Abstract

CLOSETS ARE FOR CLOTHES: PERCEIVED FAMILIAL REACTIONS WHEN A FAMILY MEMBER COMES OUT AS GAY

By Jessica Kaye Baer

This study qualitatively investigates the coming out narratives of twelve gay men and focuses specifically on how the gay individual perceived his family members’ reactions to his coming out. It allows for a better understanding of sexual orientation disclosure by gay men within the context of the family and aims to make sense of the meaning found in familial reactions to a gay child’s or relative’s coming out. Four core themes were consistently found in the interviews with gay men: the unprompted mentioning of traditional family values, coming out to friends and/or siblings before coming out to parents, familial reactions improving as time progressed, and the presence of other gay family members within the disclosing individual’s family.
CLOSETS ARE FOR CLOTHES: PERCEIVED FAMILIAL REACTIONS WHEN A FAMILY MEMBER COMES OUT AS GAY

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# Table of Contents

**Chapter 1: Introduction** ................................................................. 1  
Problem ................................................................. 1  
Purpose and Significance of the Study ......................................................... 2  
Outline of the Study ............................................................................. 4  

**Chapter 2: Review of Literature** ....................................................... 5  
Gay Identity and Construction ................................................................. 5  
Coming Out of the Closet ........................................................................ 5  
Coming Out to Parents ........................................................................... 7  
The Coming Out Process ........................................................................ 10  
Difficulties and Stigmas of Being Gay ...................................................... 12  
Benefits of Coming Out ......................................................................... 13  
Narrative Theory ................................................................................... 13  
Summary .............................................................................................. 14  

**Chapter 3: Methods** ................................................................. 16  
The qualitative study ............................................................................. 16  
Selection of participants ........................................................................ 17  
The interview ....................................................................................... 18  
Confidentiality ..................................................................................... 19  
Risks and benefits ............................................................................... 20  
Analysis .............................................................................................. 20  

**Chapter 4: Results and Discussion** .................................................. 23  
Outline .............................................................................................. 24  
Traditional Family Values ..................................................................... 24  
Marriage, children, and the family name .................................................. 26  
The Progression: Who to Tell Before Coming Out to Parents ................. 29  
Coming out to parents before anyone else can tell them .................................. 31  
Not telling older family members ............................................................... 32  
Gay Family Members ........................................................................... 35  
Parental Reactions Improving Over Time ................................................. 36  

**Chapter 5: Conclusion** .................................................................. 40  
Limitations and future research ................................................................. 40  
Summary .............................................................................................. 41  

Works cited .......................................................................................... 43  

Appendix A .......................................................................................... 46  
Appendix B .......................................................................................... 47  
Appendix C .......................................................................................... 48  
Appendix D .......................................................................................... 49
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Chapter One: Introduction

Problem

References to sexual orientation in past diversity literature have been at best cursory (Cornelius, 2001; Kossek & Lobel, 1996) – something alarming considering that a significant amount of the population is gay or lesbian. Though the results from the Kinsey Reports of 1948 concluded that an estimated ten percent of the population was gay, more recent studies have set a different estimate. Between 1989 and 1992, the National Opinion Research Center at The University of Chicago concluded that nearly three percent reported exclusively homosexual activity in the preceding year. Child-pornography researcher Judith Reisman argues in her 1990 book, Kinsey, Sex and Fraud, that homosexuals constitute perhaps as little as one percent of the population (Rogers, 1993). An exact percentage of homosexual men has been difficult to determine for many reasons including the fluid nature of sexuality (e.g. a person may engage in both heterosexual behaviors and homosexual behaviors throughout his lifetime), self-identity (e.g. a person may engage in homosexual behaviors but identify himself as heterosexual), and the fact that some individuals simply reject any label at all.

Despite the disputed numbers of gay men, we do know that a considerable amount of the population is gay and that their history has often been marginalized or neglected completely. The self-disclosing of one’s sexuality or “coming out” has become much more common in the past several decades, allowing for the potential to explore the unique stories and lives of gay men. As gay men become more visible, it is likely that any given person will have a gay family member, a gay friend, or a gay co-worker. Therefore it is important to have greater understanding of their lives. The continuous but slow awareness and acceptance of same sex relationships in recent years underscores the need for more current information regarding how people react to gay men’ coming-outs (LaSala, 2000).

The development of an alternate sexual identity is a complex and often difficult process. Unlike members of other minority groups, most gay men are not raised in a community of similar others from whom they learn about their identity and
who reinforce and support that identity. Rather, gay men are often raised by hetero-
normative families that are either ignorant of or openly hostile toward homosexuality,
making coming-out to parents one of the most monumental obstacles a gay man faces
in his life. Despite the difficulties of coming out, the majority of gay men do
eventually come out to their families. Left unexplored, the messages contained in
their personal stories become lost. Because there is already a lack of sexual
orientation literature, especially concerning how it affects the family, this research
aims to create a further understanding of the process of coming out as a gay man
within the context of the family.

**Purpose and Significance of the Study**

The purpose of this research is to explore qualitatively the coming out
narratives of gay men. It will focus specifically on how the gay male perceived
parental reactions to his coming out. Focusing on the gay male’s perceptions places
the meaning he makes of his experience front and center. Indeed, these firsthand
stories communicate deep personal truths and serve to create shared meaning between
the gay male and the people to whom he reveals his sexuality.

This study will allow for a better understanding of sexual orientation
disclosure by gay members within the context of their families and will aim to make
sense of the meaning found in familial reactions to a gay child or relative’s coming
out. For gay men, coming out stories represent important touchstones in their lives.
The coming out narrative may be seen as a particularly meaningful personal memory
because it is the central tale of one’s emerging sexual identity (Troiden, 1989).

However, disclosing a minority sexuality to a parent or family member is
typically considered one of the most stressful situations a gay man faces for a myriad
of reasons including fear, shame, and guilt (D’Augelli, 1991; Troiden, 1989). Thus,
gay men need support as they struggle to make meaning of their family’s reactions to
disclosing their new sexual identity. By coming out, gay men may learn difficult
lessons about the conditional nature of love and the fragility of relationships – even
within one’s own family. Narratives of gay men can inform and support others within
the community and contribute meaningful knowledge about the experience of coming
out as a homosexual in a heterosexual world. Any prior information or insight on what a gay male can expect from his mother, father, or other family members may prove to be helpful to him as he decides how and when to come out.

At the center of every coming out is an individual’s attempt to confront an identity which is too often stigmatized or ignored. Our society privileges heterosexuality to the extent that homosexuality – the opposite of heterosexuality – has a societal stigma attached to it. Coming out is both an assertion of homosexuality and a demand that a person’s sexuality be acknowledged, and it is often seen within the gay community as healthy - even a queer duty (Thomas, 2000). The idea is that the more openly gay people there are, the harder it will be for society to marginalize them (Corrigan & Matthews, 2003). Herek and Capitanio (1996) note that the increasing number of coming-outs by gay individuals has significantly diminished the stigma experienced by sexual minorities. Yet, it is important to realize that coming out does not necessarily mean that homosexuals will be accepted into society immediately nor does it end homophobia altogether.

Members of the general public who are more familiar with minority groups such as homosexuals are less likely to endorse prejudicial attitudes. Research also shows that education may help to change the stigma of homosexuality (Corrigan & Matthews, 2003). Contact through education has largely focused on gearing sexuality discourse toward factual information. For example, educational programs may replace the often religiously based idea that homosexuality is a sin with the idea that sexual diversity is normal and good.

This study aims to educate and familiarize people with one specific aspect of homosexuality – coming out within the context of the family. I refer to families broadly within the study; however the primary focus is on the perceived responses from the mothers and fathers of the gay participants. The findings will contribute to the deficit in literature on the coming out experience within the context of the family, especially regarding parental reactions.

**Outline of the Study**
This paper will focus on gay mens’ experiences of coming out with, and in, their families. First, a review of literature will explore the relevant texts concerning coming out as a gay man. Next, the methods chapter will discuss the reasoning for using a qualitative method for this study and also will detail the process of the study. The results and discussion chapter will review the findings, meanings, and implications of common themes. Finally, the conclusion will consider the limitations of the study, as well as have suggestions for further research.
Chapter Two: Review of Literature

Gay Identity and Construction

Although the fact that homosexual people have to come out regarding their sexual identity while heterosexual people do not is problematic in and of itself, gay men do continue to reveal their “alternate” identity to others. Tacit in Western culture is a social construction that frames individuals as inside or outside the boundaries of social norms. Our culture has chosen to conceptualize and divide sexuality in a very polar way – either gay or straight, and sometimes bisexual as a middle ground between the two opposites. Yet, there are many other equally plausible ways of categorizing sexuality. For example, there is no precise label for a man who is married for twenty years and then leaves his wife for a man. How do we categorize the gay man who must hide various facets of his identity depending on his assessment of a certain environment and how welcoming or not it seems to be? Additionally, there is no acceptable label to explain the fact that some people may identify as straight or heterosexual at certain points in their life, but may identify as gay or homosexual at other times.

Society is comfortable with the assumption of a life-long sexual preference, making it easier for us to define people as being set in their sexual preference – as either heterosexual or homosexual. Typically, the fluidity of identity is not taken into consideration in the general societal discourse of sexual identity. Thus, sexuality should be viewed as the complex issue it is, rather than something so simple as gay or straight.

Coming Out of the Closet

“Coming out” describes the voluntary public announcement of one's sexual orientation and sexual attractions. Historically, “coming out” referred to the point at which a young female debutante was introduced into society at a formal presentation known as her “debut” or “coming out.” This coming out announced her eligibility for marriage, and thus announced her heterosexuality (Post, 1922). The verb “to come out” has continued to undergo semantic transformation. Coming out, according to Swain and Cameron (1999), is a declaration of belonging to a devalued group. With
this definition, any person publicly revealing himself as having a mental illness, a
drug dependency, etc. has “come out.” It is becoming increasingly common to hear
“coming out” used as an analogy for disclosures of other characteristics, such as
coming out as an alcoholic or coming out as bi-polar. However, by contemporary
Western standards, the term has become largely associated with minority sexualities
and as an experience particular to gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals.

When something or someone is “out,” it implies that it has previously been
closeted or hidden, giving us the phrase “coming out of the closet.” The closet may
be viewed as something very private, with everything in the closet hidden from view.
Clearly then, coming out of the private closet into the public sphere of society can be
seen as a huge step for anybody. Judith Butler (1991) criticizes the in/out metaphor
as creating a dichotomy where the closet denotes a place that is dark and marginal,
while everything outside of the closet is illuminated and open – a place where one’s
true identity can be revealed. Diana Fuss (1991) explains that the problem with the
in/out metaphor is that it denies the fact that most of us are both inside and outside at
the same time. To put it another way, to be out is really to be in - inside the group of
similar others.

Recent social changes away from traditionalism have been understood to
provide more opportunities for gay men to assert their sexuality or “come out of the
closet” and live the lifestyle of their choosing. It is generally understood to be easier
to be gay now than at any time in the past because of social changes such as gay
support clubs and groups and some law reforms. Traditional expectations for children
– heterosexual and homosexual alike – are less clearly marked, making it easier for
individuals to choose between a range of options in pursuit of their own happiness.
For example, it is seen as more socially acceptable today for people to feel fulfilled if
they live on their own, wait to get married, or never get married at all. Despite these
positive changes, however, homophobia and discrimination on the grounds of sexual
orientation persist (Herek & Capitano, 1996; Valentine, Skeleton, & Butler, 2003).
The decision to come out therefore, is both difficult and uncertain for many people.
**Coming Out to Parents**

Family is a unique context in which to come out because it lies somewhere between the private closet and the public sphere. Disclosing gayness to a family member is not necessarily public discourse, but rather a self-recognition of homosexuality and the ability to share this new identity with somebody else (Weinberg and Williams, 1974). Many people come out to those closest to them first, including one or several family members. Thus, coming out to family members is often the first step in publicly announcing one’s sexuality because the sexual identity of the gay male is no longer confined to only to him.

Until the 1970’s, homosexuality was generally considered to be a mental illness, which often implicated familial relations as a cause of the disease. Perhaps the frequent negative responses from the parent(s) of a gay man stem from the history of blaming poor parenting as a cause of homosexuality (LaSala, 2000). Society holds parents or legal guardians responsible for their children reaching their full potential. Conversely, children are a public face of families, and as such represent one of the many ways family units are woven into wider societal structures. If a child does not turn out “right” parents may not only blame themselves, but also may fear that others will blame them, thus tarnishing the identity and the reputation of the parents (Valentine et al., 2003).

Coming out involves and affects the whole family and is a process through which both individuals and families struggle. Silva and Smart (1999) argue that “families remain a crucial relational entity playing a fundamental part in the intimate life of and connections between individuals.” Though families will inevitably differ, they are still characterized by their members’ commitment and responsibility to one another. As a result, many of the risks involved in making the transition from a dependent child to an independent adult are still mediated through families. Families also contribute to their members’ welfare by providing emotional support, especially for their younger members (Goldscheider, 1997). Yet, surprisingly, the family as a context to which a gay man may come out has received relatively little attention (LaSala, 2000).
Given that families are often seen as a secure entity and as a safety net, it is not surprising that many young gay men are fearful that if they choose to come out they will be rejected by their parent(s) and cut off from this source of support. Due to the fact that mothers and fathers may react to the news of a homosexual child with shock, fear, shame, and guilt (Ben-Ari, 1995; D’Augelli, 1991), it is a wonder gay men come out to their families at all. Although fewer than 50% of a sample of college men had disclosed their homosexuality to a family member, these men reported that worry about disclosure to family members was their primary concern (D’Augelli, 1991). However, surveys suggest that 60-80% of gay men and lesbians do eventually decide to come out to their parent(s) (Berger, 1990). Implicit in this statistic is that 20-40% of people may never tell one or both parents that they are gay.

Disclosure of sexual orientation is a struggle for most gay men due to fears of discrimination, ostracism, isolationism, and even violence from others (Savin and Williams, 1989). Specifically, families may react harshly for a myriad of reasons, including homophobia, fear of AIDS, and worry about abandoning traditional values (Robinson & Walters, 1997). Considering the negative effects coming out may have on others, the prospect of disclosing orientation to family and friends is often the most stressful event noted by gay youth (D’Augelli, 1991). At the time when a gay child needs support from his parents the most, he often receives the opposite.

In order to cope with stress and escape the stigma associated with being gay, people learn to hide their orientation from family and friends. Although some men choose to hide their sexual identity only for a short while, others may hide it for an entire lifetime (Martin, 1982), though this may be slowly changing due to the growing acceptance of homosexuality in general. Keeping one’s true self hidden means that person’s relationships will inevitably be based on deceit and secrecy. Hiding can cause insecurity, withdrawal, depression, and demoralization in the gay male. In order to overcome these negative feelings, gay people may consider disclosing their sexuality to significant people in their lives, including various family members. Even when young people leave home, their family continues to shape and mold their identities. Indeed, what occurs within the home often has consequences for young
peoples’ identities and social relations in the spaces that stretch beyond them. Thus, it is important to recognize the transitional processes that take place between a child and his parent(s) rather than just those that occur at the wider macro scale of society.

The importance of disclosure to mothers and fathers is exemplified through the high percentage of youth who come out to them. In a nationwide sample of youth 15–21 years old, 81% had disclosed to at least one family member, 66% had disclosed to their mothers, and 44% had disclosed to their fathers (D’Augelli & Hershberger, 1993). A sample of gay and bisexual men 14–25 years old reported comparable levels of disclosure to mothers and a slightly higher level (56%) of disclosure to fathers (Savin-Williams, 1998).

There appear to be wide individual differences in the nature and timing of disclosure to parents that are not well understood. For example, there seem to be regional differences. In a study of a sample of young adults from South Carolina, Sears (1991) reported an average age of first disclosure at 19, which is three years later than most samples from other regions of the country. Also, racial differences in sexual orientation identity development are potentially important. Savin-Williams (1999) postulated that African Americans may be less likely to disclose to others because of fear of disconnection from networks that support racial identity. Because of these many possible differences, it becomes important not to generalize the results to all gay men’s coming experiences, but rather that my results are just the reportings of those surveyed in the study.

Though differences in region and race as contexts for coming out are not well understood, the differences in coming out between males and females are understood. Research has shown important differences between gay men and lesbian women in their relationship with their parent(s). For example, Berger (1990) found that there was a higher satisfaction in lesbians who were out to their families than in men, suggesting that lesbians find more familial acceptance than gay men. Perhaps this echoes societal views that place more negative and deviant connotations on gay men than on lesbian women. Because there is such a pronounced difference in men and
women who have come out to their families, the focus throughout this study is exclusively on gay males.

**The Coming Out Process**

The process of coming out is important for gay men because it is concerned with the recognition and renegotiation of their identity. Disclosing an alternate or homosexual identity is an indicator that identity development has occurred within that person. Research in sexual orientation identity development agrees that disclosure to other people is a significant event. Cass’s 1984 and Troiden’s 1989 models of the coming out process give disclosure an early and central role in the process of identity formation. These two models are the most frequently cited throughout sexual identity literature (Eliason, 1996).

Typically, gay men will explore their sexual identity prior to disclosing it to their parent(s). It is also common to hear the phrase “coming out to oneself,” meaning to admit to oneself that one is gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Self-admission is usually the very first step in the coming-out process. At the onset of becoming aware of one’s sexuality, gay men often develop negative perceptions of themselves, mostly because they are aware of the negative perceptions (abnormal, perverted, etc.) that society holds about them.

Research from the 1980’s found that harsh comments from peers, family members, and even strangers can alienate the individual and cause him to have second thoughts about disclosing his sexuality to anyone – including himself (Coleman, 1982). For these reasons, many gay men face self denial of their homosexuality and continue to identify themselves as straight or heterosexual. Many gay men may go through a period prior to coming out when they believe their sexual orientation to be a phase, to be malleable, or to be immoral. Often, gay men will try to suppress these “deviant” feelings for members of the same sex (Troiden, 1989). Because these findings are from the 1980’s and may be different today, my research will serve to update this information.

Coming out to oneself ends a period of ambiguity and begins the process of self-acceptance. The next developmental task in coming out is to disclose the
homosexual identity to others, often a trusted friend, family member, or mentor. Positive or negative reactions from those people are crucial to the way the gay male will perceive himself in his new role as a homosexual. A negative response to a gay man’s coming out may cause further damage to his self-esteem and confidence. Because of the vulnerability of a gay man’s self-concept during the coming out stage, it is important that positive responses be heard. Acceptance or rejection at the precise moment of coming out to another person is critical. Quite often, a gay male will tell his parent(s) of his sexuality only when he has built up enough positive responses after coming out to others. This way, he has been primed to handle negative reactions from his mother and/or father. Yet, for some gay men, the chances of initial positive responses from a parent are minimal.

Although coming out to one’s mother and/or father has been recognized as one of the most difficult tasks that a gay man may go through, research has largely ignored the role of the mother and the father in this process. Those authors who have researched parental reactions following discovery of a gay child typically found that parents had “typical grief reactions” (Ben-Ari, 1995) in that they grieve over the death of the child’s prior, heterosexual self. Aside from this, however, little research has been done with regard to familial reactions to coming-outs (Savin-Williams, 1989), and the research that has been conducted needs to be updated.

Understanding commonalities in how other gay men make sense of their coming out may be beneficial to the individual and his family members. Because coming out to a parent typically occurs only once, both the disclosing individual and his parent(s) often do not know what to expect. For a gay man, hearing the coming out stories of other gay men may help him to decide how and when to (or if) to come out his own parent(s). Likewise, parents can learn from other parents of gay children. Understanding the common themes found in the coming out scenarios of other families may help parents to better cope with the recent news of their own child coming out.

RQ 1: What common themes emerge from gay males’ discussions of coming out to their parents?
Difficulties and Stigmas of a Gay Identity

Families are surrounded by systems that favor the heterosexual experience. This assigns power to the assumption that people are and should be heterosexual. The person who comes out challenges the “normal” heterosexual structures of his family and society at large. Coming out is a means by which to assert homosexuality and a demand that a person’s sexuality be paid attention to. Coming out is a key moment for a gay man because it confirms that he has come to terms with his minority sexuality. The mere fact that a gay man has to state that he is gay, while a straight man never has to state that he is straight, underlies the idea that the person coming out is somehow different and not normal.

Normal and abnormal are very often tied to discourses about heterosexuality (Valentine et al., 2003). Adulthood has traditionally been understood to be defined by four markers, two of which are based on a heterosexual imperative: exiting the education system, securing paid employment, marriage, and parenthood (Morrow & Richards, 1996). Of course, it is rare that gay people experience the markers of marriage and parenthood because it is illegal in most states in America for gay couples to get married or to adopt children. Thus, gay men are frequently seen as never having fully reached a “normal” adulthood. Furthermore, homosexuals do not experience this “normal” adulthood because society does not allow them to. It is worth noting at this point that the total proportion of homosexuals in the general population does not vary dramatically - but what varies is the extent of homosexual behavior and social and cultural response to such behavior.

As stage theory suggests, coming out is a process, and often a gradual one. It is common to come out first to a trusted friend or family member and then wait to come out to others. Some people are out to their friends, but not out at work, or vice-versa. Similarly, he may be out to his mother and/or father, but not to his siblings. Because heterosexuality is always assumed, a gay male must continuously out himself in most new situations and with most new people. People tend to react differently when a friend, family member, or colleague has come out depending on the relationship and the context of the situation (Thomas, 2000). Thus, it is possible that
there are differences when coming out to a parent, too, depending on the milieu and background of the gay man’s family.

One of these differences may be found in the reactions of parents. Past research has shown that some families provide the gay child with positive responses, while other children perceive their family’s response to their homosexuality as negative or neutral. Furthermore, past research has tended to focus on initial parental reactions to a gay child coming out (LaSala, 2000), rather than long term reactions. Because many parent-child relationships remain intact after the child comes out as gay, it is important to understand how parental reactions are perceived to change through the course of the relationship.

RQ 2: How were reactions from parents of the disclosing individual perceived to change over time?

**Benefits of Coming Out**

Coming out has proven to be very beneficial to gay males. Disclosure to a wide range of family members and friends is associated with higher self-esteem for adults. Youth who disclosed their sexuality, especially to their mothers, also reported relatively high levels of self-esteem (Savin-Williams, 1989). This is because many gay men hope to create closeness in their relationships with their parent(s) by disclosing their new sexual identity. Additionally, most gay men claimed that being out to their parent(s) allowed them to have a more stable and more satisfying relationship with their partner (LaSala, 2000). Despite the likely strain that coming out may have on a child-parental relationship, coming out is still perceived as psychologically healthy.

**Narrative Theory**

Because qualitative research deals with the stories that people tell, it is important to examine how storytelling works as a means of communication. Rhetorical scholar Walter Fisher (1984) offers a humanistic model of communication which details how humans communicate by taking complicated information and transforming it into a narrative or story. This theory explains the nature of humans in terms of communication by claiming that we are essentially “storytelling animals”
who send messages to one another through stories. Fisher argues that the cultural context, and the values and experiences of the audience are important facets in human communication and storytelling. Fisher’s narrative paradigm asserts that our reason is best appealed to through stories. He defines narration as symbolic actions, words, and/or deeds that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create, or interpret them. Thus, all communication with sequence and meaning is accomplished through storytelling.

People have the ability to determine the value of the stories based upon two aspects: rationality (or fidelity) and coherence (probability) by which we distinguish good stories from bad ones. For a story to be coherent, it must hold together as a credible sequence of events and make sense in real world terms. For a story to be rational, it must match the values, beliefs, and experiences of the listener(s). If it does, it will resonate as reasonably sound to the audience.

Narratives recount truth as the individual understands it. Perceptions of personal experiences affect the individual’s understandings of their situation which, in turn, have an impact on their daily lives and relationships. Narratives are central to the storytelling process and offer selective information given by the sender to the receiver(s). Producing a narrative can assist the teller in coming to terms with the event, as narratives and stories constantly shape our individual realities.

It is important here to note the difference between the actual coming out and the retelling of the coming out story. This study focuses on the retelling of the coming out narrative. In the narrative, what is included or excluded, the language and the words used, etc. are keys to understanding how the individual makes sense of his own coming out experience. The retelling of coming out stories affects how the individual will come out to others and how he will ultimately perceive himself and construct his reality.

Summary

The process of coming out is important for gay men because it demands that his identity be recognized and understood. Research in identity formation agrees that disclosure of sexual orientation to parents and other family members is a very
significant event and possibly the most taxing event that a gay man will go through. Families are surrounded by systems that favor heterosexualism, and anything that challenges this normal structure can disrupt the entire family. That disruption in turn can cause feelings of anger, guilt, shock, confusion, and/or discomfort amongst one or both parents of the gay individual.

The majority of past literature on homosexuality has focused on the process of coming out and the steps that most gay men go through as they reveal their sexual identity to themselves and to others. Within that process is the coming-out phase, at which point the individual begins to tell others that he is gay. Very often, the gay male reveals his sexual identity to family members at one point or another, and there are both risks and benefits in coming out to the family.

Past research has shown that the context or environment in which a gay man comes out largely affects the overall coming out experience for him, yet the family as one particular context in which to communicate homosexuality has received relatively little attention. We do not know, for example, how reactions from parents are perceived to change over time, how different family members are perceived to react to the coming out, and what the disclosing individual characterizes as positive or negative responses from his parents. Because these reactions from parents of gay men are so vitally important, they certainly merit closer investigation. Additionally, much of the research that has been conducted on homosexuality needs to be updated, as views and attitudes toward homosexuality are rapidly changing. My research, then, will focus on these perceived familial responses and will aim to clarify and update the communicative processes that take place between the disclosing gay male and his parents.
Chapter Three: Methods

Process

The qualitative study

The methodology of a study is an integral component to the research process. Methodology “refers to the way in which we approach problems and seek answers” (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). In this study, a qualitative methodology was used. The telling of personal stories - be it through open narratives or responses to specific questions - has always been central to the lives of gay people and the dialogue they have with others regarding their sexuality (Chirrey, 2003). Gay men often come out many times and in many situations during their life, and then proceed to tell their coming-out stories for many years. Because everyone is presumed to be heterosexual, the stories are told to many different people many times throughout the life span. This narrative, then, is central to understanding the lives of gay people. With personal narratives becoming a more acceptable methodology within academia, more research has been conducted using a qualitative methodology in recent years (see D’Aguelli, 2003; LaSala 2000; Ryan, 2006). This methodology aims to make sense of the meaning people bring to a certain phenomenon, especially in a particular context.

Epidemiologist Nick Black (2004) has argued that a finding is more likely to be accepted as a fact if it is expressed in numbers. He observed that most of us are happy to accept any statement as long as it contains at least one statistic. However, it may not be methodologically appropriate to use this kind of methodology when aiming to understand people and the contexts in which they live or see the world. Kaplan and Maxwell (1994) argue that understanding a phenomenon in its context is largely lost when textual data are quantified. Researchers who use qualitative methodologies aim to study things in their natural setting, attempting to make sense of phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them, and they use a “holistic perspective which preserves the complexities of human behavior.”

Qualitative methods such as narratives and in-depth interviews are better suited than quantitative methods to explore and study meanings, experiences, and
processes in people’s lives. Qualitative research stresses the socially constructed nature of reality; it provides the participant with the opportunity to account for his experiences in his own words, and account for how society is reflected in his own life. Through the opportunity to speak in and listen to their own voices, participants may explore the meaning they and others assign to their lives. Qualitative data is typically rich with detail and gives insights into participants’ experiences of the world.

The ability of qualitative data to describe a phenomenon more fully is an important consideration not only from the researcher’s perspective, but from the reader’s perspective, as well. This is because the reader is being presented with information in the form in which they usually experience it – orally. Qualitative research “may be epistemologically in harmony with the reader’s experience” (Stake, 1978) and thus more meaningful. For these reasons, a qualitative methodology of coming out stories was adopted.

**Selection of participants**

Twelve gay men, all recruited from a mid-sized, Midwestern university participated in this study. As a starting point, some participants were recruited through the university’s organization for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Trans, and Queer individuals. Announcements were made at the university’s Gay Alliance meeting and passed through the organization’s listserve. Other participants were recruited through the college’s Communication department. Classroom announcements were given to Communication professors asking them to announce the opportunity to their students. Many Communication students are required to complete several activities outside of class, one of which *may* be participation in a research project. The students do not have to participate in research; rather it is just one of many options to fulfill the out-of-class requirement. Additionally, the researcher used gay acquaintances of her own. After initial participants were pulled from the above mentioned pools, a snowball method was used by which the researcher asked participants to give her name and contact information to gay acquaintances who may be interested in participating.

The participants were self-identifying homosexual men from various ethnic, religious, and socio-economic backgrounds. The age requirement to participate in the
study was 18 to 25 years, and was chosen as such in order to avoid generational gaps in the research. The interviews continued until the investigator deemed that a point of saturation had been reached; that is, the point where the stories became repetitive and did not add any new information to the stories already told.

Because the participants were either already part of the Gay - Straight Alliance and/or volunteered for this study, it is likely that participants in this study are more knowledgeable and aware of their homosexual identity and issues than other people who may experience same-sex desire. Due to the qualitative nature of the study, an average or general experience of the gay population was not intended to be reached. Rather, the researcher aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of individuals belonging to a particular group.

The interview

In-depth interviews were conducted for this study. This type of interview process granted the opportunity to vividly portray the meaning each individual gave to his coming out experience. The use of in-depth interviews enabled me to explore the ways gay men made sense of their lives and constructed their personal truths. The in-depth interviews also provided room to ask questions that emerged during the research process and allowed the researcher and the participants to clarify meanings that arose during the interview process.

An interview guide (Appendix D) was developed based on the research questions, the review of literature, and the theories underpinning the research. The interview guide was utilized to organize the interview process in a semi-structured manner. The research questions were administered in the manner of a structured interview, meaning that a carefully worded questionnaire was given verbally to each participant. Due to the structured nature of the interview, little differentiation occurred in the wording of the questions in order to ensure uniformity of interview administration. However, probes were often needed to follow up on certain responses in order to clarify the researcher’s understanding of information shared by the participant, thus making the semi-structured interview process a good fit for this study.
Participants set up specific meeting times with the researcher via email or telephone correspondence. The participants engaged in one interview session consisting of only the researcher and the interviewee in a private room of an academic building. Each interview lasted approximately 20-25 minutes, with several minutes set aside at the beginning and end of the interviews for any further questions and/or comments. All interviews were tape recorded so that they could be later transcribed and reviewed for thematic analysis.

Upon arrival at the interview, participants were given a packet containing literature pertinent to the study. Included in the packet was a letter of interest (Appendix A), a consent form (Appendix B), and a basic background questionnaire (Appendix C). The letter of interest included the research topic, a description of the research process, a brief description of the researcher’s motivations and intentions in doing this study, and a list of contacts of local counseling services should the participant wish to further discuss his experiences as a gay man. The researcher’s local phone number and email address were also included in case participants had additional questions or concerns after participation. All participants were required to read and sign the informed consent form in accordance with the guidelines for human participants (Appendix B) before moving forward with the interview.

During the initial phase of the first interview, the researcher took time to answer questions and to build a rapport with each participant. During this time, basic family background and demographic information such as age, race, education, hometown, and family members they came out to (see Appendix C) were also collected from each participant in a pre-interview questionnaire. Participants in the study did not receive compensation except for the gratitude of the researcher.

**Confidentiality**

Because the study involved human participants, it had to be approved by the Institutional Review Board at the appropriate university to ensure proper treatment and concern for the participants. At the start of each interview, the researcher distributed and explained to each participant the Informed Consent for Participants. When it was clear that each participant understood the process outlined in the consent
form, they were asked to sign the consent form. Each participant received an unsigned copy of the consent form to take home.

The project was confidential but not anonymous, as the name of each participant was known only to the researcher. All participants were given aliases and no real names were used in the completed study. The participants were interviewed individually to further guarantee confidentiality. No additional participation was needed from the participants after the interview. Due to the possibility that participants may experience discomfort if they believe that their identity as a sexual minority will be made public, all participants were notified that their identity would be kept in the highest standards of confidentiality.

**Risks and benefits**

The study, its procedures, and questions were by no means intended to cause physical or psychological risks to the participants. Therefore, participants were assured of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty, and were advised that they could choose to skip any of the questions in the interview because the discussion of a family member’s reaction might be uncomfortable or upsetting to discuss. Thus, the participants were provided with referrals for counseling services on the consent form. Because participants were asked to recall what may have been an emotionally difficult time for them, psychological discomfort may have been involved. To minimize this discomfort, participants were informed that they could terminate the interview early if they wished. None of the participants chose to do so, however. As mentioned previously, a copy of local counseling services available in the area (Appendix A) and the phone number of the researcher were also given to all participants to minimize any discomfort.

The objective of this research and the methodology used was to benefit the participants involved, other gay men struggling with their own coming out, families with gay family members, and society in general. The results will give gay men an idea of what types of responses to expect when disclosing their sexuality to family members for the first time. Further, it will give an idea of what kinds of experiences others have had in their coming out to their parents. This study allows gay men to
share stories that have the potential to provide valuable education to others. Additionally, literature such as this on coming out serves to increase awareness of the process that families go through as a member reveals an alternate sexuality.

While coming out may be seen as at least somewhat beneficial to most gay men, it is important to understand how coming out can benefit those who are receivers of the coming-out. Through the lens of communication, coming out is often explored in relation to the personal narrative of the individual who has disclosed his homosexuality, making the process of coming out seem sender based. Yet, coming-out communication is based not only in the sender, but also in receivers (people context), and framework (situation context). Far less attention has been paid to the latter two components of the communication model.

Despite processes of individuation, people’s lives are still woven together in families and in other relationships. However, the actual processes through which gay men negotiate their identities with others and the consequences of their disclosures for those that are close to them, such as family members, are often overlooked. By focusing on gay men’s experiences of coming out with, and in, their families, we examine the complex interrelationships between the identities of individuals within a family and the collective identity of the family, and explore the ways that family dynamics operate in negotiations about identities (Valentine, et al., 2003). Understanding the dynamics of the communicative process of coming out not only lends support and advice to the disclosing gay male, but benefits the family members who become receivers of the message, as well.

Analysis

Taylor and Bogdan (1984) divide the analysis process in three stages: “identifying themes and developing concepts, coding the data and refining one’s understanding of the participant matter, and understanding the data in the context in which they were collected.” In the current study, a thematic method of analysis was used. A theme is a pattern found in the information that at minimum describes and organizes the possible observations and at maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon (Boyatzis, 1998). This method may be used to determine the deeper
meanings inherent within the larger world through the identification of themes. In using a thematic analysis, the researcher was able to note the similarities and differences that occurred in various mens’ coming out experiences.

In a thematic analysis, the transcripts of the interviews serve as data for analysis. About 100 pages of interviews were transcribed from approximately 240 minutes of interviews. After the transcription of the interviews, the content of each transcript was carefully analyzed and impressions about various themes and theoretical notes on the transcript itself were documented. During this process, various patterns and general themes began to emerge.

One major advantage of the transcription method is the opportunity it affords for the interviewer to remain attentive and focused during the interview. After each initial interview, the researcher briefly documented her impressions concerning the interview, including the participant’s attitude, body language, and some general themes that emerged throughout the interview. This was done simply to supplement the findings of the interviewee’s responses.

In qualitative research, it is important to present the data in such a manner that the participants’ unique voices will not be lost in the study. By using this method of data presentation, the researcher should be able to portray more accurately the participants’ stories while remaining true to their voices. Consistent with a phenomenological approach, the themes that are identified in this study illustrate the shared experience of the participants. These themes should guide future research endeavors and the development of theory in the area of sexual identity and sexual orientation.
Chapter Four: Results and Discussion

Narrative theory provides a lens through which both the coming out stories and their interpretations by family members can be understood. Within narrative theory, a person’s revelation to others that he is gay will ring true only if it is rational and coherent in the listener’s mind. Many participants reported having parents who were either in denial of or confused by the disclosing of their sexuality – feelings which may have arisen if the receiver of the message did not perceive the coming out as rational or coherent.

For example, Derek’s father explained to him, “No, you’re not gay, that’s silly…why would you think that? You don’t want to be gay.” His father then proceeded to tell him that “homosexuality is about missing a step on the way to manhood.” Derek’s father could not reconcile the fact that his son was a man, yet chose to lead a very “unmanly” lifestyle. He was further confused to think that his son would “want to be gay,” especially considering his Christian upbringing. Narrative theory explains that the cultural context and the values of the listener are important when evaluating a story. Thus, Derek’s father was in denial at first about his son’s sexuality because it was not rational or coherent – the story did not mesh with the father’s values nor did it make sense to him.

Another example comes from Will and his father. Will explained that he and his dad didn’t have a good relationship when he was growing up because “nothing really clicked.” Will stated that his coming out “put things into perspective for [my father], like why I never really wanted to play sports…and I wasn’t that driven to…go hunt chicks and stuff.” Will and his father never got along well when Will was younger because his father did not understand why he did not act like a “normal” son who played sports and chased women. Once Will’s dad found out that he was gay, he suddenly understood why his son acted this way – the story finally made sense to the father. Now, Will’s dad understands his son better, and Will says that they have a great relationship because of it.
Outline

Two research questions were put forth at the beginning of the study: What common themes emerge from gay males’ discussions of coming out to their parents? How were reactions from parents of the disclosing individual perceived to change over time? The first research question was answered by three core themes which were consistently found in the interviews with gay men: the unprompted mentioning of traditional family values (with the sub-theme of marriage, children, and family name), coming out to friends and/or siblings before coming out to parents (with the sub-themes of coming out to parents before anyone else can tell them and not telling older family members), and not coming out to older family members. The second research question was answered by the core theme of parental reactions improving over time.

Traditional Family Values

While it may not be surprising that family values play a role in coming out to the family, it is interesting that so many participants mentioned traditional family values even though they were not prompted to do so. Eight out of twelve participants noted that their family’s traditional values played a large role in their coming-out. Typically, the participants defined their family’s traditional values through religion. Three different self-identified Christian participants described their families as being traditional, as did three self-identified Catholic participants and one self-identified Jewish participant. Two participants said that their parent’s military background was the cause of traditionalism in the household.

Peter had some reservations in telling his parents that he was gay – not because he was scared or frightened, but because they were a conservative family:

I wasn’t afraid of their reaction or anything, but for some reason I just couldn’t make myself bring it up. It’s a very stereotypical WASPy family setting. My family just doesn’t talk about sex at all – whether it was gay sex or straight sex, we just don’t talk about sex. I realized that later on, and I think that’s why it was such a hard thing to bring up.
Alan noted a “really intense religious dominace over the whole coming-out situation.” He described how his mother drove the both of them to an ex-gay conference several months after he came out. Ex-gay conferences are often affiliated with a religious organization and aim to make the gay man straight. Alan explained, “It was really hard for me because I saw my mom finally trying to grasp the concept of homosexuality, but she was grasping it in a completely different direction.” Around this time, members of his mother’s church would perform exorcisms on the house in an attempt to cleanse it of evil and homosexuality, and Alan was sent to see an ex-gay therapist. He described the force of religion on his coming out experience as “the worst time of my life.”

On the other hand, Derek’s experience with religion turned out to be a positive aspect in the process of coming out to his “very conservative parents.” Initially, however, Derek’s father used religion to advocate against his homosexuality. After he came out, his father “tried to give me literature from Christian sources about how homosexuality is a missing step on the way to manhood.” However, Derek explained how his dad read a book by Mel White, who was kicked out of the priesthood for being gay. He now has a partner and travels the country speaking about sexuality and religion. Derek stated, “I know my father read Mel White’s book which helped him a lot because my father’s entire issue [with me being gay] was on a religious basis. Religion was the issue that was, like, his biggest stumbling block.” Derek went on to discuss how the church pastor seemed to help his parents get through the difficulties of having a gay son:

Our pastor is from New York, I think. I think that he’s just more open-minded, and he has two daughters that are about my age. He apparently has been talking to my father and mentioned that his daughters have friends that identify as bisexual, lesbian, gay, et cetera. That helped my father a lot, because the pastor was one of the main people my father went to talk to about it.
Thus, Derek attributed his father’s negative-turned-positive reaction to religion - specifically talking with the “more open-minded” pastor of their church and reading Mel White’s book.

Attitudes about sexuality are often formed by family values. Overall, families with a strong sense of traditional family values were perceived as less accepting of homosexuality. For those who had disclosed to one or both parents, the traditional parents were perceived as reacting with more disapproval than those parents who were not labeled as traditional.

**Marriage, children, and the family name**

A recurring sub-theme under traditional family values was the idea that a gay family member will not get married, have children, or carry on the family name – all things associated with traditional and normal roles of children, as aforementioned. Four of the nine participants who mentioned traditional family values also brought up that their family was worried and/or upset they wouldn’t carry out family duties such as getting married and having children.

Justin, an African-American participant, mentioned his parent’s Christian background and military background both as reasons why they such a negative reaction when they inadvertently discovered he might be gay. Their background and values also served as a platform to raise concern over being a man and carrying on the family name. When asked about why he thought his uncle’s initial reaction was negative, Justin said that:

> It was military and religion both. I mean, more military than religion. You’re a man, you ain’t supposed to be lying with another man. And even before my uncle knew that I was gay, I heard him say some derogatory stuff about gay people.

Shortly thereafter, an aunt approached Justin about being gay. He said that he perceived the comments from his aunt as saying, “You are my dead brother’s only son, the only man in the family who can carry on the last name – and you’re gay.”
James, another participant from a military family, had a similar story. James’ father also serves in the military, but does not yet know that his son is gay. He is concerned about telling his father “because he is formal military” and “very conservative.”

At this point, what is keeping me from telling my dad is that he has very negative views in terms of, like, same sex is basically bestiality. And then also because he is formal military, like don’t ask don’t tell. And he has a Catholic background.

James further describes the dilemma with his father in terms of the typically straight duties he will not carry out:

In general, I am the last person in the family who can carry on the family name. My dad’s like, “You have to get married, you have to have kids as soon as possible.” I don’t know how I am going to break it to him.

Homosexuality can be seen as a threat to the hard-line masculinity of the military, despite instances of homoerotic bonding that have been shared. In fact, both of my participants who grew up in military homes mentioned that their masculinity was in question due to their homosexuality (Justin’s father told him that it was unmanly to lay with another man and James’s father is pushing marriage and children.)

Based on my interviews, many participants mentioned that their family’s traditional values – be they religious or military – played a role in their coming out. Most often, participants who noted their family’s traditional values had a harder time coming out due to those principals. Six of the eight participants who mentioned coming from families with traditional values received (or fear they will receive) negative reactions from family members. The two participants who noted coming from liberal families both stated that coming out was easier for them and that they “were lucky” to have families with more flexible values.

In regards to religion, the Catholic Church is known to be highly traditional and conservative. Many traditional religious groups teach that homosexuality is a chosen and addictive behavior, but accept the findings that a small number of people have a homosexual orientation which they cannot control. Although the Catholic
Church teaches that men and women with homosexual tendencies must be treated with respect, compassion and sensitivity, Catholicism still regards homosexual orientation to be “objectively disordered” and view homosexual practices as serious “sins gravely contrary to chastity” (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 2003).

These beliefs are grounded in the concept of natural law. Since Catholicism regards the main purpose of sex to be procreation, the Church insists that any ethical sexual act must be open to conception – which same-sex sex is not. Though Judaism as a whole is viewed to have a more open and liberal following, Orthodox Judaism still holds the tradition of bearing children at its core. As Adam, a Jewish participant, stated, “My ethnic background, my religious background has sort of the expectation of ‘be fruitful and multiply.’” Adam will not tell his grandparents that he is gay because it will “ruin the fantasy” of his getting married and having children. Adam further noted that he believes not having children is disappointing to his mother. Thus, families who have a very religious background may naturally have a difficult time accepting a gay child into the family because he will not be able to carry out all of the sacred life cycle duties expected of him.

Families with a military background also tended toward traditional values. The military is notorious for being conventional, masculine, and homophobic and continues to attempt to identify and exclude gays. The military historically constructed definitions of homosexual identity relying upon religious and medical discourses that defined homosexuals as unstable, making their risk to national security obvious, and mandating their exclusion from the Armed Services. While the military does not openly express distaste for gays, their homophobia is implicit in their withstanding “Don’t ask, don’t tell policy,” in which a member of the military may be discharged for homosexual acts or admission.

When traditional family values are trumpeted, the notion that gays threaten American family life is resounded. Moreover, the idea that homosexuals are a threat to the home not only comes from outside voices, but often from voices within their own families. The gay child is seen as something of an anomaly within the family because he will not get married or have children like a traditional child would, and
may even be seen as committing a sin by not doing so. Even if he does get married or have children, he will have to go about doing so in a non-traditional way. That is to say, he will have an alternative union, rather than a traditional wedding; he will have to go through the process of adopting a child or artificial insemination, rather than having a child the “normal” way with a woman. A gay man will probably not have a traditional family like the one in which he grew up, in fact gay people and gay advocates are some of the largest supporters of “alternative families.”

The Progression: Who to Tell Before Coming Out to Parents

A second theme that emerged was that participants came out to friends or family members before they came out to their parent(s). Two of the participants did not have an official coming out to their parents (i.e. their homosexuality was always assumed and not spoken). Of the ten participants that did have or plan on having an official coming out to their parent(s), nine of them came out to at least one friend and/or non-parental family member first. Derek mentioned that he came out to his girlfriend at the time and his older brother before he told his parents:

I came out to my girlfriend before I came out to my parents. She offered to be there with me when I came out to my parents. I had also already come out to my brother over Instant Messenger, and my brother encouraged me to come out to my parents and even teased me about how he had worked on them a bit.

In Derek’s case, both his brother and girlfriend provided a support system for him before he told his parents. James also noted that his friends and family served as a support system. He stated that coming out to friends “helped me build up my confidence.” About a year after coming out to several friends (a freshman in college at this point), James came out to his older sister:

She was really, really supportive which was good. I didn’t expect anything less. She is pretty much my best friend and a real constant person in my life, I guess. But we assessed the situation after that, and I just didn’t feel comfortable at that point to come out to mom and dad. So over the summer I continued to develop more comfort and tell more friends and such.
Thus, James used his friends and sibling to build confidence and a greater level of comfort before coming out to his mother. He has yet to come out to his “very conservative” father, but plans to do so eventually. Sal, who is not yet out to his parents but plans to come out soon, said that:

I wanted someone in my extended family to talk to because it’s kind of difficult feeling like you’re not quite fitting into the family scene. So I started thinking about confiding in someone in my family after a very long relationship ended and I really needed someone to talk to and there really wasn’t anyone here [small Bible Belt town] who could identify. And my cousin is gay and so after some hesitation I gave him a call…and it was the most awkward first move in a conversation I’ve ever had. But it was good, and I’m glad I did it.

Before coming out to parents, participants knowingly and deliberately chose to come out to people who they thought would provide positive responses and support. Many participants noted that they came out to friends and trusted non-parental family members first in order to build the positive responses and confidence needed to tell their parent(s).

Additionally, some participants mentioned that it was easier to come out to friends and other family members first because they were not dependent on them, especially financially. Knowing that a parent can kick you out of the house or stop paying your college tuition are certainly viable reasons for not revealing an alternate sexual identity. A friend may wish to cease a relationship upon finding out that an individual is gay, but a parent who ceases to fulfill parental responsibilities may have far harsher consequences, especially on a younger individual who is dependent upon his parent(s) for money, food, shelter, etc. Derek noted that he came out to his brother first because “I don’t depend on him for living assistance and so forth. Because I still get monetary support from my father, it would be much more difficult if he cut that off.” Another participant mentioned that after telling his mother he was gay, he was told that she would not pay for his college tuition. They finally worked
out a deal where she would pay for college if he agreed to see an ex-gay therapist regularly.

**Coming out to parents before anyone else can tell them**

The first sub-theme under the theme of progression is that once participants were out to non-parental family members and/or friends, they mentioned the need to come out to parent(s) before anybody else told them. Of the nine participants who came out first to friends and/or non-parental family members, three of them mentioned that the next natural step was to break the news to their parent(s) before somebody else did.

For example, Bo came out to his younger brother, then friends, and finally came out to his parents several months later. When asked about the progression of coming out and why he came out to his parents last, Bo answered:

I came out and everybody knew – and in [my semi-small town], if one person knows then everybody knows. So I was just scared that somebody was going to go up to my parents and be like, “I heard about Bo.” I didn’t want that to happen. If it wasn’t for being from a small town, then I don’t know if I would have told them yet. I just wanted to make sure they hear it from me, and not from some random community person.

Peter had a similar story regarding the decision of when to come out to his parents. He had come out to all of his friends by the end of high school but didn’t tell his parents that he was gay until the end of his freshman year in college. When asked why he told his parents when he did, Peter said that he didn’t want one of his fraternity brothers to tell his parents inadvertently when they were visiting him at college:

I’m like, “Man, they’re coming up for Mom’s weekend, and I’m totally out here, and I have a totally supportive group of friends, and they will probably think that because I’m so comfortable with it…my parents would have known.” And something might have slipped, something nice like, “I really respect your son” or “I have learned a lot from him this semester.” And my
parents would be like, “What are you talking about?” I didn’t want that to happen.

Craig, who is only out to friends and one of his five siblings, said that he will eventually tell his parents he is gay when the situation arises. Craig stated I want to avoid situations like when graduation comes up. Like, my whole family will be there and I don’t want something to be said. I know I should be over that…but it does make me nervous. Thus, it is not uncommon that the decision to come out to parents may be fueled by the fear that they will find out anyway, which the participants did not want to happen.

Although none of the participants expanded on why they did not want their parent(s) to find out from another source, it may be speculated that keeping a secret from certain family members may only add more distress to an already difficult situation. Often, parents (and other family members) play a role which makes them central figures in their child’s life. Because many individuals’ families span the boundary of their public and private lives, it is common for them to feel as though they should not be keeping secrets hidden from close family members. As most parents already experience some degree of difficulty when a child comes out, finding out from another source may only serve to make the situation more confusing and difficult, especially when the parent-child relationship is a close one. The implicit idea that the child does not keep secrets from his parent(s), especially one as significant as true identity, is broken when somebody else breaks the news to the parent.

Not telling older family members

A second sub-theme that emerged under the theme of progression was that four participants mentioned that they have not come out to older family members such as grandparents. These participants noted that older family members were even more set in their ways, thus coming out to them would be confusing and/or hurtful. Peter said that he would be okay with anybody in his family knowing about his sexuality except his grandmother:
I have chosen routinely not to come out to my grandma… my grandma actually…I don’t know what she’s thinking…she’s really old and she’ll ask a lot if I have any girlfriends and I’m like, “No, grandma I’m really busy” or something like that. One time she asked me if I had any special friends in [my] club, and I was kinda confused by what that meant, and to this day I don’t know what it meant. It seemed like she was trying to put into words something she didn’t understand. I kinda left it open-ended, but it was an interesting conversation that reoccurs. To this day, I consciously won’t come out to my grandma just because she’s so old. Anyone else in the family, if they asked I wouldn’t lie or anything.

Adam also discussed how he has decided not to tell his grandparents that he is gay:

My grandparents on my mother’s side are still alive, but I have felt no need to discuss the issue with them…my grandmother keeps bothering me about when I am going to meet a Jewish girl…at times I just want to scream at her “I’m not going to marry a Jewish girl – ever!” But it’s kind of sad actually, it’s funny but it’s sad. But that’s just par for the course. It’s who they are, it’s where they are, and where they come from. My grandmother is a Holocaust survivor and my grandfather was interned in labor camps in Russia. For them, watching their children have children and even having great-grandchildren one day would be a big deal and I don’t want to shatter that dream for them. Anyway, [my grandmother] is probably won’t live to see it if it were to happen anyway.

Bobby has opted not to tell his grandparents for different reasons:

My parents have asked and pleaded with me not to tell my grandparents; they don’t have that much time left and knowing the kind of world they grew up in, I think it would just cause them more hurt than growth. I would like to tell them, but at the same time I would like to have a relationship with my parents, so I’ve chosen that over telling my grandparents.
In Bobby’s case, he has not told his grandparents “out of respect” for his parents. Whereas Bobby perceives his openness toward his grandparents as a positive thing, his parents are concerned that it may hurt his grandparents too much.

Typically, older generations serve as the most traditional component of the family. Be it because they grew up in a more conservative era or because they are set in their ways, older family members may not be open to the “new” concept of alternate sexualities. Often, a family’s traditional values stem from and are solidified in its older members.

In the progression of disclosing sexuality, most participants came out first to a boyfriend, sibling, trusted friend(s), or a trusted family member. Often, participants came out to the seemingly easiest and most accepting person first, as mentioned in the interviews of Derek, James, and Sal above. As Bobby also noted:

I knew telling my friends was going to be easiest because they had known me a much shorter period of time than my parents certainly…even when I look at the friends I told, I started with the two closest and the two easiest.

For most participants, only after coming out to a friend or non-parental family member did they come out to their parent(s). For example Craig said, “For a while I was fine telling my friends, but I was not okay telling my family.” It is interesting that many people have such a difficult time telling parents. Typically, friends come and go, but families are permanent. The love of a parent is said to be is unconditional, whereas friendships are often viewed to be more fragile and based on conditional love. Thus, one may think that it would be easiest to come out to those who will provide unconditional love and support, such as parents, but that has not proved to be the case.

Due to the vulnerability of the self-image during the coming out process, a gay man may try to build up as many positive responses as possible. Once he has built up enough positive responses from others, he may be able to better withstand the negative responses (including the burden of being financially responsible) that he will encounter. Though there is no guarantee as to how somebody will react to a coming out, it seems as though gay men are careful to choose who they want to know about
their sexual identity and when they want them to know – and usually that means telling others before telling parents.

**Gay Family Members**

The third theme is the mention of gay relatives. Five of the twelve participants voluntarily mentioned that they had a gay or lesbian family member. In most of the interviews, having a gay or lesbian relative seemed to help the participant in his own coming out process. James quoted, “I figured [my mom] would be more supportive…she has a lesbian cousin, and I figured that would help out.” Similarly, Mike noted:

> My aunt’s a lesbian. She kind of paved the way for me [to come out to] my grandparents. She had already gone through all the major drama that I would have faced had she not been a lesbian and not already come out. I am very grateful to her in that sense.

For Will, having a homosexual family member actually proved to be a hindrance during his coming out.

> My other sister didn’t take it well because…I know for a fact she is a lesbian, but she’s not come out or said anything to me or anything….When I told my sister that I was gay she just [gave] me a look and goes back upstairs, and I go up to talk to her and she was very unhappy, just like generally pissed off that I came out and she couldn’t or something.

Will then went on to note that she was further upset because “I came out and she’s not the first one I told and she’s not in on it.” However, Will’s sister’s reaction has gradually improved over time, just as do most familial reactions:

> I’d say she was negative and she does the passive stuff every so often, but she’s trying really hard and she’s pretty much completely okay with it now, but she still does little passive things… every now and again, but she also argues my side when my grandparents or my mom get on a tirade when I’m not around.

Though it may seem like having a gay or lesbian family member would make it easier for another individual within the family to come out, some participant’s experiences
may prove otherwise. Perhaps having two gay people in one family takes away the uniqueness of it, as it did for Will’s lesbian sister. Additionally, James, who figured that his mother would react more positively to his coming out due in part to her lesbian cousin, received a reaction that was described as neutral-negative rather than positive. Though James thought that the lesbian cousin might lessen the blow of his own homosexuality, perhaps his mother still reacted dispassionately because he affects her life more so than does her cousin.

There is some evidence for genetic influences on sexual orientation, meaning that homosexuality could run in the family (Pattatucci, 1998), similar to height or hair color. However, there are a number of alternative explanations as to why some families have more than one homosexual member, including environmental factors. While the verdict is still out on whether or not there is a “gay gene,” it is certainly a topic that merits further investigation.

**Parental Reactions Perceived to Improve Over Time**

The forth and final theme was that the majority of participants perceived parental reactions to their coming out as progressively getting better over time. This theme answers the second research question (RQ 2) put forth in the review of literature. Two participants were not out to either their mother or father at the time of the interview, and one participant was out only to his mother. All other participants mentioned being out to both parents, for a total of 19 parental reactions. Of the 19 parental reactions, eight participants reported their father’s reaction as getting better and five reported their mother’s reaction as improving. One participant perceived his father’s reaction as staying the same, and four participants reported their mothers’ reaction as staying the same. Only one participant perceived a parental reaction actually worsening over time (mother). To simplify, thirteen participants reported a parental reaction getting better, five participants reported that parental reaction stayed the same, and only one participant reported that a parent’s reaction got worse as time progressed after he came out to her.
Bobby is a good example of parental reactions getting better over time. For Bobby, his parents initially reacted to his coming-out in a negative way, but are now heading toward a more positive attitude:

So, I came out to my parents and it was a textbook awful reaction. My mother sobbed for days…my father dealt with it in a much more aggressive way…then two days later I received a ripped piece of paper that said they hated me and never wanted to see me again and that they hoped I died and lived an awful life. That’s pretty much where our relationship remained for a number of months.

However, when asked about how he perceived his parent’s reaction today, Bobby said that:

They are doing their best because they would not pick this life for me, but I think they’ve accepted that this is my life, and if they want to be a part of my life they have to start accepting me…they have done extremely well. They’ve invited my boyfriend into our home and they’re still continuing to grow and gain a better understanding.

For Bo, his parents reacted in a neutral-positive manner when he first told them he was gay, but have become even more positive over time due to their better understanding of homosexuality. When asked how he perceived his parents’ reactions when he told them that he was gay, Bo stated that, “At the time, I thought they were just confused about it…they were trying to be very reassuring and supportive of my decision, but their first reaction was that they were confused and hazy about all this.” Now, Bo says that his parents “…have changed in terms of better understanding it.” When asked what he thought attributed to their better understanding, Bo said:

I feel like there is this new movement going on, especially with entertainment movies like Brokeback Mountain and TransAmerica …Even with Brokeback previews and stuff, my parents were so curious. Will and Grace and Queer Eye – all these stereotypical gay things, my mom watches and asks, “You don’t do this stuff do you?”…They have asked me a lot of questions. I mean,
you don’t ever want to talk to your parents about sex or anything, but I would rather them find out from me than create things in their head – be it from television or from horrible stereotypes.

Will actually attributes an improved relationship with his father to his coming out. At first, Will perceived his father as having a negative reaction:

Dad, I have something to tell you out of respect. I’m gay. He said he figured and later he told my sister, “It was like someone punched me in the stomach when [Will] told me that.” And it wasn’t like I was happy to hear that, but he would never tell me that. And now me and my dad have a better relationship than ever and we didn’t have a good relationship when I was growing up, it was like nothing really clicked, like, but now we have a great relationship, better than me and my mom.

When asked why he thought the relationship with his father improved Will said:

I think it put things into perspective for him, like why I never really wanted to play sports or, not to be stereotypical, I like to play golf and I like hanging out with the guys and but I wasn’t that driven to like go you know, hunt chicks and stuff. I just never was… that stuff just wasn’t attractive. A good example is he calls me a few weeks ago and was like, “I got something really disturbing in the mail with your name on it” and I was like, “What is it?” and he was like, “Fredericks of Hollywood catalogue” and I was like, “Dad, I’m sorry, I got something to tell you….I’m straight (laughing).” It was a good moment.

The usual response when parents learn that their child is gay is an initial period of instability and difficulty, followed by a steady increase in acceptance (LaSala, 2000), a finding which is consistent with this research. Parents learn that if they want to be a part of their child’s life, they eventually have to accept that child’s sexual identity. Perhaps because trust and honesty are solidified in disclosure, relationships can improve beyond what they previously were. Though it has been found that responses often become more accepting over time, gay men still tend to be apprehensive prior to disclosure. Some participants noted that gaining information through exposure helped their parents eventually come to accept their gay identity. Several structures
that were mentioned for helping parents overcome their emotional anguish include exposure to homosexuality through educational means such as the media or knowing another gay person. In light of the pervasive influence of outdated and biased information, parents may need to be re-educated about gay lifestyles. There is research to suggest that the more a parent knows about lesbians, gay men, and their relationships, the easier it is to adjust to the disclosure that a son or daughter is gay (Ben-Ari, 1995). Thus, it should be suggested that parents of a gay child seek out resources which will provide them with more exposure to gay culture and life.

Though coming out was found to often induce crisis (even if mild) and progress through stages to acceptance within the family, it is important to note that some parents may never reach a point of acceptance. Parents may continue to be apprehensive of their child’s homosexuality identity due to a myriad of reasons including worry about the well-being of their child, often due to societal homophobia. Thus, even if parents are accepting of their child’s gay identity, it is likely that society will not be as accepting. Parents may also be apprehensive due to the commonly held myth that homosexual children are a product of poor parenting, thus implicating the parents of the gay child as not properly fulfilling their parental responsibilities. Nonetheless, it is extremely important that the disclosing child receive positive initial reactions after coming out, especially from those closest to him such as family members. Acceptance of a child who chooses to come out not only promotes the psychological well-being and positive self-image of that child, but also creates a supportive familial environment for that child.
Chapter Five: Conclusion

Limitations and Future Research

The results of this study must be considered in relationship to the limitations related to it. In this study of twelve gay male students, the first limitation was the small sample size. While the intent was never to make a sweeping generalization about the coming out experiences of all college-aged gay men, a larger sample size may have allowed for smaller, more cautious generalizations to be drawn. Because this investigation provided a rich description of the coming out experiences of a few gay males, making generalizations about coming out experiences was impossible. Future research may include more participants in order to gain a more generalized idea of what coming out to parents is like.

Secondly, participation was totally voluntary and self-selected. Such self-acceptance might indicate that only those gay students who had positive experiences coming out volunteered, thereby decreasing the variety of stories heard and skewing the results. Though many participants shared difficult and painful stories, other potential participants with negative coming out stories may not have stepped forward. In fact, several participants were reluctant at first to share their stories with me because the experience was so painful. Though it is impossible to make gay men with very negative coming out stories participate, those stories need to be heard, as well.

Thirdly, all of the participants attended a large, co-educational, predominantly white, wealthy, Midwestern university. Additionally, the university has been repeatedly noted as having a “conservative feel” to it. Knowing that context influences identity, the results might have been different had the sample included participants from a variety of institution types in different geographical regions. Because differences in campus culture may influence one’s identity and his decision to come out to parents, future research should focus on the experiences of gay males with varying demographics and collegiate backgrounds.

Furthermore, the findings from this study mostly represent the experiences of Caucasian gay men. Only one participant in this study was African-American, while the rest were Caucasian. Future research must seek out gay ethnic and/or racial
minority students to look at their collegiate experiences in order for their voices to be heard. Belonging to two marginalized groups creates the burden of living as a double minority who is subject to both racism and homophobia. Therefore, future studies dealing with gay racial/ethnic minorities in the face of racism and homophobia could be also conducted.

Fifth, a longitudinal study of gay college students should occur. Researching the lives of gay men beyond the first several years of being out to their families could give a better glimpse of how family dynamics change from generation to generation and how the gay man continues to function within his family. Future research could examine the contrast between coming out in the family and coming out in the workplace, for example. This study could serve as a springboard for all these areas of research.

Sixth, it was very surprising and interesting that none of the participants mentioned that their family was concerned about AIDS in the retelling of their coming out stories. For years, AIDS has been closely associated with and tied to the gay community. Yet, with AIDS affecting other segments of society in great numbers today, perhaps it is perceived as less of a gay issue and more of an issue for society in general - a shift which raises additional questions and merits further investigation.

Finally, this study brings attention to the importance of further research on lesbians and their coming out experiences within the family. This research focused exclusively on gay males. Findings from this study can serve as the foundation for additional studies into the lives of lesbian or bisexual individuals. This study could be replicated to investigate the experiences of lesbians to see what similarities or differences may exist between the experiences of gay men and lesbian women.

**Summary**

This study was an exploratory project to provide a better understanding of the perceptions that gay men have during the process of coming out to their parents. Specifically, this study focused on how gay men came out to their parent(s) and how they perceived parental reactions. This research provided a unique opportunity to hear the voices of gay men and their narratives, and the findings highlighted the
contextual nature of gay identity exploration. Within the narratives, four central themes emerged: the unprompted mentioning of traditional family values, coming out to friends and/or siblings before coming out to parents, not coming out to non-core (especially older) family members, and parental reactions getting better as time progressed. These themes provide implications for future research by which coming out to one’s family may be further explored and understood.
<p><strong>Works Cited</strong></p>


Appendix A

The purpose of this research is to explore the coming out stories of gay men. Specifically, I am focusing on the reactions that family members have had to the coming-out stories.

The interview will be audio taped and then transcribed. All information you provide will be kept strictly confidential. The findings of this research will not contain your name or any other identifying information.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If at any time you wish to stop participating in this research, you may do so without prejudice or penalty.

It is not intended that this interview will cause any psychological risks. However, should you like to talk to a professional at any point after this interview, several numbers are listed below:

Student Counseling Services
513-529-4632
B-30 Warfield Hall (lower level)

Psychology Clinic
513-529-2423
18 Benton Hall

Community Crisis and Counseling Center
513-523-4146
110 South College

Once the study is completed, the findings will be available to you. In the meantime if you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact Jessica Baer via email at Baerjk@muohio.edu or via telephone at 513-529-1879.

If you have questions about your rights as a participant, please contact The Office for the Advancement of Research and Scholarship at 513-529-373.

Thank you for making this project possible!
Appendix B

Consent Form

The purpose of this research has been explained to my satisfaction, and I understand the explanation.

I understand that my participation in this study is completely voluntary.

I understand that I may discontinue my participation at any time without penalty or consequence.

I understand that any information about me collected during this study will be held in the strictest of confidence and will only be known only by the researcher.

I understand that at the conclusion of this study, all records which identify me as a participant will be destroyed.

By signing below I verify that I am 18 years of age or older, and that I agree to and understand the conditions listed above.

Signature ________________________________
Date ________________________________

Name (printed) ________________________________
Appendix C

Pre-Interview questions

Name _________________________

Age ______

Race/Ethnicity ____________________

Highest level of Education (please check one):
- Some High School _____
- Completed High School _____
- Some College _____
- Completed College _____
- Some Post-Graduate School _____
- Completed Post-Graduate School _____

Have you personally “come out” to at least one family member? (Yes or No) ______

Which family members have you personally come out to? (i.e. mother, uncle, grandfather, etc.)
Please list all:
Appendix D

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1) Step by step, take me through how you came out to your family – from when you first thought about it until now.

2) How would you characterize/how did you perceive each family member’s reaction?

3) Who specifically did you choose to come out to and why?
   A) Did their reactions change over time?
   B) If so, why do you think they changed?

5) Do you have any final thoughts about coming out to your family?