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## Coming out : sexual orientation disclosure to siblings

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Rachel Mae Gottesman,  
Coming Out: Sexual Orientation  
Disclosure to Siblings

## **ABSTRACT**

This qualitative study explores LGBTQ individuals' experiences navigating sexual orientation disclosure to their sibling(s). The purpose of the study was to examine the role siblings play in sexual orientation disclosure, how and why LGBTQ identified individuals 'come out' to their sibling(s), and provide a glimpse into their experiences of this disclosure. Eleven individuals, ages 25–32 who identified as Lesbian, Gay, Bi–sexual, Transgender or Queer were interviewed via open–ended, semi–structured interviews. LGBTQ participants were asked to speak about their sibling(s) relationship prior to and following their sexual orientation disclosure and the trajectory of their sexual orientation awareness through the process of 'coming out'. Though each story was unique and individual, common themes emerged across interviews including periods of silence and secrecy, sense of relief, honesty and the intersection of self–discovery and the effects of exposure on the sibling(s) relationship.

Findings from this study showed that the nature of the sibling relationship, moments of opportunity and circumstances were primary determinants of disclosure to siblings. Individuals shared diverse stories about their experiences 'coming out' that ranged in length, intensity and effect; all of which are difficult to isolate from external influences. Siblings and the sibling relationship played a role in LGBTQ individuals' sexual orientation disclosure whether it functioned as a bridge between familial generations and society or a questioning voice. Sexual orientation disclosure is multifaceted and 'coming out' to siblings is just one aspect of this ongoing intimate process that contributes to a deeper understanding of the LGBTQ community.

## **COMING OUT: SEXUAL ORIENTATION DISCLOSURE TO SIBLINGS**

A project based upon an independent investigation,  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2012

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I hope that this research helps to open communication within your families and the LGBTQ community and supports the individual and collective coming out experience.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iii
CHAPTER	
I INTRODUCTION.....	1
II LITERATURE REVIEW.....	6
III METHODOLOGY.....	27
IV FINDINGS.....	32
V DISCUSSION.....	44
REFERENCES.....	59
APPENDICES	
Appendix A: Human Subjects Review Approval Letters.....	65
Appendix B: Informed Consent Form.....	67
Appendix C: Semi-Structured Interview Guide.....	69
Appendix D: Recruitment Flier.....	71

## **CHAPTER I**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to explore the experience of LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer) individuals in their experience of ‘coming out’ or disclosing their sexual orientation to their sibling(s). Despite advances in LGBTQ civil rights, LGBTQ individuals continue to face rejection and oppression prior to and after self-disclosure of their sexual orientation on a familial and societal level. Depression, anxiety, low self-esteem and diminished sense of self are significant mental health outcomes that corresponded to LGBTQ individuals prior to their disclosure. In a poll of registered voters nationwide, 63% reported having a close friend or relative that is gay or lesbian (PollingReport.com 2010 as cited in Rossi, 2010). In the United States, approximately 5–6% of adolescents in grades 7–12 identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender (GLBT; Udry, 2001 as cited in Rossi, 2010). Based on previous poll data, if young people remain consistent in their views toward the normalization of sexual diversity, then acceptance and disclosure will only continue to increase (Savin-Williams, 2005). However, until society truly embraces differences in sexual orientation, there always will be a coming out process that will involve working through shame, self-doubt, and fear (Bringaze & White, 2001).

LGBTQ individuals are a hidden minority because sexual orientation is not necessarily a visible characteristic. This invisibility and ensuing ability to pass as heterosexual places stress on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer persons when deciding when and to whom to

disclose their sexual minority status (Morris, 1997 as cited in Ritchie, 2008). D'Augelli (1991) contended that disclosure to one's family is the most difficult and yet the most pivotal act of disclosure faced by lesbian and gay persons. Many feel that only after they have disclosed to their family, have they truly "come out". While parents have been the focus of relative empirical research, other family members, regardless of their sexual orientation or biological relation, are a significant component of the coming out process.

In the United States, 85% of adults have at least one sibling (Cicirelli, 1982 as cited in Stocker, Lanthier & Furman, 1997). According to Savin-Williams (1998b), approximately 50%-60% of lesbian, bisexual and gay youths have disclosed to one sibling, although studies have shown mixed results in whom LGBTQ individuals first disclose. The responses and reactions to disclosure also have varied significantly, but the focus has predominantly been on parental response. In a study of support group adolescents, 35% reported that they were verbally assaulted by an immediate family member, most often by a mother and least often by a sister (Savin-Williams, 1998b); and, although siblings have been considered to be at least as supportive as mothers, they are seldom the first person to whom sexual minority youth disclose. According to research by Morris & Rothblum (as cited in Rothblum, 2011) lesbian and bisexual women are more likely to be out to siblings than to mothers and fathers. Therefore, siblings may be in a position where they are the first members of their family to learn about their sibling's sexual orientation or gender identity (Rothblum, 2011) and have the opportunity to significantly impact their siblings' coming out experience. However, research surrounding how and why LGBTQ individuals come out to their siblings is lacking.

One participant recounted, "When I told my siblings, it was just a declarative statement. It wasn't like a questioning kind of, are you going to accept me" (Rossi, 2010, p. 1188). This

comment is consistent with Weston's (1991) notion that gays and lesbians expect greater acceptance from siblings than from parents. However, it is unclear why so many individuals do not come out to their siblings first, considering the research that shows how siblings can serve as a bridge between parental reactions and society, whether it is rejection or acceptance. Empirical research focusing on sexual minorities is limited and especially that which concerns sexual orientation disclosure. Although family has been identified as an integral component of the coming out process, siblings have been consistently left out. Understanding the role siblings' play in the process of coming out could add relevant depth to this body of knowledge.

This researcher conducted a qualitative, exploratory study using semi-structured face-to-face and over-the-phone interviews with eleven LGBTQ individuals who came out of the closet and disclosed their sexual orientation for purposes of exploring how siblings were involved in their coming out process. Semi-structured, open-ended questions elicited narrative and in-depth descriptions of the challenges and experiences of LGBTQ individuals' disclosure to siblings. A qualitative research design was warranted in order to gain insight into the subjective experiences of LGBTQ individuals and the ways in which their siblings were involved in the coming out process. The open-ended questions contained in the interview allowed room for participant-specific responses to obtain complete and diverse ways siblings played a role in their sexual orientation disclosure.

Individuals identifying as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or queer are increasing in the United States and while multiple sexual orientations are becoming more accepted by society, service providers must learn to adapt to the needs of this sexual minority population with cultural sensitivity and competency. Understanding the position of a sibling to an individual can shed light on this LGBTQ's subjective experience in a myriad of ways. Service providers and family



members can use this understanding to more effectively serve the LGBTQ community with a deeper understanding of their experiences, struggles and successes. Familial involvement along with cultural continuity corresponds to greater success among LGBTQ individuals and society at large.

This study began with a list of definitions of relative vocabulary, a comprehensive review of the literature related to sibling relationships and sexual orientation disclosure, followed by the methodology used to explore questions under review and findings from the narratives of 11 participants who intimately shared their experiences and insights about coming out to their sibling(s) and within society. The final component of the study included a discussion of the findings as they relate to previous literature as well as clinical implications and future research.

#### **Definition of Terms used in this Study**

*Coming Out:* becoming aware of one's sexual orientation or gender identity and beginning to disclose it to others. A person may be selectively "out" in some situations or to certain people without generally disclosing his or her sexual orientation or gender identity. "Coming out" is a process that takes place over time, in some cases over many years (Bochenek & Brown, 2001, p. xiii as cited in Rasmussen, 2004).

*Closeted:* the experience of living without disclosing one's sexual orientation or gender identity (also referred to as being "in the closet") (Rasmussen, 2004).

*Heterosexism:* an ideological system that denies, denigrates, and stigmatizes any non-heterosexual form of behavior, identity, gender, relationship, or community (Herek, 1990).

*Homophobia:* The irrational fear and intolerance of people who are homosexual or have homosexual feelings within oneself. Assumes heterosexuality is superior (Gender Equity Resource Center, n.d.).

*Homonegativity*: Negative attitude towards homosexuality, homosexual people or those who do not consider themselves heterosexual.

*Sexual Orientation*: The deep-seated direction of one's sexual attraction. Sexual orientation is a continuous process evolving over time (Gender Equity Resource Center, n.d.).

*Lesbian (L)*: women who are attracted to women (Gender Equity Resource Center, n.d.).

*Gay (G)*: men who are attracted to men (Gender Equity Resource Center, n.d.).

*Bisexual (B)*: attracted to two sexes or two genders, although this is limiting because there are not only two sexes or genders (Gender Equity Resource Center, n.d.).

*Transgender (T)*: people whose psychological self differs from the social expectations for the physical sex they were born with (Gender Equity Resource Center, n.d.).

*Queer (Q)*: a political statement, as well as a sexual orientation, which advocates breaking binary thinking and seeing both sexual orientation and gender identity as potentially fluid. A person who is attracted to multiple genders or sexes may identify as queer (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, n.d.).

## **CHAPTER II**

### **Literature Review**

There is insufficient empirical research that focuses on the coming out experiences of the LGBTQ population, which exhibits the nature of discourse about sexual orientation and disclosure in current society. In light of the need for empirical research with this population, the following literature review focuses on previous research concerning the process of coming out as it relates to siblings. While the current researcher found very little data specific to the current study, there are elements that transcend to the present study. The first section of this chapter presents an overview of research literature and findings pertaining to the sibling relationship as a take off for the current study. The second section of this chapter hones in on research conducted on pertinent areas related to the coming out experience including Coming out to Family, Parents, Brothers and Sisters. The final sections address Coming Out literature as it relates to oppressive and protective roles of silence and psychological effects of disclosure and cultural differences.

#### **The Sibling Relationship**

Theories of familial interaction have historically focused almost exclusively on the influence of parents on psychosocial development. However, Schwartz' (as cited in Rothblum, 2011) family systems theory suggested that families are interdependent, so that one person's behavior affects the dynamic of the other family members. Western culture at the turn of the century focused upon the parents as the primary providers of emotional resources and thus directed the literature. Freud's pessimistic viewpoint about siblings was derived from his own

experience with his siblings and the parent-oriented culture of Germany at the time, which also significantly influenced the direction of family theory. Collateral relationships were given little importance, while hierarchy and one-upmanship was emphasized. Freud claimed that sibling relationships are only significant as a derivative of the more overpowering experiences with parents (Bank & Kahn, 1980). This notion and trend in family theory literature has carried over to current research literature related to sexual orientation disclosure. The parent-child experience with sexual orientation disclosure has been prioritized over "collateral" relationships (Rothblum, 2011).

Sibling interactions have been seen in response to the parent-child relationship rather than as a separate and independent entity. However, within the current research considerable evidence points to the importance of the sibling relationship. Bank & Kahn (1980) contended that siblings might at times be more influential in each other's development than the parents. Agger (1988) wrote, "the existence of actual siblings as well as internal sibling representations within the mother's psyche exert a sizeable effect upon the child's ego development. This may occur even before the father's presence is recognized as an accountable force" (p. 3). Agger also noted, "The conflict experienced between initiative and guilt may determine a lifelong tendency toward being victimized, selecting only aim-inhibited relationships, and seeking the shadow of another's stronger personality" (p. 15). Thus, the sibling relationship could have a lifelong impact on how an individual experiences interpersonal relationships.

Historically, the experience of being a sibling is rarely described among family and individual psychotherapists (Bank & Kahn, 1980). However, in *Families of the Slums*, Minuchin (as cited in Bank & Kahn, 1977) made the sibling subsystem imperative and powerful in the presence of disorganized parental functioning. Still however, the sibling dyad is referenced only

in relation to the parent–child relationship. In *Families and Family Therapy* (as cited in Bank & Kahn, 1977), Minuchin found that siblings turn to each other for protection when parental subsystems are disorganized. He also contended that siblings reflected self–appraisal, which is crucial for identity development and can act as socializers for each other to interpret the outside world. Although Minuchin significantly contributed to research around the sibling relationship, again, it was emphasized only in response to the parent position.

Bank & Kahn (1977) identified variability in the autonomy of the sibling subsystems from the parental system and simultaneously maintained that siblings collude and align with each other, often in efforts to resist vertical parental influence. Bank & Kahn (1977) also found that siblings are more direct with each other and “tuned in” to each other in a way that is empathic. In addition, they made the point that the sibling relationship often lasts through a lifetime from 50–80 years, which is much longer than the child–parent relationship, which is usually from 30–50 years.

Bank & Kahn (1977) identified identification and differentiation, mutual regulation, direct services and coalitions as the primary functions of the sibling relationship. Of particular interest within these functions was mutual regulation. They noted that “siblings serve as sounding boards for one another; they provide a safe laboratory for experimenting with new behavior where new roles are tried on, criticized and encouraged, or benevolently acknowledged before being used either with parents or non–family peers” (p. 503). According to this concept, it is presumed that siblings can play a crucial role in an individual’s experience in disclosing their sexual orientation. Research however in this specific area is lacking. Bank & Kahn (1975) had unearthed their findings on siblings from only several “scattered islands of research and theory,” (p. 495) insinuating that research related to siblings is scarce and therefore research related to

sexual orientation disclosure and siblings also is limited. Additionally, Bank & Kahn (1977) used samples of middle-class families and did not explicitly identify race, but it is assumed that they are referring to white middle-class families. Therefore key variables as they relate to personal trajectories are missing because of the limited population samples and exclusion of race.

Much of the existing, current literature that has shifted focus to that of siblings has addressed birth order and identity formation. Cooper (2000) conducted a qualitative study of lastborn children's sibling experiences while Abdel-Khalek, & Lester (2005) administered personality tests to look at personality traits associated with sibling size and birth order and Freese, Powell & Steelman (1999) tested Sulloway's 1996 contention that firstborn adults are more conservative, supportive of authority and "tough-minded" than laterborns. Klein (1984) investigated birth order in relation to introversion and extraversion. Michalski & Shackelford (2001) contended that research design determined how birth order, intelligence and personality related to birth order. Snyder, Bank & Burraston (2005) discussed how social behavior is influenced by the sibling dynamic, which is determined by birth order.

As contemporary research has progressively looked at sibling relationships independently of the parent-child relationship, sibling relationships have been found to be influential in mediating the effect of adverse social circumstances (Sanders, 2004). Additionally, research conducted on children's relationships with their siblings found that sibling rivalry is associated with depression, loneliness and low self-esteem, while warmth in the sibling relationship is related to higher self-esteem, fewer feelings of loneliness, and fewer behavior problems (Stocker & Dunn, 1994; as cited in Stocker, Lanthier, & Furman, 1997). Some siblings may provide support and affection for each other as they move through normative developmental transitions. Cicerelli (1982) also found that siblings reported feeling close and accepting of each

other (as cited in Stocker, Lanthier & Furman, 1997). Keeping this in mind, it is possible that siblings could create a positive, supportive environment for sexual orientation disclosure, as it is a developmental transition.

Based on one longitudinal study, Gass, Jenkins & Dunn (2006) contended that “For children who experienced high stressful life events, having a highly affectionate older sibling resulted in less change in internalizing over time when compared to children with less affectionate older siblings” (p. 171). Researchers found that maternal positivity did not significantly predict a change in child internalizing and that sibling affection is protective regardless of the age gap between siblings or the gender composition of the sibling dyad. In addition to sibling relationship quality, mother–child relationship quality, internalizing and externalizing, this study also took age and gender and socio–economic status into consideration.

According to the aforementioned literature, it is evident that the sibling relationship is significant, but has historically received less attention in research. Paralleling family theory and related literature, the sibling relationship also has received secondary or tertiary attention in sexual minority disclosure literature. However, provided that coming out is a stressful life event, sibling affection could have significant impact on the coming out experience and considerably shift the trajectory of negative reactions to disclosure that have reportedly shaped the past.

### **Coming Out**

In response to cultural heterosexism, people are generally presumed to be heterosexual and therefore, coming out is an ongoing process of interrupting assumed identities (Fassinger, 1991). For the purposes of this study, “coming out” refers to the process wherein a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer individual acknowledges their sexual orientation and discloses this identity to others. Galatzer–Levy & Cohler (2000) contended that society, with its strong

emphasis on heteronormativity stigmatizes alternative sexual identities. Lichenstein (1961, as cited in Galatzer–Levy & Cohler, 2002) pointed to how contested sexual identities, such as being lesbian or gay poses problems for managing a sense of individual coherence.

Early research literature regarding the process of coming out was concerned with stage–sequential models, which specified typical timing and sequencing of relevant milestones (Cass, 1979; Floyd & Stein, 2002; Troiden, 1989). Savin–Williams (1998) and subsequent qualitative studies challenged the stage–sequential framework and exposed significant variation and complexity of the coming out process. Individual narratives also exposed the diversity involved in the coming out experience, and further questioned the notion of a comprehensive model. In addition, many studies and literature regarding the coming out process and experiences focused on adolescents (Rossi, 2010; Riley, 2010; Gorman–Murray , 2008) and excluded adults who came out later in life.

Heatherington & Lavner (2008) analyzed several empirical studies on coming out to family and subsequent family process among lesbian, gay and bisexual adolescents. They looked at several family–level variables that were associated with positive outcomes in an effort to propose a more current model for the family trajectory of coming out. Gorman–Murray (2008) on the other hand, investigated youth coming out in supportive family homes to add depth to literature that previously primarily focused on coming out within an oppressive heteronormative nuclear family.

Other research relative to coming out has paid particular attention to family involvement. For lesbian and gay individuals, the act of disclosing sexual orientation is a major psychological decision and for those who do make the decision to come out, coming out to family is one of the most challenging (Savin–Williams, 2003).



## **The Family**

According to Hancock (1995, as cited in Savin-Williams, 1998b), “Families supply physical and emotional sustenance, connect us with our past, and provide a context within which we learn about the world” (p. 416). This notion validates how the family plays a significant role in the coming out process, but much of the research literature focused on the parental reaction to disclosure, instead of the family unit. However, few studies concentrate on the family system and the process of the family as a whole instead of individual family members. Baptist & Allen (2008) used a case example with a six-member family to look at how family rules were negotiated and the rebuilding that took place within the family after disclosure. This study was not centered on the changing dynamics between family members so much as how the family responded as a whole. The focus of this study revolved around how the family embraced gay identity, overcame homonegativity and integrated and bonded as a family post disclosure.

Similarly to Baptist & Allen (2008), Heatherington & Lavner (2008) were interested in the family system with regard to coming out. Heatherington & Lavner (2008) evaluated the family-level variables associated with positive outcomes and focused on relationship variables from several empirical studies. After comparing and analyzing multiple studies and discussing their findings, Heatherington & Lavner (2008) suggested a preliminary conceptual model for a family systems approach to coming out. However, they contended that “family reaction” is not a singular variable, but a compilation of the mother’s, father’s and sibling(s) reaction.

While Heatherington & Lavner (2008) looked at empirical research studies for the purposes of creating a conceptual model, Baptist & Allen (2008) chose a case example to identify the family process involved in coming out. Savin-Williams (1998b) discussed six empirical research studies with gay and lesbian youth who attended support groups and

concentrated on statistics revealing to whom youth disclosed. Savin–Williams (1998b) emphasized mother-father differences primarily and secondarily addressed the implications of the findings for youth, parents and the family system.

Savin–Williams (1998b) found that about 60–80% of youth had disclosed to their mother and paid particular attention to whom youth first chose to disclose. Disclosure to other family members was an aspect of analysis, but particular focus was on first disclosure and mental health issues for youth. After comparing findings within empirical research studies, this article also suggested who within the family system was the most comfortable to disclose to first. Similar to related studies, Savin–Williams (1998b) presented the heterosexual nuclear family as oppressive for an individual coming out. Gorman–Murray's study (2008) on the other hand concentrated on autobiographical narratives of GLB youth coming out in supportive nuclear family homes.

Gorman–Murray's (2008) study concentrated on positive experiences of youth coming out in direct response to D'Augelli, Hershberger & Pilkington's (1998) research that highlighted negative reactions to disclosure. Gorman–Murray (2008) underlined several comments within the coming out narratives of individuals in order to shed light on the underpinnings of positive experiences coming out in the family home. The goal of this analysis was to present reasons for and consequences of familial acceptance. Gorman–Murray (2008) contended that the heterosexual nuclear family home can be *queered* and sometimes families do respond positively to sexual difference. This literature provided an opposing perspective compared to the majority of other research studies and critiqued other researchers for failing to discuss reasons for and consequences of acceptance. Gorman–Murray (2008) included narratives from diverse ethnicities, but did not incorporate how this might play a role in their coming out experience.

Unlike Gorman–Murray (2008), D’Augelli, Grossman & Starks, (2008) addressed the coming out experiences of youth who were negatively affected in their longitudinal study. Researchers found that family member’s knowledge of GLB youths’ sexual orientation was associated with victimization, as youth known by parents and siblings reported more lifetime verbal harassment based on their sexual orientation, but decreased fears about being rejected in the future. This study investigated parents’ and siblings’ awareness of and reaction to youths’ sexual orientation and stressed variables related to age, gender and number of family members. D’Augelli, Grossman & Starks, (2008) did not use narratives like Gorman–Murray (2008) or a case example, like Baptist & Allen (2008), but instead examined the components of a family individually, as opposed to collectively.

Herd & Koff (2000) included accounts of youth and their parents and described the process families go through when children disclose their sexual minority status to parents. The phases characterizing the families’ response to disclosure also were outlined in this study. Although this literature emphasized the familial involvement in disclosure, researchers used the parental lens to examine the family. Similar to previous studies the narrative of the family moved from a homonegative standpoint to eventual acceptance and family coherence.

The limited research literature regarding coming out to the family has ranged from focusing on the family system as a whole to the parental reaction. Sample populations have varied from a single case example to over 500 individual GLB youth. With the exception of Gorman–Murray’s (2008) study, the majority of the empirical findings have shown a progression of negative reaction to acceptance within families. Although the aforementioned studies center on the family, the sample populations have limited racial diversity and all use biologically related family members as opposed to extended or adopted families.

## **The Parents**

Empirical research regarding the coming out process for LGBTQ individuals has significantly concentrated on the parental reaction (Ben–Ari, 1995; Boxer, Cook & Herdt, 1991; Saltzburg, 2004; Savin–Williams, 1989; Savin–Williams & Dubé, 1998, Savin–Williams, 2001). Most of the information gathered pertains to how family members feel directly after disclosure and most frequently is either from the LGBTQ member’s perspective or their parents’ point of view (Baptist & Allen, 2008; Heatherington & Lavner, 2008). Savin–Williams & Dubé (1998) discussed the developmental stages that characterize parental reactions to disclosure, while other studies (Boxer, Cook & Herdt, 1991; D’Augelli, Grossman & Starks, 2008) explored how youth responded to parental reaction, which parent youth disclosed to first, and how disclosure affected parent-child relationships.

Savin–Williams (1998b) contended that the more recent the study, the larger the percentage of youth disclose to their parents. Consistent with previous findings, results from Boxer, Herdt & Cook’s (1991) study showed that mothers were more frequent recipients of disclosure than fathers. Additionally, fathers from this study reported direct disclosure from youth and more positive relationships with those who had disclosed their sexual orientation. Savin–Williams (1998b) also contended that mothers were more likely than fathers or siblings to verbally abuse a sexual minority youth after disclosure and especially if the youth was a lesbian daughter. Based on this evidence, it is possible that sibling acceptance in sexual orientation disclosure could positively impact LGBTQ individuals mental health.

Boxer, Herdt & Cook (1991) used a nonclinical sample population from a youth group to conduct their mixed-method longitudinal research study. Researchers administered semi-structured interviews and paper and pencil assessments with 202 LGBTQ youth and a sample of

50 White, middle and upper middle class parents of gay and lesbian children. D'Augelli, Grossman & Starks (2008) also conducted a longitudinal study, but looked at the contextual and personal factors influencing the development of GLB youth and only considered the perspective of 528 self-identified youth, instead of the parent's voice. Boxer Herdt & Cook (1991) discussed youth sexual orientation, changes in the parent-child relationship, disclosure to parents and other family members and the quality of relationships. Boxer, Herdt & Cook (1991) and D'Augelli, Grossman & Starks (2008) emphasized the level of awareness parents of youth had in each study.

D'Augelli, Grossman & Starks (2008) found that 70% of youth said their parents knew, while 30% did not and half of the parents had a positive reaction and half negative. Results from this study also indicated that one third of families where both parents knew had a positive reaction: one third had a negative reaction and one third had one parent with a negative reaction and one parent with a positive reaction. This study paid specific attention to the number of siblings in the family and whether LGBTQ participant was part of a one or two parent family. D'Augelli, Grossman & Starks (2008) also emphasized the variation in awareness and reactions within families depending on the number of siblings.

Saltzburg's (2004) study on the other hand explored parent feelings and their reaction to disclosure as opposed to the family members' level of awareness or change in quality of relationship. Saltzburg (2004) used a narrative interview approach to gain understanding of the parent experience. The five mothers and two fathers included in this qualitative study revealed a deep sadness and disappointment that their offspring would not lead a life they had envisioned for them. However, findings also showed that parents maintained a sense of connection to their child despite the initial despair they felt.

Savin-Williams' (2001) study portrayed the ways in which disclosure affected both offspring and parents and looked at parent-child relationships prior to disclosure and following. Savin-Williams (2001) included reasons not to tell, which included the belief that it wasn't the right time, fear of a negative response, not wanting to trouble the parent and not being close to a parent. The sons with a close relationship to their mother in Savin-Williams' (2001) research reported that "to be 'out' to their mother is truly to be OUT" (p.139), which may explain why the research literature on sexual minorities so frequently focuses on the parent-child disclosure. However, research related to reasons behind this mindset are lacking and developing further understanding behind why LGBTQ individuals come out to those they choose could benefit the sexual minority community and related families.

### **The Brothers and Sisters**

Based on relevant research, it is evident that parents are not the only family members impacted by or influencing an individual's sexual orientation disclosure. There is a significant void in research literature pertaining to siblings coming out to each other, although various empirical studies have included siblings in statistics related to disclosure. In an Internet study of 2,000 Lesbian, gay and bisexual youth (aged 10-25 years old) 49% disclosed first to their mother and 38% first disclosed to their brother or sister (Savin-Williams, 2001), which is a staggering statistic provided the limited research regarding disclosure to siblings. In Herdt & Boxer's (1993) study of sexual minority youth in Chicago approximately 5%-22% disclosed to their sibling, depending on the age and gender of siblings. Chan's (1989) study of 35 Asian-American young adult LG people found that sexual orientation disclosure occurred more frequently with siblings than parents. Based on the aforementioned statistics, there is reasonable cause to investigate the meaning behind how and why LGBTQ individuals either decide to come

out or not come out to siblings, especially considering that according to sibling research they could facilitate or support the process.

The empirical evidence Savin–Williams (1998b) investigated showed that approximately 50–60% of lesbian, bisexual and gay youths have disclosed to at least one sibling. Murray (1994, as cited in Savin–Williams, 1998b) observed that siblings are told or discover their sister or brother’s sexual orientation before parents. Regardless of whether LGBTQ individuals disclose to siblings before parents, each of these studies demonstrates that sexual orientation disclosure to siblings is prevalent and siblings do play a significant role in the family and the disclosure process. Although each of these studies includes statistics related to siblings, deeper understanding around the process of coming out to siblings is missing.

D’Augelli, Grossman & Stark’s (2008) study placed more emphasis on siblings than previous studies and prioritized siblings as much as parents. These researchers found that very few youth in their study reported negative reactions from all siblings. The male siblings that knew were found to have significantly more negative reactions than female siblings. This study however focused specifically on patterns of sibling awareness and reactions instead of how minority youth came to come out to their sibling. D’Augelli, Grossman & Stark (2008) also contended that youth with siblings who knew of their sexual orientation reported more lifetime verbal victimization by siblings, but were less worried about siblings rejecting them than youth who did not know. Savin–Williams (1998b) contended that sibling relationships could deepen and become more positive and intimate over time after disclosure because of the shared secret. Additionally, he suggested that previous competition between siblings could become moot on account of different sexual identities. Although neither study followed the process of the LGBTQ

individual coming out to their sibling, both studies emphasized the siblings' position more so than previous research literature.

A more recent qualitative study (Hilton & Szymanski, 2011) did focus specifically on the sibling relationship after the gay brother or lesbian sister disclosed their sexual orientation. Hilton & Szymanski (2011) explored the heterosexual biological siblings' experience after their brother or sister disclosed instead of the sexual minority process. Jenkins (2008) also focused on the sibling relationship with regards to coming out. Hilton & Szymanski (2011) used a very small population sample (14) that was all white and highly educated, but the age range of the sample population did expand from 19–59 years. Jenkins (2008) included case examples of sibling relationships to identify prospective changes, which provided relevant context for why the sibling relationship is important and related to the coming out experience, but prioritized the role of assumed heterosexual siblings instead of the experience of the LGBTQ individual.

In Hilton & Szymanski's (2011) study, 11 of the participants reported that their sibling relationship changed in some form or another and 9 of the 11 heterosexual siblings described the disclosure as bringing them closer to their siblings. However, Hilton & Szymanski (2011) did note that this reaction and acceptance could be significantly contingent upon the racial make-up of the sample population, as she contended that based on data, people of color are less likely to be out to their families than white people. Despite the exclusive focus on the sibling relationship, Hilton & Szymanski (2011) explored the heterosexual siblings' experience as opposed to the sexual minority population and restricted the population sample to heterosexual individuals as opposed to including other sexual orientations or genders.

Current research related to sexual orientation disclosure is progressively placing more of an emphasis on siblings than previous quantitative and qualitative literature has recognized, yet a



deeper understanding of the process leading up to disclosure is missing. Hence, the current study provides a window for understanding the experiences of self-identified LGBTQ individuals with their siblings prior to, during and after the coming out process.

### **Protective and Oppressive Roles of silence and psychological effects of disclosure**

The correlation between the coming out process and mental health is established in relevant sexual minority research (Bringaze & White, 2001; Bybee, Sullivan, Zielonka & Moes, 2009; D'Augelli, Pilkington & Hershberger, 2002; Greene, 1994; Jordan & Deluty, 1998; Meyer, 2003; Morris, Waldo & Rothblum, 2001; Oswald, 2002; Savin-Williams, 1989; Savin-Williams, 1998b; Vaughn & Waehler, 2010) and the psychological impact of silencing one's sexual identity has been documented. However, many people continue to manage their sexual identity by passing as heterosexual and much of the research literature is limited to the white population, excluding the experiences of racial minority populations. Also missing from the literature are studies explicitly focused on the protective roles of silence and minimal research has been done on the negative reactions and results following disclosure.

Savin-Williams (1998b) and Bybee, Sullivan, Zielonka & Moes (2009) isolated the oppressive roles of silence and related psychological effects. Savin-Williams (1998b) contended that if youth do not disclose their sexual orientation to their parents, they might feel isolated and alienated from the family and fearful of parent's reaction if their sexual identity was exposed. In this study, Savin-Williams (1998b) used a sample population of gay, lesbian and bisexual youth, whereas Bybee, Sullivan, Zielonka & Moes (2009) used a sample population of gay and heterosexual adult men to explore the psychological effects of staying closeted. Findings from this study indicated that shame and guilt are not related to sexual orientation, but guilt is correlated to poor mental health, which among gay men is correlated to concealment and

closeted behavior. Bybee, Sullivan, Zielonka & Moes (2009) used several questionnaires and quantitative measurements to examine chronic shame and guilt in the mental health of heterosexual and gay men. This study looked at mental health from a developmental perspective as opposed to other related studies that have focused on youth.

Savin-Williams (1998b) discussed the negative mental health consequences of staying in the closet in addition to the positive effects associated with disclosure. Both, the studies Savin-Williams explored and Bybee, Sullivan, Zielonka & Moes' (2009) study, predominantly included white sample populations and neglected the negative realities minority populations may encounter post disclosure. Like Bybee, Sullivan, Zielonka & Moes (2009), Vaughn & Waehler (2010) used quantitative measurements to explore mental health effects of coming out, but used a larger sample population and included lesbian women, but did not use a heterosexual population for comparison. Vaughn & Waehler (2010) also measured Stress-Related Growth associated with coming out, as opposed to shame and guilt. Vaughn & Waehler (2010) found that the concept of Coming Out Growth (COG) is a common experience for sexual minorities and addressed how a more in-depth understanding of the positive effects of coming out as a sexual minority is a unique expression of positive psychology within the sexual minority population.

Instead of exploring the negative consequences of concealment and moving a step beyond identifying the Coming Out Growth that Vaughn & Waehler (2010) emphasized, Bringaze & White (2001) conducted their study to identify factors that contributed to success in the coming out process. Bringaze & White (2001) developed a set of suggestions based on the findings of the sample lesbian population used; associating with other sexual minorities was found to be most helpful while self-help resources, meditating and readings were the second most helpful and counseling as third.

While significant research literature related to mental health and coming out has focused on the oppressive role of silence, D'Augelli, Pilkington & Hershberger's (2002) study did address the negative consequences of disclosure. D'Augelli, Pilkington & Hershberger (2002) explored the relationship between past victimization based on sexual orientation directed toward LGB youth at high school and current mental health. The sample population used in this study also included youth from twenty different states in the U.S. and five provinces of Canada. D'Augelli, Pilkington & Hershberger's (2002) found that the earlier youth disclosed their sexual identity, the more they were victimized in high school, which was related to higher mental health symptoms. Based on their findings, D'Augelli, Pilkington & Hershberger (2002) contended that sexual orientation victimization could have an impact on youths' adjustment.

Research literature exploring the protective and oppressive roles of silence and mental health effects of disclosure have varied in methodology, sample population and focus; however, all demonstrated a significant correlation between disclosure and positive mental health effects. While many studies used quantitative measurements, qualitative analysis is void from the literature, limiting deeper understanding of the mental health implications. Familial links to or influence on mental health effects is also largely excluded from studies related to oppressive and protective roles of silence.

### **Cultural differences**

Research literature pertaining to cultural differences among sexual minority youth is scarce and most consistently, predominantly white sample populations are used for empirical studies. However, Dubé (as cited in Dubé, Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2001) contended that the perspective that sexual-minority youth are more similar to one another than different regardless of culture, ethnicity or race obscures crucial cultural differences. Theoretical and

clinical writings also proposed that the families of ethnic minority gays and lesbians are more homophobic than whites because many writers and researchers believed that ethnic minority families are more religious and traditional in their views and practices (Dubé, Savin–Williams & Diamond, 2001).

In three of the studies that Savin–Williams (1998b) explored, 60% of the youth in the studies were white, while the rest were primarily African American and single digit percentages of Latino, Asian and Native American youths. According to Savin–Williams' (1998b) analysis, among lesbians and college students of color, 20% fewer disclosed their same-sex attractions to their parents. Based on this study alone, it is evident that race plays an important role in the coming out experience and neglecting this element would deny a complete picture of empirical results.

Chan (1989) conducted one of the few empirical studies of ethnic and sexual minorities and looked at identity development among youth instead of the coming out process. However, Chan (1989) found that among sexual minority Asian Americans, the fear of rejection from family influenced participants to either stay in the closet or come out later in adulthood, when rejection was tapering. Savin–Williams' (1998a) study on Latino gay youth, found that the Catholic Church imposed internalized homophobia instead of their ethnicity. Although reasons for concealment in each of these studies differed, both Savin–Williams (1998a) and Chan (1989) found that racial and ethnic minorities had distinct experiences coming out or concealing their sexual orientation that were related to their race or ethnicity.

Hetrick & Martin (as cited in Dubé, Savin–Williams & Diamond, 2001) reasoned that sexual minorities of minority ethnicities are more likely to fear rejection from their family; and it is reasonable to believe that they would be less likely to disclose sexual orientation to their

family members or community. Based on the few studies that do consider the relevance of ethnic minority status, it is evident that there is a significant deviation from white populations in the coming out process and this is important for future studies to consider.

Grov, Bimbi & Nanin's (2006) study incorporated how race, ethnicity, gender and age interacted with the coming out process and results indicated that among GLB people of color, sexual identity remained secondary or tertiary to other identities and roles. This study also revealed that people of color come out to themselves and others and experienced sex with same-sex partners at roughly the same time as white people, but white people were more likely to be out to their parents than people of color. The methodology used in this study was quantitative, which negated individual perspectives and points of view, but nonetheless demonstrated how race affected the coming out experience.

Although minimal, the empirical research that has incorporated race and ethnicity all demonstrate that the impact on disclosure is significant and exposes a gap in current research. Research literature to date has not shown significant concern for race in sample populations, although it is feasible that this is in response to higher rates of concealment within racial minority populations and there is very limited empirical research concerning the negative consequences for ethnic minorities that do disclose their sexual orientation.

## **Summary**

Bell Hooks (as cited in Gorman–Murray, 2008) argued that family homes became sites of resistance to the brutal reality of racism, sexism and dehumanization. Based on this notion, it is crucial to consider how race and ethnicity factor into sexual orientation disclosure in order to gain insight into how homes can remain sites of resistance for racism, sexism and dehumanization, as well as homophobia. The coming out process in culmination with the sibling

relationship may be relevant to LGBTQ individuals in particular. Literature pertaining to these two areas provides a context for exploring the specific experience of LGBTQ individual's sexual orientation disclosure and their internal process.

The LGBTQ population is consistently expanding as disclosure rates increase and research related to sexual minority populations is trailing behind. However, the mental health effects of closeting ones sexual orientation are evident and continued silence could perpetuate already prevalent oppression, depression, low self-esteem and a compromised sense of self. To better serve this minority population, new research is needed to understand how LGBTQ individuals experience the coming out process in order to provide a context for this experience.

Despite the paucity of research surrounding disclosure and the sibling relationship, family and sibling research demonstrates that sibling relationships could be considered potentially important buffers against mental health effects of sexual orientation disclosure. Based on empirical findings, LGBTQ individuals first disclose to their mother, however, several studies have omitted siblings as an option and therefore neglected this potential. Although mothers have been consistently the first person in the family to be disclosed to, an understanding behind this reasoning is needed. Contradicting findings like Murray's (1994, as cited in Savin-Williams, 1998b) observation that siblings found out before parents motivates further exploration. Although results indicate that LGBTQ individuals faced prevalent verbal victimization from siblings after disclosure, they also experienced fewer negative reactions from siblings. Given the mental health effects of the coming out process and the sibling position within the family, new research is needed to address sexual orientation disclosure to siblings.

In the current study the researcher therefore sought to explore how LGBTQ individuals process and understand coming out to their siblings, with the goal of facilitating a supportive path for sexual orientation disclosure, and decreasing negative mental health effects

The specific areas of inquiry in this study were:

- (1) How LGBTQ individuals decide to disclose their sexual orientation to their siblings;
- (2) How LGBTQ individuals experience coming out of the closet to their siblings;
- (3) How LGBTQ individuals would disclose their sexual orientation to their family if they could repeat the experience.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **Methodology**

This research study sought to answer the question, “What are the experiences of LGBTQ individuals disclosing their sexual orientation to their siblings?” A qualitative, descriptive research design was used to examine the research questions in order to develop a deeper understanding of the experiences of LGBTQ individuals with regards to coming out to their siblings. A qualitative research method allows the research procedures to evolve as more observations are gathered, and permit the use of subjectivity to understand human experience (Miller & Garran, 2008). A qualitative method also allowed the researcher to spend more time with fewer subjects to focus on their individual experiences. A descriptive cross-sectional study was also preferred in part due to time constraints and because the researcher did not look at the causal processes over a length of time, but rather the LGBTQ individuals’ experience and meaning. Particular attention was paid to the process and feelings experienced leading up to sexual orientation disclosure, circumstances of actual disclosure to siblings as well as sibling response. Semi-structured, open-ended questions elicited narrative responses that described the emotions and internal processes of LGBTQ individuals’ disclosure.

Feminist research inquiry, which is inherently political and committed to work toward social change and liberation from oppressive ideologies (Rediger, 1996), was the theoretical underpinning of this research study. Inquiry strives to disrupt oppressive understanding by analyzing dominant and subjugated conversion. This is achieved with semi-structured



interviews, the principal means by which feminists have sought their respondents active involvement in the construction of data about their lives (Bologh, 1984). Open-ended questioning and gentle inquiries for deeper reflection are intended to create an environment of trust, which may facilitate interactive moments of insight (Baptist & Allen, 2008). During the course of conducting this study, interview questions also were reframed and reordered depending on individual responses and interpretations of the questions asked. Content analysis was the method for analysis.

### **Sample**

A total of eleven participants comprised the sample size for this study. Eight self-identified as queer individuals, one gay male, one lesbian female and one individual who chose not to identify were interviewed for this study. The sample of convenience consisted of two males (ages 29 and 26) and nine females between the ages of 25 and 32 years old. Population characteristics included: white, black and mixed race individuals of various ethnic backgrounds from middle-class socio-economic status. All participants were from two parent and single parent biological families with one or more siblings, English speaking and mentally able and documented. This researcher makes no claims that this research is statistically representative of the U.S. LGBTQ population at-large.

A non-probability sample and sampling were used due to time constriction and feasibility restrictions and convenience. The sample for this study emerged through networking within the Smith College School for Social Work community and through personal connections. The researcher contacted specific individuals, in person and via email whom she already knew fit the criteria or who may be able to refer the researcher to other LGBTQ individuals who may be interested in participating. Techniques for recruitment of study participants also included placing

an ad and flyer in the Creative Loafing Newspaper, networking with contacts through word-of-mouth, emails and “snowballing” (asking interview participants to tell others about the study). A sample of convenience was used to recruit respondents. Initially, participants for this study were geographically restricted to Philadelphia, PA, Atlanta, GA, Boston and Northwestern, MA and New York, NY. However, as snowballing continued, participants from geographic areas outside of the aforementioned locations volunteered to participate and geographic inclusion criteria expanded to include Providence, RI and San Francisco, CA.

### **Ethics and Safeguards**

All participants in this study were provided informed consent letters prior to a scheduled interview, which detailed the study itself, the purpose of the study and the criteria for participant eligibility. The informed consent letters explained participants’ rights and included potential benefits and risks of participation. Securing the information provided by participants and replacing names and any identifying information protected confidentiality. The benefit to participants in this study was their freedom to process their individual coming out experience in a safe and secure environment without interfering with any of their interpersonal relationships. In addition, their involvement contributed to available information for LGBTQ individuals and other sexual minorities, added to existing data, research and knowledge about LGBTQ individuals, including other sexual minorities, siblings and other family members of LGBTQ people. There were minimal risks to participation in this study. Potential risks for participants included distress or discomfort in exposing themselves to emotional vulnerability and revisiting a possibly difficult time in their lives. This researcher made referral sources available to participants who were interested in seeking the support of additional services in their geographic vicinity.

The interviews were conducted in person, in private or semi-public places that were designed to protect confidentiality. Phone interviews were conducted if the participant did not live in the same geographic area as the researcher. The interviews were audio recorded with the consent of the participant. To ensure confidentiality per Federal Guidelines and the mandates of the social work profession, once recorded this researcher transcribed the data, which were analyzed thematically and all identifying information was removed and/ or disguised. The coded information and other documents were password protected during research activity and will be stored for at least three years in a secured location, after which time all information will be destroyed if no longer needed by this researcher.

### **Data Collection**

The Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee approved this study (see Appendix A). The data for this qualitative study was gathered through face-to-face interviews as well as over the phone interviews. Participants were provided with the informed consent at the time of the face-to-face interview and in advance, if the interview was conducted over the phone. For over the phone interviews, once the participant signed the informed consent and the informed consent was received, an interview was scheduled. A tape recorder was used to record both over the phone and face-to-face interviews. All participants agreed to be tape-recorded and agreed to consent. The researcher manually transcribed all data.

Participant interviews ranged in length between 25 and 50 minutes and were composed of a series of twelve open-ended and direct questions. The open-ended questions used in this study sought to elicit narrative, in-depth responses from the participants and their subjective opinions and understandings of their experience before, during and after coming out to their sibling. Examples of specific interview questions included: 1) After acknowledging your sexuality, how

long was it before you self disclosed to your sibling(s), family and friends? To whom did you self disclose first? 2) What did you say to your siblings when you came out? 3) What expectations, if any, did you have in coming out to your sibling(s)? These interview questions were intended to yield individual information specific to the participants' experience. The questions posed in the interview also were intended to elicit unrestricted, open answers, guided by each participant in order to promote a sense of ownership of their experience.

There were some inherent biases in this study, which were monitored throughout the research. Issues related to racism, sexism and/ or heterosexism also were keen to this researcher. In order to maintain objectivity and non-bias of data, the researcher closely monitored participant selection and was in ongoing consultation with her research advisor for clarity and consistency in data collection and interpretation.

### **Data Analysis**

The demographic data collected was analyzed according to age, race, class, gender, religion and socio-economic status. The qualitative data was manually analyzed thematically, observing both similarities and differences in response. The transcripts were grouped in relation to each research question and then placed into categories based on emerging themes. Analytic induction observations of patterns and identification of themes also were part of data analysis.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **Findings**

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the experiences of LGBTQ individuals in sexual orientation disclosure to siblings. This section contains findings that are based on 11 interviews conducted with LGBTQ individuals who disclosed their sexual orientation to one or more siblings. The interview questions were designed to elicit information about the experience of the process of disclosure to siblings. Interviews began with participant demographic information, which included: age, race, ethnicity, gender, religion, socio-economic status and education. Upon completion of the demographic data, an in depth exploration of individual experiences and emotions leading up to sexual orientation disclosure to family members, with particular attention to siblings, moment of actual sexual orientation and the aftermath of disclosure. This study responded to three research questions: (1) How do LGBTQ individuals decide to disclose their sexual orientation to their siblings; (2) How do LGBTQ individuals experience coming out of the closet to their siblings; and (3) How LGBTQ individuals would disclose their sexual orientation to their family if they could repeat the experience. The data are organized as follows: 1) Demographics of participants, 2) Participant responses to research questions, 3) Findings generated during course of data analysis.

#### **Demographic Data**

Eleven individuals participated in this study. Eight participants were female and two participants were male. Four participants were 29 years-old; two participants were 26 years-old;

two participants were 27 years–old; one participant was 25; one participant was 28 years–old; and one participant was 32 years–old. When asked to identify their race, six identified as Caucasian, four identified as multi-racial (African American, Cherokee Indian and Irish; ½ Costa Rican and ½ Caucasian; ½ Japanese and ½ Caucasian; ½ Pakistani and ½ Caucasian), and one participant identified as black. With regards to ethnicity, two participants identified as Jewish; two identified as European and seven identified as mixed (½ Costa Rican and ½ American; ½ Japanese and ½ American; ½ African American and ½ Panamanian; American Indian; ½ Welch and ½ Baluchi; Irish European; Polish European). In terms of religion, three participants identified as Agnostic; two participants stated they were non–practicing (Catholic; Jewish); one participant identified as spiritual instead of religious; two participants did not identify with any religion; one participant identified as Catholic; one participant identified as Christian; and one participant identified as Jewish. Regarding education attainment, six participants had a B.A. Degree; two participants had a Masters degree; one participant had an M.D. Degree; one participant had a J.D. Degree; and one participant had a High School Diploma. In terms of socio–economic status, eight participants considered themselves middle class; two participants considered themselves upper–middle class; and one participant declined to answer this question.

A significant finding not specific to the demographic questions was how participants self–identified in terms of their sexual orientation. Seventy two percent (n = 8) of the participants identified as queer. Nine percent (n = 1) identified as lesbian; nine percent (n = 1) identified as gay; and nine percent (n = 1) chose not to identify with any sexual orientation.

### **Research Question Data**

Below are participant responses to each of the three research questions of this study.

Research Question 1:

How do LGBTQ individuals decide to disclose their sexual orientation to their siblings?

Findings:

Responses to this question were varied and eight distinct categories emerged: (1) Parents forced LGBTQ individual to tell sibling(s); (2) Circumstance presented itself; (3) Opportunity presented itself; (4) Wanted to be honest with sibling(s); (5) Parents, rather than participant, told sibling(s); (6) Sibling' acknowledged to the participant they knew; (7) Effort to bond/ obtain support; and (8) Looking for affirmation.

Nine percent ( $n = 1$ ) of the participants in this study did not decide to tell their sibling(s), but were pushed to tell their sibling by their parents. This participant shared:

... And I think when I had this girlfriend, my mother's anxiety was about who do I tell. I don't know what to keep a secret and what not to and she was like, you need to tell your siblings. And so I called my sister actually. And like I said, we don't have a phone relationship.

Eighteen percent ( $n = 2$ ) of the participants in this study decided to disclose their sexual orientation to their siblings when circumstances occurred that exposed the participant's lifestyle to the sibling, as reported below.

Well, I was living in New York and my sister came to visit me... I was like, my roommate's not my roommate. I was totally a huge coward about it. We were literally circling the block before going up to the apartment and it was sort of the last possible second. ...[before going into the apartment].

A second participant recounted; "so he came the first time to New York, to live with me. And when my brother got here I needed to figure it out... I needed to make sure he wasn't finding out some other way."

Twenty seven percent (n = 3) of the participants in this study decided to come out because the opportunity presented itself. This is reflected when one participant recounted;

It was my second year of college. She got off the phone and asked me if I was dating anybody. And I had just made out with this girl... so I told my sister about it and she was like not surprised. And I really emphasized that she not tell my parents.

Nine percent (n = 1) of the participants did not tell their sibling(s), but instead their parents told their sibling(s). This participant stated, "I don't remember telling him. I think my parents probably told him or he kind of figured it out." Nine percent (n = 1) had their sibling(s) acknowledge to the participant that they knew of their sexual orientation and the participant was given the information as opposed to providing it. This participant recalled;

Well, my sisters, I wasn't going to say anything to my family at all. At that time I didn't feel like I needed to because I was in a different state. I was in CT and they were in Georgia. Why did they need to know anything? My sisters were 11 and 9 and they said they wanted to have a sister date with me so we went to dinner. We went to Ruby Tuesdays. And they were basically like, we've been talking. The two of them. They were like; we want you to know that it's ok to be gay... I was so blown away. That they could just pick up on that and then talk about it amongst themselves and decide that they needed to bring it to my attention because I wasn't bringing it to theirs.

Nine percent (n = 1) of the participants in this study chose to come out to their sibling as an effort to bond with them and obtain their support. This participant openly stated; "Because it was kind of like, maybe we could bond over being gay." Only nine percent (n = 1) of the participants in this study chose to disclose because they were looking for affirmation from their sibling(s). Nine percent (n=1) fit into two categories because this participant had a different



experience with their brother than with their sister. This participant decided to disclose their sexual orientation with their sister because the opportunity presented itself and decided to come out to their brother because they wanted to be honest with him.

Research Question 2:

How do LGBTQ individuals experience coming out of the closet to their sibling(s).

Findings:

Participant responses to this question were classified into five categories: (1) Positive experience/ affirmed and validated; (2) Challenging experience/ questioned; (3) Acceptance; (4) Negative experience/ unsupportive; (5) Supportive experience with positive feedback.

The largest percentage of participants, thirty six percent ( $n = 4$ ), had a positive experience disclosing their sexual orientation to their sibling and received positive feedback. Referring to her sister, one participant stated,

She was totally cool. She was actually the coolest person of anybody I've had a conversation with... About this. Very enlightened. I was shocked. ... It wasn't even like I don't want to know kind of thing. It was like, I already know and you don't have to be stressed out.

Another participant reflected; "He was just like, cool, I love you. I'm happy for you. That was about it."

The second largest percentage of participants, twenty seven percent ( $n = 3$ ), had a positive experience disclosing their sexual orientation to their siblings and they felt affirmed and validated. Eighteen percent ( $n = 2$ ) of the participants in this study had a difficult experience coming out of the closet to their sibling because their sexuality was questioned and challenged. One participant recounted:

I didn't experience my family like, oh god, you're gay, or like you're going to go to hell. I didn't get overt bigotry. More like, are you sure you're attracted to women? Sort of like insidious disbelief? And you know what? I think that really ties into the fact that I'm femme presenting.

In remembering the experience, the participant also reflected:

I told her again the second time because I wanted to see if she would have the same reaction of questioning my attraction to males because it really bothered me the first time. I don't know. I just wanted to be affirmed.

The other participant in this category stated that her sister responded by saying; "well, everyone that I know that's had a girlfriend in college doesn't anymore, so we'll just see about you. Nine percent of participants in this study (n = 1) experienced acceptance in coming out to their sibling(s). In discussing the moment of disclosure, this participant remembered; "he was like ok.... And he like totally hung out with everybody all summer long and my friends and a bunch of people and he came back the next summer." Eighteen percent (n = 2) had a negative experience coming out to their sibling(s) and felt unsupported. This participant's sibling responded; "Yes! You're going to let mom and dad down too. So that was kind of an interesting reaction that I wasn't really expecting." This participant was the only participant whose sibling identified as gay.

Research Question 3:

How LGBTQ individuals would disclose their sexual orientation to their family if they could repeat the experience.

## Findings:

One hundred percent (n = 11) of the participants in this study did not respond to this question. What this non-response may mean is that participants were either relieved for the disclosure when it did happen, could not imagine an alternative experience than their own or their disclosure experience was not a traumatic event. It is also possible that they would disclose sooner and without their parents influence if they could repeat the experience.

### **Findings Generated During Data Analysis**

Other pertinent findings that did not directly correspond to the research questions included the settings of disclosure, method of disclosure, sibling response, prior knowledge of sexual orientation, length of time between acknowledging individual sexuality and sibling disclosure, feelings leading up to disclosure and afterwards and change within the sibling relationship.

A significant number of participants, sixty three percent (n = 7), 'came out' to their sibling(s) through face-to-face, direct (verbal intimate) contact. Face-to-face settings of disclosure included 'over dinner' or 'sibling conversation' or in the car. Eighteen percent (n = 2) came out to their siblings while at their parents' home and eighteen percent (n = 2) disclosed their sexual orientation while siblings were in their own home. One participant came out to their sibling in the car over 'sibling conversation'. Eighteen percent (n = 2) disclosed their sexual orientation over the phone and eighteen percent (n = 2) of the participants chose to come out in an indirect (written) or fluid manner, such as texting or Internet chat. One individual was informed by his sister of a female friend who wanted to go out with him and the sister texted the participant for approval to provide a phone number. The participant responded to his sister via texting that he was gay.

The most common method of disclosure included sharing information about participants' romantic relationship at the time. Forty five percent (n = 5) of the participants disclosed their sexual orientation to their sibling(s) by informing them of their current girlfriend or boyfriend, whether they initiated it or their sibling did. Eighteen percent (n = 2) of the participants 'came out' to their sibling(s) by specifically stating that they were gay. Nine percent (n = 1) of the participants shared their sexual orientation with their sibling(s) by informing them of their sexual partners in a pragmatic manner. These findings indicate that the participants in this study were not seeking approval from their sibling(s), but were transmitting or sharing information about themselves.

The length of time between when participants' awareness of their own sexuality and disclosure to their sibling(s) ranged from less than one year to ten years. Fifty four percent of sibling(s) (n = 6) remained closeted from their sibling(s) for five years or more. Eighteen percent of participants (n = 2) were closeted from their sibling(s) between one and five years and twenty seven percent of participants (n = 3) withheld their sexuality from their sibling(s) for less than one year. Several participants mentioned some awareness of their sexual orientation prior to disclosure to friends or family, but did not have the language to express it at the time or were not secure enough in their identity to share this part of themselves.

Prior knowledge of sexual orientation was prevalent among participants in this study however this information did not always surface. Twenty seven percent (n = 3) of the participants revealed that when they did share their sexual orientation with their sibling(s), their sibling(s) expressed that they already knew and were waiting for them to disclose. One participant stated; "Its funny because my sister said, I knew it! So I guess she always knew that I was but was waiting for me to come out and say it." This also was consistent with disclosure to

parents and friends. Nine percent ( $n = 1$ ) of the participants in this study had siblings that knew their sexual orientation prior to disclosure and brought it up before the participant. In describing this moment, the participant shared:

They could just pick up on that and then talk about it amongst themselves and decide that they needed to bring it to my attention because I wasn't bringing it to theirs. That something in them felt like, we need to say that to her. She needs to hear this from us.

The greatest percentage of participants, sixty three percent ( $n = 7$ ), had siblings that did not share that they knew prior to disclosure, but did not express surprise. It appears from this study population that siblings and parents innately knew of their siblings and children's sexuality without being told and that their open disclosure was a formality of sexuality disclosure.

However, one participant shared an alternative opinion. This participant stated; "What I found out was that the closer people were to me the less they suspected... For the most part people that were close to me did not know at all."

What was most revealing about this study were the participants feelings of "release" and "letting go of a secret" as well as a sense of permission to move forward in life. This is most clearly expressed when one participant shared; " Just like, I couldn't handle it anymore. I couldn't contain this secret... like I was living a lie. It wasn't even like I'm going to be brave and tell my secret. It was like I can't handle it anymore." Another participant expressed sentiments of moving forward with their life:

I just feel like I got to live my own life. I don't need to make sure that I do everything right. I just feel like I just am who I am and I have to make life decisions for me. I feel more able to realize... I think I was scared to maybe envision a life that was different from my parent's life. I feel more comfortable with that now.

Feelings shared by participants varied depending on their relationship with their sibling and circumstance of disclosure. Forty five percent (n = 5) participants in this study shared anxious or nervous feelings leading up to and directly before their disclosure to their siblings. Thirty six percent (n = 4) did not share feelings they had leading up to the disclosure to their siblings; and eighteen percent (n = 2) expressed that they had feelings of uncertainty or curiosity about their siblings' reaction prior to disclosure.

Findings from this study indicate that sexual orientation disclosure did affect a participants' relationship with their sibling. Forty five percent (n = 5) of participants expressed a deeper or closer relationship with their sibling directly related to coming out to them. One participant stated:

I think it's forced me to be a little bit more real. Yea and like this is who I am. Stand firm in who I am so they can step toward me. Because I was the little sister. I was cute. Cute and funny. And now I'm like this person who's ... I have to be solid in who I am to a degree. Stick to my guns about who I am. So that's forced them to look at me in a different way. So in that way, I guess we've become closer.

In describing the change in their sibling relationship, another participant captured the nature of how the relationship deepened in the following statement:

My sister... Has played this role in mediating my relationship with my parents on this point. I'm not even aware of all the work she's done. I know that she's played a role in explaining me to them and not only that but explaining the world and how the world views me to them. So in that way, it's made us a lot closer because we have this trust and rapport. And I feel deeply indebted to her and also very proud of the fact that we're sisters. It built up our relationship a lot to go through that. And I was not expecting her to

be such a support. We had no groundwork for that before. That's one way it's really changed my relationship with my entire immediate family but with my sister in particular. I think she trusts me.... She started confiding in me a lot more after we started openly talking about the coming out process and she sort of started communicating with me in a reciprocal way, which was amazing. Not something ever expected to have with her before when we were younger.

Thirty six percent ( $n = 4$ ) of the participants could not determine a change in their relationship with their sibling(s) based on their sexual orientation disclosure. Nine percent ( $n = 1$ ) of the participants expressed more distance in an already difficult relationship with their sibling(s) and nine percent ( $n = 1$ ) expressed a more estranged relationship from their sibling(s) since coming out, but did not attribute this to sexual orientation disclosure. This participant contributed these feelings to the sister's upcoming marriage and her sense of loss 'for celebratory union' as revealed in the following quotation:

Well, interestingly enough, my sister's planning on getting married in September so there's been a lot of wedding planning. I have felt this weird disconnect in a way. I don't know it just seems celebratory of this heterosexual union. And the fact that that's legal and not second-guessed and no one has said to me about the fact that same-sex couples cannot get married. That's becoming a growing reality for me. The fact that my sister is being so celebrated for being joined with a man. That's not going to be something that I'm going to experience and no one has acknowledged that.

Findings from this study population suggest that sibling(s) do not impact or influence the coming out process to other family members and friends. It appears that individuals make the decision to disclose to the first person they disclose to with or without sibling(s) support. Only

eighteen percent (n = 2) of participants disclosed to their sibling(s) before their parents, but both of these participants told their friends first. Fifty four percent (n = 6) of participants disclosed their sexual orientation to close friends and their parents before their sibling(s) while eighteen percent (n = 2) first disclosed their sexual orientation to a family member other than their parents or sibling. These participants expressed that they felt safest coming out to these particular family members, including a grandmother and basset hound. One participant remembered:

The first person that I actually told was my grandmother. My Dad's mother...I went over to her house one day. I was off work that day and I went to visit her and I told her. I said hey you know I want to tell you something. And she said well, come in my room and sit down and we'll talk. So I told her, I said, 'I'm gay and I haven't told anyone else'.

When asked about first realizing their sexual orientation another participant responded with sharing the member of their family to whom they first disclosed:

It's hard to say because I think I always kind of knew. Even when I was little, I told my Bassett hound that I was gay. I was 10 years old. .... The reason I told Parker [Bassett hound] was because I was pretty sure that Parker was also gay. He took it well. We had a little support group.

Only nine percent (n = 1) of participants told their sibling(s) before friends or other family members. Seventy two percent (n = 9) of the participants in this study inferred that their decision to disclose was prompted by external factors separate from sibling(s) support or input. In fact, it appears that participants in this study wanted to reveal 'the secret' more so than seek support from their sibling(s).



## **CHAPTER V**

### **Discussion**

This study examined LGBTQ individuals' experiences coming out to their sibling(s). Inquiry focused on three research questions: (1) How do LGBTQ individuals decide to disclose their sexual orientation to their sibling(s); (2) How do LGBTQ individuals experience coming out of the closet to their sibling(s); and (3) How would LGBTQ individuals disclose their sexual orientation to their family if they could repeat their disclosure? This chapter discusses responses to these questions as well as additional questions generated by data analysis and how the current study supports or refutes other research on sexual orientation disclosure with relation to siblings and related topics.

Findings from this study indicate that participants decided to come out to their sibling(s) for a myriad of reasons, which were dispersed over the entire study population. However, there was not one single consistent determining factor that contributed to a participants' decision to disclose their sexual orientation to their sibling(s). Many participants decided to come out because the moment of opportunity or circumstance presented itself; sibling(s) asked about participants' romantic life and opened the dialogue or participants wanted to include their sibling in their life, which involved relevant romantic relationships. In this study participants also reported that they decided to disclose only when 'the secret' seemed unbearable to withhold any longer. These motivating factors were not limited to disclosing only to siblings; it carried over to parents as well. Based on the interviews conducted, it appears that participants did not tell their

sibling(s) explicitly for the purpose of creating a bridge to their parents, other family members or society. It is difficult to determine whether or not these findings support or refute previous findings because this question has not directly been asked in other research.

Savin–Williams (2001) incorporated reasons LG individuals do not tell their parents, which included the belief that it wasn't the right time, fear of a negative response, not wanting to trouble the parent and not being close to a parent. Although this question was not explicitly asked or investigated in this study, some of these reasons carried over to the participants with relation to their sibling(s). A few participants who were older siblings did not want to burden their younger sibling(s), some participants did not believe it was the right time or necessary because of their life circumstance and geographic location and other participants did not tell because they were not close to their sibling(s). However, participants did not appear to withhold from their sibling(s) for fear of a negative response.

Murray (1994, as cited in Savin–Williams, 1998b) observed that siblings are told or discover their sibling(s) sexual orientation before parents. This occurred with only two participants in this study, but was otherwise refuted. Fifty four percent ( $n = 6$ ) of the participants disclosed their sexual orientation to close friends and their parents before their sibling(s). Based on who participants from this study first disclosed to, parents prevail as primary importance instead of siblings, but it appears that the fewest barriers existed with friends or peers, so they were told first. However, it is possible that siblings knew of the LGBTQ individual's sexual orientation prior to parents' knowledge, but was not communicated until after.

Minuchin (as cited in Bank & Kahn, 1977) contended that siblings turn to each other for protection when parental subsystems are disorganized. Participants in this study did not turn to their sibling(s) for protection related to their sexual orientation when parental subsystems were

disorganized, but some participant's sibling(s) did take on this role whether or not the parental subsystem was organized or not. One participant directly requested their sibling not disclose their sexual orientation to their parents, while another participant's siblings offered to do this before the participant could request it. Another participant's sibling is still protecting the participant in that they are keeping this individual's sexual orientation from the father, who the participant lives with, but this agreement was not directly communicated so much as indirectly understood. Although, Minuchin's notion did not contribute to deciding factors for sexual orientation disclosure to siblings, this study did partially support the concept. In addition, it is possible that LGBTQ individuals could have a less stressful coming out experience if they were to disclose to their sibling(s) before their parents or did rely on them for protection.

The ways and influences behind participants' decision to disclose were multiple and were based on the eight categories contained in Research Question 1. This study supports Savin-Williams (1998) and subsequent qualitative studies, which challenged the stage-sequential model and exposed significant variation and complexity in the coming out process. In addition to the complex arrangement of deciding influences to disclose sexual orientation, this study also supports Savin-Williams' (2003) notion that the act of disclosing sexual orientation is a major psychological decision and the family is one of the most challenging to disclose to. This is exemplified in the participants' feelings leading up to disclosure as well as the length of time between acknowledging individual sexual orientation and disclosure.

Forty five percent ( $n = 5$ ) of the participants shared anxious or nervous feelings leading up to disclosure and the length of time between acknowledgment and disclosure ranged from one to ten years. One participant disclosed to their dog ten years prior to sharing their sexual orientation with their parents and sibling, which speaks to the ambivalence many face when

deciding to disclose. The participant who has not disclosed to their father yet, first came out eight years ago, which also demonstrates the gravity of the decision. The majority of the participants in this study disclosed to their friends before family members, which also underscores Savin-Williams' notion that family is the most difficult to disclose to.

Similar to the range of reasons influencing participant decisions to disclose, LGBTQ individuals from this study had several different experiences 'coming out' to their sibling(s), which were largely dictated by the nature of the sibling relationship prior to disclosure. The four participants who had positive experiences disclosing their sexual orientation to their sibling(s) with positive feedback had a close relationship prior to disclosure. The three participants who had a positive experience disclosing their sexual orientation to their sibling(s) where they felt affirmed and validated also had strong relationships with their sibling(s) prior to disclosure. The one participant who had an explicitly negative experience disclosing to their sibling and felt unsupported had a pre-existing contentious sibling relationship.

Only three participants from this study challenged the idea that the experience and aftermath of disclosure was reflective of the sibling relationship prior to disclosure. Two of these participants had supportive and positive relationships with their sibling(s), but were questioned about the validity of their sexual orientation when they disclosed. This does not imply that the response was contradictory to the previous relationship as the questioning could derive out of concern or a lack of understanding. And, one participant was overwhelmed by her sibling's support considering they had not already developed a relationship that would necessarily secure such a response.

Congruent with D'Augelli, Grossman & Stark's (2008), this study also found that very few individuals reported directly negative reactions from their sibling(s). Only nine percent (n =

1) of the participants in this study had an overtly negative experience coming out to their sibling(s) where they felt entirely unsupported. And like D'Augelli, Grossman & Stark's (2008), this study predominantly found male siblings to have more negative reactions than female siblings, considering the one explicitly negative response came from a male sibling. However, several participants also did experience acceptance or positive reinforcement from their male sibling(s). And, two female siblings did question the participant's sexual orientation instead of outright acceptance, but the participants did not experience complete aversion.

Many participants in this study experienced direct conversation or contact with their sibling(s) about their sexual orientation, which supports Bank & Kahn's (1977) findings that siblings are more direct with each other and "tuned in" to each other in a way that is empathic. One participant's sibling(s) broached the topic before the participant and two participant's siblings responded to the participant by acknowledging their existing awareness of their sexual orientation, which speaks to how "tuned" in siblings were to each other. This is also exemplified by the method of disclosure participants used as well as the settings of disclosure and sibling(s) responses. Participants most frequently came out to their sibling(s) by sharing information about their romantic partner and disclosed in passing as opposed to an overt statement about their corresponding sexual orientation. This implies that participants were not seeking affirmation or validation, but were sharing a part of their lives. Most participants (n = 7) also came out to their sibling(s) through face-to-face, direct (verbal intimate) contact, which also signifies that participants occupied a level of comfort that allowed for in person confrontation.

Bank & Kahn's (1977) notion that siblings serve as sounding boards for one another and provide a safe laboratory for experimenting with new behavior where new roles are tried on was only partially supported by participant experiences disclosing to their sibling(s). This was

contingent upon an already established relationship and much of the time it appeared that participants were not “trying out” their new identity on their sibling(s) so much as informing them of it in a pragmatic manner. Although participants from this study did not experience overt bigotry in their experience disclosing to their sibling(s), it is clear that sibling status did not guarantee a “safe laboratory” for participants and many experiences were difficult regardless of whether they were positive or negative or they became closer to their sibling(s) in the end or not.

Several participants from this study reported that disclosure did affect the nature of their sibling relationship and expressed a deeper or closer relationship with their sibling directly related to coming out to them. These findings support the research conducted by Savin–Williams (1998b), who found that sibling relationships could deepen and become more positive and intimate over time after disclosure because of the shared secret. Findings from this study also are consistent with Hilton & Szymanski’s (2011) study, where all participants reported a change in their sibling relationship and eighty one percent ( $n = 9$ ) described the disclosure as bringing them closer to their sibling(s). However, several participants from this study did mention that other factors, such as living closer to each other, similar stage of life or common interests contributed to the change in relationship and that it was difficult to discern whether external factors or sexual orientation disclosure influenced the shift in relationship.

Previous research has not focused on how LGBTQ individuals would choose to disclose their sexual orientation to their sibling(s) if they were to repeat the experience. It is difficult to discern what the non–response to this question from this study indicates, but based on interview responses, it is possible to interpret that participants would have disclosed sooner to their sibling(s) or could not imagine an alternative experience than their own. This research question needs more exploration and can become the foundation for future research exploration.

This study focused primarily on coming out to siblings, but findings also relate to research regarding sibling and familial relationships. Schwartz' (as cited in Rothblum, 2011) family systems theory that suggests families are interdependent, and one person's behavior affects the dynamic of the other family members is supported by this research study. The participant who disclosed their sexual orientation to their sibling only in response to parental suggestion as well as the participant who withheld their sexual orientation from their sibling(s) because of parental suggestion particularly emphasizes this. Three participants' experiences also underlined Bank & Kahn (1977) in how they identified variability in the autonomy of the sibling subsystems from the parental system and simultaneously maintained that siblings collude and align with each other, often in efforts to resist vertical parental influence. This is shown by the participant who was confronted by her sisters about her own sexual orientation as well as the participant who declared her sibling not tell her parents after disclosing her sexual orientation and the participant who relied on her sister to be an intermediary between society and her parents.

This research study also supports previous findings surrounding the coming out experience. Based on the length of time that LGBTQ participants remained 'closeted', this research study supports Galatzer-Levy & Cohler (2000), who contended that society, with its strong emphasis on heteronormativity stigmatizes alternative sexual identities. Additionally, several participants' experiences from this study supported Lichenstein (1961, as cited in Galatzer-Levy & Cohler, 2002), who pointed to how contested sexual identities, such as being lesbian or gay poses problems for managing a sense of individual coherence. This is most explicit with the participant who experienced a deep depression for several years leading up to sexual orientation disclosure. In addition, several participants mentioned internal rules they

created for themselves facilitating their self-acceptance of their respective sexual orientations. This includes mentally allowing the possibility of same-sex attraction for various lengths of time as well as imposing personal ultimatums for sexual orientation disclosure.

With regards to the protective and oppressive roles of silence and psychological effects of disclosure, findings from this study reinforce Savin-Williams (1998b), who discussed the negative mental health consequences of staying in the closet in addition to the positive effects associated with disclosure. Although this research study did not explicitly focus on the psychological effects of disclosure, many findings demonstrate the struggle participants faced prior to disclosure and feelings of release after disclosure. One participant struggled to withhold her sexuality from her sibling(s) and felt like she was sacrificing her honesty and truth. Other participants waited to disclose because they did not want to experience their sibling(s) response regardless of whether it was positive or negative.

This study supports the correlation between disclosure and positive mental health effects in the overarching sense of relief most participants shared after disclosure and the anxiety preceding disclosure. However, the one participant who remains closeted from his father also has the lowest educational degree (High School) of all the participants and did not disclose socioeconomic status, which may signify a direct correlation between class status and disclosure. This participant withholds their sexual orientation for protective purposes, whereas the other participants were not in a situation of depending on a family member for their living circumstance. This implies that disclosure is a privilege that not all socioeconomic groups are afforded.



## **Strengths and Limitations**

The analysis used in this study allowed for a deeper understanding and exploration into LGBTQ participants' individual experiences. The uniqueness of each participant is beyond the realm of generalization. Thus, it is important to note that the group of LGBTQ individuals interviewed might not be representative of the general population of the LGBTQ community with siblings. Such representation would be impossible with such a small sample size ( $n = 11$ ).

The demographics of individuals in this study also limit this study's representativeness and generalizability. The eleven participants in this study had similar demographics in relation to socioeconomic status (9 of the participants were middle-class), level of education and sexual orientation (8 individuals identified as queer). Although there was some variance in gender, it is unknown if perspectives would have been different if the sample included more men or trans individuals. The demographic information of study participants was a strength and limitation in that the narrow age bracket and narrow socioeconomic range controlled certain variables but restricted population diversity.

In addition, only two interviews were conducted in person, and the other nine were conducted over the phone. This variable was not controlled. The different modes of communication may have impacted individuals' comfort levels and/ or information sharing, and the phone interviews did not allow for the researcher to interpret the nuances in facial expressions of affect that can be detected in personal interviews.

Due to the limited amount of time to conduct the research, the researcher was only able to interview eleven participants. Future research would benefit from a larger, more diverse sample size in addition to more insight related to participant sibling(s) gender and age difference as well as class and race. Despite the limitations of this research study, some of the strengths include:

ability to access a vulnerable and under-studied population, insight into subjective experiences and opinions, and a wide range of sibling relationships and birth orders.

The researcher's role as the enquirer was not without bias; as a queer younger sibling, she came with a set of assumptions, beliefs and values that influenced her interpretation of participant's narratives. Efforts to acknowledge existing bias did not preclude the possibility of bias.

### **Research Implications and New Questions**

This study provided an intimate look into the experiences of LGQ individuals as they have navigated coming out to their sibling(s). The nature of this study allowed LGQ individuals to search deeper into their experiences disclosing their sexual orientation to their sibling(s) and make meaning of this journey. Participants were provided space to share a variety of positive, negative, difficult and humorous encounters.

The information gathered in this study allows for greater appreciation of LGBTQ individuals experiences and needs. Sharing their stories and feelings, these LGQ individuals have given voice to a minority population and moved the discussion in new directions. From the data collected in this research study, it is evident that there is a greater need for an understanding of the coming out experience from multiple angles. Research implications include how siblings can be allies to their LGBTQ family member, the differences in the sibling relationship and the coming out process and issues pertaining to race and class diversity.

Future research may include LGBTQ individual perspectives on the positive and negative components of their sexual orientation disclosure to their sibling(s) and the most helpful or welcoming responses and reactions and reasons behind them. There is a need for studies to examine the experiences of step, half, and adopted LGBTQ individuals and their sibling(s),

LGBTQ individuals from non–middle class families, single–parent families, extended families, intergenerational families and families–of–choice who are both accepted and rejected by their sibling(s) but not their parents and transgender and intersex persons with siblings and racial and ethnic minority LGBTQ persons.

In addition, the homogenous population is removed from overtly discussing their sexual identity and thus not calling attention to themselves as sexual beings. One aspect of the coming out experience involves exposing a sexual identity. This study did not acknowledge the component of coming out that differentiates an individual's sexual identity exposure from specific sexual orientation exposure. A direction for future research may involve discerning the sexual identity component of coming out and discussing one's self as a sexual being from disclosing same–sex or gender attractions or relationships.

Research questions that have been generated through the course of this research study include: What would LGBTQ individuals want their sibling(s) to know? What advice could be given to LGBTQ individuals coming out to their sibling(s)? If the sibling relationship were different, how would sexual orientation disclosure be impacted? How has the sibling relationship impacted the LGBTQ ‘coming out’ process?

### **Clinical Implications**

For service providers, this study provides an in depth look at the struggles, joys and needs of these LGQ individuals. It opens a window into the ways siblings impact LGBTQ individuals. Issues of disclosing sexual orientation are frequently limited and this study underlines the importance of expanding how sibling relationships and coming out is addressed.

For other LGBTQ individuals with siblings, this study validates the uniqueness of each experience while also demonstrating commonalities. The emotional, positive and negative

experiences of participants will support others who might be undergoing a similar process and contribute to sibling(s) and other family members understanding.

Based on the findings of this study, service providers working with either an LGBTQ person or their family that includes a sibling, might acknowledge and educate family members of the uniqueness and importance of the sibling relationship and the coming out process. They might also validate the feelings of the parents and sibling(s) and note the challenges and differences in familial relationships once the LGBTQ identity has been disclosed. The clinician may want to assist individual family members and the LGBTQ individual in processing what the disclosure means for them.

Service providers need to be aware of the potential conflict that might arise when an individual comes out to their family and has the potential to unite or divide a family. Service providers also need to recognize the potential for gender and age differences in response to the coming out process. In addition, clinicians need to identify and differentiate personal issues that contribute to and exacerbate the coming out news.

In reviewing the question: How can clinicians provide culturally sensitive and appropriate care to LGBTQ members and their families to increase awareness about LGBTQ family issues?

Findings from this research suggest that service providers can be most effective in providing culturally sensitive and appropriate intervention to LGBTQ individuals and their families when they first confront their own issues and beliefs about their own and LGBTQ sexual orientations. LGBTQ individuals have some of the same basic needs and relationship issues as do the homogeneous population. They also experience disparities related to equity, discrimination and isolation as well as feelings of shame, disappointment, and fear of rejection

on a continuum. Unlike the homogenous population, LGBTQ individuals share a coming out process, which transcends a single experience or moment. The culturally sensitive clinician will treat LGBTQ individuals and their families with sensitivity, understanding and openness.

This is accomplished through understanding LGBTQ issues and culture and being aware of the unique forms of discrimination that LGBTQ persons face in today's society. This also can be accomplished by ensuring a safe and respectful treatment environment for all clients, not simply a select few.

Hearing previously silenced voices of the LGBTQ community can allow service providers, peers, colleagues and family members to be better informed and prepared to serve a population that has historically been underserved and marginalized. The voices of LGBTQ individuals with accepting and non-accepting siblings could prepare clinicians to better assist the LGBTQ community.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this study reinforced Savin-Williams' (1998b) notion that coming out to family is one of the most challenging and siblings are no exception despite how "tuned in" they are to each other. Disclosing sexual orientation to siblings is a distinct aspect of the coming out experience and assessing this is imperative. This research study adds to the existing literature by examining the unique relationships and experiences of LGBTQ individuals coming out to their sibling(s). This research study not only shed light on coming out to siblings but also a part of LGBTQ identity, the sibling relationship and the coming out experience independently. Based upon the findings from this research study, coming out to siblings is a complex experience that varies significantly and is unique to each individual within the LGBTQ community. Frequently there exists a parallel process for LGBTQ individuals who simultaneously may be trying to

understand their own sexuality as they are coming out to siblings, other family members, peers and society. According to this research study, all participants shared a potential fear of rejection, the experience of withholding and individual uncertainty.

LGBTQ individuals must negotiate a range of challenges when coming out within their families and society at large; none of which can be generalizable. Disclosing sexual identity within one's family has a profound impact on the subsequent dynamics and relationships between family members as well as a sense of individual cohesion and siblings are no exception. Siblings of LGBTQ individuals are in a unique position where they have the opportunity to support LGBTQ individuals and inform their experience. Participants in the current study demonstrated strength, resiliency and openness about who they are and how they want to be viewed. And while coming out is particular to the LGBTQ community, too often they report that they are viewed by their sexuality and not by their person. One participant especially demonstrated this need, as shown in the following excerpt.

I'm definitely proud of who I am. I love who I am. I want to be known as a person. I don't want to be known as XXX, the gay guy that lives in RI. I don't feel like it identifies every part of me. That's just a portion of who I am. There are other sides to me also. And they can be like you're gay, so you must also be this, this, and this. And that's not necessarily true. I just want to be known as a person with a great heart. A great brother, a great friend. That's what I want to be known as.

This participant's remark indeed speaks to the need for clinician understanding and awareness of the LGBTQ community. While the coming out experience is involved and an important component of sexual minority identity, it is unique to each individual in relation to their sibling(s) and beyond. LGBTQ persons and their families attribute multiple meanings to

coming out, which transcend a distinct beginning and end. The coming out process is an important element of LGBTQ identity, but it is not the only element. Likewise, siblings play a role in sexual orientation disclosure, but alone do not dictate the experience and just like sexual orientation does not solely make up one's identity, the sibling role does not make up the entirety of the process of disclosure. However, based on this research study, siblings are an underutilized source for the LGBTQ community who could influence their sexual orientation disclosure experience if provided the opportunity. One participant's response underscores the unique nature of disclosing to a sibling when she remembered, "I don't even think I got a full sentence out. Before she was like, she could see the pained look on my face. She was like I already understand all of this and you don't have to explain yourself to me".

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## Appendix A

### Human Subjects Review Committee Approval Letters



**School for Social Work**  
Smith College  
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063  
T (413) 585-7950 F (413) 585-7994

January 19, 2012

Rachel Gottesman

Dear Rachel,

You are officially approved by the Human Subjects Review Committee. Nice changes!

*Please note the following requirements:*

**Consent Forms:** All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

**Maintaining Data:** You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

*In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:*

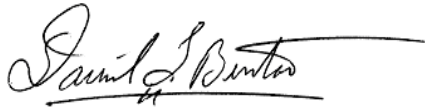
**Amendments:** If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

**Renewal:** You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

**Completion:** You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Thank you and good luck with your research.

Sincerely,



David L. Burton, MSW, PhD  
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Narviar Barker, Research Advisor



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**School for Social Work**  
Smith College  
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063  
T (413) 585-7950 F (413) 585-7994

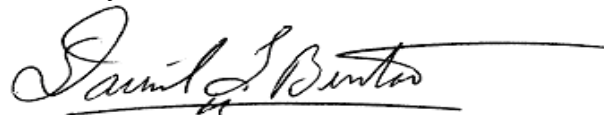
March 23, 2012

Rachel Gottesman  


Dear Rachel,

I have reviewed your request to expand the geographic inclusion criteria for the participants in your study to Providence, RI as well as San Francisco and I approve it. Thank you for keeping us informed. Nice work.

Sincerely,



David L. Burton, M.S.W., Ph.D.  
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Narviar Barker, Research Advisor

## Appendix B

### Informed Consent Form

Dear Participant,

My name is Rachel Mae Gottesman. I am conducting a research study on how LGBTQ individuals come out to their sibling(s) and what is the process leading to and after their disclosure. Data collected in this research study will be used for my Social Work thesis as well as in possible future presentations and publications.

I am interested in how LGBTQ individuals come out to their sibling(s) and what this experience was like for them. Inclusion criteria for this study are: (a) you self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer or are currently in a same-sex relationship; (b) have one or more biological or non-biological siblings; (c) have come out to your sibling(s) and (d) are between the ages of 24 and 36. As a voluntary participant of this study you will be asked to participate in a face-to-face or over-the-phone interview. Questions will be open-ended and will focus on your experiences (both positive and negative) in coming out to or during consideration of coming out to your sibling(s) and how this experience influenced or may influence your sibling(s) relationship. I also am asking demographic/personal information about you (gender, race, ethnicity, religion, educational degree and socio-economic status) in order to accurately describe the participants in this study. Should you choose to participate, I will provide the interview guide in advance. If you are participating in an over the phone interview, I will email you a copy of the interview guide one week in advance prior to the scheduled interview. If you are participating in a face-to-face interview, I will either hand deliver or email you a copy of the interview guide one week prior to the scheduled interview time.

The interview will take approximately 60 - 90 minutes depending on your responses. Interviews will be audio and digitally recorded, and will be coded to ensure your confidentiality. All materials (Consent letters, digital recordings, notes, etc.) will be kept private and secure for a minimum of three years after they are collected, as required by Federal regulations. After that time, all materials will be kept secure until no longer needed, at which time they will be destroyed. My thesis advisor will have access to the data only after I have removed all identifying information.

I'm sorry that I can't pay you for your participation in this research study. However, you may benefit from knowing that you have contributed to a body of knowledge about issues confronting the LGBTQ community as well as the mental health and service needs of this population, including those with sibling relationships. It is my goal that this study will lead to improved knowledge and information for social workers that work with individuals experiencing coming out to their sibling(s) and the impact of this process on the individual. You also may benefit from this study by voicing your personal experiences and having your perspective heard.

It is difficult to anticipate the risks of this study, provided that the content matter is personal and may be stressful for some. However, resources are available for additional support and interviews will be conducted in a manner to create minimal risks to participation in this study. Potential risks may include distress or discomfort in sharing your emotional vulnerability and in revisiting a possibly difficult time in your life. In an effort to minimize these risks, I will provide you a list of referral resources in the event you wish to talk with someone about your feelings.



Your participation is voluntary and you are free to refuse to answer any questions. You are also free to withdraw from the study at any time prior to April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2012. If you wish to withdraw, please call me or email me at the contact information provided and state that you do not wish to continue participating. If you decide to withdraw, I will immediately remove and destroy all data pertaining to your participation. All research material will be shredded upon withdrawal from this research study.

If you have additional questions or are concerned about your rights or any aspect of this study, please contact me at [REDACTED] or the Chair of Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee at 413.585.7974.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration.

YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY

Participant's Signature:

Date:

Researcher's Signature:

Date:

## Appendix C

### Interview Guide

#### Demographic Information

What is your:

Gender:

Race:

Age:

Ethnicity:

Religion:

Educational Degree:

Socio-economic status:

#### Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your relationship with your family members.
2. Please describe your relationship with your sibling(s) before coming out.
3. Is there anyone else in your family that identifies as gay, lesbian, bi-sexual or transgender or that you believe to be gay or lesbian?
4. When did you come to realize that you were gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or queer?
5. After acknowledging your sexuality, how long was it before you self disclosed to your sibling(s), family and friends? To who did you self disclose first?
6. How did you “come out” to members in your family? How did they react?
7. What did you say to your sibling(s) when you came out?
8. What expectations, if any, did you have in coming out to your sibling(s)?

9. What thoughts were you having prior to disclosure?

10. Do you think that your family, siblings or friends suspected your sexuality before you verbally came out to them?

11. How has your relationship with your sibling(s) and/ or other family members changed since you came out to them?

12. Is there anything else you'd like to share with me or that you think is important for clinicians or others to know ?

## Appendix D

### Recruitment Flier

## ***Seeking research participants for LGBTQ study***

### **Criteria for Participation**

LGBTQ individuals between the ages of 24 and 36 and have come out to one or more siblings and are English speaking.

### **Purpose**

This research is being done to examine the experiences of LGBTQ individuals disclosing their sexual orientation to their siblings and to engage the LGBTQ community as collaborators in expanding information around the coming out process.

### **Benefits and Risks**

The benefits to participation in this study are LGBTQ individuals' contributions to current research on sexual minority populations and outreach to the LGBTQ community. The value of providing insight and giving voice to the needs of the LGBTQ community will be invaluable to professional service providers, educators, administrators, and families.

It is difficult to predict the risk of participation for unknown participants. The subject matter may be very stressful for some individuals while minimally stressful for others, depending on their relation to the topic and experience coming out. A resource list will be available to those interested in additional support. There will be no monetary compensation for your participation.

### **When and Where**

Participants will partake in a 60 to 90 minute interview in a location of their choosing. Participants are invited to include any members of their support system who have been part of their coming out experience in the interview.

### **How**

If you or anyone you know might be interested in participating, please contact Rachel Mae Gottesman for more information.

**Contact Information**

Rachel Mae Gottesman  
Masters of Social Work Candidate, 2012  
Smith College School for Social Work

Phone: [REDACTED]  
Email: [REDACTED]

