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**SYSTEMIC INFLUENCES ON ACCEPTING AND SUPPORTIVE
PARENTS OF GAY SONS: TOWARDS A STRENGTHS MODEL**

By

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ABSTRACT

SYSTEMIC INFLUENCES ON ACCEPTING AND SUPPORTIVE PARENTS OF GAY SONS: TOWARDS A STRENGTHS MODEL

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The Purpose of this study was to learn more about the attributes and systemic influences of parents who are accepting and supportive of their sons' gay identities. This was a qualitative study in which fourteen parents of gay sons were asked to tell the story of their own coming out processes as "parents of gay sons." Information concerning their definitions of parental acceptance, their journeys to acceptance, their relationships with their sons, and the ecosystemic influences on their coming out processes was obtained through their narrative accounts. By hearing these stories, an appreciation of personal attributes, strengths, and resiliency of these parents was gained. Ethnographic Content Analysis was used to examine four areas: Parental Definitions of Acceptance, Parents' Relationships with Their Sons, Parents' Stories of Their Coming Out Processes, and Ecosystemic Influences on Parents' Coming out Processes. A grounded theory approach was utilized in an attempt to generate new theoretical concepts from the parents' stories. It is anticipated that the knowledge gained from this study will ultimately assist in developing a strengths-based model that can be utilized in clinical settings to assist parents who are experiencing a coming out process related to the disclosure of a child's gay or lesbian identity.

**Dedicated to my children: Abby, Molly and Leigh, whose strength and resilience
have been a gift to my own journey.**

**And to Jean Paul Luc, who helped me discover new pieces of myself along the
way.**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I remember a time early in my journey that I was sitting in a required graduate school seminar, a sort of “Graduate School 101: How to Be Successful and Maintain Your Sanity” or some such. At some point my attention drifted and I tried to imagine myself at the end of it all. I thought about this very moment, when I would reach the end and write my “acknowledgements” to all of the people who had abetted my success. This was to replace my “Academy Award Acceptance Speech” now that I had officially given up my dreams of stardom. Many times during the process of graduate school, I would write my “acknowledgements” piece in my mind. I went through several iterations (serious, humorous and philosophical) during the commute to and from school, in the middle of the night, and yes, even when I was bored in class. I needed to envision myself a success in the end. What I did not realize was that I would have to complete the entire journey before I could truly appreciate the impact of the many people who enriched it. Now, I have finally arrived, so here it goes...

First, I would like to acknowledge and thank the parents who participated in this study. Their stories were candid and poignant. Their strength and spirit touched me. Their narratives enriched my project in ways that I never imagined.

I am very appreciative of my committee for their guidance and support during the process. I would like to thank Dr. Marsha Carolan for first introducing me to narrative study and for incorporating a feminist perspective into her teaching and supervision. I would like to thank Dr. Rena Harold for her cooperative nature, being the “outside member” of my committee. I was also fortunate to take a class from her and

experience her enlightened perspective. I would like to thank Dr. Robert Griffore for his kind and supportive manner. His ideas significantly increased the quality of this project. I am also deeply appreciative of my committee chair, Dr. Robert E. Lee, but I will thank him at the end.

I have been fortunate in my life to have many wonderful friends. These friendships have contributed to a much richer life experience and have help to shape me. Specifically, I would like to thank Dave, for his warmth, humor and for helping me relax when my last nerve is shredded. I would like to thank Cara, for being my unofficial therapist, for her honesty, for feeding me so well, and for sharing Tristan and his stories, which are always good for a smile. I would like to thank Robbin, for always being who she is, no matter what and for making me feel very valued amongst her sea of friends. Finally, I would like to thank Lori, who is truly like a sister to me. She understands mature friendship. My ability to get through some of the more tortuous times of graduate school was greatly enhanced by her unconditional love, support and ability to withstand being ‘blown off’ during the past six weeks. And nobody makes me laugh like her.

I would also like to thank Chris. Even though our relationship changed form over the course of the past seven years, I am hopeful that the bond that was created through our struggles and triumphs and through the experience of co-parenting will endure. I never for a minute fail to appreciate her contribution to my success. Logistically and emotionally, I would not have been able to accomplish what I have without her support.

I am deeply appreciative of my family for instilling in me the value of knowledge. My experience in my particular family taught me about change, adaptation and strength.

I would particularly like to thank my mom, for her nurturing and love throughout my life. She has been a true example of strength in the face of adversity. I would also like to thank her for bailing me out of "Transcription Hell" ("Willo" and "p-flea"). I also truly owe Jim a "debt" of gratitude (he'll hold me to this). I have to say, it was a little scary to entrust someone who thought homophobia meant "the fear of milk," but I am beyond appreciative of his help. And underneath that cynical facade, lies a truly caring person. I am also lucky to have siblings, grandparents, aunts, and uncles, whose love, support, and "spoiling," I have appreciated along the way.

My children, Abby, Molly and Leigh exceed me in intelligence, creativity and most virtues. I am so proud of each of them and they make me want to strive to be a better person. They have been such troopers throughout this journey and I consider it a true blessing that I get to be their mom. Abby, thank you for being so responsible, challenging me and for making me laugh. Molly, thank you for your good nature and for affirming and entertaining me. Leigh, thank you for being so open and creative.

Finally, back to that graduate school seminar. I remember that someone put a cartoon/fable on an overhead...something about rabbits eating foxes. I can't remember the story exactly, but the moral was that "the only thing that truly mattered was who you chose for your major professor." In Dr. Robert E. Lee, I chose the best. His example of success inspires me. His intelligence awes me. His sense of humor...is as sick as my own...and I love it. We have always been able to be honest with one another, even about embarrassing things. I feel fortunate to take his friendship with me as a gift from this journey. And as I have learned, journeys do not truly end...they branch off into different roads.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Sometimes life events require people to reach beyond their standard repertoire of coping and understanding, and adopt new ways of knowing and believing (Tomm, 1984). Such flexibility is said to be an example of healthy functioning in family systems (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). Frequently, relationships between family members must be renegotiated. Some families experience difficulty as they navigate the changes of time and circumstance. Others possess the ability to more easily transition through the vicissitudes of life. The "coming out" of a family member as gay or lesbian is one of those events that challenges previous ways of understanding and requires an adjustment of previously held beliefs. Parents often experience conflict between their love for their son or daughter on the one hand, and their own negative biases towards homosexuality borne out of the pervasive influence of societal homophobia on the other (Elizur & Ziv, 2001). Although some families successfully negotiate a coming out process of their own upon the disclosure of a member's gay or lesbian identity, others are seemingly unable to cope, often at the expense of family relationships.

One of the most difficult things for gays and lesbians to reconcile within themselves is the loss of love and support from family once they have decided to disclose their gay or lesbian identity (LaSalla, 2000). Particularly painful is the rejection from some parents who are crippled in their ability to offer support in light of their own internalized homophobia. People are often encouraged to view the family, and more specifically their parents as a source of refuge and comfort as they experience difficult

transitions. Goldfried and Goldfried (2001) observe that the presence or absence of support from parents can have a significant psychological impact on gays or lesbians. When parents are unable to provide loving affirmation for the essence of their gay or lesbian child's identity, both the parent and the child experience a deep loss. Parents who are able to accept their children's gay or lesbian identity are often rewarded with a more genuine parent-child relationship as they are able to experience the full realm of their child's being.

Statement of the Problem

While it is important to explore the coming out process for families of both gays and lesbians, this study focused on the families of gay men as a starting point. The primary goal of this research was to explore the attributes and experiences of parents who are accepting of their sons' gay identities through the parents' stories of these experiences. Specifically, this study gathered qualitative data for the purpose of providing information concerning the salient characteristics of accepting parents of gay sons as well as information about the primary systems in which these parents are embedded. This research addresses the interface of the sons' coming out processes with the parents' own coming out processes as "parents of gay sons" and explores the quality of the parent-child relationship across time. This project allowed the parents to story their experiences of coming out and to ascribe their own meanings to these experiences. Narrative accounts were elicited to illustrate the salient reactions to and experiences around their sons' coming out and their eventual acceptance of their sons' gay identities. Finally, this research attempted to develop definitions concerning levels of parental acceptance based on the narratives of the parents.

Importance of the Problem

On April 30, 1997, the sitcom *Ellen* aired a now-famous episode in which the title character came to terms with the fact that she was a lesbian, a parallel to actress Ellen Degeneres' real life coming out several years prior to the show. In this episode, Ellen talked with her therapist about her fears around this revelation, including disclosing to her parents. She observes, "Nobody bakes a cake for you when you discover your sexuality that says 'Good for You, You're Gay!'"

For many gays and lesbians their coming out process evokes similar fears (Hetrick & Martin, 1987). They not only fear lack of validation from loved ones, but also overt hostility. Although disclosure to loved ones is an important developmental step in a coming out process where the optimal end is self-acceptance and pride, the fear of rejection from their parents often propels the gay or lesbian person to develop strategies to hide or change their sexual orientation (Mallon, 1992). However, if gays or lesbians continue to hide behind heterosexual facades, roles, and behaviors, they become deprived of their own emotional life. This strategy of deception interferes with most of the relationships within the family that the gay or lesbian person attempts to maintain, creating a greater sense of isolation and decreased levels of family functioning (Bozzett & Sussman, 1989). Although there has been past research designed to investigate the effects of the coming out process on families, (Beeler & DiProva, 1999; Bozzett & Sussman, 1989; Cramer & Roach, 1988; Cramer & Roach, 1988; Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998) most of the data gathered comes from the gay or lesbian person's experience. Clearly, there is a need for research around the area of family of origin and the ability of parents to accept their children's gay or lesbian identities. While there are a

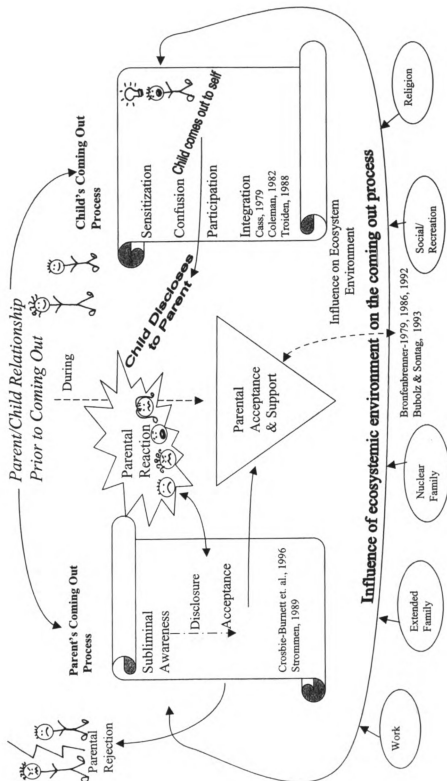
number of books aimed at helping parents "cope" with the discovery that their child is gay or lesbian (e.g., Fairchild & Hayward, 1989), there remains a large void in research identifying family strengths and weaknesses to this end. The subjective exploration of accepting parents will likely provide valuable insights necessary to the development of grounded theory in the area of parental adjustment following the disclosure of a son's gay identity. Additionally, this information may be utilized in the construction of a strengths model that will inform clinical practice with families experiencing the coming out process.

Conceptual Framework

A pictorial synthesis of the concepts used to operationalize this study is represented by the conceptual map presented in Figure 1.1. The concepts posited by human ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1992) and family ecology theory (Bubolz and Sontag, 1993) are central to this study and will be discussed more extensively in the section addressing theoretical perspectives. This figure illustrates the influence of various ecosystemic considerations on the coming out process for gays and their families. Circles are used to represent these environments. An ecomap is utilized to assess the influence of the various systems on the parents' coming out processes. Ecomaps are frequently used by clinicians to identify and highlight connections and reciprocity between families and their environments, and may be a useful tool to bridge research with practice (Harold, Mercier & Colarossi, 1997). The disclosure of the son's gay identity to the parent is an essential step of identity acquisition for the child and represents the interface of the two processes. Disclosure marks the "official" beginning of the parent's "coming out" process, which includes an initial reaction indicating the

early parental acceptance level. This map conceptualizes parental acceptance at different points in time from initial disclosure to present. A negative trajectory towards rejection is conceptualized to occur when the parent is unable to resist negative attitudes, feelings, and beliefs prevalent in society. The parent colludes with the system of oppression and further perpetuates societal heterosexism and homophobia. The conceptualization includes the possibility of mediating variables that may contribute to a positive trajectory towards acceptance. If the parent experiences positive influences from the primary systems regarding his or her coming out process, s/he will experience dissonance when confronted with homophobia and heterosexism, rejecting negative messages, and propelling towards acceptance. Parents who are accepting will also exert positive influence on the systems in which they are embedded. The relationship between the parent and child is believed to affect and be affected by the coming out processes for each. Therefore, the relationship between the parents and sons is observed across time.

Figure 1.1
Ecosystemic Influences on Parents' Acceptance of Sons' Gay Identities
A Conceptual Map



Theoretical Framework

Understanding the process by which parents achieve various levels of acceptance of the gay or lesbian sexual identity of their children may best be achieved by looking at this process in the context of several relevant theories and developing a blended theory which incorporates aspects of each. Human ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986,1992) and family ecology theory (Bubolz and Sontag, 1993) provide a useful framework to explore the systemic influences on the coming out process of the child as gay or lesbian and the parent's subsequent acceptance or rejection of that identity as they navigate a process of their own. This model attends specifically to context as it identifies the relationship between sexual identity alterations and larger social forces. For this reason, human ecological theory is chosen to provide a theoretical backdrop for the exploration of the coming out processes of both the parent and child, which is delineated in several models of gay identity formation. In particular, systems theory, research, and clinical case studies articulate the postulate that relationships with family members and the overall quality of the family system play a major part in the construction of the self and the world (Elizur & Minuchin, 1989.)

Human Ecology Theory

Human ecology theory suggests the integral relationship of human beings with a natural ecosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner emphasizes the importance of four principle environmental systems when studying the development of human beings. These environmental systems are conceptualized as a nested design in order of proximity to the human being. Bronfenbrenner (1979) defines these systems as follows:

Microsystem- The family as a whole is the principally recognized

microsystem, however, various combinations of individuals may compose dyads, triads, or larger sub-groups to form separate microsystems.

Mesosystem- This includes all systems in which the developing person is active, such as school, social activities, or community.

Exosystem- These are systems in which individuals relevant to the developing person are involved, creating a vicarious influence on the individual. Social networks or work environment provide examples.

Macrosystem-This system relates to the broad ideological values, norms, and institutional policies in which all of the systems are embedded. This system provides cultural definition which influences the way in which various systems operate.

Thus, all beings and environments are interconnected, making it impossible to view any part as totally separate from the whole. Bronfenbrenner (1986) also proposed the *chronosystem* for the purpose of examining how these various systems influence human development over time. The chronosystem conceptualizes time in relation to the continuity of or changes in development of the person .

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) early conceptualization of the environmental influence on the developing human being is a useful paradigm for this study. It is strengthened however by adding the concepts implicit in the *Process-Person-Context Model* (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). This model attends not only to the influence of the environmental characteristics on developmental processes, but also recognizes personal characteristics of the individual as an intervening influence. In fact, this model appreciates the joint function of environmental and personal characteristics working

together to produce a more substantial effect on development than either does by itself.

Bronfenbrenner (1992) defines the two key defining properties of this model as follows:

1. The design permits assessment not only of developmental outcomes but also of the effectiveness of the processes producing these outcomes (p. 199).
2. The design reveals how both developmental outcomes and processes vary as a joint function of the characteristics of the person and of the environment, thus permitting the detection of synergistic effects (p.200).

Family Ecology Theory

Bubolz and Sontag's (1993) representation of family ecology recognizes the synergistic relationship between general systems theory and human ecological theory as a useful means to achieve understanding of families. They distinguish between human ecosystems, which they describe as "a particular kind of living system comprised of humans in interaction with their environment" (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993, p. 424) and family ecosystems, which they describe as a subset of human ecosystems that are aptly described using general systems concepts. These concepts include notions of openness, permeability, input and output between the parts and wholes, and positive and negative feedback loops.

According to Bubolz and Sontag (1993), the structure of family ecosystems can be understood by recognizing the diverse characteristics that define families such as structure, ethnic origin, life stage and socioeconomic status. A further appreciation occurs when individual and family attributes, such as needs, values, goals, resources and artifacts are understood. The various parts and wholes are interconnected and have a reciprocal influence on one another while being shaped by beliefs, characteristics, and

behaviors of each individual in relation to the other (Bristol, 1990). Finally, the interaction in diverse environments contributes the complexity of family processes, which include transformation of energy and information through adaptive processes such as perception, decision making, organization, management, communication, use of technology, sustenance activities and human development (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993). The developing individual assumes different roles in different microsystems with occurrences in one microsystem subsequently affecting the others and ultimately affecting societal processes inherent in the macrosystem (Bubolz and Sontag, 1993).

Family ecology theory suggests that environments do not directly determine human behavior. However, they impose constraints and limitations and provide possibilities and opportunities (Bubolz and Sontag, 1993). Human beings are varied as to their opportunities or abilities to control and change their environmental interactions (Bristol, 1990). Andrews, Bubolz, and Paolucci (1980) identify change as a primary facet of family ecosystems, recognizing the dynamic nature of the family and calling attention to the perpetual state of modification that the family endures. When a family member comes out as gay or lesbian, such modifications are likely to occur. Bristol (1990) states that ecosystems equipped with diverse knowledge and skills have a greater opportunity for successful adaptation than those without such resources.

Narrative Study

Postmodern approaches may be particularly useful in the study of families and family relationships given the complexity of these interactions. Social constructivism in particular appreciates the natural tendency for human beings to story their experiences relevant to their own perceptions (Moules, 2000). These personal narratives and the

realities created by them contribute significantly to the development of self-concept (Gergen, 1985; Gergen, & Gergen, 1988) as well as behavior. Narrative construction involves unconscious, preconscious and conscious processes whereby people attempt to organize their life experiences in a way that helps them make sense of life events (Gergen & Gergen, 1988). These narratives also inform present realities and have the power to shape future experiences (Borden, 1992). A collective of several self-narratives expressed through language contributes to the development of stories, wherein people become historians of their own lives.

Stories are literally structured components that include a broad diversity of characters, plots and themes and outcomes. They are also a useful metaphor for the natural construction of people's lived experiences. When people are asked to create stories through language they may be afforded the opportunity to access and express parts of their experience that had previously been less apparent to them (Schnitzer, 1993). There are four primary characteristics central to the constitution of the story which includes the following (Schnitzer, 1993, p. 444):

1. One rendition of the said and unsaid
2. A chronicle across time
3. Story-telling interaction
4. An expression of dominant narratives, including cultural influences.

The story metaphor is particularly appropriate for the coming out process, in that several conscious and unconscious factors are involved, and given the perpetual nature of this process it is best chronicled over time. Although the parents may go through a similar process overall, the individual stories will capture the most meaningful aspects for each

parent and appreciate the unique characteristics across stories. These stories may become an anchoring source for the parents, their sons, and the families as a whole (White & Epston, 1990).

These stories of acceptance also have the ability to influence the systems with which the parents interact. While stories do not cause people to act in a certain way, they are powerful in shaping or guiding behavior, especially when people experience unexpected events (Borden, 1992). Parents who cannot get beyond their negative feelings related to their sons' gay identities will likely get trapped in negative and constraining themes around the "problem" that will limit their abilities to find desirable ways to address the situation as a whole. Conversely, positive narratives may allow parents to consolidate their previously held beliefs about their sons with their discovery that their son is gay. They may re-story their lives in a way that offers new options for the parent-child relationship and contributes to a more positive life experience than they might have even imagined (White & Epston, 1990). When these stories are gathered and analyzed through qualitative research methods, they will provide rich information that can be used to inform clinical practice and subsequent research (Harold, Palmiter, Lynch, & Freedman-Doan, 1995).

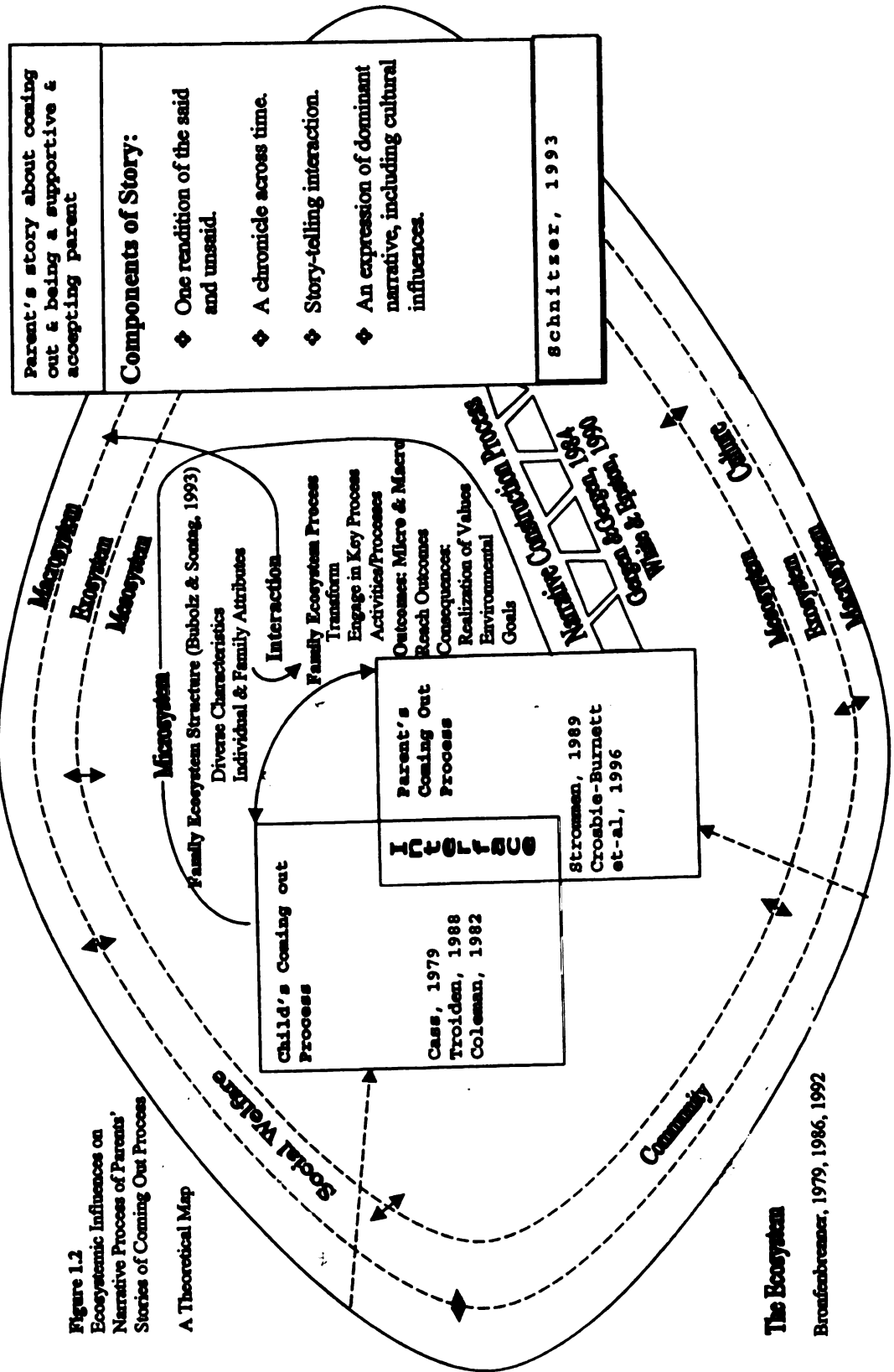
Description of Theoretical Map

Figure 1.2 is a pictorial representation of the primary theoretical concepts that guide this study. The consecutive rings on the outside depict the ecosystemic environment as outlined by human ecology theory (Bronfenbrenner 1979,1986). The concepts of heterosexism and homophobia are believed to be relevant across all of these systems and are included to illustrate the limitations imposed upon the developing

gay person and family members through cultural and societal conventions (Blumenfeld, 1992; Cass, 1984; Coleman, 1982; Foster, Murray, & Bowen, 1996; Troiden, 1988).

Family ecology theory is relevant to the diverse characteristics of the families and how people process information and is represented in closer proximity to the parent-child relationship as it likely helps to explain how the coming out process is managed by the parents, the sons and the families as a whole. The influences of the various systemic environments are believed to affect the parent's self-narratives.

The process of narrative construction happens within the context of their experiences and contributes to the meanings they ascribe and how they use these meanings to inform their current and future beliefs and behavior (White & Epston, 1990). According to this model, individuals – in the present case, the parents-- will select different parts of their experiences from the past and present, as well as their expectations for the future and connect them in a sequence that helps to create their self-narratives (Gergen, 1985). This process will result in a “story” (Schnitzer, 1993) of the parents' coming out processes and subsequent acceptance of their sons' gay identities. This research privileges the experiences and stories of parents who have successfully negotiated a coming out process of their own and have reached acceptance of their sons' gay identities.



Assumptions and Propositions

Assumptions

Several assumptions shape the researcher's perspective concerning this study.

Assumptions are statements that are presumed to be fact, or taken as a given in the research process. These assumptions are not subject to empirical testing (Reynolds, 1971). It is important not only to be aware of the assumptions that drive the research but also to make these assumptions explicit when possible to increase the reliability and validity of the project. (Fetterman, 1989). These will be presented in terms of broad and domain assumptions. Broad assumptions are statements that relate to the concepts underlying the project as a whole, while domain assumptions are particular to specific concepts.

Broad Assumptions

Assumption 1. This study employs an ecological research model. This research model is widely interpreted (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bubolz & Sontag, 1993). However, there is a basic assumption that human beings are in constant interaction with their environment, and that they reciprocally influence one another. Specifically, we must assume that this relationship is real and orderly, and can be measured both directly through observation and indirectly through empirical methodology.

Domain Assumptions

Assumption 1. There is a developmental process by which people acquire or form gay identities (Cass, 1979, Coleman, 1982; Troiden, 1988).

Assumption 2. Parents of gay children go through a developmental process to acquire an identity as a the "parent of a gay child." (Beeler & DiProva, 1999; Crosbie-

Burnett et al., 1996, Strommen, 1989).

Assumption 3. The coming out process of both the child and the parent is influenced by several levels of the environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1992).

Assumption 4. All levels of the ecosystemic environment are affected by homophobia and heterosexism. (See discussions in Blumenfeld, 1992.)

Assumption 5. The coming out of a child as gay precipitates a crisis for the family as a whole and various stages must be negotiated to successfully resolve the crisis (Elizur & Ziv, 2001)

Propositions

Propositions assert hypothesized relationships between concepts. The relationships that are observed between concepts contribute to the construction of theory. The following propositions are relevant to this study.

Proposition 1. Systemic factors will determine the level to which a parent accepts his or her son's gay identity.

Proposition 2. The type of support received by the parent will likely influence the level of acceptance concerning his or her son's gay identity.

Proposition 3. If the parent is able to accept his or her son's gay identity, then s/he will be able to accept his or her own identity as the "parent of a gay son" and vice-versa.

Proposition 4. Parents will assign meaning to their environments through the narrative process.

Proposition 5. A parent's story of his or her own coming out process has the potential to influence and be useful to others.

Chapter 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Gay and Lesbian Inquiry

Models of Gay and Lesbian Identity Formation

Several authors have suggested a sequence of stages that take place in a developmental process of gay or lesbian identity formation (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Troiden, 1988). Although different taxonomies are used to delineate this process, the concepts are closely related and share many common themes. Troiden's (1988) and Coleman's (1982) models identify an early stage wherein the gay or lesbian person has an initial awareness or sensitization feeling that s/he is somehow "different." At this stage, the person does not generally relate this feeling to sexual orientation although many report feeling that they possessed atypical gender attributes from an early age (Coleman, 1982). Generally, they report that their social experiences played a larger role in generating these feelings of being different than either sexual attractions or engagement in sexual activity (Troiden, 1988). This is a rather nebulous stage because the information gathered is largely a retrospective analysis of gays and lesbians describing their feelings and recollections after they have progressed through subsequent stages. The feelings apparently took on greater meaning when they were attached to homosexual feelings and attractions in adolescence or adulthood (Troiden, 1988).

During the next stage, the gay or lesbian person experiences confusion as s/he begins to question previously held assumptions of heterosexuality. Cass (1979) identifies

this as the initial stage in her model, rather than speaking to the awareness state encompassed in the other two models. Gay or lesbian individuals begin to associate their feelings of being different with the possibility that they might be gay or lesbian, which contradicts their previously held self-image (Cass, 1979). Gays and Lesbians at this stage often sense a growing anxiety over perception of themselves as gay or lesbian (Coleman, 1982). These individuals may also experience feelings of isolation and alienation as they realize the ramifications of being a member of a stigmatized group (Cass, 1979). They may employ several methods to ease their anxiety including denial, avoiding situations that intensify same-sex desire, assuming heterosexual characteristics and roles, and rationalization (Troiden, 1988). As they continue to put forth effort to deny their identity, they will remain immobilized in the coming out process and remain at this level. If they find the identity desirable, they will continue along the developmental process (Cass, 1979).

If the gay or lesbian person decides that this identity is appropriate, s/he will begin to engage in activities that enable him or her to explore this aspect of his or her self more thoroughly (Cass, 1979). This stage is often characterized by increased interaction with other members of the gay and lesbian community and participation in gay culture. At this time, the gay or lesbian individual may engage in sexual relationships (Troiden, 1988). An essential task for the gay or lesbian person in the process of identity formation is the act of "coming out" to others by sharing his or her gay or lesbian identity with them. Often, the gay or lesbian person is more likely to share his or her identity with others who are perceived as "safe." This is most commonly other gays and lesbians. Sometimes, however, s/he will share information concerning his or her gay or lesbian

identity with heterosexual individuals s/he perceives as likely to be supportive (Coleman, 1982). This can be a time of relative serenity for the gay or lesbian because s/he has answered questions about who s/he is and where s/he belongs (Cass, 1979).

As gays and lesbians become more attached to their sexual identity, they begin to recognize the ramifications of prejudicial behavior on many aspects of their lives. Their developing pride in their identity may be accompanied by anger towards the people and institutions working to keep them in a marginalized position (Cass, 1979). Their anger and fierce loyalty towards their group as a whole may propel them into action to fight against the injustices through various levels of activism. Troiden (1988) characterizes the final stage as “identity commitment.” At this developmental stage, the gay or lesbian individuals would not change even if they were given the chance.

Cass (1979) offers an additional stage in the process of gay or lesbian identity formation. She postulates that if interactions with members of the heterosexual community are consistently and pervasively negative, the gay or lesbian will remain in a state in which s/he dichotomizes gays and lesbians as predominantly good and heterosexuals as predominantly bad. She believes that acknowledging many sides of their character beyond their sexuality when gay and lesbian individuals are able to experience positive interactions with heterosexuals across time and circumstance, enables the former to refine their anger and pride and hold it in less emotional terms. This allows them to see themselves in a more holistic nature. They are able to develop lifestyles in which their identity is not hidden, but integrated across different pieces of their lives. At any rate, identity management is likely to be a concern that permeates the gay or lesbian individual's interactions across time and circumstance.

Family Adjustment to a Member "Coming Out"

Coming out represents a change in previously held concepts about self. This transformation happens within the relational and social contexts of the particular individual (Massey, 1986; Oswald, 2000). A social interdependence exists between the gay or lesbian person and the relationship systems in which he or she exists. As individuals come out to themselves and disclose their gay or lesbian identities to those in their family or other relationship systems, the information also influences the persons to whom the disclosure was made (Massey, 1986). Therefore, coming out is a process of significant change not only for individuals who accept and disclose their gay or lesbian identities but also for the individuals to which they disclose this identity.

The process by which parents come to accept or reject their children's gay or lesbian identity is not well documented. Various authors have identified a model of loss, which closely resembles Kubler-Ross' (1969) stages of grieving the death of a loved one. They propose models for progression through a series of stages. These stages include shock, denial, guilt, anger, and eventual acceptance (Bernstein, 1990; Bozzett & Sussman, 1989). Crosbie-Burnett, and her associates (1996) delineate a model of adjustment that assumes a developmental process for family members of gays or lesbians in relation to their own identity of having a gay or lesbian relative. This model offers several loosely ordered stages that family members progress through towards eventual acceptance of another member's gay or lesbian identity, and acceptance of themselves as a relative of a gay or lesbian. These stages parallel those offered in the identity formation models for gays and lesbians. They begin with initial suspicion, followed by disclosure and reaction, moving through confusion and anxiety, and finally reaching a place of

acknowledgment, support, and affirmation (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Crosbie-Burnett et al., 1996, Troiden, 1988). The application of this model to gays' and lesbians' family of origin promotes understanding of the interactions between members both cognitively and behaviorally within their shared physical and social environment and with varying environments in which the family is embedded (Crosbie-Burnett, 1996).

Heterosexism and Homophobia

A common assumption held by theorists addressing gay and lesbian identity formation is that it takes place in an arena surrounded by stigma and prejudice (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Crosbie-Burnett et al., 1996; Troiden, 1988). Previous research indicates that homophobia is prevalent in many facets of society, and has psychological ramifications for both homosexually and heterosexually oriented individuals (Fornstein, 1988). The synthesis of homophobia and heterosexism encourage and perpetuate the negative stereotypes necessary to maintain hostility and prejudicial behaviors towards gays and lesbians. Homophobia has been defined as an irrational fear or hatred of gays, lesbians, and bisexuals (See Blumenfeld & Raymond, 1993). The definition may be expanded to include prejudice, discrimination, harassment, and acts of violence brought on by this fear. Heterosexism may be defined as the assumption that everyone is heterosexual: social structures which serve to elevate or enforce heterosexuality with subordination or suppression of homosexuality. Cultural heterosexism involves the promotion by society in general as the only legitimate expression of sexuality and affection (Herek, 1995). It includes both explicit teachings of heterosexual normativity and tacit communication of this ideal through society's norms, institutions, laws, cultural forms, and scientific practices (Blumenfeld & Raymond, 1993).

Influences of Homophobia on Ecosystemic Environments

Research has found a relationship between homophobia and several variables. There is a moderate body of research investigating homophobic attitudes in individuals to fear of AIDS (Bouton, Gallagher, Garlinghouse, & Leal, 1989; Eliason & Raheim, 1996; Hammersmith, 1987; Nyberg & Alston, 1976). The relationship of religion to both fear of AIDS and homophobia has also been studied. Religious and political conservatism has been correlated with higher levels of homophobia (Bouton et al., 1989; Wylie & Forest, 1992). Results found no relationship between religiosity and AIDS-phobia. However, they revealed differing levels of homophobia across denominations. Regular attendance of church appears to have a positive correlation with homophobia, while lack of attendance altogether results in lower levels of homophobia (Kunkel & Temple, 1992).

Several studies investigated the relationship between exposure and/or interaction with gays, lesbian, or bisexuals and levels of homophobia. Participants who reported knowing somebody personally or having a gay or lesbian friend exhibited lower levels of homophobia. They were also more likely to intervene when derogatory comments were being made concerning gays, lesbians, or bisexuals (Eliason & Raheim, 1996). Data was collected from students at a southeastern metropolitan university who experienced three hours of exposure to gay males and lesbians, in which they were encouraged to ask questions and interact with them. Another group was not exposed to gays or lesbians. Results indicated that interaction was correlated with lower levels of homophobia, lending credence and support for the hypotheses that greater contact with gays and lesbians lessens fear and has a mitigating effect on homophobia (Lance, 1992).

It is important to consider the limitations that heterosexism and homophobia

place upon family ecosystems in terms of promoting gay and lesbian identity development in individuals and families. Generally speaking, coming out results in varying degrees of conflict that can be alleviated over time if family members are able to transcend heterosexist and homophobic values and beliefs found in many facets of society (Oswald, 2000).

Stigma and Gay and Lesbian Identity

Gays and lesbians have traditionally suffered stigmatization and negative consequences, including discrimination, limited access to opportunities, limited legal protection for relationships and general difficulty in interpersonal relationships (Crocker & Major, 1989). This unfavorable treatment stems from beliefs about the inherent inferiority of the group members that are associated with their identifying characteristics. Not all sources of human stigma are equally visible (Goffman, 1963). When membership in a stigmatized group is not easily observable or apparent, it is at the discretion of the individuals as to whether or not they want to reveal membership in the group. Gays and lesbians often worry about the potential for being discredited once their sexual identity is revealed. Moreover, there is a worry that once they are stigmatized for being gay or lesbian, they will be scrutinized negatively by members of the larger group and the stigmatizing characteristic will be given primacy over their other characteristics (Bohan, 1996.)

For stigmatized individuals such as gays and lesbians, the issue of identity management becomes crucial to their lives. Sexual identity management requires vigilance to cues in the social environment (Frable, Platt, & Hoey, 1998). Decisions regarding revelation and concealment are made based on both deliberations about how to

manage personal information and the social context (Cain, 1991).

The issue becomes one of, “to be or not to be...out.” That is the question. Openness about one’s identity has been associated with increased psychological adjustment and well-being (Cain, 1991; Cass, 1979), however there is still the issue of having to manage the stigma and adverse consequences surrounding it should the gay or lesbian person decide to be honest about his or her identity. When an integration strategy is used, gay or lesbian individuals reveal their true identity and attempt to manage the consequences. In most cases, a person must explicitly reveal that he or she is gay or lesbian since sexual identity is not usually a visible source of stigma (Goffman, 1963). Silence implicitly supports heterosexist assumptions. When gays or lesbians opt to be open about their identity they may do so either directly or indirectly (Cain, 1991). They may indirectly drop “clues” or look for opportunities to directly tell people they perceive might be accepting. This may occur during a series of personal conversations or by taking the opportunity to correct heterosexual assumptions when they occur (Woods, 1993).

If the gay or lesbian person wishes to hide his or her identity, she may employ several techniques (Woods, 1993). One technique is known as “counterfeiting” and involves constructing a false heterosexual identity that is portrayed to people the gay or lesbian person senses might be hostile towards them based on the stigma surrounding them. This heterosexual façade may involve actually fabricating heterosexual relationships, lying about personal issues related to being gay or lesbian or generally denying anything that would indicate a gay or lesbian identity. At a lesser level, gays and lesbians may simply avoid doing or saying anything that would stereotypically be

associated with being gay or lesbian. They may simply elude personal questions, talk in generalities, or change the focus of conversation. They may tend to avoid social events where people are typically expected to bring a spouse or date (Woods, 1993). The benefits and consequences of either approach are given careful consideration and usually the decision about whether to disclose is context driven (Frable et al., 1998).

Disclosure and Reaction

Although responses to disclosure have been shown to be influenced by the context of disclosure (Ben Ari, 1995) and family background (Newman & Muzzonigro, 1993), Waldner and Magruder (1999) speak to the fact that it may be more difficult for gay or lesbian individuals to disclose their sexuality when they perceive positive family relations. They fear that such a disclosure could be disadvantageous because it would threaten the heterosexual norms established within their family systems. Gays or lesbians who suspect that their parents possess remedial problem solving skills may also have a difficult time disclosing their gay or lesbian identity (Cramer & Roach, 1988). Gays and lesbians may fear that the parents will try to make them “change” or that they will not affirm their gay or lesbian identities. Disclosure, however, is a crucial developmental task for the child and marks the beginning of the parent’s own coming out process (Crosbie-Burnett et al, 1996). Once the gay or lesbian child decides to disclose their sexual identity to their parents, a broad range of emotions and reactions may occur. The most common reactions are shock, denial, guilt, sadness and blame (Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998). Parental reaction may also include involuntary psychiatric hospitalization, estrangement, violence and threats (LaSala, 2000). Some parents are able to navigate their way towards acceptance, understanding, and affirmation, while others remain

immobilized and maintain a rejecting stance. In many cases, parental attitudes may change with time (LaSala, 2000).

Research has indicated a trend in the patterns of disclosure within families. In particular, studies indicate that children disclose their sexual orientation to their mothers more often than their fathers (Boxer, Cook, & Herdt, 1991; D'Augelli, 2001; Savin-Williams, 1998). While these studies provide a quantification of trends relating to disclosure patterns, much less is known about the lived experiences of these gay and lesbian individuals who disclose to their parents. Even less is known about the lived experience of the parents whose children disclosed to them. Moreover, narrative descriptions that articulate the experiences are lacking. Much of the literature has focused on the consequences of coming out to family members, but relatively little has been documented that articulates the turning points from confusion, disapproval, or anger to the eventual acceptance experienced by the parents in response to the initial disclosure.

Resources

Resources, both internal and external, or lack thereof may help to explain the various levels of acceptance that are reached by parents (Beeler & DiProva, 1999). Many researchers speak to the importance of gays and lesbians developing networks with other gays and lesbians to promote identity development (Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1988). However, there is a void in the literature concerning this, with the exception of a few studies including a small qualitative study by Beeler and DiProva (1999). Research with gay men and lesbians indicated that friends are more frequent providers of social support than the family (Kurdek, 1988; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1987). Research has established that gay-affirming resources are important for the identity development of gay or lesbian

individuals because they encourage identity expression and create opportunities for same-sex interaction and other involvement in the gay and lesbian community (Gonsiorek & Rudolph, 1991). The availability of gay and lesbian organizations, supportive friendships and counselors are important resources for identity development. Research on the presence of support and resources for family members of gays and lesbians who are attempting to work through their feelings about this issue is largely missing from the literature. Resources are available to these individuals in terms of therapy (LaSala, 2000) and support groups such as Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (P-FLAG; www.pflag.org) a national organization founded in 1981 that provides monthly meetings, telephone help-lines, one-to-one support, speaker's bureaus, newsletters, youth groups, spouses' support groups, and family AIDS support.

Relationships Between Gays and Lesbians and Their Parents

The dominant themes addressed in the professional literature concerning gay and lesbians and family relationships focus primarily on gays and lesbians as parents, the coming out process as it relates to adolescents, and AIDS. Despite increasing interest on the part of researchers concerning the topic of gay and lesbian relationships within the context of their families of origin, there remains a dearth of information that relates specifically to the quality of these relationships. Research that focuses specifically on the characteristics of accepting and non-accepting families or which defines levels of acceptance is largely absent from the literature, with the exception of a few small studies, such as one assessing parental values and characteristics related to homophobia and changes in acceptance from initial disclosure (Cramer & Roach, 1988).

When family of origin is addressed, it is generally for the purpose of illustrating

common reaction to disclosure (Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998). Much of this literature relates to disclosure to parents by gay and lesbian youth (Boxer & Cohler, 1989; D'Augelli, 2001; Durby, 1994; Hetrick & Martin, 1987). Traditionally, parents have been misinformed that the reason for their child's sexual orientation is related to some deficiency in their parenting style or role modeling (Mallon, 1992).

Although Devine (1984) comments on the developmental stages that families must go through to move towards acceptance of a gay or lesbian child, parent and child characteristics that promote or impede acceptance are not addressed. Similarly, Crosbie-Burnett's (1996) model of social-cognitive adjustment is theoretical in nature and does not explore family relationships empirically. However, the authors identify many relevant topics related to family relationships, and list them as substantive research questions with a call for further research in the area of family of origin adjustment.

A comprehensive study of lesbian families (Slater, 1994) contains an isolated comment concerning interaction with family of origin however, is limited to one interaction and ignores the nuances of the relationship between the daughter and her family. Similarly, Benkov's (1994) study concerning lesbians with children fails to explore the issue of family of origin relationships other than in a cursory fashion. Other research concerning gay and lesbian couple relationships (e.g., Kurdek & Schmitt, 1987; Levy, 1989; Murphy, 1989) contain isolated data on some aspects of family relationships but again, fails to explore this issue in depth other than to offer occasional vignettes.

One body of research explores the process of family functioning in response to the AIDS crisis (Walker, 1991). Although this research looks more in-depth at the gay or lesbian individual's family of origin, it is primarily focused on the crisis of AIDS in a

child rather than investigating acceptance or rejection of the child's identity.

In conclusion, there currently is a paucity of information about the relationships existing between gay and lesbian individuals and other family members. Using qualitative research to further explore the coming out process of the parents is expected to provide a deeper and richer understanding of the characteristics of accepting families than currently exists.

Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative Methodology

Qualitative research is an interactive and transformational process involving close interaction with the researcher, participants, and the data (Sword, 1999). While quantitative research provides an understanding of general trends and knowledge, qualitative methods provide a more specific and profound understanding of a phenomenon (Gerhart, Ratliff, & Randall, 2001). Qualitative research provides in-depth descriptions and explanations to the flow of events in a contextual setting (Miles and Huberman, 1994.)

There has been a growing trend towards the use of qualitative research in the family sciences (Daly, 1992; Sprenkle & Moon, 1996). Proponents of qualitative methodology cite the inadequacy of traditional scientific methods as a vehicle to understanding the complexities of family systems (Rosenau, 1992.) Positivistic approaches do not lend themselves to the circularity of the human experience because they attempt to reduce data to an objective “truth” rather than appreciating the subjective meanings that are inherent in the study of human beings (Gilgun, 1992; White & Epston, 1990.) Qualitative research appreciates the importance of context as it influences the manner in which humans construct their realities. It also assumes that knowledge is socially constructed and that the investigator has the power to greatly impact this construction during the research process (Rosenau, 1992). Embracing qualitative methodology does not imply, however that there is no value in traditional quantitative

approaches. In fact, a move towards pluralism in family research will likely help researchers capitalize on the strengths of each approach rather than engaging in continued debate over the superiority of one over the other (Sprenkle & Moon, 1996.)

Qualitative research is well suited to this particular study, which seeks to identify and understand both the subjective experiences and attributes of parents who are accepting of their sons' gay identities. The use of qualitative methodology will better appreciate the diversity of ecosystemic influences, including systemic homophobia and heterosexism, that have contributed to the parents' construction of meaning around their sons' gay identities.

The detailed descriptions and explanations that flow from qualitative research are needed to obtain the data sought in this research since the focus is on exploration rather than quantifying variables (Daly, 1992). Traditionally, theories of family development have utilized somewhat narrow definitions of family. The use of grounded theory approaches may assist in developing broader theories of family development that recognize and appreciate the diversity of families, such as the families in this project. Studying families who have successfully integrated a member's gay or lesbian identity using a grounded theory approach may contribute to the development of theories around the strengths these families possess.

Grounded Theory

Grounded theory was developed for the purpose of closing "the embarrassing gap between theory and empirical research." (Sprenkle, 1996, p 66). Grounded theory is a qualitative research methodology, in which the researcher systematically develops theory by weaving observations of phenomena and

abstractions from these observations with previous research and theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Data are collected through interviews, observations, or review of written, audio or video sources (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Grounded theory offers a mechanism for the analysis of vernacular representations and concurrently provides a theoretical richness to the exploration of phenomena. An empirical iterative approach is used to collect and analyze data and the theory is constantly modified as the process of data collection and data analysis continues and is checked against empirical findings (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Implicit in grounded theory is the notion that phenomena are dynamic. Theories come to light from the “theoretical saturation of meaning, patterns, and categories” (Sprenkle & Moon, 1996, p. 65). Theoretical sensitivity reflects the investigator’s ability to use personal and professional experiences, as well as the literature, to see the research situation in new ways and use the data to promote the development of new theory (Straus & Corbin, 1990).

The concept of dynamics is critical to understanding the child-parent coming out process. A parent’s acceptance is a function of family system concepts that relate to all parent-child relationships, such as family dynamics, trust and communication skills. In addition, the parent’s acceptance will also reflect complex issues relating to sexual identity formation, including homophobia, heterosexism and the coming out process (for both the child and the parent). All of these factors are a part of evolving family systems. Grounded theory provides the best vehicle to gather and analyze such complex phenomena. Grounded theory leads to the development of pattern theories, in which the interacting factors are arranged horizontally (Gilgun, 1992). Pattern theory is in contrast to hierarchical theory, where hypotheses are deduced from general principles and tested

against facts (Gilgun, 1992). The emphasis is on making the theories as rich as possible rather than on proving instantiations of hypotheses or applications of previous theories. In pattern theory the focus is on attempting to understand diverse, individual settings, whereas in hierarchical theory the approach may mask individuality and lead to “norming” a family (Gilgun, 1992.)

Given the diverse scope of parental responses to disclosure including physical violence, involuntary psychiatric hospitalization, estrangement, denial, sadness and guilt, an approach that highlights individual nuances is critical (LaSala, 2000.) Research suggests that in many cases parental attitudes may improve with time (LaSala, 2000.) The dynamic nature of the process further complicates the process of obtaining data. The “patterning” process inherent in grounded theory likely provides the most effective vehicle for gathering and analyzing the data in this research project.

Grounded theory suggests that theory development works from the substantive level, which includes descriptive components to the formal level of abstraction as constant comparison proceeds over time (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As information is detailed substantively, it may explain many dimensions of a given research question. As substantive data are collected and compared, theory begins to develop as comparisons are made across substantive cases and are checked against previous research.

Feminist Inquiry

Feminist inquiry contains several primary tenets that drive this research. Implicit in feminist approaches to the research process is the emphasis on the subjective experience of the individual. Laird (2001) calls for both the uses of an ethnographic stance and a narrative stance when approaching the issues central to the lives of gays and

lesbians. She favors an approach where the investigator is informed yet does not claim to know everything. A narrative stance empowers individuals to be the expert of their own life experience (White & Epston, 1990). Laird (2001) suggests that culture is fluid and emergent, always moving and changing, as people constantly recreate themselves, their narratives and, in turn, are themselves changed (p.74). By privileging these experiences in clinical practice and in the research process, hierarchies are leveled and a more collaborative stance is achieved (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992). Also, a narrative approach to research may help in the deconstruction of cultural self-narratives which have roots in social and family experiences that privilege the experience of the dominant groups at the expense of gays' and lesbians', as well as their families' uniquely scripted narratives. It is the responsibility of feminist researchers to bring these stories into the realm of dominant discourse.

Research Objectives and Questions

The primary purpose of this research was to allow parents who are accepting and affirming concerning their sons' gay identities to story their experiences of coming out as parents of gay children and to investigate the ecosystemic influences on their experiences. The researcher used an explorative approach to gather data regarding the parents' subjective experiences with the coming out process for the purpose of gaining understanding of this unique experience and generating hypothesis for future research (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). This was accomplished through the use of semi-structured interviews that were guided by specific research questions. These interviews included the completion of ecomaps by the participants for the purpose of strengthening the research process through triangulation (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Additionally, a

narrative method was used. This method was loosely guided by a set of interview questions that were used to elicit parents' stories about their own coming out process related to having a gay son. An interpretive mode of inquiry was used to construe meaning of the parents' experience, both individually and across cases.

The specific *research questions* explored in this study were as follows:

1. *How do parents define themselves as accepting and supporting of their sons' gay identities?*
2. *How do parents describe their relationships with their gay sons prior to them coming out, during the coming out process, and at the present time?*
3. *What are the reflections of parents as they story their own coming out processes and the acquisition of their identities as "parents of gay sons?"*
4. *How do parents describe the impact of their ecosystemic environments on their ability to be accepting and affirming toward their sons' gay identities? Further, how do the parents describe their impact as accepting parents on these systems?*

The data has been utilized in two ways. First, the data was used for the purpose of beginning the development of grounded theory in the area of gay and lesbian family identity development. Second, information obtained has helped to generate further hypotheses that may be used in future research to build upon the present study and develop causal explanations. It is anticipated that continued research in this area will lead to the identification of causal pathways and will contribute to the construction of clinical models aimed at promoting the healthy integration of a member's gay or lesbian identity into the identity of the family as a whole.

Population and Sample

The population for this study was individual parents who are accepting and supportive regarding their adult sons' gay identities. A purposive (Gerhart et al., 2001) sample was used in this study. The goal of this research was to have a sample that yielded rich information rather than one that was generated randomly (Fetterman, 1989). In qualitative research the goal is to gain increased understanding of certain phenomenon and characteristics of the participants (Gerhart et al., 2001.) The specific purpose was to keep within the goals of the research questions by gaining a sample of parents who defined themselves as being accepting of their sons' gay identities (Newfield, Sells, Smith, Newfield, & Newfield, 1996). Before participating in the study, the parents were asked to respond to a written question, "What is your level of acceptance of your son's gay identity?" They were asked to circle one of the following responses: "Very Accepting", "Moderately Accepting" or "Somewhat Accepting." All of the parents in this study responded as being "Very Accepting." Additionally, the sons' of the parents in this study were mailed the same question with regard to their perception of their parents' acceptance levels. All of the sons perceived their parents as being "Very Accepting" as well.

Sample Size

The primary goal in qualitative research is not necessarily to obtain a large, random sample as in a quantitative study. In fact, a mandate for specific sample size does not exist within the qualitative literature. The more important concern is that the data are complete and saturated (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). It was initially anticipated that this study would include twenty parents who identified themselves as either "very accepting"

or “moderately accepting” of their sons’ gay identities. The participants were contacted as demographic information was returned via mail. Twenty-three demographic forms were returned indicating an interest in participating in the project. There were five potential participants who were contacted but were not able to participate because of scheduling conflicts. Four of the potential participants were not contacted because saturation of data was becoming evident after approximately ten interviews. After fourteen interviews had been completed, the researcher determined that the data had become saturated and the data collection process was complete at that point.

Sample Acquisition and Site

Because the nature of this topic may still be considered sensitive, the recruitment of parents included an initial contact with the leader of a local support group, Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (P-FLAG) to discuss means of approaching parents about participation in the project. Contact with such an individual is often a helpful way to gain entryway to a particular culture (Fetterman, 1989). This leader was able to identify several parents she believed would be willing to participate and agreed to mail them a letter from the researcher informing them of the nature of the project and inviting them to participate. If they were willing to participate, they were asked to send back a form with basic demographic information and were also asked to indicate their level of acceptance. All potential participants were thanked for taking the time to fill out the initial forms but were informed that they might not be contacted for the actual study. The decision to interview parents who were accepting rather than those who were rejecting of their children’s gay sexual identity mitigated some of the difficulty in finding willing participants.

Data Collection

Interview Process

Parents were initially contacted by telephone and were given a basic overview of the project and the interview process. They were informed that the purpose of the interview was to do an in-depth examination of their feelings and experiences related to being the parent of a gay child, examine the systemic influences that inform their narratives of how they came to be accepting of their sons' gay identities, and to explore their own definitions of what it means to be accepting and supportive of their sons' gay identities. Prior to starting the face- to-face interviews, the parties were asked to sign a consent form that gave written objectives of the project and descriptions of the interview process. Participants had the opportunity to ask questions about the interview process and to seek clarification about any aspect of the project in an attempt to avoid any psychological pressure in terms of their participation (Boss, Dahl, & Kaplan, 1996).

If parents of the same child were interviewed, each was interviewed separately so that the story of one spouse would not be influenced by the other. The participants were all interviewed in their homes because they indicated that this would be most comfortable and convenient for them. The first portion of the interview included some specific interview questions related to the parents' definitions of what they felt qualified them as accepting parents. The parents were also asked to describe their relationships with their children prior to the coming out process, during the coming out process and at the present time. Finally, the parents were asked to tell the story of their children's coming out, including descriptions of how they learned that their sons were gay, their reactions, and their subsequent processes of developing their own identities as "parents of gay sons."

This portion of the interview relied heavily on the parents' constructions of their personal narratives with the researcher guiding the process and utilizing some prompts and open-ended questions related to the coming out process. The narratives were tape recorded for later transcription and data analysis.

In an attempt to triangulate the data, the researcher asked the participants to complete ecomaps representing the primary systems in which the parents were embedded. These were to include extended family networks, friendship networks, culture, religion, work, and recreation. This portion of the interview was also semi-structured, with the researcher explaining the process involved in the completion of these tools, and using minor questions and prompts if necessary to facilitate inclusion of relevant information. The participants were given a broad overview of what they should try to address in terms of relevant systems. The majority of the participants completed this exercise with little prompting. The researcher drew the circles representing the systems the parents mentioned and recorded the data that was relevant to each system. The parents were also asked to consider what it was about the various systemic environments that facilitated their ability to be accepting and supportive concerning their sons' gay identities.

Data Analysis

The purpose of this study was to identify patterns and themes that became evident in the narratives and ecomaps of the participants concerning their acceptance of their sons' gay identities. In qualitative research, data analysis is a continual process that starts during the collection procedure itself and pervades the entire collection process even prior to the commencement of formal coding procedures (Miles & Huberman,

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1994.) Ethnographic content analysis specifically employs a reflexive movement between concept development, data collection, coding, analysis and interpretation (Altheide, 1987). To this end, the researcher engaged in data analysis starting with the initial interviewing process. The researcher took field notes to assist in recognizing prominent characteristics of the interviews, and to record non-verbal gestures and behavior that might be lost during the transcription process. At the end of each interview, these notes were utilized in the completion of contact summary sheets. The contact summary sheets were used to note emerging patterns in the interviews and in the development of early coding constructs. They were also used to generate early hypotheses to be explored in subsequent interviews.

The data from the tape-recorded interviews was transcribed verbatim and analyzed using grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1990.) This methodology consists of using a constant comparative approach to identify concepts and develop categories that provide a structured framework for organizing the data. This method of analysis seeks to maintain a systematic form of analysis. However, it does not imply rigidity. Rather it encourages flexibility. The researcher utilized both descriptive and pattern coding techniques (Miles & Huberman, 1994.)

Coding Process

Codes are defined as “tags or labels for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study” (Miles & Huberman, 1994. p. 56). Coding helps to organize and synthesize data while at the same time construing meaning. Coding is a useful mechanism for increasing the efficiency of data

retrieval and helping to expedite analysis. The coding process started with broad concepts and initial codes that were conceptualized throughout the interview process. Data was originally coded according to five broad classes that were directly related to each of the five research questions. Two classes subsequently were collapsed into one because the research questions were found to be similar and data related to the questions appeared to be redundant.

During the initial coding process, the researcher read the verbatim transcripts several times looking for data that pertained to the independently developed list of class categories. Data was coded as “chunks” using four different colored highlight markers to assign data to different classes. The data from each class was then copied to four separate computer files that were labeled by class and printed.

Next, the process of open coding commenced, utilizing a line-by-line descriptive approach to examine the data in each of the four classes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Additionally, concepts emerging from the ecomaps and narratives were coded similarly and comparisons were made between the two in order to generate a comprehensive and unduplicated list of categories. Predetermined categories and variables initially guided the coding process. However, additional categories were allowed to emerge throughout the study (Altheide, 1987).

Following the completion of open coding, some categories were collapsed. After the data was categorized and coded, it was printed under the appropriate heading. These code categories were used for the second stage of coding which was used to identify patterns contributing to the themes that emerged under each code. Cross-case patterns were identified and assembled as informal data displays for the purpose of keeping the

data organized. A computer file was created for each individual theme. The final coding **frame** was assembled as a chart to assist with the narrative discussion of the result and to **allow** the researcher to present the data in a comprehensive manner. Table 1 represents the **final** coding frame and emergent themes from each code.

Table 1
Final Coding Frame

<u>Class</u>	<u>Code</u>	<u>Theme</u>
Parents' Definitions of Acceptance	Treatment	Verbal Support Inclusion in Family Events Acceptance of Significant Others Non-disparate Distinction Unconditional Love
	Comfort Level	Absence of Desire to Change Sons' Gay Identity
Parents' Relationships with Sons	Recollection of Sons Prior to Coming Out	Feminine Adjective Positive Qualities Closeness of Parent/Child Relationship Ease of Raising Child
	Relationship During Coming Out Process	Contact and Connectedness Low Levels Of Strain
	Present Relationship	Growth
Parents' Stories of Their Coming Out Processes	Prior Awareness	Lack of Dating Gender Qualities Specific Incidents
	Disclosure	How and When Disclosure was Made Reaction
	Coping Strategies	Communication Information Gathering P-FLAG
	Difficult Aspects	Transcending Stereotypes Fear of Negative Repercussions for Sons Regret in Not Being Supportive Earlier Coming Out to Others
	Gay Culture	Meeting/Interacting with Gays and Lesbians Activism
	Present Experience	Non-issue

Table 1(Cont.)
Final Coding Frame

<u>Class</u>	<u>Code</u>	<u>Theme</u>
Ecosystemic Influences on Acceptance	Nuclear Family	Supportive Balanced Autonomy/Connectedness
	Extended Family	Positive Relationships
	Religion	Transcending Bias/Dogma Promoting Change
	Occupations Outside of the Home	Professional Training Experience
	Social/Recreation	Comfort and Acceptance from Friends
	Impact of Societal Homophobia	Low Level of Internalized Homophobia

Trustworthiness

Qualitative research differs from quantitative research with regard to issues of reliability and validity (in qualitative scholarship, termed “trustworthiness”). The goal of qualitative research is to seek “in-depth meanings, understanding, and quality attributes of phenomena studies (Gerhart, Ratliff & Randall, 2001) rather than simply quantifying data. Several methods can be used to increase trustworthiness in qualitative studies. These include participant verification and feedback, multiple coding, quoting, and triangulation (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This study utilized two different tools for the collection of data, aimed at increasing the trustworthiness of the information obtained. These tools allowed the researcher to return to the prevailing themes several times during the interview and thereby thickening the parents’ descriptions of their experiences.

The trustworthiness of reported results is enhanced to the extent that scholars can ascertain that the findings are not distorted by the personal qualities of the researcher (Silverman, 1998). Therefore, quotes from the participants often have been used in an effort to represent their own words rather than relying solely on the researcher’s summaries and interpretations. Finally, in order to increase the validity of the parents’ self-described acceptance, the researcher verified the level of acceptance expressed by the parents with the sons’ own perceptions of their parents’ acceptance.

Ethical Considerations

Researchers have an ethical responsibility to critically examine their effect as researchers on the process (Reay, 1996). Unless they are aware of how their perspectives and value systems are operationalized during interviews or participant observations,

researchers may bring these personal perspectives to bear powerfully on the participants stories (Boss, Dahl, & Kaplan, 1996). *Reflexivity* relates to the investigator's critical examination of his or her effect on the research process. Objectivity can be addressed by making predispositions explicit so that the reader can appropriately adjust proffered interpretations from the researcher (Guba, 1990). Reflexivity is helpful in deconstructing some of the assumptions that are taken for granted by the participants and the investigator and by acknowledging the influence on data collection (Silverman, 1998).

Relationality addresses power and trust in relationships among investigators and participants and contributes to standards of quality in qualitative research as well as standards for ethics (Lincoln, 1995). Notions of honesty and authenticity are implicit in the concept of relationality. Prior to beginning the interview process, the investigator had to make a decision about whether to disclose to the participants that she had been in a committed lesbian relationship for several years prior to this research project and had experienced a coming out process in relation to her family of origin. (This fact was also important to reflexivity, since the investigator would need to attend to her preconceived ideas about the parent-child relationship in regards to the coming out process.) The investigator was explicit about her belief that the coming out process was important in the quest for honest self-representation and decided it would be inauthentic to hide that she had been in a lesbian relationship and had herself experienced a coming out process. Also, the investigator's former partner had been extremely active in the gay community for several years and the participants might recognize the investigator's last name (which had been hyphenated with her former partner's last name) and connect it with her partner. It was anticipated that some of the participants might even have had interactions with her

former partner and might inquire as to the relationship. The investigator decided that it would be prudent to be honest up front about this fact with the participants.

The decision about what to tell the participants in this regard was somewhat complicated by the fact that the investigator did not presently identify as lesbian. Her own process made her aware that she would be open to the possibility that she could be attracted to either women or men. Her relationship was her single lesbian experience and she had experienced relationships with men before and after her lesbian relationship. While it was not necessary to share the details of her own self-narrative concerning her sexuality, this issue did have some relevance in terms of reflexivity. It was clear that a majority of the participants operated under the assumption that being gay or lesbian is not a choice. The investigator believes that is true for some people but not for others.

The investigator decided to simply inform the participants that she had been in a seven-year committed lesbian relationship that had ended in the previous year and that she had gone through a coming out process with her own family and they had also come to a place of acceptance. She informed them that her own disclosure was related to a desire to maintain integrity in the interview process but that she was interested in hearing their stories and did not believe it would be appropriate to share aspects of her own story in this context.

Chapter 4

FINDINGS

Overview

The primary purpose of this project was to allow parents who are accepting and supportive of their sons' gay sexual identities to story their experiences in a manner that enabled them to explore their own coming out process as the parents of a gay sons and to appreciate the systemic influences on that process. While the clear purpose of this study is to allow the parents to create their own narratives and make sense of their processes in their own ways, there is an undeniable interaction that occurs between the researcher and the participant. One way that this becomes relevant over the course of data collection relates to the amount of freedom the researcher allows the participant in terms of responding to interview questions. The amount of freedom afforded to the participants by the researcher in terms elaboration in their answers is often connected with the level of control that the researcher desires over the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The decision to keep data tight or loose is something that must be resolved by the researcher prior to beginning the interview process. There are benefits and consequences to each approach. When the researcher holds to a very structured interview process and keeps a tight reign on the participants' answers, the data often remains more manageable during the analysis. The downside is that often much of the richness of the participants' experiences is lost. Conversely, when the researcher decides to conduct a less structured interview, he or she may obtain data that is far richer and leads to

additional insight throughout the process. The negative side of this is that some focus may be lost as participants get tangential in their answers and the data can become overwhelming and more difficult to manage (Meloy, 1994).

This dilemma was resolved by attempting to develop a balanced and flexible approach. A semi-structured interview that was derived from the research questions and conceptual map was used as means to elicit information from the participants. There was a clear focus for the direction that was intended for the interviews. However, a fair amount of elaboration was permitted on each question. Broad, open-ended questions were used and the researcher emphasized to the participants that they should answer the questions in ways that were relevant to them and allowed them to create their own meanings. Prompts were used to address certain areas of inquiry. If the participant did not address those areas, more specific questions were asked. Often, the researcher was not required to use these prompts because the participant addressed these areas of interest in answering the general question. After the first few interviews, the researcher noticed that she was commonly saying "I know you already answered this, but..." in an attempt to hold specifically to the interview questions. When repetitive data began to occur, the researcher learned to refrain from using prompts where it was not necessary.

This chapter will describe the research participants in terms of demographic data and set forth the salient themes of the interviews. As discussed in the previous chapter, interview questions were developed in direct relation to the research questions. Four classifications in turn were derived from the interviews with the participants and will be addressed sequentially in this chapter. For each class, a brief description follows and then coded material is presented in terms of the dominant themes that resulted within

each code. For each theme, quotes from the participants are used to illustrate the types of responses that contributed to the development of that theme. Pseudonyms are used in place of the participant's actual names to preserve the confidentiality of their stories.

Demographics

The sample used for this study included fourteen parents who live in Grand Rapids and the surrounding areas. Table 2 represents the demographic information relevant to this project. In this sample, eight of the participants were female (57%) and six (43%) were male and included four married couples. All of the participants were Caucasian and all had some college background, including two with Associate degrees (14%), ten with Bachelor's Degrees (72%) and two with Graduate Degrees (Ph.D and J.D.). They ranged in age from fifty-five years to seventy-five years old, with the average age being sixty-four years old. Their sons ranged in age from thirty-years to fifty-one years old with the average age being thirty-eight years old. The average length of time that had elapsed since initial disclosure was thirteen years. The participants ranged from middle to upper-middle class in socioeconomic status.

Table 2

Demographic Information

<u>Name</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Occupation</u>	<u>Years Since Son Came Out</u>	<u>Son's age</u>
Charles	M	66	Attorney	13 years	34
Susan	F	65	Choir Director	13 years	34
Bob	M	68	Self-Employed Business	23 years	42
Helen	F	67	Homemaker	23 years	42
Harris	M	66	Retired Teacher	6 years	38
Amelia	F	65	Homemaker	6 years	38
Greg	M	66	Bank Director	8 years	44
Winnie	F	63	Retired School Secretary	8 years	44
Joe	M	55	Insurance Claims Supervisor	15 years	34
Caroline	F	55	Registered Nurse	15 years	34
Alex	M	62	Retired Professor	11 years	30
Natalie	F	61	Teacher	11 years	30
Kate	F	63	Public Health Nurse	6 years	36
Theresa	F	74	Art Museum Shop Manager	23 years	51

Parental Definitions of Acceptance

The parents' acceptance of their sons' gay identities as a broad theme was integrated throughout all of the classes of data in this project. However, this class specifically focused on definitions from the parents' perspectives of what it meant to be accepting of their sons' gay identities. A central tenet of the narrative approach is that this approach privileges the individual meanings that people place on their experiences (White & Epston, 1990). The first research question is: *How do parents define themselves as accepting and supporting of their children's gay or lesbian identities?*

The purpose of this question was to explore the meanings that parents ascribed to themselves as "accepting and supportive parents of gay sons." The purpose of this question or project as a whole was not to find a universal definition or set of requirements that must be met in order to qualify as an accepting and supportive parent, but rather to have parents reflect on their own thoughts and behaviors that contribute to their acceptance of their son's gay identities. In the original coding scheme, this class had four primary codes. However, two of the codes were collapsed and moved to another class of data, *Parents Coming Out Stories*, during final coding because they appeared more relevant to that class. The two codes that remained in this class are *Treatment* and *Comfort Level*.

Code: Treatment

Generally, many of the parents' self-descriptions of acceptance were focused on general treatment of their sons. The overriding desire for most of the parents has been to demonstrate to their sons that they were available to them and that their gay identities would not be a reason for disruption in the parent-child relationship. The parents in this

project do not engage in punitive behavior towards their sons but instead demonstrate behavior that shows their sons that they are accepting of them as gay men. Within the Treatment Code, five primary themes emerged:

- 1) Verbal Support;
- 2) Inclusion in Family Events
- 3) Acceptance of Significant Others
- 4) Non-disparate Distinctions
- 5) Unconditional Love

Theme: Verbal Support

Many of the parents identified that they often exercised direct verbal statements of support to their sons with regard to their gay identities. One father, Greg, states, “How am I supportive? I guess by letting him know that I accept him being gay and by demonstrating that through my words and actions.” Another parent, Joe, talked about how important it is to make direct statements concerning support specifically for the fact that his son is gay. He states, “He knows I’m supportive because I tell him that I am. It goes beyond whether I am just supportive of him in general as a person. He knows that I am supportive specifically of him being gay and that he can always talk to me about anything concerning him being gay because I tell him directly.”

Several parents referenced conversations that they have had with their sons wherein their sons had mentioned different struggles related to identity management. Rather than viewing their sons’ obstacles as evidence that they should try to change their gay identities or hide the fact that they are gay, these parents were able to express continued support for their sons’ coming out processes. They did not capitalize on those

incidences as opportunities to illustrate to their sons the negative implications of being gay. One mother, Kate, stated, "Well, I have always tried to be available to him and by letting him know that I am supportive of him being gay and of his decisions to come out." Another mother, Natalie and her husband, Alex, directly supported their gay son's decision to come out to their younger son, who was thirteen at the time. They individually stated their support not only for his gay identity but also for his ability to talk to his younger brother about this issue in an appropriate way. A majority of the parents expressed pride for their sons and their ability to integrate their gay identities into their lives. Harris expresses that he is supportive "by verbally telling him that I'm proud of him." Charles acknowledged that it was his son's positive way of dealing with the issue that helped him come to a more accepting place, "He was a positive example of grace under the pressure in helping his dad understand this! He is incredibly bright and was way ahead of me in the analysis of all of this. He wasn't always willing to help me but wanted me to come to acceptance on my own. When I finally did, I think I told him how proud I was of the way he had handled himself." Many other parents echoed these expressions of pride and indicated that they had told their sons that they were proud of them in relation to their gay identity at some point.

Theme: Inclusion in Family Events

It is an overwhelming fear by many gays and lesbians that once their families are aware of their gay identities, they will suffer from various types of rejection (LaSalla, 2000.) Many gays and lesbians have reported varying types of rejecting behaviors by loved ones that range from subtle comments of disapproval to overt exclusion of the gay or lesbian individual in their lives. This exclusion may be related to specific events or

may be a total cut-off from the gay or lesbian individual where all contact ceases.

Within this sample, many of the parents identified the continued inclusion of their sons in family gatherings as something that defined their acceptance. Two fathers indicated that they continued to take trips with their sons for the purpose of continuing to forge father/son bonds. In fact, these fathers identified these as times that they were able to deepen their understanding of issues relating to their sons being gay. Susan and her husband Charles both talked about the fact that they wanted to make sure their son always knew he was welcome in their home and at any family event. Susan reflects, "I know Todd was worried that we might not want him around as much after we found out, but that has never been the case. It would be a huge loss if he weren't at our family events. In fact, we are taking a family vacation on a Disney cruise over Christmas, with all of our children and grandchildren. We didn't even know if that was something he'd be interested in, but we still invited him and we are glad he wants to go."

The parents often talked about holidays or special family events such as weddings as being specific occasions where they made sure their sons knew they were not only welcome to attend, but where their presence would be missed if they didn't attend. Even when the inclusion of the son may have made other people in attendance at the event uncomfortable, the parents were more interested in including their child and found ways to address or ignore other people's discomfort about the presence of their gay son.

Theresa recalls, "I told him in the beginning, that not only would he always be welcome at family events, but he'd better come!" She did not recall any resistance from extended family or friends with regard to including her son in family events, but states, "He's my son and of course he would be invited, and if someone doesn't like it, tough, that's their

problem and they don't have to come if they don't want!"

Theme: Acceptance of Significant Others

Without exception, the definitions of acceptance from this group of parents included support of their sons' relationships with others including partners and gay friends. Although this aspect of acceptance was a prompt, it was never necessary to use this prompt with the parents whose sons were involved in committed partnerships. These parents spontaneously addressed this in response to the original question without being prompted. Helen stated, "I am very supportive of my son's relationship with his partner...People should have the right to share their lives with someone who makes them happy. That's what you want for your children. It is wonderful to see your son sharing a committed, loving relationship with someone who makes him happy." Harris talked about the fact that he and his wife had made it a point to meet their son's partner about three weeks after he came out to them. He remembers, "When he came out to us, he told us right away that he had a partner and that they had been involved for about a year. We had them over for dinner with our other son and daughter-in-law. We wanted to show him right away that we would be accepting of who he was and of his relationship. We like his partner a lot and they make a great couple." Many of the parents spoke of how their sons' partners were treated as "part of the family" or how they viewed the partners as "son-in-laws." Greg detailed that his son's partner referred to him and his wife as "Mom and Dad."

Many parents made direct comments about their fondness for their sons' partners. Winnie's "We just love Tom, He and Brad are perfect for one another, a really good balance. We treat them just like a married couple" and Theresa's "I absolutely love Rich.

He and Tim have been together for almost twenty years and they are a match made in heaven” were indicative of the general feelings expressed by the parents whose sons were involved in committed relationships. Helen was so fond of her son’s partner that she stated, “I am so happy that my son found someone like Kurt. He is so wonderfully talented, intelligent and kind. He also is completely gorgeous! If he wasn’t gay, I think I would want to marry him myself!” Harris observed that while he has a positive relationship with his own son, it is his son’s partner with whom he shares more personal interests and he is able to engage in those interests with him.

Recognition of their sons’ couple relationships was very strong throughout this sample of parents. There were numerous expressions of acknowledgment for these relationships including cards and gifts to recognize the partners’ birthdays and the couples’ anniversaries. Also, as the sons’ inclusion in family events was a prominent theme, so was the inclusion of their partners. The researcher also observed pictures of the parents’ gay sons and their partners prominently displayed at several of the homes where the interviews were conducted, which further evidences their acceptance of their sons’ partners. Bob talked about the fact that his son and his partner had a child through the use of a surrogate mother and that he proudly displays pictures of his son’s family at his office and often chooses to explain the situation to people. He also stated, “My wallet is filled with pictures of the three of them, and like most other proud grandpas, I show them off to anyone that will look at them!”

There were also several parents who had sons who were not presently involved in committed relationships. However, these parents indicated they would be supportive of their sons’ partners. Susan shared that her son had previously been in a committed

relationship for a few years but that his partner, Andy, had a brain aneurysm and eventually Andy's family wanted to move him home so they could care for him. She elaborated, "They weren't really accepting of Andy being gay, so they didn't want Todd around." She went on to lament the loss of Andy in their family and talked about how she and her husband had been supportive of Todd's relationship with Andy and that she hoped that her son would again find someone special with whom he could share his life.

Parents who had sons who were not involved in committed relationships indicated that this was something they desired for them. When asked about how she would respond to her son starting a same-sex relationship Kate responded, "It's something I would like to happen. It hasn't really come up because he hasn't had a partner. He's dated a few people, but not someone who he's been involved with enough to become part of the family. That is something that I actually would like for him to experience and for me to know that he has a committed relationship and someone to share his life with on a more permanent basis." Joe expressed his desire for his son to find someone that he could spend his life with and that he hoped he would have some kind of commitment ceremony. His wife, Caroline addressed this as well and stated, "I would be in total support if Doug were in a committed relationship. I want that for him. Up to this point he hasn't had any long-term relationships. You could say I'm the typical mother who is looking forward to planning a big wedding. I have had the chapel at Fountain Street Church booked for years just waiting for the chance!"

Theme: Non-Disparate Treatment

Perhaps the most resounding theme around the parents' definitions of themselves as accepting of their sons' gay identities was their observation that they did not treat their

sons any differently than they treated their heterosexual children. They also talked about not treating them any differently than if they had been heterosexual. Over and over, the parents' statements spoke to the fact that their feelings and actions towards their sons had not changed because they were gay. Susan's comment, "I guess for me, I don't treat him any differently. Him being gay doesn't mean that I should think of him as less of a person or a son, and I don't" was typical of the feelings expressed by many of the parents. Similarly, Harris states, "The main thing is that I don't treat him any differently than I did prior to knowing about this." Amelia also offered, "I think the best way parents can be accepting and supportive is to just treat their children the same way they treat their other children who aren't gay. He is still the same person. This is just something different about him that you didn't know before."

While all of the parents expressed in one way or another that they treated their sons in the same way that they would if they were straight, many of the parents acknowledged the fact that simply by virtue of being gay, their sons would experience life differently than if they were straight. They were able to appreciate the unique implications that being gay placed upon their sons' lives. However, they maintained that their feelings and treatment of their sons were not altered by the fact that they were gay. Winnie elaborated on this idea when she said, "An accepting parent does not feel any differently about that child than any of their other children. Everything would be the same. You wouldn't distinguish that child from any other child. He may have other things to deal with because he is gay, so in that way it is different, but he is not any different and the way I treat about him is not any different."

Theme: Unconditional Love

Originally this theme was included within the non-disparate treatment theme, however it was separated during the final analysis because it seemed to be a unique phenomenon that related solely to the fact that their sons' coming out did nothing to engender negative feelings towards them by the parents. This was true of both fathers and mothers. However, fathers often spoke in general terms of affection for their sons whereas the majority of the mothers spoke specifically about a boundless love they had for their sons. In response to the question concerning parental definitions of acceptance, many of the mothers immediately spoke of their love for their son. Theresa stated, "From the beginning, I just felt that he is my son and I will always love him. I always take him for what he is and where he is at." These mothers could not imagine that anything could change their love for their sons and could not understand how parents could capriciously turn their backs on their children over something as insignificant as sexual orientation. Many of the mother's spoke specifically of "unconditional love." Amelia's "He's my son. I love him. What else would I do?" was a sentiment that was repeated by several mothers and fathers. Helen succinctly captured this premise with her response, "The number one thing is just pure unconditional love. You just love your children for who they are. No matter what. Period. There is no 'not being there' for them."

Code: Comfort Level

A second code in the Parental Definitions of Acceptance relates to the level of comfort the parents describe with regards to their sons being gay. Literature concerning gays and lesbians suggests that final acceptance of one's gay or lesbian identity occurs when the gay or lesbian person would not choose to change their identity even if they

were given the opportunity (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982, Troiden, 1988). Similarly, it is hypothesized that parents who have accepted their own identities as the parents of gay sons would not desire to change their sons' gay identities. Parents' comfort levels were explored in terms of their acceptance of their sons' gay identities and their general comfort level with their own identities as parents of gay sons. The primary theme that emerged was Absence of Desire to Change Sons' Gay Identities.

Theme: Absence of Desire to Change Sons' Gay Identities

Originally, there was an attempt to classify the parents' acceptance of their own identities as parents of gay children separately from their desire to change their sons' identities to heterosexual. Upon reviewing the transcripts, however, these two concepts were so closely intertwined that they fall under the same general theme. Lack of desire to change their sons' gay identities was very indicative of the parents own comfort level. In response to the question, "Would you change your son's gay identity to heterosexual if you could?" none of the parents in this sample indicated any desire to do this, However, they approached the question in different ways.

One parent, Bob, talked in the most general terms about his comfort level, "Well, there's nothing about him being gay that bothers me in the least bit at this point." Many of the parents related their comfort level with their sons' gay identities to the fact that their sons' were comfortable with it themselves. Kate gave a long pause before answering, "That's a hard question to answer from the standpoint that if Scott wanted to change then I guess I would want what he wants for him. But I wouldn't change him for me. As long as he's okay with it, I'm okay with it. And, I think he is. So, no, I wouldn't change him." Greg's answer was similar, "I wouldn't do it for me or us, but if Brad

wanted to, then maybe. I want him to be happy with who he is. I think Brad is very happy with who he is and in his relationship with Tom, so I don't think there is anything to change." Some of the parents were quite passionate about their belief that there would be much audacity on the part of parents who thought they should be entitled to dictate their children's identities. Susan could not fathom the idea that people would waste their time thinking about changing their gay children and stated, "No. He's a good person and happy with who he is. Why would you ever want to change that?" Winnie simply said, "No, I would not change him. He's happy and it's who he is."

Another group of parents stated that they would not change their sons at this point, but talked about the struggle that their sons' endured in relation to being gay and their sorrow about that. Amelia states, "Quite honestly, this isn't something you would wish for one of your children. This doesn't have anything to do with me or how I feel about it. I just think there was quite a bit of struggle for Peter for many years. I think it was a very lonely place for him to be and for him to worry about having to hide such a basic part of himself or to worry about being rejected. It makes me sad to think about all of those years that he went through that, so, of course, if I could have taken all of that away for him, I probably would have. But I also think he has come to terms with this aspect of himself and I think he is happy with who he is and very happy with Ric so no, at this point, I wouldn't change him." Amelia's husband, Harris also recalled the struggle their son had gone through and commented, "No, I wouldn't change Peter, but I would make it so others would not treat gays so badly or that society in general would be more accepting. To me, I wouldn't have any interest in changing that quality about him anymore than, say, his eye or hair color." Theresa also recalled that her son had endured

some difficulty trying to come to terms with being gay. She answered, "No, I would not change him. Well, when I look at what he went through, I might have back then. I wouldn't change him, but I would change the way he was treated. But, he is who he is. And I think he and Rich were made for each other and they are very happy, so I can't imagine that he should have been with anyone else."

Other parents talked about their sons' gay identities being a part of what makes their sons special. Helen commented, "No, definitely not. I'm afraid that if I changed Chris' gay identity I would change him in general. I think some of the things in him that I love and value are partially true because he is gay." Natalie added a humorous touch to her response, "Heavens no, I wouldn't change him. He might not be the same person anymore. He has the most marvelous taste and a wonderful sense of art and design. My goodness, who would I go shopping with?"

Finally, two of the parents who are married to one another and are both heavily involved in activism talked specifically about the fact that changing their son's gay identity would have a large impact on their own identities. Carol, probably the most activist parent in the sample, had been surprised in the beginning by her son's announcement that he was gay. While she had never reacted negatively towards him she admitted, "Not now, I wouldn't change him. If he would have wanted to in the beginning, I probably would have, but he has accepted it and that is part of who he is. It is also so much a part of who I am." Her husband, Joe, gave a resounding, "Oh ~~no~~! Not to be selfish, but the fact that he is gay has allowed us to meet so many wonderful people, that had he not been gay, we probably wouldn't have met and we might not have gotten involved the way we have and that would have been a huge loss. Also, he's fine with it

and we are too.”

Parents’ Relationships with Their Sons

Generally, parents who have had positive relationships with their children will wish to continue to share close relationships with these children. The overall data was fairly consistent with this. The parents described their feelings, observations and thoughts about their sons across time and described aspects of their parent-child relationship in response to the research question: *How do parents describe their relationships with their gay sons prior to them coming out, during the coming out process, and at the present time?*

The data was coded to reflect the parent-child relationship across the different points in time as specified in the research question. The final codes were *Recollections of Sons Prior to Coming Out, Relationship During the Coming Out Process, and Present Relationship*.

Code: Recollection of Sons Prior to Coming Out

This code revealed that a majority of the parents had very positive relationships with their sons during their sons’ childhood and adolescent periods. For the most part, they described their sons in positive terms. Within their narrative descriptions of their sons and their relationships with their sons, four themes emerged:

- 1) Feminine Adjectives
- 2) Other Positive Qualities
- 3) Closeness of Parent-Child Relationship
- 4) Ease of Raising Child.

Theme: Feminine Adjectives

When asked to recollect characteristics that they remembered in their sons as children, a majority of the parents described their sons with terms that are traditionally associated with feminine qualities. Bill's first response to the question asking him to think back to specific memories of his son as a child included, "Chris was a very sensitive and artistic person." Nine of the fourteen parents used the word "sensitive" at some point during their discussions of their memories of their sons as children. Caroline elaborated, "Doug was so sensitive and caring, and I am not quite sure where that came from because I wouldn't describe either Joe or I as being overly sensitive. But Doug would always send us these really mushy flowery cards for birthdays or holidays. He would spend hours searching for just the right sentiment!" Many of the parents talked about how their sons' feelings could easily be hurt or how they were very sensitive to others feelings. Helen described her son as being "very sweet and caring and always very in tune to how I was feeling. He always wanted to please me."

Along with sensitivity, a moderate number of the parents described their sons as "nurturing" and gave examples of nurturing behavior exhibited by their sons. Kate remembers her son's sensitivity as a child as being a defining characteristic of him. She stated, "He was never rough or tough and always a very sensitive child. He was very nurturing and a caretaker. He especially loved animals and was always kind to animals. He was the type of kid who would go out into the woods but would never take a gun. He'd take a camera instead. If he ever came across an injured creature, he would do all he could to nurse it back to health." Theresa also talked about her son's fondness for and kindness towards animals. "He just could not stand to see an animal suffer. He would cry

for what seemed like forever if he saw an animal on the side of the road that was hurt or had been killed.”

The majority of the parents used more than one traditionally feminine adjective to describe their sons. While references to sensitivity or nurturing were used by nearly every parent, the other adjective that came up with a fair amount of frequency was “quiet”. This term was used by six parents to describe their sons. Joe described his son using a string of adjectives, “He was very conforming, a hard worker, intelligent, very caring and mostly, very, very quiet.”

While a few parents expressed that they had some concern about their sons’ feminine behavior when they were children, most of the parents did not find it problematic. Theresa’s quote summed up the expressions of many of the parents: “He wasn’t your typical rough and tough boy, but he had such a nice manner, and I just valued him for who he was. I wasn’t trying to make him fit into some typical ‘boy’ package.”

Theme: Other Positive Qualities

All of the parents in this sample named several positive qualities (besides sensitive and nurturing) that they remembered about their sons during the time of childhood and adolescence. A moderate number of the parents described their children as having above average intelligence and being successful academically. Susan talked about noticing that her son was very bright from an early age. She cited several examples of his intelligence, “He taught himself to read at a young age...I remember when personal computers first came out he was fascinated by them. He figured out how to use them on his own and became very proficient that way. He was also a National Merit Scholar. He

got 1510 on his SAT.”

Several parents described their sons as being industrious and goal oriented.

Harris and Amelia’s son, Peter, who now owns a landscaping business, started volunteering at a local greenhouse when he was about twelve or thirteen because he loved plants and flowers and just wanted to be around them. He used to spend hours designing landscaping plans because he knew he wanted to work in that capacity as an adult. Eventually, the owner of the greenhouse recognized what a hard worker he was and how serious he took his job and hired him on payroll. He continued to work there until he graduated from high school. He has kept that connection and gets much of the business that is referred to him through that source. Another father, Greg described a similar scenario. His son had been interested in radio broadcasting at an early age and when he was fourteen he started working at a local station and he is now involved in broadcasting as his vocation. Kate said, simply, “Scott was very efficient. He set goals for himself and he completed them. He was a self-starter. He didn’t waste time, he just got it done.”

Two of the parents talked about their sons in terms of talent and about how their sons had excelled in these areas. Theresa remembered that her son had received first prize in a talent contest at school playing the cello. He had also been in the junior symphony orchestra for the Grand Rapids Symphony and held first chair throughout. Natalie talked about her son’s interest in dancing, music and theatre and how he had been “discovered” by a local director when he was fairly young. He had gone on to star in numerous plays and musicals in community theatre.

Many of the parents used generally positive terms to describe their sons socially. Theresa described her son as “a very positive person with a great outlook.” She went on

to say “He has always had the best sense of humor and he could always make me laugh. He still can.” Several other parents mentioned that their sons had good senses of humor. Harris remembered, “Peter was quiet, but he also had a very well developed sense of humor. He was a pretty funny guy and we have always been able to joke around.” Winnie described that her son as very popular and social. He had a lot of friends in school. Her husband, Greg remembered that their son was always “very funny and the life of the party” at any social gathering.

References to their children’s tendency towards neatness were also common. Five parents indicated this quality was something they remembered and appreciated about their sons. Caroline detailed this more than the other parents. She stated, “Doug was always very organized. I never had to pick up after him and he actually helped me around the house a lot without me even having to ask him. He was fascinated with vacuum cleaners. Messiness really bothered him a lot and still does. I guess you could say he is a total neat freak!”

Theme: Closeness of Parent-Child Relationship

Most of the parents indicated indirectly that they had good relationships with their sons during the boys’ childhoods. Some of the parents spoke directly about the positive relationships they had with their sons. Kate, Theresa, and Helen all stated specifically, “We were very close.” Bob talked about the fact that he and his son spent a lot of time together when his son was a child. He stated, “I always found my time with Chris to be very pleasurable. We probably enjoyed the time together more than the actual activities we were doing. It was a nice, close relationship.”

Charles and Alex both talked about their inability to understand their boys as

somewhat of an impediment to a really close relationship. They both indicated that they expressed love towards their sons and described their sons in positive terms. However, both of them talked about how the lack of shared interests created somewhat of a void in the relationship. Caroline remembered that her son was very easy to talk with. However, she reflected “I wasn’t the typical mom because I worked full time and wasn’t able to do a lot of the things that many mothers were doing back then. I wasn’t overly involved with him, but I think we had a good relationship.” When asked whether she would call their relationship “close” she responded, “Well, I think we both knew that we loved one another, but I wouldn’t describe it as overly close. I think I am pretty independent and don’t have the tendency to be really huggy or show a lot of affection.”

Theme: Ease of Raising Child

Most all of the parents characterized their sons as being generally very easy children to raise. In fact, when asked where they would place that child on a scale of easy to difficult in relation to the overall child-rearing experience, many of them emphasized that they were “very” or “extremely” easy children as far as not having to impose much discipline. It was very common to hear these parents state, “No, he was hardly ever a problem” in relation to their gay sons. Susan recalled that her son “had a mind of his own and was very clear about how he thought about things and often engaged in debate with us over different issues, but he wasn’t really a discipline problem.” She struggled to remember any major issues related to discipline but then stated, “I can only remember one time where we had to come down on him a little bit. We found some beer in his room and of course he said ‘it’s not mine,’ but then he eventually admitted that it was. You know, kid stuff like that, but overall he wasn’t a problem.”

A few parents not only remembered that their sons were very well behaved, but stated that it was a noticeable contrast from one of their other children. Amelia remembered that “overall he was very easy, and I think because we had the comparison of his older brother he seemed all the easier! I can’t remember any major discipline problems we ever had with Peter.” Her husband, Harris did not recall any major problems in terms of discipline but “worried about him socially a little bit.” Another parent, Greg responded that his son was “very easy, never a problem. Our daughter on the other hand, she was something else!”

Two of the fathers recognized that they had a difficult time “understanding” their sons because their sons’ behaviors and interests were such a sharp departure from their own. These fathers stated that their own discomfort might have shaded their experiences of raising these sons. Charles described “He was not a bad kid in any way, but I just didn’t ‘get him’ so that felt difficult sometimes. It wasn’t really him. It was me.” Alex also described very positive attributes in terms of his son’s behavior. He stated, “He was an adult at four years old...always exercised good judgment. He probably wasn’t difficult to raise, but because I was so hyper vigilant about his feminine behavior, I experienced him as difficult sometimes.”

Code: Relationship During the Coming Out Process

The coming out of a gay person to their family represents a transition for both the gay person and for the family members themselves. There may be some renegotiating of these relationships in response to the revelation that a child is gay. Most all of the parents in this study had positive relationships with their sons’ prior to them coming out. Even the two fathers who described some difficulty in terms of their personal understanding of

their sons, did not characterize their father-son relationships in overall negative terms. This study sought to examine the parents' relationships with their children across time and appreciate the impact that their sons' coming out had on their relationships. With this particular sample of parents, having their sons come out as gay invoked very little stress on the parent-child relationships. This is not to say that they didn't have some difficulty coming to terms with the fact that their sons were gay, but rather they did not allow their own struggle to negatively disrupt those relationships. Two primary themes that emerged in this code:

- 1) Contact and Connectedness
- 2) Low Levels of Conflict

Theme: Contact and Connectedness

Research has frequently spoken to the fear that gays and lesbians have in relation to the rejection by or withdrawal of love and affection from family members upon disclosure of their gay and lesbian identities (LaSala, 2000). Both research and popular literature have cited incidences of parents who have so strongly rejected their children that those relationships have been severed completely. None of the parents in this sample experienced any kind of cut-off for any length of time from their sons. In fact, the overwhelming theme was that even in the face of the parents' personal struggles, all of them maintained steady and consistent contact with their sons during the time of disclosure. Charles who described a fair amount of personal difficulty in the beginning assured his son, "we will work this out and you never need to worry about feeling welcome." In fact, they engaged in more conversation about this issue than they had about anything in the past. Helen and Bill, the two parents who described the largest

amount of angst over their son's disclosure, did not abandon their relationships with him. They describe that they regret how they handled the initial stages of the process by suggesting that their son go to a psychiatrist to try to "change," however, they maintained frequent contact with him and did not withdraw any love or affection.

Surprisingly, many of the parents in this sample did not experience a significant process in terms of adjusting to the fact that their sons were gay. All of the parents made some verbal gesture of support upon their sons' disclosures. Many of them described increased contact around the period of the disclosure and stated that those conversations seemed to provide reciprocal reinforcement of their relationships.

Theme: Low Level of Conflict

Another prevailing and somewhat related theme involves the lack of overt conflict the parents and sons experienced around the sons' coming out. It was clear that some parents were having a hard time reconciling their sons' gay identities with their own previously held concepts. These parents, however, did not engage in reprobation or virulent arguments with their sons over their sexual identities. Charles described thinking in his mind that this was something he "could fix" and talked about some intense conversations with his son. He described some debate with his son, but stated that the two of them "always remained calm and respectful with one another. We always allowed the other person to share his view." He did not characterize this conflict as negative, but rather as a tool that eventually contributed to his growth.

Two other parents, Bob and Helen who had engaged the help of a psychiatrist for their son described that they did not fight with their son about the issue. He was willing to see a psychiatrist because he initially wanted to try and change as well. They always

listened to him and when he told them he believed he was gay and could not change, they accepted his decision.

The rest of the parents in the sample did not describe any ongoing debate or conflict with their sons. Susan's "We didn't fight about it. I don't know, it wasn't a big deal as far as our relationship went" was a fairly good characterization of most of the parents observations about the impact of disclosure on their actual relationships with their sons. Theresa's comment also captured the commitment these parents felt to their relationships with their children, despite the presence of internal conflict. She stated, "You know, I wasn't thrilled by the announcement, but it wasn't a source of conflict between us. He is my son and I love him. I'd be damned if I'd let the fact that he is gay affect our relationship negatively."

Code: Present Relationship

In healthy functioning families, positive relationships between members are characterized as being able to withstand the presence of differences between them. (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). This sample of parents indicated positive relationships with their sons that dated back to their sons' childhoods. The constancy of those positive relationships was evident across this sample of parents. Every parent in this study shares in common the fact that their present relationships with their sons are not only positive, but close and thriving. The one theme that emerged under this code was Growth.

Theme: Growth

While most of the parents described that they had always had good relationships with their sons, many of the parents also talked about the crisis of their sons coming out being an impetus for a deeper relationship between them. This was especially true of the

parents who had a more difficult time reconciling their sons' gay identities in the beginning. Charles specifically points to the coming out process as providing a forum for very intimate conversation between the two of them. He stated, "It gave us an opportunity to talk about things in ways we never did before. We were more vulnerable to each other during that time. I think it almost served as a way to strengthen our bond." Even among the parents who didn't describe a large struggle with regards to coming to terms with their sons being gay, many of them talked about how going through the experience together brought them closer. Kate who had suspected that her son was gay long before he came out says, "Once it was out in the open, I felt that we were closer. There wasn't something that had to be hidden. I wasn't preoccupied wondering about it, and he wasn't preoccupied about how or when he would disclose it to me."

Parents' Stories of Their Coming Out Processes

The personal narratives of the parents with regard to their coming out processes as parents of gay sons were of primary interest under this class. Specifically, the relevant research question was: *What are the reflections of parents as they story their own coming out process and the acquisition of their identities as "parents of gay sons?"* The story chronicle is a logical fit for this population in particular because it allowed the parents the chance to conceptualize an ongoing process as a story (Schnitzer, 1993). Insight about one's process is often strengthened by the ability of the individual to make sense of their experience through personal narratives (White & Epston, 1990.)

Additionally, the use of the story metaphor captures concepts of human ecology that provided the theoretical underpinnings of this project as a whole, namely, the influences of time, conceptualized by Bronfenbrenner's (1986) chronosystem and the

accommodation of persons and contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). These factors are important as they relates to the parents' coming out process. Also, an appreciation of dominant cultural influences is crucial to both the story metaphor and to an ecological approach. These parents' unique accounts of their processes were able to be captured because the story telling approach allowed them the freedom to construct and reflect upon the relevant influences of biological, psychological, and social history on their experiences and gave them the freedom to develop their stories in a way that was congruent with their those experiences and created meaning for them (Harold et al., 1995). The data was coded to reflect the primary areas of focus in their stories and included *Prior Awareness, Disclosure, Coping Strategies, Difficult Aspects, Gay Culture, and Present Experience*. These codes closely match the process by which parents negotiate their own coming out process as outlined by Crosbie-Burnett et al. (1996.)

Code: Prior Awareness

The issue of prior awareness, even at the subconscious level may be representative of the inchoate coming out process for the parents of gay children much as the literature on the coming out process for gays and lesbians conceptualizes a sensitization stage for gays and lesbians themselves (Cass, 1979, Coleman, 1982, and Troiden, 1988). Most of the parents in this sample had some prior awareness of their sons' gay identities prior to the actual time their sons came out to them. These levels of awareness ranged from a fair amount of certainty though an inkling on the periphery of their consciousness to a passing thought. Only two of the parents indicated total surprise when their sons came out to them. Three themes emerged in relation to prior awareness:

- 1) Lack of Dating

2) Gender Qualities

3) Specific Incidences

Theme: Lack of Dating

The strongest impetus for parents' suspicions regarding the possibility that their sons might be gay was their sons' lack of interest in girls or dating. Ten of the parents specifically cited the lack of interest in girls as the primary source of their suspicions. Over and over parents made similar comments that they suspected because "He just wasn't interested in dating girls, whatsoever." This lack of interest indicated to them "a departure from the dominant idea of the adolescent male with raging hormones seeking to lose his virginity...to a girl" as Harris succinctly stated. Only Caroline recognized this quality in her son but did not relate it to his sexuality. She stated, "Well, Doug was never interested in sports, he was interested in more 'girl-like' things, and he never dated but you know, I never ever thought he was gay."

Several of the parents commented on the fact that their sons had a lot of "friends who were girls, but no girlfriends." Helen stated, "I think he had so many friends who were girls rather than boys because his interests were more along the lines of girls' interests and it was easier for him to share those interests with them rather than with other boys. But he sure never was interested in a romantic way." Two of the parents talked about being puzzled when their sons' close friendships with some female friends did not develop into romantic interests. Joe remembered, "There was this girl who really liked Doug a lot but he never liked her for more than a friend. Her mom would talk to me about the fact that she, the girl, had a huge crush on Doug. And this girl was very cute and nice and smart and she and Doug shared a lot of common interests and got along so

well. I never understood why he didn't want a dating relationship with her. I would say, "What's wrong with her?" Susan talked about a similar experience. She remembered her son being really good friends with one of her daughter's friends. She described the girl as having "a lot going for her" and knew that this girl was interested in her son and was hoping he would show an interest in her as well. She laughed, "We would ask him, Todd, why on earth don't you like her? And he would respond, I do like her...as a friend!"

Theme: Gender Qualities

Along with the lack of dating, many of the parents also tied their suspicions of their sons being gay to the sons' atypical gender interests. It is interesting to note that all of the parents specifically remembered that their sons were not interested in sports.

Every parent commented on this fact. A few of the fathers talked about having a difficult time understanding this because they had been very active in sports when they were younger. Bob stated, "I always really enjoyed athletics but Chris was never into sports. Sometimes I didn't 'get it.' But, even though we had different interests we were able to find things that we could participate in and enjoy together."

Two of the fathers expressed that they had experienced disappointment with their sons' lack of interest in sports. Charles recalled being excited when he bought his son a new glove. He remembered taking him out to the back yard to try and teach him to catch and throw. He was dismayed by his son's lack of interest in the activity. He recollected, "I remember I'd throw and he'd miss. I'd try to show him how to throw correctly and he didn't catch on. He just seemed bored. The ball would get past him every time and I would send him after it. Pretty soon I noticed he wasn't even looking for the ball but his attention was completely absorbed by an anthill on the ground. He was more interested

n that.” He went on to add, “I always thought he was an unusual kid, but I couldn’t put my finger on it. At times it was very frustrating to me that he didn’t like athletics. They were important to me and I always assumed that a boy would be interested in sports. He wasn’t.”

Alex stated, “He didn’t do ‘male’ things, he was into theatre. I thought boys were supposed to like sports and I was disappointed that he would rather be on stage than on a playing field.” Alex in particular had a difficult time with his son’s feminine behavior and indicated that it was what caused his “original fear that he was gay.” Alex, perhaps more than any of the other parents was aware of his own process of coming out before his son ever came out to him. He talked about recognizing that his son was probably gay when the boy was very young and not being pleased with the idea. He expressed that he had a lot of internal homophobia and remembers a time when his son was in elementary school and Alex was noticing his son’s increasingly feminine behavior and yelled to his wife in a fit of anger, “He’s probably gay, you know that don’t you?” Alex had processed most of his homophobia considerably by the time his son came out and was actually very accepting towards his son when he did come out during his first year of college.

Sandy recognized her son’s “lack of interest in the typical boy things” pretty early on. She stated, “He liked reading, photography and music and he never played with the toys like trucks or played the typical cops and robbers games that a lot of boys did.”

Harris reflected on his son’s atypical interests by saying, “I know this probably sounds really stereotypical, like all gay men are florists or something, but Peter really loved flowers and gardening. He became a member of the Rose Society when he was still a

teenager.” Caroline remembered that her son “liked to do things that you would picture a girl doing. He loved to read Judy Blume books in elementary school and in high school he was a huge Madonna fan. Maybe that should have been a clue! I never consciously thought about him being gay, but sometimes I wonder if there was some subconscious awareness because I remember at least thinking that is was different.”

Kate recognized some atypical gender qualities in her son but it took some time for her to relate it to the possibility that he was gay. She stated, “I didn’t think a lot about it when he was growing up. Maybe now and then I would think that the typical cliché ‘boys will be boys’ didn’t fit, but that didn’t necessarily mean that he was gay. When he started to date in high school, he didn’t really seem interested in the girls. The relationships were never intense and never lasted very long. It was probably when he was in his twenties that I started to suspect it, because of the whole picture.” Kate was one of two parents who directly asked her son if he was gay. Her son used that as the opportunity to come out to her. The other parent, Bob had decided to broach the topic with his son once when they were on a ski trip together. He remembered, “When I asked him, he didn’t deny it right away, but there was this long pause and then he did deny it. I guess we changed the subject then but I have to tell you, I was relieved at that point.”

Theme: Specific Incidences

Several parents mentioned specific incidences that either triggered their awareness or furthered their previous suspicions. Of the six couples, only two of them talked about their suspicions with their spouses prior to finding out that their sons were gay. Of the specific incidences mentioned, the most common was the suggestion by another person that their sons were gay. Both Alex and Natalie, who are married talked

about a time that the youth minister from their church approached them directly about the possibility that their son could be gay. They attended a liberal church, and the minister wanted to make sure that their son would have adequate support. Bob had a friend who suggested to him that his son might be gay and shortly after that, Bob addressed the issue with his son on the ski trip mentioned previously. Joe also had a woman who worked with him ask if he ever thought that his son might be gay. Additionally, Joe's son, Doug had a friend who had started a rumor at school that Doug was gay. Joe stated, "At the time, Doug told me it wasn't true, but I'm not sure if he even realized it about himself yet. Even though he said that, it still raised the issue for me, in my mind."

There were other random events that parents noted with regard to their suspicions being raised about their sons' being gay. Susan talked about her son being the editor of his college newspaper and the fact that there were an increasing amount of articles being devoted to various gay issues. She said, "I guess I wondered if Todd was behind all of that or at least since he was the editor that he was supporting this. The articles just kept coming out more and more after he became editor." She also recalled that her brother, who she later found out was also gay, was running for state representative during that time period. Her brother was taking a vocal stand for gay rights and Todd started helping him with his campaign. Her husband Charles also mentioned these incidences when he was interviewed. He also recalled a specific time when his son was in junior high and was wrestling with a male friend. Charles noted, "He seemed to have an unusual enjoyment of the physical contact. There was just a quality about it that reminded me more of what a boy would act like towards a girl, not another boy."

Code: Disclosure

While many of the parents talked about their previous suspicions, the actual disclosure by their sons marked the official beginning of the coming out process for them. The tendency for a lot of the parents during the stage of initial suspicion was to give it only a little thought and then “put it aside.” Alex stated, “I knew it, I just knew that he was going to be gay, but my early inclination was to deny it.” It wasn’t until their sons made the actual disclosure that most of the parents began to actively address the issue of having a gay son. When the parents talked about the initial disclosure, two themes emerged:

- 1) How and When Disclosure was Made
- 2) Reactions

Theme: How and When Disclosure was Made

For the parents in this sample, the actual event of having their sons’ disclose the fact that they were gay remains very clear in their minds. Every parent in the sample was able to recall with great specificity how and when their sons told them that they were gay. Most all of them recalled how long ago this occurred. Many of them recalled the month or the day of the week and a few of them recalled the exact date. Winnie remembered that her son had sent a letter and on the envelope he had written that he wanted her and her husband to read it together. She said, “I was a little worried. I never thought it was going to say what it said. I think I thought there might be something wrong with Brad seeing as how he made it a point to tell us to read it together. I knew it was something important.” Winnie still had the letter. She stated that she felt his method of disclosing in a letter probably gave her the chance experience her own shock and sadness without

him seeing it and construing it as an unsupportive response. She and her husband, Greg called him a few hours after reading the letter. She said, "I think looking back, that Brad coming out to us in this way was the best way to do it. As you can see, the letter is very articulate and beautifully written and of course, his sense of humor comes through. Especially the part where he says, 'You are probably wondering how you can be helpful or supportive of me during this time. Well, you can dispense with your questions about marriage once and for all for starters!' That's just very Brad. He's always pretty positive and upbeat and I think his attitude about it was one of the things that was most helpful."

Several of the parents said that their sons made a point of coming over to their homes specifically to tell the parents that they were gay. Amelia recalls, "Yes, it was on a Sunday night and it was in November. He just stopped by and said he had something to talk to us about and I knew what he was going to say. I think I heard the words come out of his mouth before he actually said them. And then he said that he was gay." She and her husband, Harris, both related separately that their son Peter had come out to his older brother several months prior to coming out to them. Their older son had told Peter that he did not want to continue to cover for Peter and encouraged him to tell their parents and that they would likely be very supportive. Charles and Susan's son told them because he was becoming very active in the gay community and was going to be featured in a newspaper article the following week. They both remembered that he did not want them to be shocked when they saw him in the paper.

Caroline's son came out to her on a car trip when she was taking him back to college after a visit home. She had asked him if he had gotten involved with any activities on campus and he replied that he had gotten involved with a gay group on

campus. She remembered him asking, “That’s all right, isn’t it?” and that, although she was very surprised, she was supportive. He indicated that he was worried about telling his dad, Joe, and asked if she would tell him. Joe had just started a new job and was living in their new house a few hours away. They were in the process of selling their home and Caroline was still at the old home. Joe remembered, “Caroline called and told me that Doug had told her that he was gay and that he was very concerned about what my reaction would be. And I said, ‘Well, I don’t have any problem with that. I’ll call him and talk with him.’ And that’s pretty much what I did. I told him I loved him and we didn’t have any problems with it.”

Kate remembers that she had been suspecting for a long time that her son was gay. She and her son were driving to visit her daughter and she felt like being alone in the car together was a good time to have a conversation. She remembers saying, “Scott, you know, any life style you choose would be okay with me.” When asked about his reaction she stated, “At the time, there was just this long pause from Scott. I think he was a little surprised and I could tell he was processing what I said. I waited and he didn’t say anything about it and we just started talking about some other things. The next day on the way back home Scott said, I was thinking about what you said yesterday, so your probably know what I am about to tell you...and then he told me.”

Theme: Reactions

The range of the reactions to their sons’ disclosures were somewhat congruent with the literature, which indicates that shock, denial, guilt, sadness and blame are the most common reactions (Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998). The majority of the parents, however, worked through the more negative feelings fairly quickly. These parents,

particularly the mothers, most often cited sadness as their primary feeling. Much of this sadness was related to losses of dreams for their sons concerning marriage or grandchildren that were perceived by the parents. Many of the parents, along with the sadness, stated that they felt concern for their sons in terms of discrimination. Winnie stated, "Brad was always well-liked and popular and I wondered if that would change once people started to find out. That was really sad for me to think about people thinking less of Brad because he was gay. You want everyone else to love him and respect him the way you do, and I just didn't know how people would respond."

Helen and Bill were the only parents who described truly negative reactions to their son being gay. Helen stated, "We didn't get angry with him directly, but I wouldn't say we were supportive. I just wanted to get through lunch and back to the hotel, and then all hell broke loose." She described that she and her husband, Bob started "hurling accusations at one another." Bob recalled that part of the incident as well, "Helen and I started playing the blame game with each other. My reaction towards Chris was that I still loved him, and would never have turned my back on him, but I probably wasn't giving him messages that I supported him being gay." Bob also stated that he was surprised since his son had denied that he was gay on the ski trip the previous year. Bob remembers, "I asked him how long he had known and Chris said he had known he was different at seven years old, but by junior high, he knew it was because he was gay. I was just so surprised and a little bit scared that maybe me bringing it up to him the year before had planted the seed in his head."

Two of the other mothers described feeling some level of shock. Caroline said, "I guess I was just very, very surprised. Not angry or rejecting, but it was just something

that hadn't occurred to me and something to get used to." Theresa's son Tim was living in Chicago and had significantly decreased his contact for a few months. She had been worried about him and called his ex-girlfriend, Kathy to see if she had heard from him. Eventually, Kathy called her and told her that she had found out that Tim was gay. Theresa remembers, "I was just so stunned and I didn't know if I should be relieved that he wasn't strung out on drugs or something, or worried because he was gay."

There were several parents who expressed that they felt relieved. Harris said, "I think we were immediately affirming and not judgmental in any way, and I for one felt pretty relieved. My hunch about it had been verified and I thought now we can just move on with it." Susan had a similar reaction, "I think I was just pretty relieved. I think I probably already knew deep down that Todd was gay and I was glad it was finally out in the open."

A majority of the parents, despite their own feelings, made it a point to tell their sons that they still loved them. None of the parents displayed anger toward their sons. Helen and Bob both acknowledged that they had a lot of anger, but that they directed it towards each other rather than their son. Many of the parents asked their sons at some point about whether they had thought about how their parents would react before coming out to them. Most of the sons did not believe that their parents would be rejecting, but many of them talked about it being scary for them because it was an "unknown." Many of them had heard stories of parents being rejecting and it was something that existed in the back of their minds so they just weren't sure of how their parents would react. It wasn't so much a fear of complete rejection from their parents as a worry that their parents might not be able to accept and validate their identities as gay men.

Code: Coping Strategies

Following the disclosure by their sons, many of the parents described moving to a stage where they wanted to try to understand more about the issue of homosexuality.

During the early stages of their evolution, information gathering was a significant part of their processes. They elicited different sources to help them understand, however the primary themes that emerged under this code included:

- 1) Communication
- 2) Information Gathering
- 3) Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (P-FLAG)

Theme: Communication

The majority of the parents described that they spent a lot of time of talking with their sons about issues related to their gay identities and gay issues in general. For most of the parents, the time following disclosure marked a time of increased contact between the parents and sons. The parents talked with their sons about both the personal aspects of their sons' own coming out processes and about various political issues. When asked how often she and her son talked about issues related to his gay identity, Winnie laughed, "Oh all the time! I think I talked the subject into the ground with Brad, with Greg, with everybody. I think it may have been the only topic of conversation in our house for a long time, but I think that's what helped me a lot. Brad and I talked about a whole spectrum of things related to him being gay. I learned a lot." This general idea was echoed by many of the parents.

Charles said the ongoing commitment by his son to debate the various issues with

him was what propelled him to greater understanding. He stated, “Originally I thought, ‘we’ll work this out,’ which to me meant that there was some way of convincing him that he was not gay or could change. Todd was very well informed and articulate in expressing his views. Eventually, I had to admit, ‘you’re right and I’m wrong.’ Our conversations were instrumental to my growth about the issue.”

Many of the parents also cited conversations with others as being helpful to them. With the exception of Bob and Helen, who stated that conversations about their son’s gay identity were negative and severely strained their relationship in the beginning, all of the parents said that they talked extensively with their spouses following disclosure. They felt that the conversations were mutually helpful and that their relationships with each other remained positive. Theresa recalled that she had initially tried to talk to her minister, but that he told her that he would support her, but couldn’t support Tim or his “lifestyle.” She stated that she and her husband felt isolated for a long time, “We only had each other to talk to and we relied on each other a lot.”

Some parents turned to family members and close friends. Some of these conversations were indicative of the early stages of their processes of coming out to others as the parent of a gay child. This was an integral part of their identity development. The act of “coming out” themselves along with the support received from others was a reciprocal process that contributed to their evolution towards total acceptance.

Theme: Information Gathering

Along with the conversations the parents had with others, many of the parents immersed themselves in literature about gays and lesbians. Harris said that he had

always enjoyed debating issues, especially controversial ones and that since he found out his son was gay the topic became a special interest to him. He said, “I tried to get as much information as I could and I also shared it with Amelia [his wife].” Other parents made comments such as “I tried to read everything I could get my hands on.” Susan and Charles’ son had brought several books and videos with him when he came to tell his parents that he was gay. Originally, he left the information in the car because he thought his parents might not want to see it. Charles felt badly that he would feel that way. Both he and Susan utilized all of the information and found it helpful.

While many of the parents used literature to help them in the early stages of their coming out process, many also said that they have continued to be interested in increasing their knowledge about gay issues. Several parents talked about their increased interest in political topics related to gays and lesbians and talked about the fact that they stay current on these issues by watching the news and reading the newspaper. Joe and Caroline stated that they started subscribing to a gay magazine so they could discuss current issues. Related to activism, several of the parents mentioned activities related to general advocacy such as investigating political candidates’ views on gay and lesbian issues before voting. The process of gathering information was pervasive throughout the sample and has been an ongoing process that has contributed to greater depth of understanding for many of the parents.

Theme: Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (P-FLAG)

All of the parents in this study had been recruited through *Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays* (P-FLAG) and utilized P-Flag support services for some time.

Theresa and her husband, who is now deceased, were the original founders of the Grand

Rapids chapter of P-Flag along with another couple. She remembered that she and her husband had felt so isolated in terms of not having anybody to talk with and that one day the newspaper was running a series of articles about gays and lesbians in Grand Rapids. She said that the newspaper was only using the first names of the people who were interviewed but she immediately recognized that one of the couples in the article, who were telling their story about having a gay son, were friends of her and her husband. Theresa said, "We had thought we were all alone with this until this point, but then we realized there was actually somebody we knew that had gone through a similar experience and could understand what this was like. So I took a chance and called them." She related that they got together and started talking about how they could help others. The other couple had heard of P-FLAG, but there was not a local chapter. The four of them decided to start one. She talked about the evolution of the local P-Flag, "At first we just found a local church that allowed us to use some space for meetings. We had to get the word out, and Dignity, another support group that helped gay people reconcile issues of religion helped us. People used to come and for the first three sessions they would just cry and cry. We felt like we were providing something that was needed. After a while, people who had gotten to a more comfortable place and who were more familiar with the process became leaders at meetings. So we started to branch out and grew in different directions as we became more organized. With time we started offering more and it was helpful to everyone, both the parents who were just beginning their journey and the experienced parents who could give back."

Several of the parents learned about P-FLAG from their sons. Many of them said that they were surprised that there was a support group that dealt with these issues. Their

degrees of involvement varied, as did the amount of time they spent actively involved. All of the parents attended at least five meetings in the first years following their sons disclosure to them.

Some of the parents only utilized the meetings for a short time, but continued to receive newsletters and contribute financially. Susan said the meetings were somewhat helpful but that she only attended five or six because, "I think a lot of people were struggling more than we were and I thought we really didn't need to go because we were doing pretty well with the whole thing. And it got really sad to listen to the rejection stories. I suppose we probably should have gone longer because maybe we could have been helpful to some of the parents who were struggling and needed to hear positive things." She did say that she and her husband have been called by P-FLAG to speak to various forums and that they have done that.

Several parents said that attending the meetings and hearing the stories of rejection furthered their own acceptance of their sons. Winnie and Greg were very involved with P-FLAG for a number of years. Early in their journey, they met a young gay man at the meetings who had been rejected by his parents and thrown out of his house. She recalled, "He was really struggling so Greg and I kind of adopted him as a second son and helped him through this difficult time. I think in helping him and seeing how poorly he had been treated by his own parents, and seeing how much he was hurting, that made it even more important for us to work through this." Harris said, "We attended P-FLAG early on and I think hearing some of those stories in the various groups made you realize all of the devastation done to families by this, and it was so needless and senseless." Caroline and Joe have been continually very active with P-FLAG.

Caroline recalled, “We got involved with P-FLAG right away and moved ahead and just threw ourselves into this. Over the years, our involvement has just increased and it occupies a lot of our time. I think for a while we were sort of the poster parents for gays!”

Kate found P-FLAG invaluable to her own process. She said that she had never heard of the organization but that her son had told her about it. She stated, “It ended up being one of the most helpful things for me. Those meetings made me believe that it wasn’t enough to just ‘deal with it,’ but you also have to come out yourself as a parent to go through the process more fully. You also have the opportunity to help others who are going through a similar experience and that takes you to a whole other level yourself.”

Kate and others talked about how helpful the small group sessions were. Kate found them very helpful because, “You could talk as long as you needed to without being interrupted. I could say anything I wanted and knew my feelings would be respected by the group. Also, hearing about how other people dealt with negative experiences helped me feel stronger. So if I were to have negative experiences, I knew I could go back to the group and talk about it.”

Code: Difficult Aspects

The relative ease in which most of the parents were able to accept their sons’ gay identities shortly after the initial disclosure was somewhat surprising. During their stories of their own coming out processes however, the parents did relate some of the more difficult aspects of their evolution. These difficulties generally did not relate to a personal difficulty in accepting their sons, but rather in overcoming a general anxiety about gay culture that was unknown to them and being able to stand up to homophobic

attitudes, ideas, and comments by people they encountered in their various ecosystemic environments. The primary themes that emerged under this code included:

- 1) Transcending Stereotypes and Negative Sexual Images
- 2) Fear of Negative Repercussions for Sons
- 3) Regret About Failure to be Supportive Earlier in the Process
- 4) Coming Out to Others.

Theme: Transcending Stereotypes and Negative Sexual Images

Six parents talked about their processes in terms of “unlearning” some of the misrepresentations about “the gay lifestyle.” Bob said that prior to getting to his present acceptance he had felt “turned off by what I perceived as some aspects of the culture.” When asked to expand he stated, “Well, the things that people think of when they think of gay people...stereotypical stuff when you are not informed otherwise. Like I would think of things you read on the walls of restrooms and men picking other men up at rest stops. Also, having the idea that all gay men were cross-dressers.” The other five parents spoke to similar images that made them uncomfortable.

Each of the six parents talked about having to get past the idea that gay men were promiscuous and not capable of monogamous relationships. Finally, five of the six men talked about their initial difficulty in envisioning two men acting romantically towards one another. Specifically, these men had some difficulty, as Alex stated, “getting beyond the imagined sexual images.” None of them described a feeling of being totally repulsed, but rather stated that it was merely a difficult thing about which to think. Joe talked about this concept very casually, “I think it was a little bit difficult for me because of how different the idea of a man and a man or a woman and a woman was for me to imagine.

Maybe just mentally picturing it or getting used to the idea of seeing two people of the same sex act romantically towards each other...it wasn't a problem so much, just something to get used to."

Theme: Fear of Negative Repercussions for Sons

Several parents talked about their fears for their sons once the sons told them that they were gay. The parents most often cited worries that their sons might experience discriminatory behavior by others in various facets of their lives. Kate's son is a teacher and she talked about a case of a gifted and well-loved high school music teacher who had lost his job when a small group of parents found out that he was gay. The case was well publicized and Kate stated, "It was awful what that man went through. He was persecuted by parents and colleagues who had at one time sung his praises." Many of these individuals engaged in a very negative public diatribe that endangered the teacher's emotional and physical health and eventually the stress exacerbated a heart condition that led to his death. Kate continued, "I was concerned about Scott and wondered if something like this could happen to him too." Harris also talked about worrying about the potential loss of business for his self-employed son, should people become aware of the fact he was gay.

Several parents talked about their fears for their sons' emotional and physical safety. They were all aware of the powerful and destructive effects of homophobia and talked about it being difficult for them when they realized the difficulties their sons may face because they were gay. This was exacerbated for some of them when they would watch the news or read about incidences of gay bashing in the paper. Theresa said, "You think you've worked through it all, but even twenty years later, you hear something like

the Matthew Shepard incident, and it undoes you a little.” Harris also brought up the incident of the high school music teacher in terms of the emotional strain, “You get the feeling that there are still witch hunts in this modern-day. It was a very specific example of how society’s homophobia can still be such a powerful and negative tool and how people’s fear of gays can become destructive to someone’s life. Also, you see the lengths that people will go to so that they won’t have to face something they are uncomfortable with. It was devastating. It happened right here in Grand Rapids and I worried that something like that could happen to Peter or Ric.”

Most all of the parents also cited fears about AIDS as a significant concern for them earlier in their processes, which was consistent with previous literature (Robinson, Walters, & Skeen, 1989). Susan stated, “I think I was pretty scared about different safety and discrimination issues, but AIDS was the worst thought for me. Once Todd reassured me that he wasn’t putting himself at risk for AIDS, I felt better.” Several of the parents had conversations with their sons about safe sex and the issue of HIV/AIDS and reported feeling reassured once their sons conveyed their own understanding of the necessity of safe sex. Sadly, Caroline and Joe’s son eventually developed HIV. Caroline is a registered nurse and states that she had always been very open in talking about different issues related to sex when he was growing up. This was also true when he came out. She specifically made a point of talking with him about HIV/AIDS. She talked about her original fears, “I feared for his safety and worried about him being physically or emotionally hurt. Gays can suffer great discrimination. The most difficult thing was finding out he was HIV positive. It was like all those worries coming to fruition and I couldn’t believe it was happening.” She described feeling angry at her son for putting

himself at risk when “he should have known better.” However, she and Joe have continued to be very supportive of him.

Theme: Regret About Failure to be Supportive Earlier in the Process

Finally, many of the parents talked about feelings of regret that they had not been available to their sons for emotional support during their sons’ early struggles in coming to terms with their identities. Winnie related, “I think the worst thing was just the thought that I wasn’t able to be supportive of Brad while he was growing up and struggling with this issue. I hate that he had to go through this alone or that he felt too scared to tell either me or Greg that he was gay or thought he was gay when he was younger. And then I go back and wonder if I ever said anything ignorant or hurtful about gay people or if I ever did anything that made it harder for him or made him struggle more.” Winnie’s eyes filled with tears as she made this statement, and then she commented, “See, that thought still hurts after all this time.” Several other parents talked about feeling that they had been inadequate in not being there for their sons during their sons’ early struggles prior to disclosing to them. It was not uncommon for some of the parents to become tearful. Helen and Bob both talked about their regret in how they approached their son’s disclosure in the early stages. Helen stated, “I want to think that we never treated him badly, but I think that trying to make him change in the beginning and basically demanding that he see a psychiatrist solely for that purpose was probably not a nice way to treat him. It wasn’t supportive and it probably was cruel [she starts crying]...Wow, it still makes me sad to think about that.” Several parents also talked about their feelings of sadness being heightened when they would hear stories of other gays and lesbians who had struggled with family rejection. It was unsettling for them to

think of their sons struggling alone without their support.

Theme: Coming Out to Others

Coming out to other people regarding their gay or lesbian identities is said to be a crucial part of identity development for gays and lesbians (Cass, 1979, Coleman, 1982, and Troiden, 1988.) Similarly, the process of coming out to others was both a source of difficulty and growth for these parents. Coming out was a process that parents became more comfortable with as they transcended their fear of the attached stigma (Frable et al., 1998). Several parents talked about feeling uneasy when they first started disclosing to family and friends. Susan stated, "It was hard at first, telling others and not being sure about how they would react. I think we made it a point to tell relatives or people we thought should know, but then we wondered if we should let Todd tell them himself. It got easier with time." Amelia recalled, "I remember telling a couple who had been our best friends for many years and the man just started crying, as if we had told him someone had died. It was like they felt sorry for us and that's not what I wanted. After that I just started worrying about people's reactions but over time I got past my fear. We never had any friends who shunned us because of it...but I think that one reaction caught me off guard. Eventually, I went back to those friends and told them that their response had not been helpful and we worked through it. I think that was a turning point, having the courage to bring it up."

Four of the mothers stated that they had worried about people "blaming" them for their sons being gay or making hurtful comments. This is a common fear for parents because traditionally held myths about "domineering mothers and passive fathers" that heavily pervaded society at one time. While these misconceptions are not as prevalent

now as they were at one time, they have not been completely ameliorated (Mallon, 1992).

Helen stated, "I thought people would think it was my fault, but therapy helped me realize it was my own baggage." She talked about her fear of reactions from others "driving her into the closet." She remembered her friends kids planning weddings and that they would ask her when her sons [both of her sons are gay, although we focused only on her coming out process related to the first son for this project] might get married. She said, "I always felt pressure about that. After a while, I started to tell some of my closer friends whom I thought I could trust. That went pretty well, so I would tell more people. After a while, I sort of lost track of who I told and who I hadn't told, which made it kind of difficult, but finally there came a time when I just thought, 'Who the hell cares? I shouldn't have to hide this.' I just started saying, 'No, they are not married. They are gay. That's right, both of them!'"

Several parents stated that they had gotten used to disclosing to selected family and friends, but still found it difficult at times to stand up to people who told gay jokes or engaged in a negative diatribe about gays and lesbians. Consistent with the literature, their loyalties towards their sons and other gay and lesbian people about whom they had come to care helped them transcend their fear (Eliason & Raheim, 1996). Kate recalled, "I thought I was doing pretty good about coming out and then one day at work I was faced with a secretary who is very religious and was talking very negatively about gays and lesbians. It was the first time I felt like I had to stand up to someone. I told her that I had a gay son and that her comments were hurtful. I felt stronger afterwards and believe it or not, she actually started coming to me with questions and I think she started to evaluate her own thinking a little bit." Many of the parents described feeling empowered

when they transcended their fears and proactively confronted negative comments and jokes. Winnie recalled an incident where an unexpected fear came over her even after she had already come out to several people. She had been at a P-FLAG event and saw some friends who were attending a wedding reception at the same location. She avoided them because she had not told them and she didn't want them to know she was associated with a gay organization. She recalled feeling badly about it afterwards, "I felt ashamed of myself for hiding so about a month later I made a point of going to these friends to tell them. It didn't bother them at all, and their response was very supportive."

Code: Gay Culture

Research has spoken to the importance of gays and lesbians immersing themselves in gay culture as an essential part of identity development (Cass, 1979, Coleman 1982, Troiden, 1988). Getting to know other gays and lesbians is beneficial in helping gays and lesbians to feel comfortable expressing this aspect of themselves in a sympathetic environment (Gonsiorek and Rudolph, 1991). Several of the parents indicated that this was an integral part of their own process as well. Two themes were evident under this code:

- 1) Meeting and Interacting with Gays and Lesbians
- 2) Activism

Theme: Meeting and Interacting with Gays and Lesbians

Caroline's reflection about the significant impact that meeting gays and lesbians had on her acceptance was similar to several other parents' comments. She said, "It was so helpful for me to meet other gay people and get to know them. It goes beyond just being accepting of your son or daughter. It helps you to be accepting of gays and

lesbians in general. I don't miss the opportunity to discuss various issues with the gays and lesbians I have met because I always learn something new. You have to be willing to admit that you don't know everything and be open to new points of view." Greg also recognized the importance of this type of contact. He reflected, "My evolution was brought about by understanding and demythologizing what I thought about gays and lesbians...it happened as I got to know my son's friends and met gay people at different events. Not only did it dissolve my fear, but the gay people I have met are some of the most wonderful people I know." Alex, who had struggled to overcome his homophobia in relation to suspecting that his son was gay, said that the exposure to gays and lesbians was a "powerful tool in helping me get rid of the last bits of my homophobia." Susan has also welcomed the opportunity to experience aspects of gay culture. She said, "It's an added dimension. We have gone down a lot of different paths and met a lot of people that we might not have met if Todd hadn't been gay. It would be pretty boring to only know one type of person."

Theme: Activism

Most of the parents said that exposure to and conversations with gays and lesbians had increased their understanding of the different struggles facing these individuals. Their increased awareness of these issues along with their concern for their sons' quality of life advanced their desire to become involved in activism. The parents' activism took on different forms. Yet every parent communicated that they had been committed to furthering societal awareness about the negative implications of homophobia. All of the parents reported contributing financially to various organizations whose missions were to effect societal change and improve the quality of life for gays and lesbians. Many of the

parents talked about their experiences with public speaking. Many of them have spoken at different gay events. Many have also spoken at colleges and universities, usually in classes for people entering counseling and other helping professions. There were five parents who said that they had written to different political figures or had written editorials in support of various gay issues that were published in local newspapers.

Kate talked about her quiet form of activism, “I don’t like to get up in front of people and talk, but I feel like I can be an activist by simply helping other parents who are struggling with the issue.” The satisfaction of “giving back to others” was something that other parents talked about as well. They felt that it was important to impart knowledge and engage in a reciprocal process of learning and informing others.

Finally, several parents talked about the empowerment they felt when they attended different gay pride events. Helen, who had talked about her early struggle “feeling like death” evolved into one of the most activist parents in this group. She said, “I can’t tell you how liberating it was to finally be able to attend a public event and think ‘Look at me. I am the parent of gay sons and I’m proud. Let me teach you something about this.’ It was when I could do this that I realized how far I had come.” Winnie also spoke of feeling empowered when she and her husband Greg attended a gay pride march in Washington, DC. She remembered, “It was wild...quite something really. There were people from all over, both gay and straight. It’s something you can’t describe...a feeling of pride...but something even more than that.”

Code: Present Experience

The parents in this study reflected in their stories that coming out as parents of gay sons had been an ongoing process for them. Their stories began with somewhat

prescient feelings that their sons might be gay or that they were at least “different” and continued to more recent times. There was one prevailing theme as the parents talked about their present perspectives on the coming out process. Most of the parents describe working through the process to the point that they hardly think about their sons in terms of them being gay, but rather think of their other attributes. The primary theme that emerged has been labeled Non-Issue, which is how one of the parents described their present experience.

Theme: Non-Issue

When the parents spoke in regard to their sons’ gay identities being a “non-issue” they were talking specifically about the evolution they had experienced since the time following their sons’ disclosures. Many of the parents had talked about how the subject of their sons being gay had consumed their thoughts and conversations for a long time in the early years following disclosure but how they had worked through the issue to a point where they were completely comfortable with it and that they hardly ever thought about it anymore. This is not to say that they have not remained involved in various levels of activism or that their interest in or awareness of gay issues has decreased, but rather that it is not a preoccupation with regards to their sons. Susan’s statement, “Over time we just don’t really think about the fact that he is gay a lot. It’s just so much a part of him and it has become ingrained in us. The fact that he is gay doesn’t even come up that much anymore unless there is some specific gay issue in the news or something like that.” reflected many of the other parents’ current thoughts about their sons being gay.

Ecosystemic Influences on Parents’ Coming Out Processes

Human ecology theory provided the framework that underlies this project as a

whole. Each of the previous classes of data included aspects of human ecology in that human beings are in constant interaction with their environments and these interactions were likely to effect their definitions of acceptance, their relationships with their sons, and their coming out stories. This class of data relates specifically to the systems parents talked about directly in relation to their perception of influence on their acceptance. Also, this class explored the reciprocal influence these parents had on various systems. The final research question was: *How do parents describe the impact of their ecosystemic environments on their ability to be accepting and affirming toward their sons' gay identities? Further, how do the parents describe their impact as accepting parents on these systems?* The system of societal homophobia was also explored as to the level that the parents perceived it as impacting their acceptance. Primary systems that were mentioned by parents were used for the coding process and themes were derived from the parents' collective experiences in these systems. These codes included: *Nuclear Family, Extended Family, Religion, Occupations Outside the Home, Social/Recreation and Impact of Societal Homophobia.*

Code: Nuclear Family

There has been very little written about the process by which families as a whole experience the coming out of a family member. Twelve of the parents in this study indicated that there was not any disruption in their nuclear family functioning following the disclosure. Helen and Bill experienced severe marital strain for approximately a year following their son's disclosure and entered individual and marital counseling. Kate was not married to her son's father at the time of disclosure but states that they were able to talk about the issue in a positive way. None of the parents reported negative reactions

from their other children or their children's spouses. There appeared to be reciprocal processes in the nuclear family systems as a whole that influenced acceptance for the individuals and the families as a whole. The two primary themes that were evident under this code were:

- 1) Support
- 2) Balanced Autonomy and Connectedness

Theme: Support

The parents overwhelmingly experienced their nuclear family as a source of support. Winnie talked about how she had experienced extreme sadness, "I probably cried every day for the first few months. I used to worry that Greg would be sick of seeing me with mascara smeared all over my face, but you know he never told me to 'get over it' or anything like that. He was always there." Many of the parents talked about their spouses being a strong source of support. The spouses were largely able to talk through their feelings with one another and offer helpful insight. Theresa said that she and her husband (now deceased) "only had each other and our family to lean on for a long time. It honestly felt like we were the only ones in the world who had ever gone through this."

Winnie said that after a while she felt like she was wallowing in self-pity and that she appreciated her daughter's more "matter-of-fact" attitude, "Well mom, what's the big deal?" Kate said that her daughter approached the issue with similar nonchalance, "Yeah? Duh. I mean does it really matter, like would we love him any less?" These daughters also offered that "if you ever need to talk, just call." Helen, who struggled very much in the beginning, said that her daughter had been very supportive of her brother

being gay "from day one." She remembers her daughter telling her, "Mom, you need to deal with this and understand that it is not the end of the world. Chris is still Chris. It's not like he died or something. I think you can get through this."

Amelia expressed gratefulness that her older son had encouraged his brother to come out to them, "Even though I know in my heart I could never turn my back on him, it must have been scary for him to think about telling us. I'm glad Josh took a stand and said he wouldn't cover for him anymore and helped him feel safe about telling us."

Natalie talked about the fact that her son had been very adamant about wanting to tell his thirteen-year old brother, "He felt it was important in case he was struggling with the issue himself or if he knew other kids who were. He believed kids needed to be aware. We trusted his judgment and it wasn't a big deal to our younger son. I think he was a little worried about what his friends might think at first, but he got over that pretty quickly and was pretty vocal if he heard any gay bashing."

Susan's daughters had not reacted negatively but she stated, "I wondered if my one daughter's fiancé would have more of a problem since he was raised in an extremely strict and conservative background, but you know, he has always treated Todd very well and he and my daughter were fine with Todd bringing Andy to the wedding." The families as a whole capably integrated the gay person's identity into their family identities.

Theme: Balanced Autonomy and Connectedness

The parents' representations of their families implied that the members had close relationships but also broad and sometimes divergent interests. Independence was often encouraged. Theresa observed, "I think he probably realized inside that we would be all

right with him being gay, because we always encouraged the kids 'to be who you are going to be' and not what you think we want you to be." Similarly, Amelia said, "My two sons are so different, but that is what has made life interesting. You wouldn't want to have your children all the same...that would be boring. It is important for people to be themselves." Susan also said, "Todd, even since he was little, had very different ideas about the world than we did, but it was okay. We didn't expect the kids to be exactly like us."

Many of the parents stated that their children had gone on to pursue their own interests. Many of them had children who lived some distance away. The descriptions of the relationships did not imply that the children were moving away to "escape" from the confines of dominating parents. Instead, they were moving away to pursue their life interests. The parents all reported positive relationships with both their gay children and their other children. They kept in regular contact and looked forward to visits.

Code: Extended Family

Family systems theory suggests that what occurs within the nuclear family can be expected to be influenced by and to influence the extended family system of which it is a part (Becvar & Becvar, 2003). Not one parent in this sample indicated any long lasting negative responses from extended family members. Harris said that his sister became very angry towards him "because I was projecting acceptance. She didn't think I should send the message that it was okay. But, my younger brother and his wife were very open-minded and accepting right away. I guess eventually my sister felt outnumbered because eventually she came around!"

The majority of the parents did not directly state that they viewed their extended

families as highly influential on their ability to accept their sons' gay identities. It is possible that the parents may have been looking at these relationships in more literal terms and therefore did not characterize their families as an influence on acceptance because they were not looking to their families to help them through the actual crisis. They merely experienced the families as supportive and accepting rather than as influencing their own acceptance. They may minimize the influence from a psychological and systemic perspective given that they have not been trained to think systemically. They did not believe that they had influenced their extended families' acceptance and the task did not require much effort. The following statement by Theresa generally summed up the general consensus of the parents as a whole: "Telling our extended family was part of the coming out process for us. It was a relief when we did it and not as big of a deal as we thought it would be. Nobody reacted terribly. It was all fine and the family just went on as always." It was somewhat difficult to identify specific themes under this code. All of the parents indicated generally good relationships with their extended families. Therefore the one theme that was common to all of the parents was Positive Responses.

Theme: Positive Responses

A majority of the parents came out to their extended family members during the first year after their sons had disclosed to them. Many of them had aging parents. A few of the parents stated that they did not come out to their aging parents whose health was failing because they did not believe it was important at that point. None of those parents indicated that they did not tell them because they feared their reactions. In fact, they believed that these parents would have been fairly accepting. One of the parents stated

that his father had died prior to his son coming out so it was not an issue. But he believed that his father would not have been accepting.

Some of the parents expressed surprise at how accepting their families had been from the beginning. Amelia remembers, "My father was always very outspoken and if he didn't like this, we would have heard about it. I think I worried a little bit about his reaction because he was a generation behind us. He was eighty-nine when we told him and he said, 'I always knew that'. He didn't have a problem with it at all and his support meant a lot to me." Natalie said that her mother was deceased when her son came out, but that she told her father. She stated, "I didn't know how my father would react. He was a physician and he was very well read, so I think that helped. His response was very positive. Actually, I don't remember any negative experiences. I wasn't really looking for support from my family *per se*, but I appreciated that everybody reacted so positively."

Several of the parents talked about the fact that their gay sons had also shared a particularly close relationship with certain grandparents or favorite aunts or uncles. They stated that these relationships were sustained and continued to remain close after their sons came out. Joe said that his mother had been involved with Girl Scouts for years and always encouraged independent thought. He characterized his mother as "being very accepting of various types of people in general so it wasn't surprising that she would be accepting towards Doug, especially since she loved Doug a lot... She has even helped out at different events, you know like P-FLAG things and such." His wife, Caroline stated "Doug and my mother were very close, so I never doubted that she would accept him. After I talked to her about Doug, she started to really be aware of gay issues and started

reading about different things... She and Doug are still close.” Winnie also stated that both of her parents were very close to her son. She remembers, “They were wonderful about it. They sent Brad a beautiful letter telling them that they love and support him always and that nothing could change that. They also sent me and Gordon a letter telling us that they were supportive of us and thought that we had done such a good job of raising Brad and that they loved us all and that this was nothing to be ashamed about.”

There were no reports by parents of any hostile reactions from extended family members, with the exception of the one previously mentioned concerning Harris’ sister. Several parents viewed the younger generations (contemporaries of their sons) as being especially accepting. They largely reported friendly and accepting interactions at family events. None of them reported any instances where their sons were not welcome at a family event.

Code: Religion

Previous literature suggests that adherence to conservative religious beliefs can often hinder one’s ability to be accepting of gays and lesbians (Bouton et al., 1989; Wylie & Forest, 1992). Gay and lesbian individuals may also experience internal conflicts concerning the reconciliation of their religious beliefs with sexual orientation (Schuck & Liddle, 2001). Sources of this conflict may stem from and be exacerbated by denominational teachings, scriptural passages and congregational prejudice.

There was some indication of this sort of conflict with some of the parents in the sample. However, none of them indicated that their religious affiliations had negatively impacted their acceptance of their sons. Rather, they talked about having to “rethink” some of the churches’ teachings in relation to homosexuality. Five of the parents came

from very conservative religious backgrounds. However, four of these parents indicated only minimal struggle reconciling their religious beliefs with their attitudes toward the sexual orientation of their sons. Three of the parents belonged to churches that were more moderate in terms of teachings about homosexuality. Four of the parents belonged to churches that were very liberal in their teachings. None of these parents indicated that they had struggled to reconcile their religious beliefs with their sons' gay identities. Ironically, the two parents who struggled the most with acceptance for their son's gay identity stated that they were not affiliated with any church, which contrasts with some previous research (Kunkel & Temple, 1992).

The parents who belonged to churches that were considered, "conservative" and "moderate" did not perceive the actual church environment as contributing to their acceptance. Many of those parents, however, exerted a fair amount of influence on that environment. The four parents who attended the "liberal" churches indicated that their churches had a positive influence on their acceptance but did not believe that it was a primary influence. The following themes emerged in relation to this ecosystem:

- 1) Ability to Transcend Religious Bias and Dogma
- 2) Promoting Change

Theme: Ability to Transcend Religious Bias and Dogma

Although several of the parents identified that they had strong religious backgrounds, they did not believe that this interfered with their abilities to be accepting. Charles, Susan, Harris, Amelia and Theresa had all belonged to very conservative churches since childhood and each of them conveyed that the teachings of those churches held that homosexuality was a sin. They found different ways to address their conflict.

Susan stated, "I think Charles and I were able to interpret the teachings in a way that allowed us to believe that God would not create somebody to be gay if it were a sin. We do not believe that Todd chose to be gay, we believe he was born that way." Her husband gave a similar response but also added, "I have always carefully scrutinized the teachings of the church and I have spent a lot of time examining the bible from a scholarly perspective. I don't believe that you should just listen to a sermon without critical examination of what is being said." Charles also talked about a time that he and his son attended a speech given by a religious scholar that addressed the issue of homosexuality in the bible. He found it to be "an extremely enlightening and intelligent. My son had turned his back on religion and I had been disappointed, so I was happy that he agreed to attend with me. I think it was a turning point for me in both my relationship with my son and towards peace with regard to my faith."

Theresa had tried to elicit support from her minister but experienced him as unsupportive. She said that she and her husband worked through their religious conflict and did not "accept that gay people are sinners." She remembered, "I didn't get the feeling that our church with the leadership at the time could see it any other way than that it was a sin. After a while, we became frustrated and disillusioned by the church's stance on homosexuality. We stopped going for a while, but that was strange because it had always been such a big part of our lives... finally we found Westminster and that was a Godsend... it is an accepting and affirming church towards gays and lesbians... they have even done commitment ceremonies there." Kate was also disappointed that her church "taught only tolerance but not acceptance. I didn't like the connotation, like we were supposed to tolerate something bad and just pray for these wayward people or

something. That did not go along with my personal beliefs about who God is. I ended up finding a church that was more enlightened.”

Harris stated, “I was raised in a conservative religious background but I think I tend to approach religious faith as something personal more than strictly from the standpoint of church doctrine. I have also had a fair amount of exposure to some more religious beliefs.” Similarly to Charles he added, “I have spent hours reading the bible and giving it careful thought and analysis. You cannot look at it as black or white. There is all sorts of room for interpretation and I am comfortable that I have reconciled my own faith with this issue.”

Theme: Promoting Change

All twelve of the parents who were actively involved with churches indicated that they had been involved on some level in helping to address the issue of homosexuality in their congregations through various activities. Charles and Susan both mentioned that their church had started a monthly program for the purpose of discussing “hot topics” within society such as abortion and the death penalty. Charles was instrumental in bringing the issue of homosexuality up as a topic. Eventually, he facilitated a six-week class about homosexuality and religion at the church. He was eventually invited to facilitate that same class at another church. Susan stated, “Even though I knew that our church would not give this their seal of approval by any means, we were fortunate because we had some standing and respect in the church. Charles is an elder in the church so a lot of the people in the congregation were willing to listen to what he had to say.”

Many of the parents sat on panels that were aimed at expanding the churches

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views on homosexuality. Kate helped to started a support group at her church that was similar to P-FLAG but was also focused on religious issues. Several of the parents spoke at churches other than their own in an attempt to encourage further thought about homosexuality within these churches. Greg stated, "Just getting people to start talking about it instead of hiding from the issue is a positive starting place for growth to begin."

Code: Occupations Outside the Home

The parents did not generally view their actual work environments as influencing their acceptance of their sons' sexual orientation. However, they often observed that their vocational training and certain work experiences might have been influential in their ability to be accepting. Several parents stated that they had colleagues at work who reacted positively towards them but they did not tend to look to these individuals for support. A few of the parents mentioned specific incidences where they had challenged a colleague's view about gays and lesbians. The two primary themes that emerged under this code were:

- 1) Professional Training
- 2) Work Experiences

Theme: Professional Training

Several of the parents identified aspects of their professional training as having helped them address the issues surrounding their son's gay identities. Three of the parents were trained as educators and they believed that their perspectives were shaped by a desire to learn more. Harris said, "I see myself as an instrument of education about this subject, much as I was an instrument throughout my teaching career." Alex stated "My training and education related to my Ph.D. contributed to an increase in my critical

thinking skills. When you are faced with a difficult emotional issue, it is very important that you can rely on your intellect to sort things out... Of course, I wasn't pleased by the thought that my son could be gay. If I would have let my emotional side take over, I would have not been able to get to the place of acceptance I am today. And of course, as a philosophy major, I think, 'we are on this earth what, eighty years or so?' That's just a second in the scheme of things... Why should my life be ruined because I can't get over some of my own discomfort? Who would I be to NOT be accepting?"

Charles was trained as an attorney. He observed, "I think my professional training was likely one of the biggest influences on my ability to be accepting in that I was taught the importance of tolerance of different points of view. When you litigate, you have to be able to make intelligent arguments. Critical thinking is crucial. I believe that I was able to come to terms with this through careful analysis, much in the same way I was taught to analyze the law."

Two of the mothers were trained as nurses and they believed their backgrounds in science helped them increase their understanding of human sexuality. Caroline said, "My training as an RN didn't take away my surprise that he was gay. It probably helped to make it not such a mystery, though. Just the fact that I had been trained to understand the human body and I am comfortable with different issues that have to do with human sexuality."

Theme: Work Experiences

Charles, Harris and Joe all engaged in some proactive efforts towards changing their work environments. Joe brought up the issue of same-sex partner benefits to a member of upper management. He recalled, "The company I was working for was really

in the closet. It's a pretty big place, so you know there are gays and lesbians working there. But it was never discussed. They did not offer benefits to the partners of gays or lesbians and also, for whatever reason, they chose not to include sexual orientation in their policy about work place discrimination. I had some opportunities to bring it up at different times and I just kind of hedged. But then one day I thought I needed to stand up for this because it is wrong that nobody is addressing it. So I did. I gave them a lot of information about the issue and companies that are doing things and they are actually looking at it. I mean they didn't say 'no way' or anything like that."

Harris had retired as a secondary teacher, but he went back to the school at which he had previously taught and had several conversations with the principal regarding the formation of a support group at the school for students who might be struggling with this issue. He said, "I was aware of different kids' struggles with issues of sexuality when I was a teacher. I assigned journal writing for my English classes and I can remember five or six students who alluded to their struggles with their sexuality. I remember a couple of others who directly wrote about it. I tried to write supportive comments, but I was still a little scared to really try go in depth with them about it. After Peter came out I learned so much more about how difficult it can all be for kids. I wanted to do everything I could to ensure that that these kids who were struggling had some positive support." Nancy also stated, "My teaching experience raised my awareness about the different issues facing gay youth."

Charles, who was an attorney specializing in civil rights issues, stated "I had an easier time addressing the issue of gay civil rights with clients because of my personal evolution. It broadened my analysis of civil rights issues in general." His firm

represented a school district that was embattled with a gay teacher. He told his partners that he could not in good conscience be actively involved in the case and they supported his decision. Charles also sat on several boards in the community in relation to his work and was influential in advocating for a policy that included same-sex cohabitation at an assisted care facility.

Kate was a public health nurse and stated that she had a lot of experience working with gay men who were being tested for HIV. She said, "I think that seeing the fear that these men experienced made me feel sympathetic. I met a lot of wonderful gay men and this certainly was not something they 'deserved' like a lot of people might think."

Theresa worked at an art museum whose director was a gay man. She became close to him and said she learned a lot about the gay community from her interactions with him. She remembers, "Once when my son came to visit I was able to take him to a new gay bookstore. It was a bookstore and a coffee house that Dennis had told me about. I think my son was tickled that I knew about this place. Here is his old mom in this place where they have these suggestive gay pictures... I must have seemed pretty hip to him!"

Code: Social/Recreation

The parents talked about a wide variety of social and recreational interests such as travel, tennis, cards and dining out. More relevant to this code, however was the influence of the friends with whom they shared these activities. In fact, when the parents discussed this aspect of their ecosystemic environment it was their friendship networks about which they spoke. Therefore, the one primary theme that emerged under this code was Comfort and Acceptance from Friends.

Theme: Comfort and Acceptance from Friends

The parents generally chose close friends as people to whom they first disclosed the fact that their sons were gay. Some of the parents chose to confront homophobic comments from friends both for the purposes of coming out and for wanting to preserve the friendship. Winnie remembered an incident where one of her friends was complaining about her rebellious teenage daughter, “She said, ‘Well at least she is not a lesbian.’ I hadn’t told her about Brad yet, so I decided that I needed to tell her. Well, she felt horrible about what she said and started crying and got really apologetic. I was glad we could work through that. I felt like it probably made us closer.” Helen recalled, “Bob’s [her husband] idea of coming out was to kick me under the table when someone would make homophobic comments or tell a gay joke or something. He wanted **me** to confront them...Eventually he got really good at doing it himself!”

Next to their spouses, friends were often the people with whom they were most likely to share their thoughts and feelings about their sons’ gay identities. Kate remembered that she had been suspecting that her son was gay for some time before he came out to her. She had a small group of close friends who got together a couple of times a month and talked extensively about personal issues in each other’s lives. She first started talking to them about her son two years before he came out. She said, “My friends really helped me work through a lot of my early feelings a long time before Scott came out. I think that’s why I was able to raise the issue with Scott...Then, of course, they were there for me afterwards.” Helen said, “I don’t know if I would still be here without the support of my friends. It was really rough in the beginning and they were so wonderful.” Several of the parents made statements to the effect of their close friends

being “very supportive” and that they “didn’t have any trouble accepting the fact that our son was gay.” Charles said, “I think our friends just took our lead. We were doing fine with it, so they were able to accept it as well.” None of the parents reported losing any friends in relation to their sons being gay.

Code: Influence of Societal Homophobia

Central to this study is the idea that homophobia is pervasive throughout the ecosystemic environments in which people interact (Blumenfeld & Raymond, 1993). It is not possible to truly escape from the negative messages and stereotypes about gays and lesbians that are prevalent throughout society (Bohan, 1996). The level of which individuals internalize homophobia may vary. The results of internalized homophobia range from subtle prejudice to fear to loathing to overt acts of violence (Blumenfeld & Raymond, 1993). The parents in this study did not seem to possess highly homophobic attitudes or behaviors prior to discovering that their sons were gay. The theme that emerged under this code was Low Levels of Internalized Homophobia.

Theme: Low Levels of Internalized Homophobia

The majority of the parents said that they had not really thought a lot about the issue of homosexuality prior to their sons coming out. Some of the parents talked about the fact that they didn’t know any gays or lesbians before their sons came out. These parents usually immediately qualified that statement with “at least we didn’t think we did” which demonstrated their evolution from a heterosexist belief that “everybody is straight.” Theresa said, “Prior to that [her son coming out] we never thought, and I mean **thought**, that we knew anyone who was gay. Art and I were both raised in a strict Christian Reformed environment and I think we had heard all the teachings about it being

A sin and such, but we were pretty much oblivious to the whole thing.” Being “oblivious” was a common response from the parents. Caroline said, “To tell you the truth, I never had really given it much thought. I was really pretty ignorant about it. And it wasn’t something that I ever thought would affect my life or anyone in my life. I never really thought I knew anyone who was gay.” Joe also, “really didn’t think about it too much because I didn’t know anybody. If you would have asked me if I knew anyone, I would have said ‘No.’ It was just totally blank. As far as that goes, I mean I would never go out of my way to wonder, ‘Hmmm, I wonder if that guy is gay?’”

Some of the parents talked about the fact that they accepted some of the stereotypes, but did not have strong negative feelings about gays and lesbians. Greg stated, “I think I always thought it was a choice for the majority of the people and I think I would laugh at gay jokes or probably say things that were insensitive towards gay people. I don’t think I did it to be mean. I just didn’t think about it.” Bob stated, “Well the things people think of when they think of gay people, stereotypical stuff, when you are not informed otherwise. People who don’t know gay people sometime just go by the stuff they hear about. Like I would think of things you read on the walls in the restrooms and people picking up guys at rest stops. Also, getting the idea that all gays were cross-dressers...”

Alex had talked about having to work through a lot of his own homophobia. He stated, “I never thought I was homophobic. You know in little ways, like laughing at jokes or stereotypes, but not an all out fear or hatred. I even knew a guy who was gay and I thought he was a good guy. But, I think when I thought of my son being gay, that’s where it really hit me. I had to get past a lot of feelings under there that I hadn’t been

aware of.” Helen, who also had a difficult time accepting her son’s gay identity in the beginning remembered, “I actually only knew one gay guy at that time, or at least one guy who I knew for a fact was gay and I really liked him. He was very nice but I really hadn’t given a lot of thought about what his actual life was like. The whole issue was a ‘non-thought’ for me because it didn’t really exist in my life. I didn’t look at it affecting me at all, until it did.”

Chapter 5

DISCUSSION

Overview

One of the predominant challenges in qualitative research is managing the data and deciding what is most relevant to include in the report of results (Gilgun, 1992). This particular study gave the researcher pause. The parents' stories were so candid and poignant that it was difficult to refrain from the temptation to report their stories in their entirety. At times, the researcher wished that she were writing a book about parents' coming out stories rather than reporting findings in this more narrow study. She worried that she was not doing justice to the participants' experiences. However, as the researcher revisited the theoretical and conceptual maps, she was able to appreciate the value of this theory-building endeavor. While the grounded theory approach does not advocate a detailed description of every case, its value lies in "thick description" of the data as a whole for the purpose of explicating the intricacies of meaning (Gilgun, 1992). From these meanings, the journey of theory building can begin. Qualitative analysis of the parents' stories allows them to become uniquely relevant and helpful in the pursuit of strengths models that will promote the integration of gay and lesbian identities into family identities. This chapter highlights some of the key findings in the data. It also addresses some of the theoretical, research and clinical implications of this study.

Theoretical Foundations and Implications

The benefits of using qualitative methodology for this study were many. Studies concerning the perspective of parents of gays and lesbians are substantially limited in all

fields of the behavioral sciences. Qualitative research promotes the generation of theoretical concepts that will be useful as a means to inform clinical assessment and treatment when working with gays and lesbians and their families (Moon, Dillon & Sprenkle, 1990). To date, there has been little attempt to place theoretical proposals or data regarding the strengths of families who successfully integrate a member's gay or lesbian identity within the framework of existing psychological literature. This study kept within the goals of a grounded theory approach, which is to generalize the findings to a theory rather than to a population (Newfield et al., 1996). This study provides baseline data that can be used to determine the strengths of accepting families and promote further research upon which a strengths model can be constructed for the healthy integration of gay or lesbian identity into the family system.

The participants in this study were asked to discuss issues that were potentially sensitive or emotional in nature. The use of an ethnographic stance attends to the sensitive nature of the topic (Laird, 2001). It employs several techniques that are utilized in the therapeutic setting, thereby creating a safe environment for the participants to construct their narratives.

The use of qualitative data gathering techniques helped to create a rich picture of the individual attributes of the parents, their family systems, and the ecosystemic environments that contributed to the parents' acceptance of their sons' gay identities. This level of description would likely not be captured by a quantitative study. The natural tendency of people to create stories to make sense of their experiences is congruent with the goals of this research. Meaning can be construed from experiences once they have been language (Laird, 2001). Utilizing stories and ecomaps, as research

techniques are beneficial in bridging the gap between clinicians and researchers (Harold et al., 1995). The researcher becomes at once a storyteller and a scientist (Fetterman, 1989). Developing an understanding of the social contextualization of these stories is expected to result in useful strategies for intervention with families who are experiencing similar circumstances. Given that this population is very minimally represented in the literature, qualitative methodology provides a means to represent their experiences in a more holistic manner.

Key Findings/Themes

Desire to Continue Positive Relationships

It was abundantly clear that the majority of the parents in this study experienced significant satisfaction in their relationships with their sons from the time they were young children through adulthood. Even the two fathers who had a more difficult time understanding their sons as children said, that they loved and cared for their sons and were able to form some appreciation of their unique qualities and talents. These parents were eventually able to work through the fears connected to their perception of their sons being “different.”

Attachment theory and the concept of a “secure base” (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1988) may provide a useful framework to explore the intergenerational dynamics that may contribute both to the children’s ability to disclose to their gay identities to their parents and their parents’ abilities to accept these identities. Probing into the intergenerational dynamics from an attachment perspective may clarify the reasons why the gay sons did not experience immobilizing apprehension in disclosing to their gay identities to their parents. Indeed, most of the sons, while nervous about the

initial disclosure, indicated to their parents that they did not truly fear rejection.

Attachment theory “clearly assumes that supportive and autonomy encouraging parent child relations seem to be crucial to the child’s experience of the parents (and family) as a secure base from which to explore the extra-familial world and develop a differentiated ‘voice’” (Lopez, 1995, p.16). Most of these parents projected an acceptance for their sons’ departure from typical gender related behavior. This likely contributed to the sons’ abilities to navigate their coming out processes. The reciprocal value of the parent-child relationship became evident in the sons’ desires to be authentic in their relationships with their parents by disclosing to them and by the parents’ ability to accept their gay identities.

The majority of the parents spoke specifically about the importance of maintaining positive relationships with their sons. They said that their desire to remain close and connected to their sons overrode any of the other emotions associated with their sons’ disclosures. Helen and Bob, who struggled fiercely for the first year to come to a place of acceptance, said that it was their love for their son that propelled them to overcome their fears and the limitations these fears imposed on their abilities to be accepting. When asked to define what they believed to be the most instrumental influences on their abilities to be accepting, the parents most frequently cited strong emotional connections to their sons and the fear of losing those relationships. The parents commonly said such things as “He is my son. I love him. What else would I do?” (Winnie) “How could you turn your back on someone you have loved since the moment you laid eyes on them?” (Theresa)

Ability to Utilize Resources

The parents' abilities to utilize a wide variety of resources appeared to be an integral part of their ability to reach acceptance (Beeler & DiProva, 1999). Many of the parents were able to access internal resources such as intelligence and critical thinking skills to further their facilitative processes. A majority of the parents actively accessed information in the form of literature or videos to assist their understanding of issues around homosexuality and family relationships and to demythologize previously held concepts (Gerstel, Feraios, & Herdt, 1989). These parents were able to identify resources that could provide support for them. Some of these resources were informal networks of supportive people from various facets of their systemic environments. These networks could include family members, colleagues, or friends. Often times, the gay sons were themselves a resource for the parents. They offered both information and emotional support.

Other networks of support for the parents included highly organized and well-funded organizations. Several parents were able to access information from national political groups such as the Human Rights Campaign or the Triangle Foundation. These groups are actively involved in increasing visibility of gay issues, addressing discrimination issues and advocating for legislative action aimed at protecting the rights of gays and lesbians.

All of the parents found P-FLAG to be an essential source of early support in their coming out processes. Although the parents varied in their amount of ongoing involvement with this organization, many of them cited P-Flag as being extremely influential with regard to their ability to reach acceptance. They found it helpful to be

able to hear the stories of other parents who were having similar experiences. The parents also talked about being touched by stories of gays and lesbians who were struggling to gain acceptance with their families of origin. These stories allowed them to build empathy for their sons' struggles and also furthered acceptance.

Impact of Positive Interaction with Gays and Lesbians and Participation in Gay Culture

Without exception, the parents talked about their positive experiences with regard to the gay and lesbian community. They believed these interactions to be a significant part of reaching acceptance not only of their sons but of gays and lesbians in general. Research has shown that greater contact with gays and lesbians increases acceptance by lessening the fear perpetuated by societal homophobia (Lance, 1992).

At the time Theresa's son came out, she and her husband were living in Syracuse for a few months because her husband was teaching a summer seminar. Coincidentally and serendipitously, their suite mates were two gay men, one of whom was teaching a summer seminar in French literature. Theresa and her husband developed a friendship with the gay couple and she recalled, "We really hit it off with them. So, that really opened the door at the same time we found out about Tim. Being with our new friends really opened our eyes about the way we thought about gay people. We were more focused on the fact that we had similar interests and were interested in education than thinking about what they did in bed together. We were able to look past all of the stereotypes and just see them as people just like ourselves, living normal lives just like we were. It was a good education for us at the most opportune time."

Participation in gay culture is said to be a crucial part of identity development for gays and lesbians because they are able to find a place where they can express aspects of

their gay identities without fear of negative repercussions (Cass, 1979, Troiden, 1988). Many of the parents talked about the friendships they had forged within the gay community. They placed such a high value on these relationships that it was evident that these relationships were not only a source of support during their coming out process, but also provided rewards that were originally unforeseen by the parents. Many parents talked about the fact that had their sons not been gay, they would have missed the opportunity to meet many wonderful people. Harriet, who perhaps more than any other parent had struggled to reach acceptance in the beginning, summed up her interview by saying, "I've become such a fan of the gay community, that I feel sorry for parents who *don't* have gay children!"

Ecosystemic Processes Related to Acceptance

The components of Bronfenbrenner's (1992) *Person-Context-Process* model were most evident in this study. There were clearly personal variables that contributed to the parents' abilities to accept their sons' gay identities. In fact, many of the parents often cited personal qualities when asked what they thought contributed to their ability to be accepting. They often identified that they were "open-minded," "did not see things as black or white," "had a natural curiosity and desire to seek knowledge" and that they "were generally loving and accepting by nature." Their individual traits were also powerful mediating variables with regard to the manner in which they approached their various environments.

The parents in this sample could be described as "moderately differentiated" individuals (Bowen, 1978). These parents had the capacity to demonstrate expression of self to their children and also accept their children's expressions of self. They were able

to do this even when the children's notions of selfhood were a departure from their own. Additionally, the parents in the sample did not seem to be automatically shaped by the dominant thoughts and emotions of the people with whom they interacted across their systemic environments.

These parents were able to extract positive effects from the various systemic environments in which they were embedded (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993). They were also able to transcend negative messages that existed in these environments through the utilization of various resources. This was especially evident in the area of religion. Research has shown that regular church attendance may contribute to higher levels of homophobia, while lack of church attendance tends to lower levels of homophobia (Kunkel & Temple, 1992). Many of these parents not only attended church, but also had been raised in very conservative religious backgrounds. This did not impede their ability to be accepting. In fact, they found ways to reconcile their religious faith with their acceptance and turned their spirituality into a resource.

The parents as a whole reported few negative incidences or interactions across their systemic environments. There were occasional isolated incidents that usually involved another person making derogatory statements about gays or lesbians in general and the accompanying discomfort and loyalty issues experienced by the parents. None of the parents reported severed relationships or negative backlash related to their identities as parents of gay sons. Their generally positive experiences in their environments likely increased their ability to reach acceptance and to integrate their identities as the parents of gay sons. Thus, the personal characteristics of these individuals combined with the influence of their systemic environments contributed to a process of *relational resiliency*.

Relational Resiliency

The *Person-Context-Process* model (Bronfenbrenner, 1992) says that it is not enough to know what aspects of the individual and the immediate environment lead to desirable outcomes, but also to specify the process through which this takes place. Walsh's (1996) concept of relational resiliency illuminates what this process might be. Resiliency may not only be a quality possessed by individuals (e.g., Cicchetti & Garnezy, 1993), namely, social competency, problem-solving skills, autonomy, optimism, and the ability to recruit social support. Resiliency also may be a quality that is embedded in the process of interdependent relationships (Cohler, Stott, & Musick, 1995; Egeland, Carlson, & Sroufe, 1993; Walsh, 1996). When a family is resilient as a functional unit, it is able to adapt to and even prosper from crises (Walsh, 1996). Its members benefit accordingly.

The coming out of a family member as gay creates a crisis that must be navigated by the individuals separately and by the families as a whole. The family's ability to identify and capitalize on appropriate and effective coping skills to adapt to the crisis is imperative. It was clear that the parents in this study possessed the classic attributes of individual resilience listed above. These parents possessed both personal and contextual attributes that enabled them to successfully mitigate stress and not become consumed by the crises. They found ways to not only to adapt to the situation, but also to grow and create positive narratives around the crisis (White & Epston, 1990).

The parents in this study all possessed attributes that have been found to influence resiliency (summarized in Krovetz, 1999; Seligman, 1993; Walker & Lee, 1998; Walsh, 1996). The parents in this study all possessed moderate degrees of social competence.

They all had established familial and social relationships and were able to recruit positive responses concerning their coming out processes from these individuals. As mentioned previously, these parents had the ability to see themselves in control of their emotional process rather than victims of it. The parents who expressed the most difficulty dealing with their son's disclosure talked about feeling like victims in the beginning but stated that they did not like feeling that way. Therefore, they utilized therapy as a resource to work through their thoughts and feelings instead of being immobilized by them. All of the parents took responsibility for their processes and were resourceful in seeking help from others. Additionally, these parents were capable of talking constructively about the issues surrounding their sons' disclosure and their feelings around the issue. They were open to listening to new points of view and integrating them into their own analysis of the crises.

The results also indicated that these parents had an overall sense of autonomy and had developed a stable sense of self. They were able to act in accord with their own set of values and beliefs rather than being reflexively shaped by homophobia-informed views that are present in all facets of society. (See also Bowen, 1978, for discussion about differentiation as an individual and family trait.) Additionally, these parents had a large degree of influence on the various systems with which they came in contact as they actively came out as parents of gay children and engaged in advocacy and activism.

Family systems models of resilience view this quality in terms of the process of interdependent relationships (Cohler, Stott, & Musick, 1995; Egeland, Carlson, & Sroufe, 1993; Walsh, 1996). Families are continually changing and being changed by multiple contexts. These parents in this study, and their families as a whole, were able to increase

their resiliency by competently adapting to stressors related to having their sons come out as gay. Competent adaptation included their ability to utilize existing resources, develop new strengths, and reorganize relationships to minimize the disruptive impact of crises. With their sons they were able to envision a positive future and to pursue it together. Their resiliency as individuals and as functional family units could be said to have enabled them to create stories of warmth and acceptance rather than stories of disgrace and despair.

Gender Differences

Gender differences in acceptance were not as readily apparent as the researcher expected. Research has shown people to be less accepting of gays or lesbians if they are the same sex as the person (Cramer & Roach, 1988). This was only modestly true of the parents in this study. The men did express some discomfort with the thought of the sexual act, but the women did not. Caroline had talked about her experiences a group facilitator in which she was helping fathers more often than mothers. In addition, there was a hint that that the parents may have constructed their narratives somewhat differently. In their initial approaches to the process, the men in this study were more apt than the women to be cerebral. They had an initial tendency to explore literature about homosexuality and to engage in critical thinking about the various issues. While also interested in such matters, the mothers initially seemed more influenced by the feelings involved in nurture.

Research Implications

The present study was a beginning exploration of the phenomenon of parental

acceptance of children's gay identities. The participants in this study provided rich information about the influence of their personal attributes and ecosystemic influences on their stories of acceptance. A move towards "pluralism" in family research may provide even more comprehensive information (Sprenkle, Dillon, & Moon, 1996). Studies around issues of parental acceptance that utilize both qualitative and quantitative methodology will strengthen the line of inquiry related to the present study. For example it may be useful to gather empirical data for the purpose of testing hypotheses with regard to attachment styles in both the parents and gay children to ascertain the relationship between certain styles of attachment with levels of parental acceptance. Likewise, it would be beneficial to collect empirical data with regard to differentiation levels in parents who are both accepting and non-accepting.

This study gathered information on accepting parents only. Research that gathers similar information about non-accepting parents would be useful for the purpose of making comparisons of the attributes and ecosystemic influences of these parents with parents who are accepting. These comparative results would provide further direction in the development of clinical models aimed at helping families successfully negotiate this crises. Studying non-accepting parents may yeild information about how and why people get "stuck." Studying accepting parents will continue to yield valuable information about how people get "unstuck." Future research should look towards extending what is known about resilient individuals and resilient functional units by exploring these concepts in this new area of individual and family coping.

Clinical Implications

Coming out to family members, as well as keeping one's gay or lesbian identity a

secret can be stressful and provoke anxiety for gays and lesbians. The act of coming out permits the development of narratives around social identity that requires gays and lesbians to reposition themselves in relation to all of the relevant systems in which they are embedded. It requires the same of their parents. It would be wise for practitioners to prepare themselves with accurate knowledge of gay identity developmental stages and learn how the coming out process can affect family ecology. (See Crosbie-Burnett et al., 1996.) Similarly, for family members who discover that someone in their family is gay, the clinician should be prepared to educate the family about typical reactions to disclosure of homosexual identity and teach them how to mediate conflict that arises from conflicting viewpoints between gay and heterosexual family members (Bernstein, 1990).

It is important for practitioners working with gay and lesbian issues to understand the unique norms related to the process of developing a gay or lesbian identity and/or the identity as a parent or family member of a gay or lesbian individual. In doing so, clinicians may avoid pathologizing what may be normal transitional reactions to this process. The power of heterosexism and homophobia can greatly impede this process both for gays and lesbians and their parents (Bepko & Johnson, 2000). This study examined not only the coming out process, but also highlighted the abilities of these families to overcome the destructive messages disseminated in all areas of the systemic environment. In the past, clinical definitions of homosexuality were centered around pathology. Treatment objectives with gay and lesbian individuals were to find “causes” and affect “cures.” The information gathered in this study can be of assistance in the development of a more positive, strengths-based, resources model. Knowing about the

ways in which parents utilize various systems in order to cope, and what impediments in their ecosystemic environments present limitations, will assist in the development of treatment models that appreciate and capitalize on these strengths. In addition, by understanding the process of identity development for parents of gays and lesbians, therapists will be able to use this information when working with gay and lesbian individuals. Therapists will be able to concurrently represent in a fair manner the positions of all the stakeholders. This has been termed “multi-lateral partiality” by family therapists who appreciate the importance of equity in family and therapeutic relationships (Goldenthal,1993).

Family therapists are encouraged to appreciate reciprocity in relationships. The interface of the gay or lesbian child’s coming out process with his or her parent’s coming out process is a multi-level venture that is linked to the systemic environment surrounding each person. It could be easy for a therapist to “side” with the gay or lesbian individual whose parents are reacting “negatively” instead of helping the child to appreciate the process of the parents. Conversely, therapists could potentially be “inducted” into the perspective that the child has “done something terrible” to the parent and that the parent is suffering. It is anticipated that the data gathered in this study will be helpful in addressing the needs of the entire family system from the perspective that people are capable of creating narratives around success.

Clinicians can benefit from appreciating how the qualities associated with individual and family resilience are relevant to this population of families. Evaluation of coping resources could lead either to a sense of optimism or a treatment strategy focused on developing such individual and family traits. From this study we suspect that families

will do well to the extent that they can:

- ✓ Maintain warm, cohesive, and nurturing family ties
- ✓ Experience themselves as active agents in the face of novel circumstances
- ✓ Review their past with an eye to appreciating adaptive successes
- ✓ Revision positive images of the present and future
- ✓ Identify and be able to use social and community resources

Limitations

A potential weakness of qualitative studies is external validity, namely, the inability to generalize to the population (Newfield et al., 1996). That concern may be raised here. External validity is made even more difficult with regard to the experiences of families with gay sons because many parents might not be aware that their sons are gay. In the present study, the trustworthiness of the findings may suffer because there was not substantial diversity in terms of demographic characteristics of the chosen sample. The researcher limited the sample to a small geographic area surrounding Grand Rapids, Michigan. The experiences of accepting parents from other geographic regions may differ from the selected sample. This sample was predominantly white and middle class which prohibited assessment of cultural and socioeconomic differences that might be present in parents' narratives. Also, the age range of the parents was relatively narrow. Perhaps inclusion of parents from a generation before or after might have yielded insight about the effects of generational influences on the narratives of the parents.

Additionally, this research focused only on accepting parents. A study that utilizes a quantitative comparative analysis between groups of accepting and non-

accepting parents may be more informative. Also, the majority of these parents were very accepting from the beginning. It might be more informative to sample more parents such as Helen and Bob, who indicated a longer period of resistance in the beginning and experienced a longer process in coming to terms with their sons' gay identities. Those stories may highlight the ability to overtly overcome homophobia.

The decision to limit this study to parents of gay sons was made because this was the sample that was available. Parents of lesbians might story their experiences differently. It should not be assumed that the stories of parents of lesbian individuals would mirror those of the parents of children who are gay.

Another limitation inherent in qualitative studies is the inability of the researcher to draw conclusions concerning causation. The researcher was not able to identify qualities or attributes that actually determine parental acceptance or rejection. The research could, however, identify variables likely to be associated with desirable outcomes. Given the value of such information, if confirmed with other samples, "causality" diminishes in practical importance. Clinical practice will benefit to the extent that clinicians recognize the necessary and sufficient conditions associated with desirable events.

All participants in this study had some affiliation with P-FLAG at some point during their coming out process. This may have influenced how they came to describe themselves as accepting parents. There is not necessarily an apparent bias emerging from their stories based on this fact, but it may be useful to compare the stories between parents who utilized this resource with those who did not.

Finally, a longitudinal study may be the optimal method for studying this

population. The use of a longitudinal approach would allow the researcher to track changes in attitude over time and circumstance. When parents are asked to recall retrospective events, they may remember early reactions, attitudes, and feelings as more congruent with their present experience (Festinger, 1957; Loftus, 1993).

Conclusion

Contemporary theorists concerned with family processes (e.g., Walsh, 1982) and family therapy (e.g., Walter & Peller, 1992) have decried deficit models in research and therapy. Instead of focusing on those who are unable to cope, and the maladaptive things they ostensibly do, researchers and clinicians would be advised to study “normal” families and situations in which “things go right.” Such approaches make possible prevention programs, on the one hand, and resource-oriented, self-esteem boosting treatment processes on the other. The families in this present study provided a rich and promising first step in this direction for an under-studied population, namely, families with homosexual children.

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Appendix A: Sample Letter to Participants

Date:

Dear (*Name of Potential Research Participant*):

Please allow me to introduce myself. My name is Michelle Crooks-Yared. I am a doctoral candidate in the Department of Family and Child Ecology at Michigan State University. I am currently working on my dissertation titled, Systemic Influences of Accepting and Supportive Parents of Gay Sons: Towards a Strengths Model. I am at the data collection stage of this project. I received your name after contacting (*name withheld*) at P-FLAG. I am writing to you to inquire about your interest in participating in this project.

The above project is a qualitative study of parents who are accepting and supportive of their sons' gay identity. Involvement in this study would require you to participate in an interview in which you are asked open-ended questions concerning your perspectives with regards to your ability to be accepting and supportive of your son's gay identity. You will also be asked to tell the story, in your own words, about your discovery of your sons' gay identity and your experience and process of becoming accepting and supportive of that. In addition, you will be asked to talk about the different environments in which you interact and the influence of those environments on your acceptance. This will take approximately 1 ½ to 2 hours of your time. Your identity will remain confidential in all written reports of information obtained in this study.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please complete the enclosed demographic form. Additionally, please mark the appropriate box indicating your level of acceptance for your son's gay identity. It is anticipated that twenty parents will be needed for this study. Participants will be contacted as forms are returned. It is possible that saturation of data may occur prior to twenty interviews therefore all potential research participants may not be contacted for actual participation in this study. I would like to thank you in advance for your initial interest and willingness to participate should you not be contacted for the study.

Sincerely,

Michelle M. Crooks-Yared

Appendix B: Initial Interest to Participate in Study/Demographic Form

Thank you for your initial interest in this project and your willingness to fill out this demographic information form. Please fill the form out and mail it back to me in the self-addressed envelope provided at your earliest convenience. I will begin contacting individuals as the forms are returned.

Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____

Age: _____

Occupation: _____

Length of Time
Since Son Came Out: _____

Son's Age _____

Please check the appropriate blank indicating your level of acceptance for your son's gay identity:

____ Very Accepting

____ Moderately Accepting

____ Somewhat Accepting

Please sign below indicating your permission to be contacted by phone for participation in this study.

Signature

Appendix C: Systemic Influences on Accepting and Supportive Parents of Gay Sons: Towards a Strengths Model

You are being invited to participate in a study about the attributes and systemic influences of parents who are accepting and supportive of their sons' gay identity. We are asking you to share information about being the parent of a gay son. We hope to learn about which systemic environments you perceive/d as being the most influential in your personal journey of acceptance. We are also interested in discovering your personal stories concerning your experience of discovering that your son was gay and learning about how you have created a narrative of acceptance of your son's gay identity. It is anticipated that as we learn more about your successful negotiation of the coming out process as "the parent of a gay son," we will be able to create better treatment models to assist parents who are struggling with this process. You will be asked to share your story through an interactive interview, which will include guided questions, sharing of your personal story concerning the coming out process, and the completion of an ecomap. These interviews are expected to take approximately an hour and a half.

- Your participation is voluntary and without force and can be withdrawn at any time. You can refuse to answer any question or share information.
- All information obtained in the interviews will be kept confidential and any written reports relating to these stories will not use names or other identifying data. Your privacy will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law.
- Questions for the researcher can be asked at any time during the process. Additional questions about the study can be addressed to Michelle Crooks-Yared at (616-336-7740) or yaredmc@msu.edu. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact-anonymously if you wish- Ashmir Kumar, M.D. Chair of the University Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects (UCRIHS) by phone: (517) 432-4503, e-mail: ucrihs@msu.edu, or regular mail: 202 Olds Hall, East Lansing, MI 48824
- All interviews will be taped and all tapes will be erased after the dissertation is complete. Only the researcher will retain the transcripts of the interviews.

I have read the above and voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

Signature of Research Participant

Date

Appendix D: Semi-structured Interview Guide

1. How do you define yourself as “accepting” and “supportive” of your son’s gay identity?

Potential Prompts

- Do you talk openly about having a gay son to others?
- Do you discuss gay issues with your son or others?
- In what ways do you express your support for your son’s gay identity?
- Are you supportive of your son’s same-sex relationships? In what ways?

2. How would you describe your relationship with your son prior to the time he came out to you as gay through the present time?

- What are some specific memories you have about your son as a child?
- On a continuum of easy to difficult, how would you rate your overall experience in raising this child?
- What is your relationship like now?

3. I would like you to tell me about your own coming out process in regards to being the parent of a gay son. I would like you to create a story in your own words that appreciates your own experience of this process in a way that makes sense to you. The story should start with your early process and address your evolution towards acceptance and progress to the present time. I will loosely guide this process at times with questions or prompts to help facilitate your narrative. We will also complete an ecomap together for the purpose of exploring the influence of various environments on your process.

Potential Prompts

- How/when did you find out that your son was gay?
- Were you surprised or had you ever suspected? Why?
- Prior attitudes about gays and lesbians?
- Initial reaction to this news?
- Tell me about the evolution of your feelings from the time of disclosure to the present? What was the most difficult aspect of this disclosure for you?
- What was your relationship like with your child during the initial disclosure and how has it evolved since that time to the present?
- How often did they discuss issues related to son’s gay identity? In what context did these discussions occur? What types of things were discussed? What was the general tenor of these conversations?
- Specific times or experiences that relate to coming to terms with son’s gay identity?
- Most difficult aspects of this process?

COMPLETION OF ECOMAP: Several circles will be displayed and labeled with the following systems: Work, Religion, Recreation, Nuclear Family, and Extended

Family. There will be several blank circles that may be labeled with specific environments relevant to individual parents. The parents will be asked to look at each environment and describe the following:

- Their level of involvement in each environment.
 - The level of openness concerning their son's gay identity they exhibit in each environment. Which systems were/are easier to be open with concerning their son's gay identity. Which are more difficult? Why?
 - The level of support they received in each environment. What kind of support they received. Who did the support come from? Which was the most positive environment/s?
 - Any negative experiences in any environments? What were the experiences? How did they deal with these negative experiences? Which was the most negative environment/s?
 - What were the primary issues that were addressed in each environment?
 - Did your perception of support or lack of support change over time in any of these environments?
4. As you reflect on this entire experience from the time you found out that your son was gay until the present, what would you describe as the biggest influence/s on your ability to be accepting of your son's gay identity? Many people struggle to achieve acceptance. Why do you believe you are able to be accepting and supportive of your son's gay identity?

**Appendix E: Contact Summary Form:
(Illustration)**

Contact type:

Visit

Phone

Participant: _____

Contact date: _____

Today's date: _____

1. Main issues or themes that were present in this contact

2. Pertinent information from each target question for this contact
 - Parental Definition of Acceptance

 - Parent's Relationship with their Child Across Time

 - Parent's Story of the Coming Out Process

 - Ecosystemic Influences on Parental Acceptance

3. Other salient, interesting, illuminations or important in this contact

4. New (or remaining) target questions to be considered for the next contact

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