improves family relationships (Baptist & Allen, 2008; Beals & Peplau, 2006; Ben-Ari, 1995; Elizur & Ziv, 2001; LaSala, 2010). The LGB young people in a study conducted by LaSala (2010)

reported that their relationships with one or both of their parents were strengthened as a function of their disclosure. According to LaSala, "In these families there may have been a reciprocal effect whereby children felt relieved and acted warmly toward their parents and parents, noticing that their children felt better and were less distant, responded to them positively" (pp. 184-185). In Ben-Ari's (1995) study, "relationship quality was higher with family members who knew than with those who did not know about the young adult's sexual orientation, and higher for those who found out directly versus indirectly" (p. 334).

Most of the studies that have been conducted on the coming out process within families have focused almost exclusively on parents' responses to the disclosure. However, the relationships between LGB youth and other members of the family are also important to explore. D'Augelli et al. (1998) discovered that the majority of the LGB young people in their study were out to their siblings; in some families, siblings helped prepare the LGB young people to come out to their parents. Similarly, Savin-Williams (1998) and Campos (2005) found that many LGB youth who come out in their families do not necessarily disclose to their parents first, but rather to the member(s) of their family to whom they feel closest.

Scherrer (2011), who points out that the existing research on the coming out process "is largely myopic in its focus on parents' responses" (p. 5), explored the intergenerational relationships between grandparents and their queer grandchildren. She found that despite differences in age, belief systems, and culture, the relationships between the grandparents and LGB grandchildren in her study either improved or remained the same following the disclosure. This finding suggests that relationships can

be more powerful than differences among family members in determining how families adjust during the coming out process.

Factors That Contribute to Family Responses

When an LGB young person proclaims a non-heterosexual identity within the home, the entire family is transformed. As Sanders and Kroll (2000) express, "Often, when a young person comes 'out of the closet' of fear and shame, the family goes into that same closet" (p. 437). Those families that do not reject their LGB family member and choose to undergo the process of adjusting to the disclosure assume a new family identity. Taking on this new identity often involves family members acknowledging their heterosexist beliefs and learning about what it means to be gay. For some families, it also means becoming "awakened to a new idea of being categorized as a minority that activates and provides them with a cause around which to rally" (Baptist & Allen, 2008, p. 104).

The existing research on the family adjustment process indicates that a number of factors influence how family members respond to the shifts in family identity that result from the coming out of one of its members. Factors such as "fear for their loved one's well-being, cultural taboos, and a wish to avoid thinking about a child's sexual feelings" (LaSala, 2010, p. 30) all contribute to the family responses that arise during the coming out process. Furthermore, a family's cohesion, problem-solving ability, and capacity for managing the disclosure along with other stressors also affect how family members adjust to the coming out process (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008; Willoughby et al., 2008).

Stone Fish and Harvey (2005) assert that family members who feel pressured to "choose between their communities and accepting sexual minority status" (p. 128) often

respond more negatively to their LGB loved one's disclosure. When families feel that acknowledging a new identity as a queer family means losing status, identity, or family integrity, they may resist altering the status quo. This can be manifested in a number of different responses: some family members may respond with intolerance or rejection; others may engage in denial; and others will be reluctant, at first, but eventually accept their family member's LGB identity and the new family identity that comes along with it (Stone Fish & Harvey, 2005).

Gorman-Murray (2008) found that families which constitute "a traditional gender and intergenerational division of household power often react negatively to disclosure," while families "where power is more evenly distributed between members have the potential to react more positively" (p. 34). This finding is consistent with Herek's (1984) observation that individuals who hold traditional, restrictive views of sex roles and power distribution are more likely to hold negative views of non-heterosexuality. Religious beliefs and political views have also been found to influence how family members respond to their loved one's disclosure. In particular, the research suggests that family members with more traditional family values, more rigid religious beliefs, and more conservative political views tend to react more negatively to the disclosure (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008; Herek, 1984; Padilla et al., 2010; Scherrer, 2011).

Consistent with Herek's (1984) supposition that individuals who have had previous encounters with gay or lesbian people have more favorable attitudes toward non-heterosexual individuals in general, some studies on the coming out process in families have indicated that family members who have previous experiences with non-heterosexual people tend to respond more positively to their loved one's disclosure

(Heatherington & Lavner, 2008; LaSala, 2010). Furthermore, some studies have shown that beliefs about the nature of sexual orientation influence responses to the LGB young person's disclosure (Armesto & Weisman, 2011; LaSala, 2010; Stone Fish & Harvey, 2005). In particular, family members who believe sexual orientation is a choice demonstrate "greater unfavorable emotional reactions" (Armesto & Weisman, 20101) than those who recognize sexual orientation as inborn.

Some researchers (D'Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2005; LaSala, 2010; Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998) have found that family members' responses to their loved ones' coming out are influenced by whether or not they had suspicions prior to the actual disclosure. In his study of the coming out process within families, LaSala (2010) discovered that 45 of the 65 families he interviewed suspected that their family member was non-heterosexual because of his or her gender atypical behaviors. In these families, the parents, in particular, had already begun to experience what LaSala calls "anticipatory vicarious stigma" (p. 22): they empathically suffered because they believed their loved one was suffering from being different. In contrast, Heatherington and Lavner (2008) conducted a review of family systems-focused research on the coming out process and found that "disclosure may be more troublesome for parents whose children 'did not appear to be gay' while growing up" (p. 333)

The way in which an LGB young person comes out to family members, and the context in which he or she does so, have been shown to affect family responses (Morrow, 2000). Ben-Ari (1995) found that LGB young people who come out using positive and self-confident terms tend to elicit more positive reactions from family members than young people who deliver the message with uncertainty, negativity, or fear. In other

words "family members are more likely to receive the news positively if they perceive their lesbian or gay family member is happy and secure rather than upset about his or her sexual orientation" (Morrow, 2000, p. 61). Furthermore, family members tend to react more positively when the young person comes out directly to them than when they find out through somebody else in the family (Ben-Ari, 1995; LaSala, 2010).

Many family members experience loneliness and confusion during the coming out process as they struggle to manage their shifting family dynamics and adjust to their new identity; they often feel isolated and do not know where to turn (Baptist & Allen, 2008; LaSala, 2010; Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998). Research has found that for those families, the organization Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) "can be an invaluable source of needed information and sustenance" (LaSala, 2010, p. 128), as well as a way for families to connect with one another and share their struggles. Organizations like PFLAG serve an important function on the personal, family, and political levels; they help move family members through the adjustment process in the direction of accepting and embracing their loved one and, in some cases, becoming allies for the LGBT population as a whole (Holtzen & Agresti, 1990; LaSala, 2010; Matthews & Salazar, 2012; Savage & Miller, 2011).

Typical Stages of Family Responses

The studies that have been conducted on the coming out process within families illustrate that individuals—particularly parents—tend to follow a similar trajectory with regard to their reactions to their family members' coming out as non-heterosexual. D'Augelli et al. (1998) describe the adjustment process by saying, "initial responses of shock and surprise are typical, followed by varying degrees of psychological distress" (p.

361). The literature seems to suggest a universal experience of "surprise, guilt, grief, and fear" (LaSala, 2010, p. 120) among family members immediately following their LGB loved ones' disclosure.

Stone Fish and Harvey (2005) describe the process of adjustment following an LGB young person's coming out in the family as being much like a grief process. Similarly, Savin-Williams and Dube (1998) compare the adjustment process to "the delineation of stages originally proposed by Kubler-Ross (1969) that characterize individuals facing imminent death" (p. 7). According to the authors, parents' initial experience following the disclosure is one of *shock*. They then move into a stage of *denial and isolation*, during which they refuse to believe the information, attempting to convince themselves that their child's non-heterosexuality is just a phase. The next stage, *anger*, is often characterized by disappointment, dismay, or disapproval; in some cases, this stage also includes physical abuse, rejection, or removal of the LGB youth from the home. In the *bargaining* stage, parents attempt to negotiate, or bargain, with their LGB child in order to "maintain the family secret and preserve the family's social status" (Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998, p. 8).

Parents typically move into a stage of *depression*, during which they focus on the struggles they believe their child will endure for being non-heterosexual. While the depression stage is marked by negative feelings about the LGB young person's future, it also represents parents' budding acknowledgment of their child's non-heterosexuality. The final stage, *acceptance,* occurs when the parents "have essentially completed their mourning and are able to acknowledge their circumstances—they are parents of a gay child" (Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998, p. 8).

LaSala (2010) conducted a qualitative study with gay and lesbian youth and their parents and concluded that the coming out process can be divided into four phases. The first phase, *family sensitization*, occurs "at the time children begin to recognize feeling different and attracted to members of the same sex" (LaSala, 2010, p. 8). The second phase, which LaSala dubs the *discovery* phase, refers to the actual disclosure and the youth and family members' immediate reactions to it. The third phase, *recovery*, begins "once parents begin to adjust to the news that a son is gay or a daughter is lesbian" (LaSala, 2010, p. 134). Finally, the *renewal* phase refers to "the period when families can identity the benefits of having and adjusting to an out gay child" (LaSala, 2010, p. 184). LaSala points out that not all families reach the renewal phase; some families adjust to their family member's non-heterosexual identity without ever accepting or embracing it.

Potential Risks of Coming Out in the Family

Stone Fish and Harvey (2005) articulate that "the life giving and life-threatening importance of family relationships make difficult dialogues—dialogues in which people share more about themselves in relationship than they have shared before—even more difficult" (p. 131). Accordingly, coming out in the family of origin can be terrifying for LGB young people, as well as for the family members to whom they disclose. Despite the many positive outcomes associated with coming out to family members, it is not always advisable, or even safe, for LGB youth to do so (D'Amico & Julien, 2012; Legate et al., 2012; Maguen et al., 2002). Unfavorable responses are common in most families during the earlier part of the coming out process; however, in some cases, family members remain unable to accept the LGB young person, which can lead to a number of negative outcomes.

According to Elizur and Ziv (2001), "disclosure of sexual orientation to families has been repeatedly found to be a risk factor for LGB youth" (p. 129). This remains true over a decade after the authors' assertion; many families respond to the disclosure with complete rejection, thereby compounding the many existing risk factors for LGB youth described earlier in this chapter. More recent statistics indicate that "LGB children who are rejected by their families are eight times likelier to attempt suicide and at much higher risk of winding up homeless and living on the streets" (Savage & Miller, 2011, p. 8). In response to this unfortunate reality, many young people choose to wait to come to their families until they are no longer "exclusively dependent on parents for social, emotional, and financial support" (Waldner & Magrader, 1999, p. 89).

Until heterosexism and homophobia are no longer part of the cultural climate, family rejection will continue to be a real possibility for LGB youth. Many parents experience shame as a result of their LGB child's disclosure. This is particularly true for parents who believe they are responsible for determining their child's sexuality (Armesto & Weisman, 2001; LaSala, 2010; Saltzburg, 2007; Stone Fish & Harvey, 2005). Because parents "are likely to judge their children's sexual orientation against cultural and personal standards of what is acceptable and unacceptable" (Armesto & Weisman, 2001, p. 147), there is hope that the ongoing cultural shift toward greater acceptance of non-heterosexuality in the US will result in more parents embracing their LGB children.

Gaps in the Existing Literature on the Coming Out Process in Families

The extant literature offers a useful overview of how the coming out process impacts LGB young people and their family members; nonetheless, there are many limitations associated with the studies that have been conducted, leaving a gap in the

literature that needs to be addressed for a more complete understanding of the coming out process within the family of origin. As mentioned in Chapter I, many previous studies have reduced family reactions to either full acceptance or full rejection (D'Amico & Julien, 2012; Gorman-Murray, 2008; Green, 2000; Heatherington & Lavner, 2008; Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998). However, it is necessary to explore family responses in greater depth, in order to more clearly understand the many factors that inform them. It is also important to examine coming out as an adjustment process that evolves over time, rather than focusing only on family members' immediate reactions to the disclosure (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008; LaSala, 2010)

Many of the researchers who have studied the coming out process in families have recruited participants from support groups (D'Amico & Julien, 2012; D'Augelli et al., 1998), "so it is unclear whether the results generalize beyond young people who are active in such groups" (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008, p. 338). Furthermore, a large number of studies have been based on LGB young people's perspectives about their family members' responses, without including the voices of the family members themselves (D'Augelli et al., 1998; Floyd & Stein, 2002; Hunter, 1990; Padilla et al., 2010; Saltzburg, 2007; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003; Shilo & Savaya, 2011; Willoughby et al., 2008). The studies that have incorporated multiple voices have focused almost exclusively on parents, leaving out the perspectives of siblings, grandparents, and extended family members (LaSala, 2010; Scherrer, 2011). Accordingly, Heatherington and Lavner (2008) suggest that "information about family functioning should be gathered from all family members to permit true family-level variables to be assessed and studied in conjunction with measures of the LGB offspring's well-being" (p. 338).

Because "individuals are complexly embedded in a broader family context" (Scherrer, 2011, p. 8), it is important to obtain more than just the LGB youth's perspective in order to develop a clear understanding of the relational and systemic aspects of the coming out process within families. Accordingly, this study served as an attempt to add to the existing literature by including the perspectives of the LGB youth as well as those of parents, siblings, and other members of the family of origin in order to expand on what is already known about the many ways in which the coming out process impacts the family system.

Scarcity of Family Therapy Research on Queer Families

Studies have indicated that approximately 80% of family therapists work with non-heterosexual clients in various settings, yet little research has been conducted within the family therapy field to shed light on the unique clinical needs of members of this population and their families (Bernstein, 2000; Eliason & Hughes, 2005; Green, Murphy, Bloom, & Palmanteer, 2009). As Clark and Serovich (1997) point out, "Family therapy scholars can and do interact with gay, lesbian, and bisexual people and are ethically bound to respond knowledgeably, competently, and with some degree of understanding and compassion" (p. 249). Because of their understanding of the importance of context and their attention to the systemic and relational aspects of clients' experiences, family therapists are perfectly positioned to competently and compassionately work with families adjusting to the coming out of one of their members. However, the general lack of emphasis within the field on queer families has the potential to limit family therapists from aptly addressing the complex and quickly evolving needs of this population.

According to Green (2000), "Very little of the published research [on LGB youth and their families] has appeared in the family therapy journals, and few family therapists are aware of it" (p. 258). The dearth of research on queer families within the family therapy field is apparent, as is the need for studies that explore the experiences of these families within our current context. Padilla, Crisp, and Rew (2010) suggest there is a lack of research on the ways in which families affect the risk and resilience of LGB youth. The authors make the point that "despite the importance of family support to promote the health and wellbeing of LGBT youth, most programs and providers serve them as individuals, rather than members of families and communities" (Padilla et al., 2010, p. 273). The significance of family support for LGB youth is well documented (Green, 2000; Heatherington & Lavner, 2008; LaSala, 2010; Padilla et al., 2010; Stone Fish & Harvey, 2005), yet a great deal of research is still needed to identify the factors that contribute to the adjustment process for the youth and the family members to whom they disclose their LGB identity.

Heatherington and Lavner (2008) identified a general lack of systemic focus in the scholarly literature on the coming out experiences of LGB youth and their families. According to the authors, more family-systems-based studies need to be conducted in order to provide therapists "with a complex gestalt of interconnecting family dynamics and allow for a more informed systemic approach to clinical work with families of LGB persons" (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008, p. 338). The proposed study is expected to fill the gap in the existing literature by reflecting the experiences of LGB youth and their family members who are "coming to terms with the coming out" (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008, p. 329).

Existing Clinical Approaches for Working with LGB Youth and Families During

the Coming Out Process

Despite the need for more scholarly literature on the coming out process within families, some clinicians have endeavored to create approaches to therapy with LGB young people—and, in some cases, their families—during the coming out process. For example, Joe Kort, a clinical social worker and sexologist, specializes in what he refers to as *gay affirmative therapy*. According to Kort (2008), gay affirmative therapy "explores the trauma, shame, alienation, isolation, and neglect that occur to lesbians and gays as children" (p. 19). Similarly, McGeorge and Carlson (2011) promote an *LGB affirmative* approach to therapy, which involves "examining the ways in which heterosexism has shaped heterosexual therapists' personal and professional lives" (p. 16). Both affirmative approaches promote "the need for heterosexual therapists to become more aware of the influence of their own heteronormative assumptions, heterosexual privileges, and heterosexual identities on their personal and professional lives" (McGeorge & Carlson, 2011, p. 24); however, neither one directly addresses the coming out process within families.

There is a notable absence of therapy models designed specifically for working with LGB young people and their family members as they traverse the coming out process. This is especially true within the family therapy field. Stone Fish and Harvey (2005) explore the general absence of family therapy approaches for working with families during the coming out process and assert:

> Family therapists are in the eye of the storm. Although as a professional culture
> we may have begun to move away from blatant pathologizing of homosexuality,

the family therapy field seems to be in an uneasy truce, especially when it comes to the treatment of children in family contexts. The field's stance appears to be one of managing homosexuality or coping with it. (p. 26)

In response to the need for greater emphasis within the family therapy field on working with families in the coming out process, Stone Fish and Harvey (2005) describe their own clinical work with such families. They emphasize the importance of creating a crucible, or refuge, for families, which they describe as "the process of organizing a therapeutic environment in which family members are able to have access to their burgeoning thoughts and feelings about themselves and others so that they can grow and develop in intimate relationships" (pp. 123-124). Similarly, LaSala (2010) suggests that "therapists, whether they are gay or straight, can model for their client families the importance of tolerance and acceptance by making sure their offices are welcoming places" (p. 46).

The writings of Stone Fish and Harvey (2005) and LaSala (2010) offer useful guidelines for family therapists addressing the coming out process in a relational context. They emphasize the importance of therapists examining their biases and assumptions, encouraging productive dialogue among family members, honoring family members' multiple perspectives, and modeling tolerance and acceptance for family members who struggle with the disclosure (LaSala, 2010; Stone Fish & Harvey, 2005). But despite these clinicians' useful contributions, the family therapy field has been slow to adopt and promote clinical approaches that improve family therapists' preparedness to work with LGB youth and their family members who seek family therapy as a way to adaptively adjust to their new family identity.

Significance of the Proposed Study for the Field of Family Therapy

By grounding this study in the lived experiences of contemporary LGB youth and their family members, I propose to offer family therapists a valuable opportunity to assume an LGB affirmative posture when working with families in the coming out adjustment process. Research has indicated that LGB individuals are approximately two to four times more likely than heterosexual individuals to seek therapy (Barrett & McWhirter, 2002; Carroll & Gilroy, 2002), so "LGB clients are a significant part of the average caseload" of most practicing therapists (Murphy, Rawlings, & Howe, 2002, p. 187). Because of their systemic and relational focus, family therapists are well positioned to work with LGB clients along with the members of their family to whom they are out. This presents a vital need for family therapists to provide competent, ethically sound services to queer families, approaching their work with a balance of understanding and curiosity (Long & Serovich, 2003). This study is intended to provide valuable information about the "family adjustment trajectory" (LaSala, 2010, p. 120) that family therapists can incorporate in their clinical practice.

Although "family therapy has been slow to address [LGB] needs in practice, theory, and research" (Green et al., 2009, p. 160), the shift in our general culture toward more acceptance of non-heterosexuality must serve as a clarion call for the field to prepare therapists to work skillfully with LGB clients and their families. While family therapists can potentially play an invaluable role in queer families' process of adjustment (LaSala, 2010; Stone Fish & Harvey, 2005), there is a need for more research within the family therapy field on the coming out process in families to support therapists' practice (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008). This study is expected to contribute to family

therapists' understanding of LGB individuals and the impact of their coming out on the family system.

Summary

This chapter provided a historically and culturally situated overview of the existing literature on LGB individuals, focusing in particular on the coming out experience and its reverberations within the family system. The literature reviewed for this chapter will contribute to the interview questions used in this study, further enriching the study's results. In Chapter III, I present the methodology for this study, including information about the proposed sample, the expected data collection methods, and the IPA approach I intend to employ.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This study was designed to address the following research question: *How do LGB young people and their families adjust following the young person's disclosure of non-heterosexual identity?* To effectively answer this question, I incorporated the voices of LGB young people and their family members who went through the coming out process and were willing to share their stories. In this chapter, I present a justification for using the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach to address the research question guiding this study. I discuss the inclusion criteria for participants and describe the sampling methods I utilized. I then present a brief overview of the data collection and data analysis methods I employed. Finally, I discuss the ethical issues relevant to the study and describe my role as the researcher.

Qualitative Research

Hays and Singh (2012) define qualitative research as "the study of a phenomenon or research topic in context" (p. 4). As a family therapist informed by systems theories, I recognize that "all behavior makes sense, or is logical, within a given context" (Becvar & Becvar, 1998, p. 19). Accordingly, I believe it is important to conduct research that is mindful of the context in which participants are situated, in order to arrive at a richer, more complex understanding of the research phenomenon. Qualitative research presents an opportunity to explore the experiences of research participants in context through the process of "description, attention to process, and collaboration within a social structure and its people" (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 4). My intention for the proposed study was to arrive at a contextually grounded understanding of the experiences of LGB young people

and the family members who have traversed the coming out process with them. As such, a qualitative design was most appropriate.

Hays and Signh (2012) contend that "qualitative inquiry is well suited to bridge the gap between research and practice within a particular discipline" (p. 5). As mentioned previously, this study is expected to contribute to the field of family therapy by providing useful information about the coming out process from the perspective of LGB young people and the family members with whom they have navigated that process. Accordingly, I used a phenomenological approach in order to capture the unique lived experiences of the LGB young people and family members who shared their coming out stories with me.

Phenomenological Qualitative Research

Phenomenological research represents an attempt to get as close as possible to the personal experience of the research participant (Smith et al., 2009). As Findlay (2011) puts it, "the aim of phenomenology is to describe the lived world of everyday experience" (p. 10). Like most qualitative research methods, phenomenology is concerned with capturing description and detail; its central focus is deriving a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon under study as it is situated within the context of the participants' lives. Furthermore, the questions explored in phenomenological research are directed toward meaning rather than difference or causality (Smith et al., 20090).

The present study was designed to generate a rich, nuanced understanding of the coming out experience in families through the perspectives of individuals who have lived this experience. As such, the phenomenological tradition of qualitative research presents a good epistemological and methodological fit for this study. Findlay (2011) aptly

articulates the power of phenomenological research by describing it as "*transformative*

for both researcher and participant" (p. 10). She goes on to say that this form of research

"offers individuals the opportunity to be *witnessed* in their experience and allows them to

'*give voice'* to what they are going through. It also opens new possibilities for both

researcher and researched to *make sense of* the experience in focus" (Findlay, 2011, p.

10).

The notion of making sense of the experience under study is central to

phenomenological research. As a qualitative research approach, phenomenology is

focused not only on mere experience, but also on how the individuals who have lived the

experience make sense of it (Findlay, 2011; Smith et al., 2009). As a researcher, my

primary interest was in making sense of how the participants in this study make sense of

their coming out experience; therefore, I chose to use the interpretative phenomenological

analysis (IPA) approach as the mode of inquiry for this study.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

The IPA research method, which was formally developed in the 1990s, was

designed as a specific approach to qualitative research aimed at capturing accounts of

subjective experience (Rose, 2013). This post-positive research approach is centered on

three main philosophical traditions: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography

(Rose, 2013; Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2008). Each of the philosophical

underpinnings of IPA exerts significant influence on the approach, lending to its utility.

Phenomenology. Phenomenology—which is best described as "a philosophical

approach to the study of experience" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 11)—draws from the work of

four major phenomenological philosophers: Husserl, Heidegger, Merleu-Ponty, and

Satre. These philosophers emphasize the significance of experience and its subjective nature; although each takes a unique position, the primary intersection among the four philosophies is the human being's way of knowing about the world. These phenomenological assumptions contribute to the IPA approach by illustrating that "the complex understanding of 'experience' invokes a lived process, an unfurling of perspectives and meanings, which are unique to the person's embodied and situated relationship to the world" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 21).

Hermeneutics. The second major theoretical underpinning of the IPA approach is hermeneutics, the theory of interpretation (Smith et al., 2009). Hermeneutic theorists are primarily concerned with the context of a text's origins and the context of its interpretation. According to Schleirmacher—a philosopher whose work has contributed to the theory of hermeneutics—researchers act as interpreters, and their interpretations of research participants' experiences often exceed and subsume the explicit claims of the participants themselves (Rose, 2013; Smith et al., 2009). Gadamer, another contributor to hermeneutic theory, suggests that researchers often come to understand their biases and preconceptions of a research phenomenon through the process of interpreting the research data (Smith et al., 2009).

Due to its influence from hermeneutics, IPA researchers write first-person accounts of the research study, acknowledging and claiming their biases and reactions to the data. Hermeneutics operate at many levels throughout the research process. At the basic hermeneutic level, participants make sense of their experience; at the second hermeneutic level, the researcher makes sense of the participants' making sense of their

experience; at the third hermeneutic level, the reader makes sense of the researcher making sense of the participants' making sense of their experience (Smith et al., 2009).

One of the most central ideas to the theory of hermeneutics is that of the hermeneutic circle. This concept is primarily concerned with the relationship between the part and the whole (Bontekoe, 1996). It presumes that "to understand any given part, you look to the whole; to understand the whole, you look to the parts" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 28). As it pertains to IPA research, the hermeneutic circle comes into effect when the meaning of a participant's words can only be understood within the context of the whole interview, or when that one interview takes on new meaning when interpreted within the context of the entire research project. The process of data analysis in IPA research is iterative in nature; the researcher moves back and forth in many different ways as he or she interprets the data. This nonlinear approach to data analysis is founded on the principle of the hermeneutic circle. It offers the IPA researcher a rich, relational way to make sense of the research data.

Idiography. The third major influence on IPA research is idiography, a tradition that is concerned with the particular (Rose, 2013; Smith et al., 2009). This influence is evident in IPA's commitment to "understanding how particular experiential phenomena (an event, process, or relationship) have been understood from the perspective of a particular people, in a particular context" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 29). Although idiography emphasizes the particular, it does not eschew generalizations. As such, the IPA research process often moves from the particular experiences of a small sample to more abstract generalizations about the phenomenon under study.

Key Features of the IPA Approach

The IPA approach is committed to the exploration, description, and interpretation of participants' lived experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2008). In particular, IPA researchers set out to explore how participants make sense of their experience. In order to do this, the researcher must access rich, personal accounts of the phenomenon under study. With regard to the research question, IPA research is best suited to explore questions that focus on personal meaning and sense making among people who share a particular experience, in a particular context (Rose, 2013). As Smith and Osborn (2008) explain, "IPA is a suitable approach when one is trying to find out how individuals are perceiving the particular situations they are facing, how they are making sense of their personal and social world" (p. 55). Research questions in IPA studies should avoid a priori theoretical assumptions; instead, they should be directed towards meaning and detail (Smith et al., 2009).

In IPA research, participants are selected according to how closely they represent a particular perspective, rather than by how much they represent a particular population (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2008). As such, IPA researchers are primarily concerned with recruiting participants who can grant them access to valuable and personal perceptions about the phenomenon under study. Because IPA research is used to explore detailed accounts of individual experience, the issue is quality rather than quantity. In other words, IPA research can be conducted with a small number of participants and still generate rich, meaningful data. It is suggested that the ideal sample size for IPA studies is between three and six participants (Smith et al., 2009).

Participants

As indicated in the preceding chapters, this study was designed as an attempt to fill a gap in the existing research literature on the coming out experiences of LGB young people within their families of origin. Many of the previous studies on the coming out process within families have been based on retrospective accounts from LGB adults about their coming out experiences; others have involved LGB young people reporting on their experiences and conjecturing about the experiences of their family members. Those studies that have included family members of LGB young people have largely excluded their LGB loved ones. While previous studies have offered valuable insight into the coming out experience within the family context, they have not generated family systems-based information about the coming out process that can aid family therapists working with families adjusting to their loved ones' disclosure and their new queer family identity. Because my intention in conducting this study was to fill this significant gap in the literature, I recruited LGB young people and their family members for participation in the study, offering more rich and inclusive data. A total of three families participated in the study.

Inclusion Criteria for Participants

In order to aptly contribute to the gap in the existing literature and address the question of how LGB young people and their families adjust following the young person's disclosure of non-heterosexual identity, I developed specific inclusion criteria for participation in this study. First, participants fell into two categories: (1) LGB young person or (2) family member of LGB young person. Each LGB young person who agreed to participate in the study recruited one person from his or her family of origin who was

also willing to participate. This criterion was essential to the study, as it allowed me to derive more complex, family-systems-based data about the coming out adjustment process for the participants. I chose not to specify the particular family members who participated in the study along with their LGB loved ones in an effort to generate more inclusive and representative data.

As mentioned in Chapter I, only LGB young people over age 18 were included in this study. I set this inclusion criterion for both theoretical and ethical purposes. Because the average age of disclosure within families is 16 (Matthews & Salazar, 2012), LGB individuals who are age 18 or older are theoretically more likely to have been out for at least a year. Therefore, they and their family members are able to reflect on the initial disclosure, as well as discuss how the family adjustment process has evolved over time. From an ethical perspective, limiting inclusion to LGB individuals over the age of 18 minimizes the potential risk of participating in the study, as young people under 18 may be more vulnerable or susceptible to harm and discomfort as a result of participating. I chose to implement a cutoff age of 24 for the LGB young people who agreed to participate in the study. This was based on my assumption that participants in their mid-20s and older are more likely to be embedded in non-familial social settings or intimate relationships that will serve as a potentially distorting lens through which they recall their experiences with coming out in their families of origin.

As mentioned previously, I required that the LGB young people in the study were out to their family members for a minimum of one year at the time of our interviews. This criterion was put in place to help ensure a shared foundation for the experiences of the participating families. The only inclusion criterion for the family members of the LGB

young people in the study was that they were over 18 years of age at the time of our

interviews.

Participant Recruitment

Former studies on issues pertaining to the sexual minority population have noted

the difficulty of finding individuals who are willing to participate. Because LGB young

people are part of a population that remains marginalized, I anticipated that it would be

challenging to recruit participants for the proposed study. Other researchers have

attempted to overcome this challenge by recruiting participants from LGBT support

groups and organizations. However, I chose not to use this recruitment method, as it

introduces the possibility that the results of the research only reflect the experiences of

individuals who have actively sought support and resources. In an effort to obtain a

diverse sample of LGB young people who have had a range of experiences with regard to

their coming out process, I began my recruitment efforts by incorporating three main

strategies.

First, I utilized my relationship with the Executive Director of a non-profit

organization called *I'm From Driftwood*—which collects the stories of LGBTQ

individuals throughout the country—to attempt to access LGB young people who might

be willing to share their stories for this study. I sent my recruitment flyer (Appendix A) to

members of the *I'm From Driftwood* community through emails and online forum posts

but did not receive any responses. My second recruitment strategy was to solicit

participants through the student associations and list serves of colleges and universities.

Based on my intention to obtain a sample that is representative of LGB young people and

families throughout the US, I attempted to recruit participants from several schools

throughout the country with the hope of obtaining a more diverse sample. However, I was not able to recruit any participants this way, as the emails I distributed through university list serves went largely unanswered.

The third strategy that I initially designed for participant recruitment was to post advertisements on Facebook as well as some online forums, including gayteenforum.org and emptyclosets.com. Although I received several responses using this method, none of the individuals who contacted me met the inclusion criteria for participation. After attempting to recruit participants using the three initial methods I devised, I began to explore new strategies for bringing participants into the study. I posted a message about the study in eight separate groups on the professional networking website *LinkedIn*. Although I received several responses, only two of the people who contacted me met the criteria for participation, and neither of them responded to my follow-up inquiry. I then began to send emails and make phone calls to many of my personal contacts. This method proved to be most successful, as several people in my personal and professional networks put me in contact with LGB young people who met criteria for the study. Through this word-of-mouth method of recruitment, I was able to obtain my sample for the study.

Consistent with the tenets of the IPA approach, my recruitment efforts were aimed at obtaining participants who could offer insight into the coming out process within the family. To do this, I engaged in purposive sampling in order to obtain a sample of families that could grant me access to their particular perspectives on the coming out process. According to Smith et al. (2009), "IPA researchers usually try to find a fairly homogeneous sample, for whom the research question will be meaningful" (p. 49).

Accordingly, I did not recruit participants randomly, but rather on the basis of their experience with the central phenomenon of the study. I was not interested in generating a sample of participants that is representative of all queer families in the US; instead, I aimed to interview LGB young people and members of their families who could give voice to their particular experiences with the coming out process.

The Participating Families

A total of six individuals participated in the study, making up a total of three families. I created pseudonyms for the participants to protect their privacy and used them in all transcripts and written materials. I refer to the participants according to their pseudonyms throughout the study.

Family number one. The first LGB young person to participate in the study was a 24-year-old male, Logan, who presently resides in the Western part of the US. He is White, Jewish, and identifies as gay. At the time of our interview, Logan had been out to his family members for almost a decade. He came out to each of his family members separately. Logan recruited his older brother, Isaac, to participate in the study with him. Isaac also currently lives and works in the Western part of the country. I conducted my interviews with Isaac and Logan via Skype.

Family number two. The second family that participated in the study was comprised of Lauren, a 22-year-old Hispanic female who identifies as lesbian, and her older sister, Katrina. Lauren and Katrina grew up together in the Northeast with their older sister and two parents. They were raised in a traditional Hispanic family centered on strong family values and a Catholic belief system. Lauren and Katrina presently share an apartment in a Southern US state. I conducted my interviews with them via Skype.

Family number three. The third LGB young person who agreed to participate in the study was Samantha, a 24-year-old White female who identifies as gay. She participated along with her mother, Janet. Although they live in separate cities, Samantha and Janet both presently reside in the same Southern US state. Samantha, who is an only child, grew up living with both of her parents until they divorced when she was 13. She then lived with Janet until she moved out of the house at 18 years old. I was able to conduct my individual interview with Samantha in person. I conducted my individual interview with Janet via Skype, and for our conjoint interview, Samantha and I met in person and contacted Janet together through Skype.

Data Collection

Family Interviews

Once I recruited the first participants for the study and obtained their signed consent to participate, I began to set up the interviews. Since I did not intend to obtain a representative sample, I aimed to include a small group of participants with the common experience of coming out within the family of origin. I used this purposive sampling to recruit the three LGB young people in the study. Each of those young people then invited a member of each of their nuclear families to participate with them.

Although IPA research is intended to focus on a homogeneous sample, I wanted the sample to represent the voices of LGB young people; as such, I originally set out with the intention of including one participant who identifies as gay, one who identifies as lesbian, and one who identifies as bisexual. However, I quickly found that the people I was speaking with about their potential participation in the study did not identify themselves in terms of these distinct categories. Instead, they described their sexual

orientation in a less restrictive way and, in a couple of cases, even mentioned that they

prefer not to use labels to define themselves. This was a delightful surprise for me, as it

corresponded with much of the current literature that describes the more fluid way in

which modern LGB young people identify their sexual orientation (APA, 2008; Fedders,

2006; LaSala, 2010; Savin-Williams, 2005). The three LGB young people who

participated in this study represent a range and diversity of sexual identity; they include a

24-year-old male who identifies as gay, a 24-year-old female who identifies as gay but

previously identified as bisexual, and a 22-year-old female who identifies as lesbian.

The vast majority of the studies that have been conducted with queer families

have been based on data collected from individual interviews with each of the

participating family members. While the results of such studies have yielded valuable

information, I conjectured that including conjoint interviews with multiple family

members would allow for a more relational understanding of the dynamics of the coming

out process within the family system. Heatherington and Lavner (2008) support this

perspective, claiming that interviews about the coming out process within families should

incorporate the voices of multiple family members, in order to "permit true family-level

variables to be assessed and studied in conjunction with measures of the LGB offspring's

[experience]" (p. 338). Accordingly, I conducted a one-on-one interview with each of the

participating LGB young people and a separate one-on-one interview with each of their

participating family members. After completing both of those interviews, I conducted a

conjoint interview with each LGB young person and his/her family member. By

conducting three interviews with each participating family, I was able to gather multiple

perspectives and derive a more relational view of the coming out process in families.

In-Depth, Semi-Structured Interviews

Because phenomenological research is interested in experience, the IPA researcher is tasked with exploring the experience under study through purposeful conversations that privilege the participants' unique perspectives. The IPA approach is aimed at designing "data collection events which elicit detailed stories, thoughts and feelings from the participant" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 57). As such, in-depth, semi-structured interviews are the preferred means of data collection in IPA research.

According to Hays and Singh (2012), semi-structured interviews have the advantage of "including more participant voice, as appropriate, to provide a richer picture of a phenomenon under investigation" (p. 239). This aspect of the semi-structured approach fits well with the theoretical assumptions of the IPA approach. The IPA researcher is interested in engaging each participant in a dialogue. In this dialogue, the researcher's questions are modified in light of participants' responses, and the researcher is able to follow up on any interesting topics that arise during the course of the interview. Using the semi-structured approach allowed me to ask similar questions of all the participants, while also enabling me to respond flexibly to the unique responses each participant shared. I found that despite basing my interview on a prepared list of questions, I was able to engage in a casual dialogue with the participants that flowed naturally while yielding a great deal of valuable information.

Since I conducted three interviews with each participating family, I developed three separate interview schedules (Appendix B). One schedule consisted of questions for my interviews with the LGB young people, another contained questions for my interviews with the family members, and a third schedule was comprised of questions for

the conjoint interviews I conducted with the young people and their family members.

Some of the questions I asked the LGB young people included:

- How did you decide when to come out to your family?

- Can you tell me about your feelings before, during, and immediately after you first came out to your family?

- What sense do you have of how your family members experienced your coming out?

Some of the questions I asked the family members included:

- What was it like for you when you learned that [your loved one] is gay/lesbian/bisexual?

- In what ways has your relationship with [your loved one] changed since he/she came out?

The questions I asked in the conjoint interviews included:

- If you could change any aspect of what happened in your family during the coming out process, what would it be? What would you keep the same?

- If you could offer any information or advice to other families adjusting to a family member's coming out, what would it be?

The questions listed above served merely as a framework for the interviews; through the interactive, co-created context of each interview, I was able to spontaneously derive additional questions to obtain meaningful data that contributed to the study.

The majority of the individuals who participated in the study did not reside in my local area. I conducted my interviews with those participants via Skype and found that using this online communication website enabled me to conduct high quality virtual

interviews. Apart from a couple of minor technology glitches, the participants and I were able to see and hear one another clearly. Furthermore, conducting the long-distance interviews through this video format enabled me to pick up on the participants' facial expressions and body language throughout the interviews. Every other aspect of the interviews that I conducted via Skype, including the interview schedule and audio recording procedures, remained the same.

Data Preparation

Throughout each of the interviews, I made notes of participants' nonverbal communication and other contextual information relevant to our conversations. These notes served to augment the data, as well as remind me of pertinent aspects of the shared reality I created with the families in each interview (Breckenridge, Jones, Elliot, & Nicol, 2012). I received consent from the participants to record our interviews and used two audio recording devices to ensure that the recording would still be captured if one of the devices malfunctioned. I saved the audio recordings on a flash drive, which I stored in a locked cabinet in my home office. After each interview, I transcribed the audio recording using the Express Scribe transcript software, and produced a written account of the interview to use for coding and analysis. The process of transcription helped me become more intimately familiar with the data I collected from each of the interviews. This familiarity aided in the data analysis process.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in IPA research is "an iterative process of fluid description and engagement with the transcript. It involves flexible thinking, process of reduction, expansion, revision, creativity and innovation" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 81). After

conducting each interview, I listened to the audio recording several times and reviewed any handwritten notes I took during the interview. I then transcribed the audio recording into Microsoft Word. Using the Track Changes feature, I filled the margin with my initial reactions, assumptions, curiosities, and interpretations to the chunks of transcribed data. From these initial comments, I derived the primary themes. Although data analysis is intended to be a flexible, fluid process, Smith et al. (2009) outline a series of steps that serve to aid the novice IPA researcher. I engaged in these steps as I moved through the process of analyzing the data from my interviews with the participants in this study.

Step 1: Reading and Rereading

The purpose of this first step is for the researcher to immerse him or herself in the original data. Before engaging in this step of analysis, I listened to the audio recording of each interview several times, in order to re-live, as much as possible, the original interview experience. Once I transcribed the interview, I read the transcript several times, taking notes on my recollections of the interview experience and my reactions to the participant's responses. This step is intended to help the researcher enter the participant's world while resisting the temptation to jump to conclusions or make reductive assumptions about the data. I engaged in this initial step with each individual transcript.

Step 2: Initial Noting

The second step in IPA data analysis involves the researcher writing notes on each transcript that are augmented with subsequent readings of the text. In essence, the first two steps of analysis merge in practice, as the researcher simultaneously reads the transcript and takes notes. In an attempt to stay with the theoretical assumptions of IPA research, I wrote notes that were interpretative in nature, aimed at helping me understand

the participant's experience in context. I tried to write *descriptive comments* by taking participant's responses at face value; *linguistic comments* to focus on how participant's words convey meaning; and *conceptual comments* to shift my focus to the participant's understanding of the research phenomenon. By attending to language and getting curious about any abstract concepts that arose in each interview, I attempted to position myself to make sense of the participant's sense-making.

Step 3: Developing Emergent Themes

The third step of IPA analysis requires the researcher to begin moving from the concrete to the abstract. It involves focusing on discrete chunks of the transcript while also taking into account the notes and comments written throughout the transcript. This step involves interpretation, and it represents a manifestation of the hermeneutic circle. According to Smith et al. (2009), "the original whole of the interview becomes a set of parts as you conduct your analysis, but these then come together in another new whole at the end of the analysis in the write-up" (p. 91). When working on this step of analysis, I created a table with three columns to illustrate each chunk of data from the transcript, my initial comments on that data, and the theme that emerged from my interpretation of the participant's original account. This process helped me to identify themes in each transcript that reflect the participant's original words, while also incorporating my interpretations of those words.

Step 4: Searching for Connections Across Emergent Themes

In this step, the researcher draws together existing themes and organizes them according to the patterns and connections among them. There are many different ways to look for patterns among emergent themes. I did so by printing a list of the themes that I

derived from each interview, cutting those themes out into small strips of paper, and arranging those strips of paper into various configurations based on the relationships among the themes. I took my time on this step, exploring the various ways in which the themes relate to one another. This was the most complex and challenging part of the data analysis process, as it required me to move further away from the participant's original words and rely heavily on my own interpretation to flexibly organize and connect the various themes.

Step 5: Moving to the Next Case

This step in the data analysis process involves moving to the next transcript and repeating the process of the first four steps. In IPA research, each individual case is explored in-depth, on its own terms. It was challenging for me to focus on each transcript and engage in the first four steps of analysis before moving on to the next case. As Smith et al. (2009) point out, when moving to the next case, the researcher is inevitably influenced by what he or she has already found in the previous transcript(s). In an effort to bracket the ideas that emerged from my review of the other interviews, I kept a journal in which I wrote notes about thoughts that would arise about previous interviews or connections that I was making between each individual interview and the composite of all the interviews I had conducted up to that point. This journaling process helped me to maintain my focus on the transcript at hand. I found that when working on this step of the data analysis, I moved frequently between highlighting chunks of data, writing comments, deriving themes, and taking notes in my journal.

Step 6: Looking for Patterns Across Cases

In the sixth and final step of data analysis, the researcher looks for patterns across the themes derived from each case. To do this, I used a large poster board to arrange all of the themes I derived from the nine interviews. This enabled me to see the relationships among the themes and, therefore, to generate some information about how the participants' unique accounts connected with one another. It also helped me to subsume the themes under a higher level of organization, thus developing a series of primary themes and corresponding sub-themes. My work on this step was more than a surface-level arranging of themes; it involved interpretation and required me to develop theoretical connections among the various themes.

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Validity and Quality of the Study

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According to Smith et al. (2009) the validity of a qualitative study cannot be measured using the same criteria used to assess quantitative research. As Yardley (2008) points out, objectivity, reliability, and statistical generalizability are often inappropriately applied to qualitative studies. However, although the criteria used to evaluate quantitative research cannot be applied to qualitative studies, it is important to determine the validity and quality of an IPA study in order to demonstrate its value in shining light on a particular research phenomenon. Yardley outlines four principles that can be used to assess the quality of a qualitative study. The first, *sensitivity to context*, is demonstrated in IPA research through the researcher's awareness and dedication. In conducting this study, I remained attuned and sensitive to the data, recognizing it as a reflection of participants' unique experiences. When reflecting on the data and conducting data

analysis, I remained mindful of the context in which each participant's contributions was situated.

Yardley's (2008) second principle, *commitment and rigor* can be demonstrated in many ways in IPA research. In the case of this study, I was committed to ensuring that my participants felt comfortable during all stages of the research process. I was also committed to attending closely to the participants' words and staying close to the original data when conducting my analysis. I demonstrated rigor—which refers to the thoroughness of a study—by conducting thorough, in-depth interviews with all of the participants. Furthermore, I engaged in a rigorous process of data analysis; I carefully engaged in each step of data analysis, balancing my view of the particular participant accounts with my understanding of the emerging results as a whole.

The third principle proposed by Yardley (2008) is *transparency and coherence.* It refers to how clearly the researcher describes the research process and how coherently the themes fit together. Although this was my first attempt at conducting IPA research, I believe I have satisfied this principle by detailing each step of the research process and thoughtfully connecting the research themes to present the results that appear in Chapter IV. I aimed to make clear how I conducted this study and generated the final results. Yardley's final broad principle, *impact and importance,* is used to measure the real validity of a study. It is a question of whether a study informs the reader and offers useful results. It is my hope that the present study is true to this principle and is, therefore, a valid piece of qualitative research.

Ethical Issues

As with any study involving human studies, it was necessary for me to attend to the relevant ethical issues. Accordingly, I did not begin to solicit participants or collect data until I received full approval from the Nova Southeastern University Institutional Review Board (IRB). Upon being approved, I began the research process with mindful consideration for the safety and wellbeing of my participants. This included ensuring that the participants clearly understood the nature of the study and what was going to be asked of them. These details were explained in the Informed Consent form (Appendix C) that each participant signed before beginning the study. I let participants know that their involvement in the study would be completely voluntary, and that they would be able to withdraw at any point, with no penalty to them. Since I did not compensate the participants in this study, I clearly outlined the potential intangible benefits of participating, as well as the possible risks.

Since the coming out experience can be fraught with fear, pain, estrangement, and a host of other unpleasant emotions, I anticipated that some participants might experience discomfort as a result of participating in the study. I attempted to attend to such discomfort by conducting the interviews with the same empathy and patience I use in my work as a therapist, giving space for participants to take their time and respond in whatever ways allow them to feel safe. However, I was mindful of staying in the role of researcher and not acting as a therapist in my exchanges with participants. As I anticipated, the family interviews added an additional layer of complexity, particularly on the occasions when my interview questions prompted family members to discuss aspects of their coming out experience that they had not previously addressed with one another.

When conducting these interviews, I remained aware of the reality that I was intervening in the participating families' lives and contributing in some way to their coming out adjustment process. By making conscious efforts to remain sensitive to this, I positioned myself to better ensure the participants' safety and comfort.

The Informed Consent document signed by the participants in this study explained that if a participant were to experience extreme discomfort and choose not to continue with the study, I would promptly conclude the interview and discard any records taken for that participant up to that point in time. In addition, I let the participants know—both verbally and in the Informed Consent document—that if they wanted to speak with a professional about any discomfort experienced during their participation in the study, I would offer the names of therapists in the local area whom they could contact for an appointment. Neither of these scenarios occurred with any of the participants in the study. Rather, they were all open and eager to participate in the interviews and share their lived experiences with me.

Self of the Researcher

According to Heggen and Guillemin (2012), "Reflexivity is a concept that is well-known in qualitative research, where researchers are urged to seriously consider their role and its impact on the research process" (p. 473). As I mentioned in Chapter I, my position as the researcher is something I have considered throughout the process of conceptualizing and carrying out this study. It is something that informed how I engaged with participants and how I interpreted the data. Although the ultimate purpose of any phenomenological study is to shed light on participants' lived experiences, the

researcher's role must be considered. What I brought to this study is meaningful, as it inevitably merged with the participants' voices in significant ways.

My choice of the IPA approach for this study was, in part, influenced by the notion that the product of a phenomenological study is not only situated in the participants' experiences but also "co-constructed in the interaction between the viewer and the viewed, the researcher and the participant" (Breckenridge et al., 2012, p. 67). This form of research is, as its name reveals, interpretative in nature. My personal and professional experiences with the coming out process, along with my engagement with the existing literature on the subject, influenced my interactions with the participants and the data in this study.

Bias is inevitable in any form of qualitative research; it is something to be mindful of, not something to be avoided. In phenomenological research, bracketing is an integral part of the research process. It involves the researcher setting aside his or her biases and assumptions in order to be open to hearing and understanding the participants' experience on its own terms (Smith et al., 2009). From the initial contact with each participant to the final steps of the data analysis process, I engaged in bracketing in order to ensure that the results of this study are not mired in any of my personal ideas, beliefs, or suppositions. I did so by maintaining a journal throughout all aspects of the research process. By writing down the thoughts and ideas that spontaneously arose for me throughout the process, I was able to set aside my personal views and biases in an effort to be open to the unique experiences of the participants in this study.

As Mills et al. (2006) point out, "Researchers, in their 'humanness,' are part of the research endeavor rather than objective observers, and their values must be

acknowledged by themselves and by their readers as an inevitable part of the outcome"
(p. 26). Recognizing my role in the research process, I was able to acknowledge my
preconceptions at all points of the research process and bracket them as best I could by
maintaining a personal journal. My focus was on illuminating the complex and nuanced
facets of the coming out process, as lived by the participants who share their stories with
me.

Summary

In this chapter, I offered an overview of the methodology for this study. I
described the IPA approach and outlined how I followed it while conducting this study. I
also discussed the methods I used to recruit and interview participants while preserving
their privacy and safety. By attending to ethical issues and remaining adherent to the
tenets of constructivist grounded theory research, I aimed to produce a trustworthy study
that can serve as a contribution to the field of family therapy, offering valuable insight
into the coming out experiences of LGB young people and their families. In Chapter IV I
present the findings from the study, using extracts from my interviews with the
participants to demonstrate the various themes and sub-themes I derived from my
analysis.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

Coming out is a unique event that is different for everyone who goes through it. This is especially true when it comes to the experience of coming out within one's family of origin. The individuals who lent their voices to this study shared valuable perspectives about the family adjustment process that occurs after a family member discloses a non-heterosexual identity. This chapter illustrates the primary themes that I derived from my analysis of the captivating stories shared with me by the participants of this study. Table 1 displays each of the primary themes, along with the sub-themes subsumed under each one. Throughout the chapter, I elucidate the meaning of the themes by including excerpts from the original data. I weave the participants' original voices through my own description of the themes and sub-themes in an effort to illuminate the lived experience of the family adjustment process.

The excerpts that are shared in this chapter represent multiple perspectives—those of the LGB young people in the study, and those of the family members who participated with them. I conducted three interviews with each family and asked a different set of questions in each one. However, in my analysis I found that common themes emerged across participant category and interview type. In other words, there was convergence among the data from my interviews with the LGB young people, my interviews with the family members, and the conjoint interviews I conducted with the LGB young people along with their respective family members. I chose not to make any arbitrary distinctions and instead allowed myself to derive themes irrespective of where the data originated. The themes and sub-themes I present and illustrate in this chapter emerged from my

analysis of the composite data and are representative of the perspectives shared by the

participants in all of the interview configurations.

Table 1. *Primary Themes and Sub-Themes*

Primary Theme	Sub-Themes
Coming Out: What It Is and What It Isn't	• Just One Family Issue Among Others • A Complex, Emotional Experience • Coming Out As a Process, Not an Event
Coming Out to Self: The Developmental Self-Discovery Process	• Sensitization • Identity Confusion • Identity Assumption • Commitment
Testing the Waters: The Initial Phase of Disclosure	• Practicing with Peers • Bisexuality As a Transitional Identity Label • Coming Out First to Closest Family Member • The Lower the Stakes, the Lower the Stress • The Importance of Perceived Safety
Family Member Reactions: Many Shades	• Vast Space Between Acceptance

of Gray	and Rejection
	• Shift in Heteronormative Expectations
	• Lack of Uniformity and Cohesiveness in Family Responses
	• Love and Closeness Trump Personal Beliefs
	• Even with Acceptance Comes Fear
	• Taking on the Role of Ally
The Role of Context in Family Responses	• Generational Differences
	• Individual, Contextual Factors
	• Prior Assumptions
	• Prior Exposure to LGB People
The LGB Young Person's Experience	• Pressure to Stay Hidden or Return to the Closet
	• Withholding as a Form of Protection
	• Some Minds Can't Be Changed
A Matter of Time: The Process of Family Adjustment	• Two-Way Process of Acceptance
	• Change in Responses Over Time
	• Improved Closeness Over Time
A Larger View: Perspectives on Sexuality	• Fluidity and Complexity of Sexual

and Identity	Orientation
	• The Limiting Nature of Labels
	• Just One Fact About a Whole Person
	• One Day, Coming Out Won't Be Necessary
The Broader Social Context	• Importance of Visibility
	• The Role of Social Media
	• It's Getting Better

Coming Out: What It Is and What It Isn't

In the process of recalling and describing their family adjustment process, the participants in the study conveyed some of their personally held ideas about what it means to come out in general. In different ways, the participants all shared their perspectives on the coming out process, which they derived from their personal experiences. The views they shared on coming out in general help to contextualize how they made sense of their families' unique processes of adjustment.

Just One Family Issue Among Others

The existing literature on the coming out experience within the family can easily lead one to assume that a young person's disclosure of non-heterosexuality is the most significant issue in the family. However, the responses from the participants in this study suggest that it is just one family issue among many. Although all of the individuals I interviewed saw the disclosure as a major event in the family life cycle, none of them

perceived it to be the most crucial family event, even at the time when it was taking place. For example, Logan (F1P1) spoke about many challenges in his life that converged around the time of his initial disclosure within the family.

> F1P1: Umm I was going through . . . Middle school years were not good for me. Umm I was very, very depressed. Umm my, my dad left. My parents had a kind of pretty (pause) shitty breakup, um, that was very unexpected. Umm and I was kind of in the middle of it. I was very, very close with my mother. Like very much a momma's boy; very tight with her, and um when my dad left, it, it came out of nowhere. There was no communication; there was no sitting down and saying, uh, "Ok, we still love you." Like literally, one day he was just gone. . . . And um . . . uh I was dealing with that, and I think also, like, the puberty, hormone changes in my mind, in my head . . . so I was really depressed. I was suicidal. I cut myself quite a bit.

Logan made sense of his coming out within the family as something that happened within the context of other important family issues. Because of his parents' divorce and the pain it caused in the family, Logan's coming out did not take center stage. Similarly, Samantha (F2P1) spoke about her initial disclosure of bisexuality to her mother and the fact that her mother took it much less seriously than she had anticipated. She made sense of this by recognizing that her coming out was not the most significant event taking place within her family at that time.

> F2P1: Umm so I . . . but I don't think my mom very much took it seriously. And that issue probably took a back seat when that was going on.

DF: The issue of your sexuality took a backseat when the divorce and separation
happened?

F2P1: Exactly. Exactly.

DF: Ok.

F2P1: And, um, yeah, so even though I had mentioned it to my mom, it wasn't a,
a huge part of our lives for another couple years at least.

In Lauren's (F3P1) case, her coming out was disruptive to the family, but her
sister, Katrina (F3P2), helped the other members of the family process the disclosure and
put it into context so that the initial emotional intensity did not endure. Of the three
families, Lauren's was most heavily impacted by the disclosure, and even still, it was not
the only issue or stressor affecting the family. To varying degrees, the stories of all three
families suggest that an LGB young person's disclosure of non-heterosexuality within the
family does not necessarily become the family's prominent concern.

A Complex, Emotional Experience

Although the participants acknowledged that their families adjusted to the coming
out in the context of other important family issues, they emphasized the emotional
aspects of the disclosure. Logan, for example, described the intense emotional experience
of first coming out to his mother.

F1P1: It was like a whole afternoon of (pause) crying, and anger, and
throwing things. . . . So I remember being in this kind of, like, frantic
emotional place, and I'm not sure if it was, like, "I don't need to go to therapy
because I know what's wrong with me," that kind of idea. Umm and it kind of
extended into the afternoon, and I remember I was just, like, lying on my floor

crying, and my mom was there. And umm . . . and she kind of, like

(pause), you know, like I told her, and she kind of was like nodding and, and

crying a little bit.

Samantha spoke during our interview about the many emotions she felt during her

father's process of adjustment, and she shared with me her presuppositions about the

emotional impact that her disclosure had on her father. She recounted a painful memory

of her father becoming angry the first time one of her girlfriends spent the night at his

house, and she recalled how "very embarrassed" he became afterward. Though Samantha

described her father as generally unemotional, she was able to remember a number of

occasions on which her coming out noticeably affected him.

For Lauren (F3P1) and her sister Katrina (F3P2), even talking about Lauren's

disclosure and the responses within their family produces strong emotions. During our

interview, both sisters smiled through tears when remembering Lauren's coming out and

the impact it has had on their family.

F3P1: Yeah, we're like crybabies, so we're like "Oh my god, stop." (Both sisters

laugh)

F3P2: Yeah.

F3P1: I was like, "I'm just so glad I have you." And she's like, "Stop, stop."

F3P2: Yeah, we're really emotional.

F3P1: We were so . . . yeah, we're ridiculous. We don't really talk about it

unless we wanna cry. (Everyone laughs)

Coming Out as a Process, Not an Event

The stories shared by the participants in this study corroborate Savage and

Miller's (2011) assertion that "coming out is a long process, not a single event" (p. 2). All

three of the LGB young people made multiple disclosures within their families of origin,

and each particular disclosure involved a unique process of assessment, preparation, and

adjustment. In all three families, the young person's coming out process consisted of a

series of disclosures that took place over time, followed by a period of adjustment that

each family member went through at a different pace. In two of the three families, the

LGB young people came out more than once to the same family member. Logan came

out to his brother, Isaac, in an off-the-cuff manner when they were teenagers, and then

again more formally several years later. Samantha came out three times to her mother:

first as pansexual, then as bisexual, and finally as gay.

For each of the three LGB young people in this study, coming out in the family

was a process that took place over time, not a discrete event with a singular effect. The

young people all shared unique perspectives on the experience of coming out in their

families that illustrate how the process unfolded over time. Lauren, for example, recalled

that over a year after her father's initial negative reaction to her disclosure, she got to

continue the process of coming out to him.

> F3P1: They never said goodbye to me either when I went to Spain. My parents
>
> dropped me off at the airport, they didn't say bye. And my dad looked at me and
>
> was like, "You're gonna be a lesbian and do nothing with your life." Like, it was
>
> horrible. . . . So I came out my junior year of college, and then I went to Spain my
>
> senior year my first semester. Then I had my second semester at school, and then

when I graduated, my parents came down to watch me graduate. And that's when me and my dad had that moment where he sat me down, and he was actually able to hear me out.

In some cases, the family members shared their own perspectives on the process of their loved ones' coming out. Isaac (F1P2) made sense of his brother Logan's process as a vacillation between extremes.

> F1P2: Um, but . . . it kind of went through, in ebbs and flows. Honestly there were times when he was very much like, "I'm here!" and like, just wanted to tell everybody; and then there were also times when he was, he was kind of, like, checking himself from that extreme. Like going to say, like, not telling anybody and pretending he's straight.

Samantha's mother, Janet (F2P2), remembered that Samantha's process of coming out to her took place over many years and occurred in the form of multiple conversations based on the different stages of Samantha's development as a romantic and sexual being.

> F2P2: And at some point she had said to me . . . "You know, mom, I think that I might be bi" . . . and I said, "Well, are you sure? Do you know?" And she goes, "I'm not sure," and I said, "Well, let me know." You know, and that was about as far as we got, and then that was a good while before she, I think, ever actually had a relationship with someone, you know, that was in any way reciprocal. . . And it, it wasn't really more of an issue until she was old enough to be dating. And so this was maybe . . . I'm guessing she was around 14, 15, maybe when she started talking to me about it.

The recollections and perceptions that the participants shared with me illustrate the complex, emotional nature of the coming out process. Although the coming out process was not the most significant event in the participants' families, it did have a meaningful impact on the family as a whole, and on each of the individual family members. The LGB young people, in particular, emphasized the personal meaning of coming out in the family as the culmination of a long process that began with self-discovery.

Coming Out to Self: The Developmental Self-Discovery Process

All three of the LGB young people in this study told me that before coming out, they went through a sometimes painful process of trying to figure out who—or "what," as a couple of them put it—they were. All three of them described experiencing relief when they realized that being gay was an actual orientation; it helped them feel less "weird" and "wrong." This self-discovery was a formative experience for all three of the young people. It provided them with a foundational non-heterosexual identity and informed how they later came out to the important people in their lives.

Troiden (1989) proposed a four-stage model of optimal identity formation for LGB youth. Based on what they shared with me, the young people in this study appear to have followed the trajectory of that model, which consists of sensitization, identity confusion, identity assumption, and commitment. Each of them described a developmental process of self-discovery that began with recognition of same-sex attractions and culminated in the claiming of a non-heterosexual identity that they confidently share with others. The participants' recollections of their self-discovery process can best be conveyed within the context of Troiden's four-stage model.

Sensitization

According to Troiden (1989), the first stage of identity formation, sensitization, occurs when the young person first recognizes that he or she is attracted to the same sex and begins to explore the possibility of being different from the expected heterosexual norm. Logan recalled his first recognition of same-sex attraction, perfectly capturing the essence of this stage.

> F1P1: Umm the first time I really remember thinking, "Okay, this is weird," I was 11 years old, and um I was in sixth grade. And I remember looking at my sixth grade science teacher's ass as he was walking by and being like, "That's nice!" And then being like, "Wait. What??" And that's when I knew, like, okay, this is strange.

Identity Confusion

The second stage of identity formation is known as identity confusion (Troiden, 1989). In this stage, the young person experiences inner turmoil and attempts to determine whether his or her attractions to members of the same sex are indicative of a non-heterosexual identity. Samantha's experience illustrates the confusing nature of this stage.

> F2P1: And, um, I didn't know it was a real thing, with a real name, and a real community until about seventh grade. . . . And, uh, so it was definitely more talked about and more okay by middle school, but I wasn't . . . I was still definitely in denial. And I saw a movie that's very famous in the gay community. It's called *But I'm a Cheerleader*, and I had a crush on the character, and I'm like,

can I be that? Am I that? Like, is this real? And it was definitely, like, an inner turmoil when seeing the movie.

Identity Assumption

In the third stage, the young person begins to assume a non-heterosexual identity. During this part of the self-discovery process, he or she becomes increasingly more willing to claim an identity that falls outside the heterotypical norm. Lauren talked about the significance of this stage in her self-discovery process, and she emphasized the role her sister played in helping her assume a non-heterosexual identity.

> F3P1: I was dating a girl for eight months, and I was still saying I wasn't gay. And when I told her that, she was like, "Lauren, you're gay." And I was like, "No, I'm not gay. It's just this one girl." And she's like, "Girl." (Laughs). I'll never forget that moment. And then I was . . . I will never forget any of this. I was, like, showering, and I was, like, (long, drawn out gasp), "I'm gaaaaaaay." Like, it was, like, this moment that it just all hit me, and I was like, "I'm gay."

Commitment

In Troiden's (1989) fourth and final stage of identity formation, the LGB young person commits to his or her LGB orientation, taking it on as a way of life. This process includes a sense of self-acceptance and involves the integration of the young person's private and public selves. LGB young people who reach the commitment stage take ownership of their non-heterosexuality and confidently share that part of themselves with others. During our conjoint interview, Samantha told her mother and me about the way she handles conversations about her sexual orientation since committing to a gay identity.

F2P1: I just . . . you know, I am who I am in any way. The fact that I'm gay, the

fact that this or that . . . any part of me is just who I am. I'm not usually one to

censor much. . . . I just sort of use natural opportunities to tell people versus it

being a formal conversation *ever*. . . . So, like, same with this experience, I just

moved, and all my guests [referring to clients at her hair salon] are the biggest

example. My guests are (pause) probably the only people that once in a while I

have to say, "Well, you know that *I'm* gay," or, "Well, you know that *my* kid will

have two moms," or some way of saying it because of whatever we're talking

about.

As the excerpts from my interviews with Lauren and Samantha illustrate, the

identity assumption and commitment stages outlined by Troiden (1989) often take place

through the process of a young person sharing his or her identity with others and

receiving some form of feedback or reinforcement. Perhaps the most crucial aspect of the

young person's self-discovery process is the transition from self-identifying as non-

heterosexual to disclosing this identity to others. This transition can be especially nerve-

wracking when it involves disclosing the non-heterosexual identity to family members,

whose reactions have immense consequence. As a result, it often involves treading

lightly.

Testing the Waters: The Initial Phase of Disclosure

Morrow (2000) aptly describes coming out within the family as "a consequential

life event for lesbian and gay people. The experience can result in greater closeness

between lesbian and gay people and their families on the one hand, or in the complete

dissolution of family ties on the other" (p. 55). The LGB young people in this study all

shared a common experience of approaching their disclosures to family members with great caution. They described a number of ways in which they tested the waters in preparation for coming out within their families.

Practicing with Peers

The coming out experiences of the LGB young people in this study corroborate the common assertion in the existing literature that LGB young people tend to come out to friends and members of their peer groups before coming out to family (Beals & Peplau, 2006; Campos, 2005; Mustanski et al., 2011; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003). Lauren recalled how coming out to her friends gave her the confidence to come out to her sister.

> F3P1: Oh yeah, so, like, I asked my friends. I was living with all lesbians. Like, I always surrounded myself with lesbians. Like, I was more comfortable around gay people, and my two best friends were dating. And I sat them down. . . . And I was like, "I have to tell you guys something." . . . And they were like, "Whaaaat?!" They couldn't believe it. They were like, "Why were you so afraid to tell us? Like, we're all lesbians." And I was just like, "'Cuz it's wrong, right?" . . . And they were all telling me, "Lauren, it's not wrong." So the way I went around it was I told my friends first, and then I told Katrina.

Logan also practiced coming out with his peers at school before disclosing to his family.

> F1P1: So I came out, I guess, at umm . . .like, when I was 12, I came out to my friends at school, um, first as bi . . . um, 'cuz I still, like, had little girlfriends and stuff. Um, and so then I was, like, 12, 13 . . . by 13, like, pretty much everybody in the school knew, not just my friends . . . um, that I was bi.

Bisexuality as a Transitional Identity Label

Logan was not the only young person in the study who initially identified as bisexual and later came out as gay. Samantha also came out to her friends and family members as bisexual and then eventually claimed a gay identity. Lauren did not outwardly claim a bisexual identity, but she simultaneously had relationships and sexual experiences with both males and females until she came out as lesbian. None of the young people in the study presently identify as bisexual; for all of them, bisexuality was a stage that they passed through on their way to committing to a gay or lesbian identity.

The young people's explanations for how they transitioned in their self-identification raise questions about the nature of bisexuality and its legitimacy as a sexual orientation. According to Guittar (2013), individuals who ultimately claim a gay or lesbian identity may first come out as bisexual out of "the desire to satisfy social expectations, please other people, and be comfortable with oneself" (p. 170). Logan's description of his transition illustrates this point in a profound way.

> F1P1: There would be, like, the cute dudes in the locker room that I was like, 'Yeah, that's hot." But I wasn't like, "Oh, I wanna be your boyfriend." You know? Um, and that happened (pause) . . . that kind of process was, was gradual. I think I was probably, like, 15, and at that point I was still bi, and I had a friend who said, "Logan, like, you're not bi. Like, you're just . . . you're, you're gay. Like, you're gonna be gay." And then after she said that, I was like, "Wait, really?" And then all of the sudden I was like, oh, I'm gay! Um, but yeah, that was just, like, I don't know. I don't know if that's . . . I don't know what part of that was, like, the social conditioning or, like, since you're a little kid you think

about your future and you know, and how much of that just took some time to, um, to, you know, go away.

Samantha explained the rationale behind her decision to come out first as bisexual.

F2P1: I came out as bi originally. Um, and I really believed and lived that way for a long time too.

DF: What do you mean by that?

F2P1: Um, that I still would try and date men. It was never a success, but it was something I didn't wanna just totally shut off as an option.

Samantha's decision to keep trying to maintain relationships with men underscores the pressure of societal expectations to be attracted to members of the opposite sex. By claiming a bisexual identity, Samantha was able to make a compromise with her identity that might have been easier for her to accept, and more palatable for others as well.

Though there is nothing inherently wrong with gay and lesbian individuals testing the waters with a bisexual identity, doing so has the potential to trivialize bisexuality (Crawley, Foley, & Shehan, 2008; Guittar, 2013; Lucal, 2008). This can add to the marginalization of bisexuality, which occurs even within the LGBTQ community, where bisexually identified people are pressured to pick a side (Guittar, 2013). The three young people in this study represent points along the vast continuum of sexual orientation. Although all three of them identified as bisexual before coming out as gay or lesbian, it is important to remember that for many people, bisexuality is more than just a sexual identity way station.

Coming Out First to Closest Family Member

When it came time to disclose their non-heterosexuality in their families, all three of the young people in the study chose to do so first with the family member to whom they felt closest. Their experiences coincide with Savin-Williams (1998) and Campos's (2005) finding that LGB young people tend to come out first to the family member to whom they feel the most connected and whom they believe will be the most supportive. Isaac made an interesting observation about his brother Logan's decision to come out first to their mom.

> F1P2: I know my mom was very much, a lot . . . she's a lot closer to my brother than my dad was, and that's kind of a part of it too, where, you know, if he's not living up to that paradigm of being a man who dates women, then I think he found himself much closer to my mom. . . . So I think my mom probably had a . . . more of . . . I think he came out to my mom even before me or anybody else.

Isaac made sense of his brother's choice to disclose to their mother first as being about safety as much as it was about closeness. In his view, Logan did not feel as much pressure from his mother to live up to heteronormative ideals, so he was able to feel comfortable around her. This enhanced the closeness in their relationship and affected both his willingness to come out to her, and her willingness to create a safe space for him to do so. Samantha also came out first to her mother, who always conveyed that her love, support, and acceptance of Samantha were unconditional. The closeness between Samantha and her mother created a safe environment for Samantha to disclose her non-heterosexuality.

Lauren chose to come out to her sister before she talked to anyone else in her family. She approached the conversation with fear, trepidation, and feelings of shame and self-doubt. But because she and Katrina were so close, she was willing to take the risk of sharing this part of herself. Lauren remembered the conversation with her sister this way:

> F3P1: I was *so* ashamed of myself, and I didn't wanna admit it. Like I didn't wanna admit that I was gay for so long. Like I said, I was in a relationship with a girl for eight months and *still* was not gonna accept that I was gay. She told me, "Lauren, you're not doing anything wrong" . . . She was like, "Girl, do your thing. Like, if you're in love, be in love. Be happy. Be you." And I, and I guess I've always looked up to her since I was little. So I was like, you know, if she says it's okay, it probably is okay.

For all three of the young people in this study, the first person they came out to in their families was accepting and supportive. This gave them the confidence to come out to other family members.

The Importance of Perceived Safety

For Logan, Samantha, and Lauren, their decisions about how, when, and to whom to come out in their families were guided, in large part, by their sense of how safe it would be to do so. They all talked about the initial stage of the coming out process within their families as one that involved assessing their various relationships with family members and determining which of those relationships were secure and safe enough to withstand the impact of the disclosure they were preparing to make. In Samantha's case, her mother's initial support of her non-heterosexuality created a general sense of safety that enabled her to come out to other people.

F2P1: And I had told actually a couple of friends, but actually, once I told my

mom is when I started telling other people more so, including friends. 'Cuz I felt,

like, safer and clearer about it.

Lauren had a different experience. She learned to seek relational safety before

coming out to other people as a consequence of her parents' initial negative reaction. It

caused Lauren to perceive people as less safe, and it adversely affected her confidence in

coming out to others. Lauren described this aspect of her coming out process by stating:

F3P2: Honestly, I came out to my cousin 'cuz we're best friends, and she asked

me, "Do you want me to tell my parents?" I told her, "Yes," because I was close

with them, but I wasn't . . . I was kinda ner-- . . . Honestly, when you feel, when

you experience homophobia by your own parents, you . . . it petrifies you and you

don't even talk to anyone else about it, because these are the two people that, like,

out of *anyone*, they're supposed to accept you, and if they don't, it's like [makes

awkward, pained face]ehhhh, you tiptoe around anyone else.

The Lower the Stakes, the Lower the Stress

As Lauren's experience illustrates, coming out within the family can induce

anxiety and stress, as it involves taking a significant risk. It introduces the possibility of

rejection, which has immeasurable negative consequences for the LGB young person.

The stakes are especially high when LGB young people come out to their parents, as

"they may face anything from a dismissal of their feelings to an actual dismissal from the

household" (Rotheram-Borus & Langabeer, 2001, p. 104). However, the young people in

this study all made sense of the coming out process within the family as one that becomes

increasingly less stressful when it involves coming out to family members outside of the

nuclear core. The young people perceived the possibility of rejection from those members of the family to be less of a threat. When the stakes seemed lower, the stress diminished significantly.

In many cases, the young people did not have to come out directly to some members of the family. Instead, they allowed other family members to reveal the news for them. Logan, for example, stated:

> F1P1: So my mom's sister married into, like, a big, Sicilian Catholic family, um, but I didn't really have to come out to them, 'cuz my aunt kind of sat them down, kind of all around the same time, was like, "This is what's going on. This is what this means," and kind of explained it to them. So I didn't really have to deal with it.

Lauren had a similar experience of feeling less stressed and experiencing more favorable responses when the stakes were lower. She talked to me about her experience of coming out to a cousin who then, with her permission, shared the news with other members of the family.

> F3P1: So when she told them, they reached out to me, and they told me, "Hey, like, we love you. We don't care if you loved a fucking horse, like, as long as you're in love and they treat you right, we're happy." So I have them who reached out to me, and then since I, since, because of Facebook, my uncle, and my other aunt, and my godmother—aunt slash godmother—have reached out to me. I've gotten just nothing but positivity. . . . So I've never actually had to come out.

The sub-themes in this section demonstrate that for the young people in this study, the initial phase of disclosing within the family was a process of appraising relationships,

evaluating the degree of safety, and weighing the costs and benefits of staying closeted versus revealing an important part of themselves. This evaluative process helped the young people prepare themselves to receive the initial responses from their family members.

Family Member Reactions: Many Shades of Gray

As discussed in Chapter I, the existing literature on the coming out process in families is centered almost exclusively on family responses of either unbridled acceptance or total rejection (D'Amico & Julien, 2012; Gorman-Murray, 2008; Green, 2000). One primary purpose of the present study was to examine the range of family member responses and uncover the more nuanced reactions that are not adequately reflected in the extant literature on this phenomenon. The lived experiences of the participants in this study confirm that family member responses take on many shades of gray. The families included in this study were neither entirely accepting nor entirely rejecting of their LGB loved one. Instead, they demonstrated a host of reactions and responses that varied from one family member to the next and often transformed over time.

Vast Space Between Acceptance and Rejection

The participants' descriptions of the reactions and responses within their families do well to illustrate the vast space between acceptance and rejection. Samantha acknowledged that while her parents made her feel safe and comfortable when she disclosed to them, it still had an impact on them, and they needed time to adjust and make their way toward a more accepting stance. While Samantha viewed her parents' reaction as loving and caring, she also acknowledged that they struggled to accommodate this

information about her. In the following excerpt, she describes her father's response to her disclosure.

> F2P1: He remembers me coming out. I, I would say he definitely remembers that, 'cuz that was a funny conversation. . . . And I think it was still difficult for him, even though coming out to him was not as bad as (trails off) . . . I'm very lucky that my parents are ultimately concerned with my feelings. So when coming out they know I'm doing something big and sensitive, so they were concerned with the conversation going well. That doesn't meant that it was smooth and the aftermath was just as nice. Umm but (pause) in the conversation, both of them were great.

Lauren's sister, Katrina, talked about the way her mother has responded to Lauren's being out in the family as lesbian. From her perspective, her mother's response is not entirely rejecting, but not nearly accepting either. Instead, she is tolerating this part of Lauren's life and, in an effort to preserve the relationship, coming to terms with the reality that her non-heterosexuality is not something she can control or change. Katrina made sense of her mother's position this way:

> F3P2: I think she's slowly coming around, you know? I think (pause) she . . . her and Lauren speak more now. . . . I speak to my mom about Lauren's girlfriend. She's, like, totally . . . she won't ask me a bunch of questions, but she won't shut me down either. . . . She won't ask many questions, but she's open to the idea. . . . She's accepting it, I think, now that Lauren is a lesbian, and she realizes that there's nothing that she can do about it, you know. And that the more she accepts it, then the happier our family will be.

Shift in Heteronormative Expectations

Previous researchers have suggested that when a young person comes out to the family as non-heterosexual, family members—and especially parents—have to modify or do away with expectations they had for their loved one to achieve certain heteronormative milestones (Saltzburg, 2007; Tillmann-Healy, 2001; Waldner & Magrader, 1999). The participants in the study made sense of this in a somewhat different way. While some family members mourned the loss of heteronormative expectations, others simply re-contextualized this aspect of their loved one's life. Logan's brother, Isaac, discussed his father's experience of letting go of some of the expectations he had for his son.

> F1P2: I think he was kind of . . . had some level of, uh, I guess disappointment maybe is the word . . . like, where he was imagining a future for my brother that would be, okay, you know, he's straight . . . it's maybe easier than if you're gay. That was the kind of context that he put it in. . . . He could be, you know, discriminated against or whatever, but there's also this subtext of him imagining my brother marrying a woman and having kids and blah, blah, blah.

Samantha's mother, Janet, expressed a different view.

> F2P2: And that was the only time where there were ever any issues, because suddenly sleepover had a new meaning if it was a girlfriend. And I just had to take a step back, you know, and say, "Okay, please don't make me uncomfortable in my house by putting yourself at risk in any way. Just let me know you're being responsible. And, you know, you can't get pregnant—yay—and all that, but

please (trails off) . . ." Oh, and that was my other issue that I'm really, really

concerned about is, have a baby, damnit! Because I want one. I want a grandchild.

Janet went on to say, "So if I have to go out of state for a wedding, I'll go out of state for

a wedding." She did not make sense of Samantha's non-heterosexuality as a reason to

abandon any of the traditional, heteronormative expectations she had for Samantha. It

simply involved a shift in context and perspective.

Lack of Uniformity and Cohesiveness in Family Responses

An interesting and important finding from this study that helps to provide a more

nuanced understanding of the family adjustment process is the degree to which family

members vary in their ways of receiving the LGB young person's disclosure. The

excerpts in this section provide valuable perspective on the heterogeneity of family

responses. Logan, Lauren, and Samantha all shared that they came out to each member of

their nuclear families separately, and then made personal choices about whom to come

out to within their larger family systems. They reported that each family member's

response was different, and in some cases drastically so. In Lauren's family, for example,

her sister Katrina was the only family member to be fully supportive and accepting. Her

parents both struggled significantly when Lauren came out, but their responses were not

the same—and the incompatibility in how they took the news created conflict in their

marriage. Lauren talked about it this way:

> F3P1: Honestly, at one point I thought my parents were gonna honestly split up
>
> 'cuz of it. Because when my mom saw that my dad was actually accepting of me,
>
> she couldn't handle it. She was like . . . she felt like the bad guy, and she was like,
>
> "I can't believe you." And, and there was a time when I thought my parents

would split up, but (pause) I don't know, my dad's kinda come back to the place where he just doesn't have a say.

Although Samantha has chosen not to come out directly to many members of her extended family, she and her mother, Janet, talked about the diversity of responses that she would likely receive if she did.

F2P2: But it's a good example, and you know you have relatives on one side of your family who would have cut you off, and, and others that would've totally accepted you.

Love and Closeness Trump Personal Beliefs

Although the various members of the families featured in this study responded in a variety of ways to their loved ones' coming out, there was one commonality that emerged from the participants' responses. Even among those family members who had a difficult time accepting their loved one's non-heterosexuality, love and relational closeness ultimately trumped their personal beliefs. In other words, their desire to maintain a loving relationship with their gay or lesbian family member won out over their need to stick to principles, morals, or belief systems that might otherwise cause them to be rejecting. This was illustrated previously in the excerpt from Katrina describing her mother's willingness to move toward acceptance in order to reestablish a strong bond with her daughter.

All of the family members in the study shared the view that family ties take precedent over personal beliefs. This is perhaps predictable, as their decision to participate in the study implies that they are committed to the bonds they share with their LGB loved ones. As the results of numerous previous studies indicate, not all family

members share the belief of the participants in this study. Many individuals find themselves unable to prioritize family ties when they receive the news that a loved one is non-heterosexual (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008; Hunter, 1990; Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998).

The participants communicated their shared perspective that love and closeness trump personal beliefs in the context of making sense of their own responses and expressing their beliefs about how families should respond in general. Katrina, for example, said the following:

> F3P2: . . . for some people I think they have to just keep in mind that that's their family, and you love each other, so you just have to go through it together and face whatever happens together. 'Cuz you're family, and that's what you're supposed to do.

Janet and Samantha communicated a similar view in this exchange.

> F2P2: . . . I cannot speak for the tight ass people who think it's a sin, and whose kids inevitably suffer . . . but if you listen with love to anybody, then, then you can (pause) help it be okay. You know, help everything be good. What do you think?

> F2P1: Yeah, I do, I agree that, like, part of loving somebody means supporting them through things that maybe you don't even agree with.

Even with Acceptance Comes Fear

In his study on the coming out experience within the family, LaSala (2010) pointed to the common reaction of fear among family members. That finding was supported in this study, as the participants all described incidents in which family

members communicated fear for their safety or a concern that the quality of their lives may somehow be diminished as a result of their non-heterosexuality. Even those family members who were generally accepting conveyed some degree of fear and concern for their loved one's wellbeing. Isaac, for example, is accepting and supportive of his brother Logan, but he expressed the following apprehension:

> F1P2: So I still view it as positive. Like there isn't really . . . there isn't really a down side to me. Unless I think about, like, well, you know there's all these kinds of implicit risks that gay men tend to encounter . . . um, that kind of stuff. So I mean that's the negative, kind of scarier part.

> Katrina described her own fear:

> F3P2: My first thoughts, unfortunately, were what are my parents gonna say? You know? And it was, I know it's gonna be tough for her. You know, in a lot of ways it's gonna be tough. I mean, I think when I first heard, I, I just kinda was a little more concerned for my sister. I didn't want her to deal with anything from my family, outside of my family.

Samantha described her realization that although her mother responded to her disclosure with love and acceptance, she also carried some worries.

> F2P1: I can honestly say only at one point did I ever slightly question or feel insecure about their support, or her support specifically. . . . My parents are the kind of parents that the only reason they wouldn't want me to be out is because of the backlash, so she made a comment something along those lines. That, like, my life would be a little easier if I were not gay.

Taking on the Role of Ally

In spite of whatever concerns they had for their loved one's safety and wellbeing, the family members in this study were all supportive of their gay and lesbian loved ones, and they underwent an interesting shift as a function of having a non-heterosexual relative. Isaac, Katrina, and Janet all took on the role of ally in a variety of ways that included defending their loved one against other family members' negativity, collaborating with their loved one in the coming out process within the larger family system, and providing emotional support. In some cases, the family members even took on an ally or advocate role outside of the family, taking opportunities to stand up for LGBT people in general. The following excerpts capture the essence of this sub-theme. Katrina described the role she assumed in her family this way:

> F3P2: So I was her advocate and I, I was always kind of in the middle of things. So it kind of had an effect on my relationship with them [her family members] as well, because (pause) in, like, normal conversation, if Lauren were to come up and I would defend her, they would get angry with me.

Isaac talked about it by stating:

> F1P2: You know, if there's ever somebody who's talking negatively about gay people in any context—which happens, honestly, very rarely I think—I would definitely, even if it's not solely about Logan, which it probably wouldn't be, but I would definitely be like, "Are you serious?"

Janet explained:

> F2P2: I would slice and dice anybody who ever said anything about homosexuality, and I'm really good. When (pause) people start making

homophobic remarks, I cut them off. And I go, "Yeah, and my daughter's gay, so what were you saying?" (Laughs) And it goes away.

For the three family members who participated in this study, their loved ones' coming out presented an opportunity for them to come out in their own way. They all sought ways to be a source of support and encouragement, aligning with their loved one within the family system and even seeking opportunities to promote respect for LGBT people in more public ways. It is unsurprising that the family members who took part in the study were such supportive advocates, as their willingness to share their stories for the study connotes a level of openness and support. However, as some of the previously discussed themes have indicated, not all family members were able to respond approvingly or lovingly. The next theme sheds light on some of the contextual factors that underlie family members' various responses.

The Role of Context in Family Responses

Without understanding the role that context plays in influencing family member responses to a loved one's coming out, it is easy to erroneously attribute those responses to ignorance, indifference, or a lack of compassion. Becvar and Becvar (2003) point out that "context offers an alternative understanding, or new meaning, to which new and different responses are logical and thus possible" (p. 297). An exploration of the contextual factors that inform family member responses to a loved one's coming out allows for a more sensible and sensitive understanding to be drawn.

Generational Differences

As discussed in Chapter II, the equality movement has progressed at an astonishing rate in our culture, shedding light on the need for more general acceptance of

non-heterosexuality. This movement has informed younger generations, allowing them to respond more openly and lovingly to individuals on the queer spectrum. However, older generations can recall a time when non-heterosexuality was synonymous with aberrance, illness, and immorality. They might, therefore, be more apt to react unfavorably to a loved one's disclosure. The results of this study underscore the generational differences in family member responses. Logan shared an exchange he had with his mother that exemplifies the role of generational differences in the family adjustment process.

> F1P1: Yeah, I think my mom's concern was that, you know, life would just be harder for me, and then she was also concerned, um, about the HIV and the AIDS thing. And even (pause) somewhat recently . . . I mean not that recently, but I remember still having that talk with her and being like, "Mom, you know HIV is also, like, in every heterosexual community, and it's not just this gay epidemic. It's not a gay disease." And you know I think her thinking about that is still . . . you know, and of course I didn't live through that. I didn't have friends who died, and I wasn't around yet, so I didn't experience it, but I think her thinking is still like, okay, this is this gay thing.

Individual, Contextual Factors

The generation in which family members grew up is just one of many contextual factors that informs their responses to the LGB young person's disclosure. The participants in this study described a number of other factors that influenced family members and led them to react in one way or another. One of the most significant of those factors is religion, which was interestingly most predominant among older generations. The participants revealed that religious beliefs played a strong role in

influencing family member responses. This is consistent with the findings from several previous studies that have drawn a connection between religiosity and negative family reactions (Herek, 1984; Padilla et al., 2010; Scherrer, 2011). For example, Janet recalled:

F2P2: Uhh my folks are . . . my dad's gone now, my mom has dementia, but they're very devout, conservative Catholics who might've been worrying about her immortal soul or something in their mind.

Katrina discussed the role of religion in her mother's reaction to Lauren's non-heterosexuality.

F3P2: We're Catholic, and, um, that was . . . that's a big issue between Lauren and my mother. They have that argument all the time. My mom says, "You're going to hell," and Lauren will tell her, you know, "Well, if you're gonna live by the Bible, you have to live by the Bible entirely. You know, you're supposed to be wearing this, this, and that." Like she'll kind of go back at her and say that my mom isn't really living a very Catholic lifestyle as well, you know? But I think religion definitely played a factor for my mom. She became very, very . . . she got even more religious after Lauren came out.

Although religion was a prominent influence on family members' reactions, the participants shared a number of other factors that also played a role. Isaac described the role that his parents' general values and belief system had on their responses to Isaac's coming out.

F2P2: Well I would definitely say that, you know, my family's very, just generally very liberal, very embracing, very, you know, sort of hippie, quote unquote. And, uh . . . you know, my parents, they, you know, they kind of lived

off the land in the 80s, and they grew up in a very rural area, and they did the

whole, like Woodstock stuff, and they go to Burning Man and whatever, so they

come from a very, like, open-minded cultural, um, background I would say.

Samantha discussed the influence that her parents' careers as state police had on their

reactions to her disclosure.

> F2P1: So I'm very, very lucky. And they're pretty worldly because of their jobs,
>
> even though they come from such conservative backgrounds. They've seen a lot
>
> and dealt with a lot, and I think specifically 'cuz my dad's had so much youth
>
> oriented work in his life, it's made them even more open to the fact that this is
>
> how you have to stay engaged with your child if you want to stay engaged with
>
> your child. And that's how he talks about it.

Prior Assumptions

In LaSala's (2010) study on the coming out experience in families, he discussed

the effect of family members' prior assumptions about their loved one's non-

heterosexuality, asserting that such assumptions cause them to react negatively.

Contrastingly, the participants in this study described prior assumptions and awareness

from family members as a buffer against undesirable attitudes or reactions. Samantha, for

example, recalled a humorous statement from her father when she first disclosed to him

her gay identity.

> F2P1: So with that he said (in a funny, authoritative voice), "Well, you know,
>
> Samantha, I have done many studies over the years, and basically, after certain
>
> characteristics, I suspected all along." . . . So (pause) it wasn't, it was not a bad
>
> conversation.

Logan shared with me that he made sense of his mother's generally loving and supportive response as stemming largely from her prior awareness of his non-heterosexuality. He stated:

F1P1: And (pause) at the end of the day, like, she knew. I mean, she always knew. Like, it wasn't really even a question.

Interestingly, Logan's brother, Isaac, shared that he never developed his own assumptions about whether Logan might be gay. So when Logan came out to him, his initial reaction was one of disbelief and denial. He recalled his reaction this way:

F1P2: So at that time I totally didn't . . . it didn't register with me, and I was just like, "Shut up, you're just trying to get, you know . . . you're trying to get attention." Like I didn't even count it as being truthful or whatever. So I always knew he was sort of different, but I never put that together. When I was in high school I was never like, okay, he must be gay even though he's never told me. It didn't really register with me. I think probably other people had that awareness— maybe my parents or something . . .

Prior Exposure to LGB People

Another contextual factor that emerged in this study as a buffer against negative family reactions was prior exposure to LGB people. This supports Ben-Ari's (1995) finding that family members who had previous relationships with non-heterosexual people responded more positively to their loved one's disclosure. Katrina described the influence that her father's relationship with his sister had on his response to Lauren's coming out.

F3P2: Um, my mom and Lauren's relationship is kind of still on the rocks, but

my dad was surprisingly very (pause) supportive. I mean, he . . . his sister was a

lesbian as well. That was something that we didn't really know growing up as, as

kids. We kind of found out, um, found out later on in life. But my dad was

actually pretty, pretty supportive about it, which is awesome.

Janet talked about how she was able to be non-judgmental towards Samantha because of
her prior exposure to non-heterosexual people.

F2P2: Well, I'm not judgmental about it. I'm sure she's told you, I've had . . .

I'm, I'm a retired law enforcement officer. I have been around everybody in every

slice of life there is. . . . And anyway, no, I have no . . . I don't have any

judgments about it. I have cousins who are gay. . . . So I'm just . . . no, it's not an

issue for me.

The context of the family, including the personal experiences and characteristics

of each individual family member, both influence and are influenced by the LGB young

person and the way in which he or she comes out in the family. This study created a

valuable opportunity to understand the coming out experience from the perspective of the

family members who received the disclosure as well as from the perspective of those who

made it.

The LGB Young Person's Experience

The young people who took part in the study made sense of their personal

experiences with coming out, reflecting on the choices they made about when, to whom,

and under what circumstances they disclosed their non-heterosexuality. While each

young person's process was unique, some commonalities emerged. The following sub-

themes illustrate the young people's shared experience of coming out and being out in their families of origin and in broader contexts.

Pressure to Stay Hidden or Return to the Closet

At some point, all three of the young people in the study felt a pressure to adhere to the heteronormative status quo. This was, of course, a particularly powerful feeling during the initial stages of the coming out process, when the fear of potentially losing the love and support of the people they cared about was most salient. On some occasions, the young people were tempted to return to the closet to feel safer and less subject to scrutiny. Lauren talked about the difficulty of being out in her family after the majority of her family members reacted negatively.

> F3P1: 'Cuz I know in the beginning it's really hard. Like right now, I'm like, oh whatever, she doesn't wanna accept me, it's fine. But in the beginning, it was so hard for me. Like I tried to push myself back into the closet several times, and I've been like, no, like, fuck that.

Logan described the struggle he felt in early adulthood to conform to heterosexual norms, particularly when he first started working as an actor.

> F1P1: Um, and it started out like okay, this is just somebody who I'm gonna bring to these kind of industry related functions. But then I found myself lying about it even to other gay people, you know? Who I was, you know. I'd still say I'm straight, and I'd still say, like, "Oh, I have a girlfriend," and I still kind of had, like, fabricated this whole world. But the importance of being straight was really, really drilled into me.

Withholding as a Form of Protection

Throughout the process of coming out within their families, Logan, Samantha, and Lauren had to make a series of difficult decisions about whom they would disclose to and how they would do it. In order to make these decisions, they had to assess their relationships with various members of their families and consider the contextual factors that might influence their family members' responses. The young people all shared with me that when it came to some members of their families—particularly grandparents— they chose not to disclose as a means of protecting themselves from negativity and protecting their family members from worry, concern, fear, or any other unpleasantness that might arise. During our family interview, Samantha talked to her mother and me about how and why she decided not to come out to her grandparents.

> F2P1: So, and I know that that's exactly how they would've been with me, but they still would've believed whatever they believe. And it wouldn't be with anger, it would just simply be . . . They would be *sad* for my soul. It's totally true. . . . And they probably would think it's a choice. . . . Yeah, they would probably think it's like a new-age trend instead of it being . . . understanding it fully.

Logan shared a very similar experience.

> F1P1: My Jewish family in London, like, my grandparents, even though I was out, you know, before they passed, I didn't come out to them. And that was more (pause) just 'cuz they're from a different era and, you know, they're from the old country and that's . . . you know, I had a wonderful relationship with them; it's not something that I felt like I was hiding, and I just knew it would cause them more confusion and whatever than it was worth.

When Lauren's grandmother hinted at being aware of Lauren's non-heterosexuality, Lauren made the decision not to disclose. She talked to me about that experience and shared why she chose not to come out to her grandmother.

> F3P1: She's in her 80s, and she asks me every time I talk to her, "How's your love life?" and "Do you have a boyfriend?" And she knows. I *know* she knows, because she has that sixth sense, and she's asked me, "Who are you texting that you're smiling on your phone?" . . . She goes, "Is it a boy or is it a girl?" . . . I go, "Who's the best granddaughter you have?" She goes, "You are." I go, "Alright. With that being said, does it matter if I'm talking to a boy or a girl?" And she looks at me, like, "No." So I go, "Okay then, it doesn't matter." And I held her hand, I kissed her, and she left it alone. Like, we've had those moments, and I know she knows, but I don't have the heart to tell her.

Some Minds Can't Be Changed

An undesirable reaction from a family member can be devastating for a young person coming out in the family. It was certainly the case for Lauren, whose parents and oldest sister reacted overwhelmingly negatively, placing strain on all of the relationships in the family. Her initial reaction—and Katrina's as well—was to try to convince her family members that they were being shortsighted and needed to come around. However, Lauren and the other young people in the study shared the view that some people—once they have decided to be unaccepting—cannot be moved to change their minds. Lauren talked to me about wanting her parents to come around while also believing that it was a lost cause.

F3P1: I want to educate them in some way. . . but I don't think that there really is anything that would change their mind. They're . . . my mom is so far gone that I just . . . I couldn't see anything helping her. . . . I don't really see anything getting through to them.

Samantha shared a similar sentiment with her mother and me.

F2P1: And it is . . . there is, unfortunately, not much you can do about somebody else's perspective. . . . So somebody else who that is their belief, whether that's how they were raised, or that's something they found themselves and decided is what's working for them, that, unfortunately, you can't even give advice to that, because they . . . that's how they feel, like, that is their life.

The three LGB young people in the study were willing to openly share their coming out experiences, including the more challenging and painful parts. Their responses reveal the complicated decision-making process involved in claiming a non-heterosexual identity within the family. All of the participants described the complex nature of the coming out process and the various effects it has had on their respective families. Though the participants discussed the impact of the initial disclosure, they all emphasized the significance of the family adjustment process and the many forms it has taken over time within their families.

A Matter of Time: The Process of Family Adjustment

Heatherington and Lavner (2008) point out that "there is very little research that elucidates how adjustment plays out in real time following disclosures" (p. 338). This study was conducted, in part, to examine the family adjustment process and explore how family member reactions, family relationships, and family dynamics in general transform

over time. This theme underscores the developmental nature of families' responses to a loved one's coming out.

Regardless of the nature of their responses, everyone in the three families featured in this study had to make some form of adjustment after their loved ones' disclosure. This is, perhaps, a testament to the default expectation of heterosexuality that most people hold for their loved ones. It might also be the natural result of recognizing that the LGB young person is part of a marginalized group, and that some education about non-heterosexuality might be necessary (Saltzburg, 2007). It is clear from the excerpts illustrating this theme that adjustment is an inevitable part of the coming out process. The participants described the many ways in which that adjustment occurred in their families.

Two-Way Process of Acceptance

Logan, Lauren, and Samantha made it clear that their family members were not the only ones who needed to make adjustments after they came out. They all described a circular process that occurred as everyone in their families acclimated to the disclosure. As their family members adjusted to the disclosure and made efforts to accept their non-heterosexuality, the young people were also involved in a process of working toward understanding their family members' perspectives and accepting their limitations. For example, Logan shared that for much of his adolescence, his relationship with his father was distant. Even though his father was aware that Logan was gay, it was not a subject that either one of them felt comfortable discussing openly. This was disappointing for Logan, but he described a personal process that led him to accept his father.

> F1P1: . . . as a kid, what I wanted in a father was, like, a strong, like, leader,
> like (in a gruff voice), "This is my dad" and, you know? Like that kind of dad.

But instead my dad was the, like . . . my dad parties, and he has women and whatever. That's not what I wanted in a father. And then it wasn't until I was 19 where I was like okay, I can accept my dad for this is who he is. And once I can just accept that that's who he is, and he isn't this, like, hero idea of a man, he's just this, like, flawed human being.

Samantha reflected on the adjustment process that her parents went through in moving toward acceptance of her gay identity. In doing so, she revealed her own process of adjustment that involved becoming more capable of accepting her parents' limitations and making sense of how and why they reacted in the ways that they did.

F2P1: Um, I think definitely both experiences with both parents were less difficult than I anticipated. Um, and the things that were difficult are the same things that are always gonna be difficult about my relationships with them. Like the fact that my mom and I, when we clash, it's a big boom. . . . And same with my dad, about how we went so long without talking. I know that about him, that it is hard to get him to vocalize extras inside that are not, you know, just things that I'm pulling out, like, to volunteer.

Change in Responses Over Time

Stone Fish and Harvey (2005) assert that after young people come out in their families, it is important that they "take into account the time needed after disclosure for the family to acquire information, assess this new reality, and reexamine the internal assumptions they have lived with for years" (p. 67). The family adjustment process is one that takes place over time, and family members' responses shift and transform in many

ways after they first receive the disclosure. Katrina talked to me about how she was

making sense of the changes in her parents' responses to Lauren's disclosure.

> F3P2: I mean, like I said, my father is pretty accepting of it. Him and Lauren I
>
> think have become a little bit closer after she came out. . . And they've gotten . . .
>
> their relationship has gotten a lot better. Uh, but in terms of my mom, I think
>
> she's slowly coming around, you know? I think (pause) she . . . her and Lauren
>
> speak more now. It's been a long road, but there was a time where they weren't'
>
> speaking at all.

Isaac made sense of the change in his response to Logan's disclosure as moving

from callousness to curiosity. He talked candidly with me about his perspective shift,

which he attributed to his general maturity and the positive evolution of his relationship

with his brother.

> F1P2: I had put him in this little box as my little brother, where I didn't consider
>
> him to be a person that had, like, anything of value for us to discuss or whatever.
>
> Like he's over here doing his little thing . . . we're, you know, we're not in the
>
> same strata even. . . . So I honestly don't think that at that time I gave it much
>
> thought. . . . I definitely don't really remember thinking about it deeply until we
>
> discussed it later on when I was in college or something. . . I think it was
>
> definitely more casual, and it was kind of like, you know, by that point we felt
>
> comfortable. . . . I was definitely just more curious and interested to know what it
>
> meant, and it was kind of like a novelty thing for me. So I was kind of like,
>
> it's kind of cool that I have a gay brother.

Improved Closeness Over Time

As the excerpt from Isaac illustrates, family members can become closer over time, even—or especially—after a loved one comes out. The stories shared in this study demonstrate that a disclosure of non-heterosexuality within the family has the potential to fortify relationships and strengthen bonds in a unique way. It can give family members access to an intimate part of one another's lives and prompt deep conversations about beliefs, attractions, desires, and fears. The participants shared that in some ways, the coming out process allowed certain family members to know and understand one another in a more profound way, which might otherwise not have occurred. Janet explained that although she and Samantha have always had a good relationship, she has grown even closer to her daughter over the years.

> F2P2: I mean we're close, we're stubborn, um, she's strong-minded, so am I. We're both independent, but yeah. So we can . . . we, we love each other desperately, deeply, and also I really like her too. And I think she's starting to like me as a grownup.

When I asked Janet how her relationship with Samantha has changed as a function of Samantha being out, Janet replied:

> F2P2: I'm a nurturing mommy, and her girlfriends, I love that they still come and see me and eat dinner with me even though Samantha doesn't live here. And I, I, like, have this whole . . . I call them all my brats. And it's most of her lesbian network up here that come and visit me, you know? And I feel really good, because I get lonely. I'm up here by myself. Wahh. You know? (Laughs). It's nice that way. So in a way, she's enriched my life.

Isaac described the strengthening of his relationship with Logan over the years and his sense of how Logan's coming out and being out have enhanced and improved the bond they share.

> F1P2: So, I mean, even when I was in college and my brother was still at home in high school, we still kind of had a lot of tension in our relationship; but now we've reached a point where we're . . . honestly, he's one of my closest friends. So now we get along really well. . . . You know, it's probably a weird thing to say, but I still view it as being I'm glad that he's gay and not straight, because I'm like, if he was straight . . . like, I'm straight, I know what it's like. You know, I wouldn't get a chance to learn about all this stuff. So I still view it just as a positive thing.

A Larger View: Perspectives on Sexuality and Identity

As expected, the experiences shared by the participants shed light on a great deal more than just the coming out process within the family. One of the more interesting themes that I identified pertains to the perspectives on sexuality and identity that were revealed in numerous ways. As discussed in Chapter II, sexual orientation cannot be confined to a simple definition, and contemporary young people are identifying their sexuality in broader and more inclusive ways than ever before. Fedders (2006) makes the excellent point that sexuality researchers do not agree about whether sexual attraction, sexual behavior, or self-identification is most relevant in assessing sexual orientation," and "adolescents have their own viewpoints, which do not necessarily coincide with those of any researchers" (p. 104).

Fluidity and Complexity of Sexual Orientation

The three young people in the study all define their sexuality in fluid ways. They shared informative perspectives on how they came to define their sexual identity and what they believe about the nature of sexual orientation in general. Lauren, for example, revealed that she had authentic romantic feelings for her boyfriend while simultaneously experiencing sexual desire and having sexual experiences with females. This highlights the multi-dimensional nature of sexual orientation. Lauren stated:

> F3P1: 'Cuz I was really in love with him . . . but then I think about when I was with a girl in eighth grade, and the girls that I liked in high school, and all the people that I really, really liked that were girls before I even met him. And I know for a . . . even when I was with him, I would fantasize about girls.

Mosher (2001) asserts that sexual activity alone does not dictate or imply one's immediate or ultimate identity" (p. 167). Samantha's story corroborated this point. She shared with me that while she has had authentic relationships and sexual experiences with both males and females, she does not define her sexual orientation according to her behavior. Instead, she allows herself to be led by what she desires. She explained it this way:

> F2P1: Okay, so for me, I don't identify as bi anymore, however in the end of October through kind of beginning of January I dated a man. . . . And that was the first person—the first man—I've ever had sex with. . . . And I didn't not enjoy being physical with him, because I was attracted to who he was, and I wanted to please him, but it still was not at all the same for me. Like it turned me on, but didn't even turn me on at all in the same way that a female does.

The Limiting Nature of Labels

Fedders (2006) points out that LGB young people often feel that "identifying as gay, lesbian, or bisexual does not adequately account for the fact that they understand themselves, relate to the world, and experience oppression on the basis of a multiplicity of identities, including their race, class, age ethnicity or religion" (p. 105). Once people come out as non-heterosexual, the world tends to see them in terms of that single aspect of their identity. The young people in the study talked about this issue in their interviews and shared their collective view that labels are limiting. Logan put it this way:

> F1P1: For me, the biggest issue is when you say something like *gay* or *bisexual* or whatever, people have so many of their own connotations of what that means, that as soon as you say that, I already have lost a part of my inherent identity. . . . I hate this idea of, like, the gay friend, or the token gay dude, because all of the sudden it's like, well, that's not who I am. If you're gonna label me, I'd rather be labeled, like, you know, an artist, or a writer, or a Jew. Like, there are things that to me are, like, way more telling of who I am.

Samantha explained her reasoning for identifying as gay rather than lesbian. In doing so, she illustrated how she makes sense of labels and the effect that they often have of limiting how people define themselves and others.

> F2P1: But, um, so yeah, that's why I feel like gay is the term that I am most comfortable with, because it's a little more general. And I actually am not also a fan of things that are so specified to gender. And so I don't like that lesbian automatically gives away that I'm a female wanting females. Um, I mean I know

it's stupid, because you see me and obviously I'm a female . . . but I still don't

feel like I need a term that is so specific. I don't like that.

Just One Fact About a Whole Person

The participants in the study shared the view that non-heterosexuality is just one

fact about a person. It was shared most often in the context of family members making

sense of how they were able to be as accepting as they were. A couple of the young

people talked about it in their conveyance of the message that they are more than just

their sexual orientation. They also discussed the shifts they made in their perspectives,

from seeing their non-heterosexuality as an all-encompassing identity marker to

acknowledging that it is just one aspect of who they are. Logan, for example, described

his personal recognition that just because he was gay did not mean that he was exactly

like all other gay men.

> F1P1: I moved down here and I thought, like, oh, like, I'm gay, and I feel like all
>
> gay people are creative, and well-read, and smart, and doing interesting things.
>
> And then when I found out, wait, you know, there are just as many ignorant,
>
> trashy, stupid people who are gay as straight people, that was surprising to me.

For Isaac, Logan's sexuality is not the most significant aspect of who he is. He explained

it this way:

> F1P2: Um . . . you know, I don't see that fact about him having made any
>
> particular difference over time.

Janet shared a similar view about Samantha's sexuality. She contextualized her

desire to know about Samantha's sexual orientation as being no different from wanting to

know other things about Samantha's life.

F2P2: And it was just one, one more of those things that parents wanna see in

terms of your development. You know, we just sort of want to be plugged in to

that stuff. But that it wasn't any different as to whether or not you decided you

were gonna be vegetarian. It was just a, you know, another fact about you.

One Day, Coming Out Won't Be Necessary

According to Stone Fish and Harvey (2005), "coming out to one's family is a

developmental milestone" (p. 64). From the perspective of the participants in this study,

that will only be the case as long as heterosexuality is the default expectation. Many of

the individuals who took part in the study shared with me their belief that although

coming out remains a necessary part of the developmental process for LGB young

people, it will not always be so. Lauren offered her take on it by saying:

F3P1: Like I think there should be zero coming out process. It should be, "I have

a girlfriend," and that's it. That's the end of discussion. Like, to me, if you have a

boyfriend or girlfriend, it should be just like any other relationship. You talk

about that person, that relationship, and it shouldn't really ever be . . . I hope one

day it's not a thing."

Samantha expressed the hope that one day LGB young people will not need to come out

at all.

F2P1: I think, um (long pause), it's like for a while, unfortunately, it will be

somewhat necessary in certain settings. . . . I don't think it'll be like that forever.

Isaac beautifully articulated his ideas about how the perception of coming out as a

requisite event may change.

F1P2: I mean I think if we lived in a world where the default of being a straight person wasn't just kind of that intertwined from day one . . . if there was exposure to other, uh, ways of being as kind of a regular thing throughout growing up, then maybe coming out would be different. But, um, yeah . . . I don't think there's really any way around it in sort of conventional society.

The Broader Social Context

One of the most significant contributions of this study is the way in which it captures what it means to come out to one's family in our present-day society. The young people in the study came out to their families in a particular social context, and that must be considered when making sense of their responses. The sub-themes featured in this section illustrate the predominant contextual issues that emerged from the participants' reflections on their lived experience.

Importance of Visibility

One of the predominant issues that arose from my interviews with the participants in this study was the importance of having models of healthy, happy LGB people and queer families. The young people referred to this in the context of explaining the process they underwent to form a non-heterosexual identity, and the family members discussed its importance with regard to helping them adjust and accept. In the participants' view, it is important for young people to have access to non-heterosexual models from whom they can draw strength. In the absence of such role models, a young person might feel abnormal or ashamed of not living up to heteronormative societal expectations.

Katrina emphasized the power of visibility, as it helps people know they are not alone. She explained that part of her desire to participate in the study with her sister stemmed from her eagerness to help other families by sharing the story of her own.

F3P2: I'm glad that you're doing this, you know, because people need to understand. They have to make connections. And when people connect and say, hey, this family went through it and they're totally fine, I think that helps. Maybe if we got, like, TV exposure in that sense of it being totally ok, and life after coming out, I think that may help, you know?

Logan emphasized Katrina's point by discussing the increased visibility of LGB models in our contemporary culture and the general role that visibility plays in influencing LGB young people's development.

F1P1: I feel like I was on the very tail end of coming out in a place where, or a time where (pause), I still didn't feel like I had access to a lot of stuff. Like I look at now, and I look at the TV shows that I've worked on, and I look at the shows that my friends are on, all this stuff in the media that has gay characters and, you know, bisexual and all this stuff that I just had no comprehension of. . . . I mean because I did have access to some of my own research, but if I didn't have access to anything, it probably just would have taken me a while, and (pause) you know, if I wasn't able to make sense of that, I think that would have just been internalized shame or self-loathing or, you know, whatever.

The Role of Social Media

It became clear from my interviews with the three families in this study that social media has played an important role in the young people's coming out and the families'

adjustment. Facebook, in particular, was mentioned frequently. This is unsurprising, as it is an overwhelmingly popular form of online communication and a way for families to stay connected with one another. Samantha talked about the role that Facebook has played in helping some members of her family move toward greater acceptance.

> F2P1: My mom's youngest sister is very uptight, so it's like "Ohhh!" She can't stand to discuss it, because she's just like, "Wow! Something so weird in my family!" But she will like pictures on Facebook of me and my girlfriend and things like that, so she's making her little steps.

> Although Facebook and other social media sites can aid in the adjustment process, they can also present certain risks for the LGB young person. Because it involves the public sharing of personal information, Facebook creates the potential for problems like cyberbullying or rejection. Lauren talked about a troubling incident that occurred as the result of a Facebook post.

> F3P1: My other sister, like, I remember last year I wrote "Happy Pride." That's all I wrote. "Happy Pride! We'll be at this place for the after party." And she deleted me off Facebook. And I literally rarely ever talk to her. I maybe talk to her (pause) once a month. And we used to be super close as well.

However, she also mentioned a positive effect that Facebook has had on her ability to be confidently out in a public way.

> F3P1: Even with me and my girlfriend being together in general, like we're super open. We're Facebook official. We write, like, mushy poems on each other's walls. Like, we have changed so many people's outlooks. And it's, like, because we're both so girly, and we're both so normal, that people are actually able to

accept being gay more, because it kinda ruins their misconception that being gay

is being, like, butch, you know what I mean?

The ubiquitous nature of social media in our contemporary culture makes it an inevitable influence on LGB young people and their family members. For better or worse, it contributes to the process of coming out and being out, and it may be expected to do so for some time to come.

It's Getting Better

Every individual who took part in the study shared a singular, optimistic view of the future with regard to the general acceptance of non-heterosexuality: It's getting better. The participants all conveyed some awareness that our present-day culture has influenced the process of adjustment in their families, and there was no doubt among them that society is evolving in positive ways toward greater acknowledgment, understanding, and embracing of LGBT sexuality. Isaac shared his take on how things are changing for the better.

> F1P2: I guess that's kind of the fundamental lesson is that it is a spectrum, and there's no kind of . . . you know, it's not even just a linear spectrum, it's just a diverse pool of people. And as . . . you know, there really isn't much in life that is actually binary, that's homo or hetero. It's all kind of a mixture. So, um (pause), yeah, it feels like the world is going towards an awareness of that, but inevitably, if people kind of have this underlying philosophy that it's okay to be who you wanna be, then that can kind of overcome any sort of weirdness, hopefully.

Of all the participants, Janet was the most emphatic about our society's movement in an encouraging direction.

F2P2: I guess it's just that I'm happy that this is all occurring in a society that's

evermore accepting all the time. . . . It's getting better and better, and I hope it

continues to and that, you know, [Samantha]'ll have all of the same rights that

everybody else has, including the right to be a divorcee (laughs) if that's what

happens, you know. . . . So we must be heading in a good direction. I'm resolutely

optimistic about that.

The participants' voices echo the hope that society's continued changes will make it

increasingly easier for LGB young people to come out and be out in their families.

Summary

The results of this study support many of the findings in the existing literature

about LGB young people's experiences coming out within their families of origin.

However, the inclusion of family members' perspectives and the systemic focus of the

study expand upon what has already been said about how families adjust to a loved one's

disclosure of non-heterosexuality. The excerpts featured in this chapter illustrate a range

of issues that were particularly relevant to the participants in the study. They emphasized

the significance of contextual factors such as culture, generational differences, family

dynamics, and countless other individual and relational variables. Considered together,

they elucidate the family experience of adjusting to a young family member's disclosure

of non-heterosexuality.

In Chapter V, I make connections between the findings from this study and the

extant research literature on the coming out experience within families. I identify the

strengths and limitations of the study and offer suggestions for future studies to expand

upon what has been found in this exploration of families' experiences. Finally, I discuss

the implications of the study and its relevance for the field of family therapy.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Making Meaning of the Study and Its Results

This study was designed to explore how LGB young people and their families adjust following the young person's disclosure of non-heterosexuality. By interviewing three LGB young people along with a member of each of their families, I was able to offer valuable relational perspectives on the adjustment process that will serve to enhance the existing literature on this phenomenon. The participants in the study shed light on a number of important issues that affect how queer young people navigate the process of coming out to their families, as well as how their family members make sense of and adjust to the coming out.

I conducted this study with the hope of transcending the acceptance-rejection paradigm and elucidating the nuanced aspects of the family adjustment process by showing, as Lauren put it, that families' experiences are "not all just black and white." The transcripts from the nine interviews I conducted contain an abundance of rich information that I strove to capture in a way that would preserve the integrity of the participants' original words while offering new interpretations of the phenomenon that can enhance family therapists' work with LGB clients and their families. At times I struggled to decide which excerpts to highlight, as everything the participants shared with me was immeasurably valuable.

The results of this study corroborate what other researchers have asserted about the coming out process in families, yet there are many novel findings that capture what it means to come out in one's family of origin, as well as what it means to adjust to a family member's non-heterosexuality. For example, it is clear that the families in this study have

been influenced a great deal by the sociocultural, political, and historical contexts in which they are situated. Were I to conduct this same study 10 years ago or 10 years from now, the findings would be entirely dissimilar. As our society changes, so do the perspectives of the people within it, and the individuals in this study are no exception. Furthermore, the perspectives shared within the study make clear that the coming out process within the family is far more complex and multifaceted than previous studies have been able to capture.

In my review of the existing literature in Chapter II, I overviewed the primary findings of the previous studies that have been conducted to explore how non-heterosexual young people form an identity, how they come out in their families and other settings, and how their families tend to react when they come out to them. In some ways, the participants in the present study echoed what has been found in previous studies. For instance, their lived experiences illustrate the previous finding that coming out is a process that takes place over time and has both intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions (Beals & Peplau, 2006; Bernal & Coolhart, 2005; Campos, 2005; D'Augelli et al., 1998; Elizur & Ziv, 2001; Floyd & Stein, 2002; Matthews & Salazar, 2012; Morrow, 2000; Mustanski et al., 2011; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003; Shilo & Savaya, 2011; Stone Fish & Harvey, 2005). This study also underscores the previous assertion that LGB young people engage in a complicated decision-making process before coming out to their families (D'Amico & Julien, 1999; Maguen et al., 2002; Waldner & Magrader, 1999).

The findings that most closely correspond with those of previous studies have to do with the various factors that influence how family members make sense of and

respond to their loved one's disclosure. Family members are informed by their age, religious affiliations, political views and values, previous exposure to non-heterosexual people, and previous assumptions about their loved one's non-heterosexuality (D'Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2005; Heatherington & Lavner, 2008; Herek, 1984; LaSala, 2010; Padilla et al., 2010; Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998). However, the findings from this study depart from the previous literature in exemplifying that for the family members of the LGB young person, love and the desire for closeness can win out over personal beliefs.

As predicted, the inclusion of family members in the study led to a more complex understanding of the family adjustment process. Capturing the voices of siblings was particularly valuable. As the contemporaries of their LGB loved ones, their perspectives emphasize the significance of generational differences and the power of our current social context in motivating responses to the disclosure. Isaac and Katrina were among their siblings' biggest supporters. The impact that their understanding and encouraging responses had on their LGB loved ones underscores the importance of allies and advocates in the movement toward greater general acceptance of non-heterosexuality.

The composite findings from this study expand upon what has already been found on the coming out process in families. They emphasize that families do not respond in uniform, cohesive ways to a loved one's disclosure of non-heterosexuality and show the degree to which context influences family responses. Furthermore, the results of the study show that family member responses shift in a nonlinear fashion over time, and that this is both the result of and the impetus for changes in the various relationships within the family system. The study highlights the socially constructed nature of sexual orientation

and demonstrates that "many individuals' lived experiences are not as limited as the ideological binary suggests" (McDowell, Emerick, & Garcia, 2014, p. 106). Most importantly, the study shows that a young person's disclosure can enrich and strengthen family relationships and add new dimensions to how family members understand their LGB loved one, sexuality in general, and themselves. This strength-based view is an important addition to the existing literature on the subject, which is largely focused on the risks associated with identifying as LGB and the challenges associated with families' adjustment to a loved one's disclosure of an LGB identity. In order to better understand its contribution to the existing literature, it is important to examine this study's various strengths and limitations.

Strengths and Limitations of the Study

In my view, the methodology I used for the study is one of its primary strengths. The IPA approach—which emphasizes the meanings people derive out of their experiences—enabled me to shift back and forth between the original essence of the participants' responses and my own understandings of them. A quantitative study of the family adjustment process would have offered a reductive overview that would fail to capture the valuable nuances that were essential to this study. Other qualitative methodologies, while enabling me to explore this research phenomenon in context, might not have given me as much latitude to interpret the participants' descriptions of their lived experiences. The "hermeneutic turn" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 34) in IPA research builds on the foundations of phenomenology by tasking the researcher with making sense of how the participants make sense of their experiences. Using this methodology allowed

me to see the participants' experiences through their unique perspectives as well as through my own, "experientially-informed lens" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 36).

Through the interviews I conducted with the participants, I was able to derive a body of meaningful data, and I allowed the participants' voices to guide me in analyzing the data and developing the primary themes and sub-themes. What results is a detailed picture of the coming out process within the family that has practical value for LGB young people, members of their families, and family therapists.

Another fundamental strength of the study is the group of families that participated in it. I gained access to the families through people in my personal network who understand and share my passion for the topic of this study, and I believe their enthusiasm in spreading the word about the study contributed to the participants' excitement to share the details of their stories with me. Because of their candor in relating their personal experiences, I was able to generate a body of meaningful data from which I derived the study's results. The families in this study are, of course, not representative of all families adjusting to a loved one's coming out, but their stories will resonate with a wide range of people who are preparing to go through the process or have already experienced it. Also, the inclusion of two sets of siblings—one with two males and one with two females—along with a mother-daughter pair adds to the significance of the findings and allows for some interesting questions to be derived that could guide future studies.

My focus on both the intrapersonal and interpersonal aspects of the coming out process constitutes another significant strength. The LGB young people in the study gave voice to the personal process of development they underwent before disclosing a non-

heterosexual identity to others. Their family members revealed the many ways in which they have accommodated and adjusted to the disclosure.

The multiple perspectives captured in this study reveal important nuances about the ways in which a young person's disclosure impacts every individual family member, the multiple relationships within the family, and the family system as a whole. For example, it highlighted the gray area between acceptance and rejection in family members' responses, which is a divergence from the predominant focus in the existing literature (D'Amico & Julien, 2012; Gorman-Murray, 2008; Green, 2000; Hunter, 1990; Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998). Furthermore, the inclusion of siblings in the study shed some light on the significant role they can play in the coming out process. This is a unique perspective that contributes to the current literature, which is largely centered on the responses of parents (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008; LaSala, 2010; Scherrer, 2011). Most importantly, the study is unique in its inclusion of multiple perspectives on how relationships in the family transform as a function of the LGB young person coming out and being out.

The participants' experiences illustrate that individual responses tend to change, and family relationships often strengthen over time. They also revealed that family members experience a change in their sense of self as a function of having an LGB family member, and they can serve as important advocates for their loved one as well as for the LGBT community at large. Lastly, the study adds to the extant literature by showing the role that social media plays in the coming out process for contemporary LGB young people and the adjustment process that their families undergo.

My decision to conduct three interviews with each of the participating families served to strengthen the study and enhance the findings. The semi-structured interviews I conducted with the participants took on new dimensions with each question I asked and each response I received. Although I was guided by the schedule of questions I prepared, the participants' unique responses took the conversation in fascinating directions, adding immense value to the findings of the study. The family interviews were a particular strength, as they are a significant deviation from previous studies on this phenomenon. They allowed me to engage in meaningful dialogues with the family members, and—as I had hoped—they enabled the family members to respond to my questions as well as comment on one another's responses. Many of the participants told me they enjoyed the opportunity to talk with one another in the family interviews and share their personal perspectives in a different way. Those interviews gave the family members a chance to speak about the diverse ways in which they have remembered and made sense of their families' processes of adjustment.

I would be remiss if I did not emphasize the degree to which the participants in the study exceeded my expectations for what I might find through this exploration. Their willingness to speak unguardedly about their experiences, and the captivating ways in which they did so, were invaluable. I remain in awe of the individuals who took part in the study and beautifully illustrated the coming out process within their families. Their voices serve as the study's greatest strength.

Naturally, this study has limitations that must be considered. This study did not include much diversity with respect to participants' ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or geographic location. Future studies would do well to incorporate a more diverse sample,

to offer a broader view of the family adjustment process. The age of the participants in the study is another limitation. All of the LGB young people who participated were similar in age and near the upper limit of the age range for inclusion, so the experiences of younger people who might have distinct, age-related perspectives are absent from this inquiry. Because younger participants would have come out more recently, their families' responses and processes of adjustment might have offered valuable information about the influence of our current sociocultural context, which continues to change rapidly and move toward greater visibility and general acceptance.

The natural lack of breadth that accompanies the inclusion of a small sample could be considered another limitation of the study. However, what was not achieved in breadth was accomplished in depth, as the study uncovered many individual and relational aspects of the coming out experience in families. Some might also consider the lack of bisexually identified participants to be a limitation of the study, as their absence potentially leaves out information about how family members respond and adjust when their loved one discloses and maintains a bisexual identity. However, the participants in this study offered valuable information about the fluidity of sexual orientation that moves beyond simple categorization. Their stories illustrate that labels have the potential to be limiting, and that a number of other factors—such as family dynamics, relationships culture, and historical context—have a greater impact on the adjustment process than the way in which the young person identifies.

Suggestions for Further Research

There continues to be a need for more studies to broaden and enhance our understanding of what it means to come out and be out in one's family, as well as what it

is like to adjust to a family member's non-heterosexual identity. To expand upon the findings from this study, future studies should include more family members, offering an even more detailed understanding of the systemic implications of the coming out process in the family. There would also be great value in interviewing family members at multiple points in the adjustment process, offering a more inclusive view of how family member responses and family relationships shift and transform over time.

In a couple of the families in this study, family members were able to be more open and accepting of their LGB loved one because they had previously adjusted to another family member's coming out. For example, Lauren's father had formerly adjusted to his sister's disclosure, and Janet had cousins who previously came out to her. It would be beneficial for future researchers to explore the experiences of families in which more than one member of the family system has disclosed an LGB identity. This could elucidate whether adjusting to a loved one's disclosure primes or prepares a person to adjust to the disclosure of another family member.

As discussed in previous chapters, I chose not to include transgender young people in this study because of the research that emphasizes the unique nature of the coming out process for these young people (Ashton, 2013; Bockting & Coleman, 2007; Zimman, 2009). However, it is important to capture the lived experiences of transgender young people and their families. If the present study were to be replicated with participants who identify as transgender, a great deal of information could be derived about how families adjust to that disclosure, and how their adjustment process compares to that of other queer families.

It is clear from the results of this study that family members are influenced by the historical, social, cultural, and political settings in which they live. These contextual variables must be considered when making sense of how families adjust. As long as heterosexuality is the expected norm, studies should be conducted to examine how family members adjust after learning their loved one does not identify as such. When it comes to the acceptance of non-heterosexuality, our society is changing at a remarkable rate. Future researchers must pay close attention to how these changes impact family responses and how support from family members can lead to even greater societal acceptance.

Implications of the Study

This study has wide-reaching implications that can serve LGB young people, their families, and professionals in the field of family therapy. I am hopeful that the participants' shared experiences will resonate with other individuals and families, and that the results of the study can help guide the work of researchers, educators, and practitioners. As I mentioned in previous chapters, my intention was to expand upon what exists in the present literature, and to shed light on the family experience of adjustment as articulated by individuals who have lived that experience. This study represents a reflection of a unique time in history and an important family phenomenon that is worthy of consideration and understanding.

For LGB Young People

Although things are—as the participants suggested—getting better, there are still challenges associated with identifying as non-heterosexual in our present society. Most people are assumed to be straight unless they reveal themselves to be otherwise, and

when they do, they risk being met with intolerance, disapproval, or rejection. The results of this study show that family support has the potential to enhance LGB young people's acceptance of themselves. It can serve as a buffer against any deleterious effects of being non-heterosexual (Bernal & Coolhart, 2005; Bregman, Malik, Page, Mayken, & Lindahl, 2013; D'Amico & Julien, 2012; Gorman-Murray, 2008; Matthews & Salazar, 2012; Mustanski et al., 2011; Padilla et al., 2010; Sanders & Kroll, 2000; Stone Fish & Harvey, 2005), and it can bolster the young people's confidence to come out and be out in other areas of their lives (Shilo & Savaya, 2011; Willougby et al., 2008). Family members can also grow from the experience. As LaSala (2010) expressed, families "can use the experience of adjusting to a lesbian or gay [loved one] to broaden their perspectives on life. They can also develop sensitivity to other marginalized groups" (p. 209).

Young people who read this study may recognize aspects of themselves in the stories of the participants. My hope is that the voices of the LGB young people who shared their experiences with me can encourage other young people to proudly claim their identity, whatever it may be, and however much it may differ from the heterotypical norm. Lauren's biggest ally, Katrina, passionately believes that staying in the closet is akin to silencing oneself and living a lie. She had this to say to LGB young people who might be fearfully considering whether or not to come out:

> F3P2: Life is so short, and you really have to be happy. And if you're living a daily lie on something like that, about love, you're not gonna allow yourself to be happy and in love, just because you're worried about what everyone else is gonna think of you. I think that's so stupid. Life is too short to live an unhappy life."

The primary implication of this study for LGB young people is that family acceptance is possible, and that even if one's family members do not all respond positively, the support of one family ally can make a big difference. If queer sexuality is ever to be universally acknowledged, it is essential for acceptance to occur at the level of the individual and the family. Young people who know that their family members' reactions to their disclosure—even those that are initially negative—will shift over time, may be more willing to come out. Furthermore, if they can decide, based on the findings of this study, that there is potential for their family relationships to strengthen after they disclose their identity, they will likely be encouraged to do so.

For Families

Becvar and Becvar (1998) remind us that "the family, however defined or structured, is a human *system* consisting of the interactions among its members" (p. 69). This study explored the effects that one family member's disclosure of a non-heterosexual identity has on the family system as a whole. Families may benefit from knowing that it is natural to experience a period of adjustment after a family member comes out. It is important that family members take time "to sort out their reaction, including the initial reaction of questioning and denying this reality" (Baptist & Allen, 2008, p. 106). They should understand that their loved one has likely gone through a difficult period of preparation prior to disclosing to them, and whether or not they are able to receive the news with unbridled openness and acceptance, they should aim to respond with love and compassion. The LGB young people in the study felt comfort in knowing that even though their family members were struggling to accommodate the new information about them, they were no less cared for and no less safe.

The participants shared many perspectives on how family members can best support their LGB loved one through the coming out process. What they shared echoes some of what has been found in previous studies within the field of family therapy, such as the importance of maintaining a safe space for the LGB young person within the family (Sanders & Kroll, 2000; Shilo & Savaya, 2011; Stone Fish & Harvey, 2005) and the value of family members prioritizing love and closeness over their personal beliefs (Armesto & Weisman, 2001; LaSala, 2010; Saltzburg, 2007). Logan offered his view that a young person's disclosure is "a gift," as it connotes a willingness to share an intimate part of his or her life with the family. He had this to say to families who might be adjusting to a loved one's disclosure:

> F1P1: I would say to remember that it isn't about them. I think when a lot of people come out to their family, the family makes it about them, and the person having the difficulty, who it's hardest on, is the person coming out, because they're the one that's facing the potential of, you know, not being accepted by their family.

Logan's message underscores an important issue, which was reflected in the participants' contributions to the study and has been asserted by researchers who have conducted similar studies: Family support is central to a young person's development, particularly if he or she is forming an LGB identity. Shilo and Savaya (2011) found that LGB young people whose families are supportive benefit from improved self-acceptance, emotional wellbeing, perceived safety, and mental health. This issue has significant implications for families going through the adjustment process. Lauren beautifully emphasized the point by saying, "I think that if any family member thinks that someone

in their family is gay, just be their right-hand man and their support, because it will change their life, really."

For Therapists

All three of the LGB young people who participated in the study went to therapy at some point during the course of their coming out process. In all three cases, the young people were in individual therapy, either because they chose to see a therapist to work through their self-acceptance and sexual identity formation before coming out to family—as was the case for Lauren—or because their parents thought it would be a good idea—as was the case for Logan and Samantha. None of the families featured in the study sought family therapy as a form of support through this process. I asked all of the participants to reflect on what they might have found useful if their families had gone to therapy together, and to share with me any advice they would give to therapists who are working with families as they adjust to a young family member's disclosure. Their responses have meaningful implications for family therapists.

Logan shared an interesting perspective on how therapy tends to be approached after a family member's disclosure. He said, "I oftentimes feel like when somebody comes out and then therapy's involved, uh, I feel like it's the parents who need therapy for the adjustment and not the kids." In his view, parents who cannot accept their loved one often look for a therapist who will align with their view and make the young person's sexual orientation the main focus of therapy. This has important implications for therapists who are approached by individuals who are unable or unwilling to accept their family member's non-heterosexuality. In order to be helpful to all members of the family system, impartiality is essential.

Several of the participants expressed the opinion that a therapist can only be helpful to a family that is traversing the adjustment process if he or she is accepting and open to all expressions of gender and sexuality. This is congruent with the assertion in the existing literature that therapists who work with LGB clients must be aware of their biases and assume an affirmative stance (Baptist & Allen, 2008; Godfrey, Haddock, Fisher, & Lund, 2006; Kort, 2008; McGeorge & Carlson, 2011; Murphy et al., 2002; Rock et al., 2010; Stone Fish & Harvey, 2005; Tanner & Lyness, 2004). Isaac said the following about how therapists should position themselves in order to be optimally effective in helping families adjust:

> F1P2: I think that's definitely a prerequisite is to have that kind of openness and, you know, the underlying idea that it's okay if this person is gay. Let's try to work through what we're feeling about it and the challenges we feel like we might have because of it, and try to come to some agreement on it. Um, so I guess yeah, just positive communication, facilitating, you know, productive connections between the family members.

Therapists who read this study should "pay close attention to self-of-the-therapist issues" (Godfrey et al., 2006, p. 502) when working with this population in order to remain aware of any biases they might hold with regard to sexual orientation and gender expression.

It is my hope that family therapists will benefit from this study by understanding the complexities of the family adjustment process and the many divergent views among family members. In order to help families adjust, heal, and thrive after a young person's disclosure, family therapists must be open to the range of responses and reactions that

might be expressed in the therapeutic process. All perspectives, even those underlying negative reactions, should be acknowledged and validated in therapy. As the results of this study show, people are influenced by innumerable variables—such as culture, age, political views, and religion—that when understood in context, can help make sense of their inability to respond with complete acceptance. If family therapists can help shift the perspectives of those family members who respond negatively, it could make a world of difference for the family.

For Family Therapy Educators and Supervisors

Hernandez and Rankin (2008) make the valid point that "marriage and family therapy has long been an arena of struggle between progressive ideologies and conservative religious doctrines" (p. 251). As such, issues of sexual diversity are all too often absent in the training and education of family therapists (Aducci & Baptist, 2011; Bordoloi, O'Brian, Edwards, & Preli, 2013; Clark & Serovich; 1997; Godfrey et al., 2006; Green, 2000; Hernandez & Rankin, 2008; Long & Serovich, 2003; Rock, Stone, & McGeorge, 2010). This study elucidates the many ways in which a person's disclosure of a non-heterosexual identity is a relational issue that influences family relationships and intergenerational family dynamics. It is important for educators and supervisors in the field of family therapy to prepare future clinicians to manage the complex family interactions that sprout from a family member's coming out. This includes educating therapists on sexual diversity, providing case examples of queer families, promoting a thorough understanding of heterosexism, and doing everything necessary to ensure that therapists in training uphold the non-discrimination mandate in our code of ethics (AAMFT, 2012).

This study has major implications for those family therapists who hold the belief that non-heterosexuality is sinful or otherwise unacceptable. The participants in this study passionately expressed their shared belief that in order to be helpful to families during the coming out process, a therapist must be competent, compassionate, and prepared to honor every family member's perspective. Any efforts to persuade the young person to go back into the closet or promote a particular view among family members is a direct violation of the ethical code, as well as a form of "therapeutic violence" (Cecchin, 1987, p. 413) against the family. Supervisors should ensure that therapists in training be prepared to work ethically with LGB clients and their families.

Edwards, Robertson, Smith, and O'Brien (2014) assert that since there are no formal accreditation requirements for the integration of LGB-specific information in family therapy graduate programs, the inclusion of this content "is dependent on the opinions and priorities of the faculty in charge" (p. 24). The results of this study emphasize the importance of educators and supervisors challenging themselves and the emerging therapists they oversee to "continuously examine and deconstruct [their] own heteronormative and binary belief systems" (McDowell et al., 2014, p. 103) in order to best serve LGB young people and their families. The gatekeepers of our field must prepare clinicians to provide the best level of care for families traversing the adjustment process after one of their members comes out.

Concluding Thoughts

When I first decided to study the coming out experience in families, I wondered whether I would be able to uncover anything that has not already been found in previous studies on the subject. This study has exceeded all of my expectations for what I could

learn or teach others as a result of conducting it. Every aspect of the process has expanded my perspective and offered me new ways of understanding the complex nature of the coming out process and the various ways in which its effects resound within the family system.

Conducting this study has been an honor and a gift. It enabled me to develop new perspectives on what it means to form and claim a non-heterosexual identity. It gave me the opportunity to have conversations with my family members that I might not have had otherwise, and it enhanced my understanding of my family members' experiences. Most importantly, it allowed me to gain entry into the lives of six remarkable people whose contributions to this study have been invaluable. Their ability to brilliantly articulate their experiences and the various ways in which they have made sense of them was staggering. I was, and remain, captivated by their willingness to speak their truths, no matter how vulnerable they had to become to do so. Each of their stories will remain with me for a long time to come, and I am hopeful that they gained as much from the experience as I have.

It is clear from the results of this study that no two families are alike in their manner of adjusting to a young family member's disclosure of non-heterosexuality. The participants in this study elucidated the complexity of the experience and the many factors that influence its trajectory within the family system. There is no doubt that positive responses from family members bolster LGB young people's self-acceptance and pride, emboldening them to come out and be out in broader contexts. This has powerful implications for the greater general acceptance of non-heterosexuality in our society.

This study shows that some family members' minds cannot be changed, and that full acceptance is not always optimal, or even possible. However, it also illustrates that some family members' negative responses have the potential to soften over time, and that personal concerns and misgivings can be overridden by love and a desire to maintain closeness within the family. My hope is that this study will have a wide-reaching impact, shedding light on the family adjustment process in the family and elucidating its systemic and relational dimensions. I hope that the study reaches LGB young people who might be considering coming out to their families, and that after reading the accounts of the participants, they feel confident to do so. I hope that individuals with LGB family members read the study and recognize how much potential they have to alter their loved ones' lives in positive ways. I hope that family therapists who access this study use its results to inform the way they work with non-heterosexual clients and their families. Finally, I hope that everyone who reads this study feels moved to become an ally and advocate for LGBT people everywhere. Our society's movement toward greater recognition of sexual diversity is encouraging, and it will continue to take shape and accelerate when we recognize that general acceptance happens one conversation at a time. I am optimistic that this study will inspire some of those conversations.

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Appendix A

Recruitment Flyer

Research Study
Nova Southeastern University
Department of Family Therapy

This study is being conducted to explore families' experiences adjusting to a young family member's disclosure of non-heterosexuality.

Who is Eligible?
To be eligible to participate you must:
- be 18-24 years old
- identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual
- have been out for at least one year
- have been living at home when you came out to your family
- have at least one family member over the age of 18, to whom you are out, who is willing to participate in the study with you

What Will You Be Asked To Do?
You will be asked to participate in two interviews: one interview with the researcher and another interview with the researcher and your participating family member(s). The researcher will also conduct a separate interview with your family member(s). Interviews will be conducted face-to-face, if possible, or online through Skype.

If you have any questions or are interested in participating, please contact Denise Fournier Rodriguez at 954-309-0834 or dfournie@nova.edu

Appendix B

Interview Schedules

Questions for LGB Youth

- Can you remember when you first became aware of your same-sex attraction?

- How did you decide when to come out to your family?

- How did you decide whom to come out to first?

- How did you come out?

- Can you tell me about your feelings before, during, and immediately after you first came out to your family?

- What, if any, expectations did you have about how your family members would react?

- Were there any reactions to your coming out that surprised you?

- Can you tell me a little bit about what it was like when you came out?

- How, if at all, have things changed in your relationships with your family members since you have come out?

- What sense do you have of how your family members experienced your coming out?

- What are some of the factors that you think have affected how your family has responded to your coming out?

- What would you keep the same?

- When you think about all the changes that have taken place in our society when it comes to accepting LGB people, what—if anything—do you think might have been different if you'd come out a few years before you did? A few years after?

- How have you made decisions about how out to be in your extended family?

- Are there any individuals, information, or resources that you believe have helped your family adjust to knowing that you are gay/lesbian/bisexual?

- Can you think of any additional resources that could help your family continue to adjust to knowing that you are gay/lesbian/bisexual?

Questions for Family Members

- What was it like for you when you learned that _____ is gay/lesbian/bisexual? Did it come as a surprise to you, or was this something you had thought about or discussed with someone else in the family prior to _____ telling you directly?

- Can you recall what you were thinking and feeling when _____ first came out to you?

- Do you think other family members were surprised by _____'s coming out?

- How, if at all, did the relationships within your family change after _____ came out?

- Did you have any previous relationships with LGB people that influenced the way you responded to _____'s coming out?

- What did you think about the timing of the conversation you had with _____ about his/her sexual orientation?

- What sense do you have of how it was for _____ to come out and be out in the family?

- What have you noticed about _____'s position in the family since he/she came out?

- In what ways has your relationship with _____ changed since he/she came out?

- What are some of the factors that have affected how your family has responded to _____'s coming out?

- In what ways, if any, have you changed as a result of having a gay/lesbian/bisexual family member?

- What individuals, information, or resources, if any, have helped you and the other members of your family adjust to having a gay/lesbian/bisexual family member?

- Can you think of any additional resources that could help you and your family continue to adjust to having a gay/lesbian/bisexual family member?

Questions for Conjoint Interviews (LGB Youth + Family Members)

- What are your opinions and perspectives about the coming out process in general?

- If you could offer any information or advice to other families adjusting to a family member's coming out, what would it be?

- If you could offer any advice to therapists working with a family adjusting to a family member's coming out, what would it be?

- If you could go back and change any aspect of what happened in your family in the coming out process, what would it be? What would you keep the same?

- Is there any additional information that you would like to share that you did not share in your individual interviews?

Appendix C

Informed Consent

Consent Form for Participation in the Research Study Entitled
Coming Out, Coming Together, Coming Around: An Interpretative Phenomenological
Analysis of Families' Experiences Adjusting to a Young Family Member's Disclosure of
Non-Heterosexuality

Funding Source: None

IRB protocol #:

Principal investigator(s)	Co-investigator(s)
Denise Fournier Rodriguez, M.S.	Shelley Green, Ph.D.
1900 N Bayshore Dr., Apt. 3317	3301 College Avenue
Miami, FL 33132	Fort Lauderdale, FL 33314
954-309-0834	954-262-3028

For questions/concerns about your research rights, contact:
Human Research Oversight Board (Institutional Review Board or IRB)
Nova Southeastern University
(954) 262-5369/Toll Free: 866-499-0790
IRB@nsu.nova.edu

What is the study about?
You are invited to participate in a research study. The goal of this study is to explore the experiences of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) young people and their families. The purpose of this study is to develop an understanding of how families adjust after a family member comes out as LGB.

Why are you asking me?
You are being asked to participate in this study because you identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB), are between the ages of 18-24, have been out for at least one year, and have at least one family member who is willing to participate in the study with you; or because you are the family member of someone who identifies as gay, lesbian, or bisexual and are over the age of 18. There will be approximately 20 participants in this study; each individual participant will take part in two interviews, which will last a combined total of 1 to 4 hours.

What will I be doing if I agree to be in the study?
If you choose to participate in this study, the researcher will contact you to arrange a set

Initials: _____   Date: _____   Page 1 of 4

of interviews. One interview will take place between you and the researcher, another will take place between the researcher and your participating family member(s), and a third interview will include you, the researcher, and your family member(s). If it is not possible to conduct the interviews face-to-face, you will be asked to participate in the interviews using Skype video call technology. The interviews you will be asked to participate in for this study will last a total of 1 to 4 hours. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Is there any audio or video recording?

This study will include audio recording of the interviews. This audio recording will be available to be heard by the researcher, Ms. Fournier, personnel from the IRB, and the dissertation chair, Dr. Green. The researcher will keep the recording device stored in a secured, locked cabinet to which only she has access. Following the interviews, the researcher will transcribe the audio recordings in her private home office using headphones. All transcriptions will be stored in a password-protected computer to which only the researcher has access. The recording will be kept for 36 months from the end of the study. After that time, the PI will destroy all recording by shredding physical documents and permanently deleting digital information. Because your voice will be potentially identifiable by anyone who hears the recording, your confidentiality for things you say on the recording cannot be guaranteed although the researcher will try to limit access to the recording as described in this paragraph.

What are the dangers to me?

The risks for participation in this study are considered minimal, meaning they are not thought to be greater than other risks you experience every day. Because of the sensitive nature of the coming out process, it is possible that you or your family member(s) may experience some emotional discomfort while discussing your experiences during the interviews. If you are asked a question that you do not feel comfortable answering, you may request to skip that question or take a break from the interview. If you experience significant discomfort and choose to withdraw from the study, you may do so without penalty. There is also a potential risk associated with the time you will spend completing the study; however, the PI will minimize this risk by accommodating your schedule and conducting the interviews as efficiently as possible. If you need further help, Ms. Fournier will provide three referral sources for counseling in your area. However, you will have to assume the cost of such services.

Because you will be sharing some private and personal information in this study, there is a minimal risk of invasion of privacy. To help avoid this risk, the researcher will be in a private location when communicating with you and handling any materials pertaining to the study. To further ensure your privacy, you are asked to not share any information in the study that might be subject to mandatory reporting requirements. There is also a minimal risk of breach of confidentiality associated with your participation in this study. However, the researcher will take steps to minimize this risk by securing and keeping private all information pertaining to the study.

If you have questions about the research, your research rights, or have a research-related injury, please contact Denise Fournier Rodriguez at 954-309-0834 or Shelley Green at 954-262-3028. You may also contact the IRB at the numbers indicated above with questions as to your research rights.

Are there any benefits for taking part in this research study?
While there are no direct, tangible benefits for participating in the study, you and your family member(s) may benefit from talking about your experiences together through the process of the interview.

Will I get paid for being in the study? Will it cost me anything?
There are no costs to you or payments made for participating in this study.

How will you keep my information private?
Prior to participating in the interview, you will be assigned a family code and an individual code, which will ensure the confidentiality of your contributions to the study. All information in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law. Although you will be participating in this study along with a family member, your responses in your individual interview with the PI will be kept private and not shared with your participating family member during the conjoint family interview or otherwise. Research records—which include audio recordings, transcriptions, and correspondence with the interviewer—will be secured in the researcher's private, password-protected computer or stored in a secure, locked cabinet in the researcher's home office. Only the IRB, regulatory agencies, Denise Fournier Rodriguez, or Dr. Shelley Green may review research records.

 If you choose to participate in the interviews over Skype, be advised that Skype may collect information about you including (but not limited to) your name, address, phone number, email address, age, gender, IP address, etc. You can visit the Skype privacy policy website (http://www.skype.com/intl/en/legal/privacy/general/) if you would like further information. While Skype may not know that you are participating in this study, they may be collecting identifiable information.

What if I do not want to participate or I want to leave the study?
You have the right to leave this study at any time or refuse to participate. If you do decide to leave or you decide not to participate, you will not experience any penalty or loss of services you have a right to receive. If you choose to withdraw, any information collected about you **before** the date you leave the study will be kept in the research

records for 36 months from the conclusion of the study but you may request that it not be used.

Other Considerations:
If significant new information relating to the study becomes available, which may relate to your willingness to continue to participate, this information will be provided to you by the investigators.

Voluntary Consent by Participant:
By signing below, you indicate that
- this study has been explained to you
- you have read this document or it has been read to you
- your questions about this research study have been answered
- you have been told that you may ask the researchers any study related questions in the future or contact them in the event of a research-related injury
- you have been told that you may ask Institutional Review Board (IRB) personnel questions about your study rights
- you are entitled to a copy of this form after you have read and signed it
- you voluntarily agree to participate in the study entitled Coming Out, Coming Together, Coming Around: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Families' Experiences Adjusting to a Young Family Member's Disclosure of Non-Heterosexuality.

Participant's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Participant's Name: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent: _____

Date: _____

Biographical Sketch

Denise Fournier Rodriguez was born and raised in South Florida, where she attended private schools and excelled in academics. Upon graduating from high school, she moved to North Carolina to attend the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. There she pursued a degree in Psychology with a minor in Sociology. Denise was passionate about her studies and took every opportunity to advance her understanding of human cognition and behavior. She conducted research studies under the guidance of her professors and presented at local conferences.

Upon earning her Bachelor's degree, Denise moved to Northern Virginia, where she spent two years earning work experience as a bank loan officer and a restaurant assistant manager. These experiences fortified her interest in human behavior and human relationships, and they convinced her to return to school to pursue a Master's degree. This led Denise to return to South Florida to enroll in the Mental Health Counseling program at Nova Southeastern University (NSU). On the day that she was accepted to the program, she was also offered a position as the Administrative Assistant to the Department of Family Therapy at NSU.

During her time in the Master's program, Denise earned experience in the mental health counseling field while also learning about the field of family therapy through her full-time job. After she earned her degree, she attended a workshop led by Kenneth Gergen, which sparked a curiosity about postmodern ideas. She followed her interest by asking the professors in the family therapy department to recommend introductory texts, and upon reading them, she became convinced to pursue a Ph.D. in Family Therapy.

As a Ph.D. student, Denise sought opportunities to meld the systemic, relational ideas she was being exposed to with the concepts she learned in her mental health training. The integration of these ideas created the foundation for her clinical approach. During her time in the Ph.D. program, Denise worked with a variety of clients in the Brief Therapy Institute Family Therapy Clinic as well as in private practice at Isaac Farin Therapy, LLC. She presented at conferences and conducted studies in efforts to expand and share her knowledge. She also created an academic editing business to apply her grasp of the APA writing style toward helping graduate students improve their writing.

Denise's personal passion for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community led her to seek ways to explore the issues affecting LGB individuals through a systemic lens. This culminated in her dissertation research. Presently, Denise works as the Clinical Director for a treatment center that serves clients who suffer from chemical dependency, anxiety, and depression. She is also the Founder and Clinical Director of a non-profit organization—The SAILS Institute—that is designed to provide sliding scale therapy services and independent living skills education to at-risk LGBT young people and their families in Miami, Florida.