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Kimberly Dasso
The Coming Out Process: An
Exploratory Study of Families with
More than One LGBTQ sibling

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore families in which there are more than one Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, or Queer identified sibling, specifically looking at the coming out process as influenced by another LGBTQ sibling. Twelve semi-structured, exploratory interviews were conducted with six sibling sets, aimed at exploring the perceived impact of having a LGBTQ sibling with regards to revealing one's sexual identity. All of the participants in this study reported experiencing some level of anxiety and/or fear before coming out, regardless of having an LGBTQ sibling. The majority of participants in this study reported feeling closer to their LGBTQ sibling after coming out. Of the six sibling participants in this study who came out first, all reported that they believed they made it easier for their sibling to come out. The majority of siblings who came out second (66%, n=4) claim that having a sibling who had already disclosed their LGBTQ identity made it harder for them to come out themselves. For second siblings to come out, a common response in this study was fear and worry in anticipation that their parents would take it hard having not just one, but *two* gay identified children. Further findings regarding sibling aggregation of homosexuality, coming out, family response, and sibling relationship are discussed and compared to current relevant literature. This study concludes with a discussion of the limitations of this study, implications for social work and recommendations for future research.

**THE COMING OUT PROCESS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF FAMILIES WITH MORE
THAN ONE LGBTQ SIBLING**

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

Kimberly Dasso
2015

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study would not be possible without the six sibling sets willing to share their stories of coming out. Thank you for your courage, depth, and vulnerability. I am deeply honored to have listened to your stories, document your experience, and learn from your knowledge.

To my family, for your unwavering support and belief in me during my Smith journey. I am grateful everyday to have such amazing people to call my family. Thank you. I love you.

To my friends at Smith and beyond - your curious minds, laughter, encouragement, and love keep me grounded. Kate, our cappuccino thesis dates and city adventures have a very special place in my heart. This process would not have been the same without you. Jlynn, your steadfast support, and ever-present laughter are a gift in my life.

Lastly, to my thesis advisor, Dr. Krishna Samantrai, thank you for your guidance and patience throughout this process.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

The purpose of this research project is to explore families in which there are more than one lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer (LGBQ) sibling, specifically looking at the coming out process as influenced by another LGBQ sibling. Coming out, or disclosing one's sexual identity to another person, is arguably one of the most challenging and transformative processes in a lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or queer person's life. Although "coming out" can happen several times over a LGBQ person's lifespan, many agree that the disclosure of one's sexual identity to one's family is most significant.

Several studies both large and small in scale, have reported that sexual orientation appears to be familial (Bailey & Benishay, 1993, Coghlan, 2014, Pillard, 1996, Pillard & Weinrich, 1985). It has been found that homosexual men tend to have more gay brothers, and lesbian women tend to have more lesbian identified sisters (Baily, Pillard, Neale, and Agyei, 1993; Bailey & Benishay, 1993). Additionally, research indicates that sibling relationships help children discover and gain skills such as affection, friendship, provision of advice and mentorship, offering protection from outside threats, and serving as mediators in times of conflict (Harvey, 2007). Even though studies have shown the importance of sibling relationships, and the familial occurrence of homosexuality, there are virtually no studies that exist on this topic.

The influence of family, particularly parental figures of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth has been shown to be one of the most significant problems that LGBQ youth face (Bregman,

Malik, Makynen, & Lindhal, 2012). Several factors may influence how an individual chooses to disclose their sexual identity to other people.

Theoretical Framework

Symbolic interaction theory emphasizes that families are social groups and individuals that develop a concept of who they are and their identities through social interaction (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). If an individual recognizes that they are disliked by others, they are much more likely to have a negative self-perception. Symbolic interaction theory postulates that through family social groups, individuals form not only their identity, but also their values and way of looking at the world.

Empirical studies have shown that adolescent and young adults that experience rejection report lower self-worth, while adolescents who perceive support from parents have been found to have high self-esteem. Taken together, symbolic interaction theory and empirical studies of parenting suggest that parental responses will significantly influence sexual minority identity development in adolescents and young adults (Bregman, et. al. 2012). Overall, parents and siblings have been determined to affect youths' adjustment including their self-esteem, views of their sexual orientation (internalized homophobia or personal negative attitudes about their sexual orientation), and their mental health (D'Augelli, et. al, 2008). This is important information with regards to a sibling's observation of a parent's rejection or acceptance of their LGBQ sibling and subsequently, their decision of how and when to come out.

Persons who are out are more likely to access LGBQ supports and have less internalized homophobia. Using a symbolic interaction theory framework, we see the importance and relevance of families influence on one's identity and self-regard. Given this knowledge, family (including guardians and siblings) reactions' to a member of the family coming out, is highly

likely to play a markedly important role in a youth's decision of how, why, and when to disclose their sexual identity. Further exploration on this impact is needed.

Methodology

In order to further explore the phenomenon of LGBQ siblings and influence on the coming out process, this researcher conducted a qualitative, exploratory study using a semi-structured interview questions. Six sibling sets (12 individuals) were interviewed via Skype or face-to-face. Using open-ended interview questions allowed participants to decide for themselves what is most important to share about their experience and helped to capture basic human emotions such as love, joy, pain, and despair.

This topic is relevant to the field of social work because it explores a largely unstudied, but relevant phenomenon-LGBQ siblings. Findings from this study may help inform family members and clinician's knowledge and awareness of LGBQ experiences, struggles and successes, in families in which more than one lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer sibling exists. Additionally, findings from this study may help illuminate how, why, to whom and when LGBQ individuals come out.

Organization of Chapters

This study begins with a list of definitions pertinent to this study, followed by a comprehensive review of literature relevant to this topic. Next, the methodology for this study is described in chapter three. Finally, findings from the qualitative interviews are presented, followed by a discussion of how these findings relate to current literature and how it applies to the field of social work.

Definition of Terms

In order to better understand this research, it is important to define some key terms used throughout this study. To start, the acronym LGBQ is used throughout the research. This stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer. I would like to acknowledge that the acronym LGBQ does not include T, for transgender, as is commonly used in the queer community. I do not want to discount the importance of transgender issues, especially the coming out process. However, due to the small scale of this study, I did not feel that I could do justice to fully represent both the transgender coming out process of gender identity as well as sexual orientation disclosure.

Definition of Key Terms used in this Study

Bisexual- A person emotionally, physically, and/or sexually attracted to both men and women.

This attraction does not have to be equally split between the genders. (LGBT Resource Center, 2013)

Coming Out- may refer to the process by which one accepts one's own sexuality, gender identity, or status as an intersexed person (to "come out" to oneself). May also refer to the process by which one shares one's sexuality, gender identity, or intersexed status with others (to "come out" to others). This can be a continual, life-long process for homosexual, bisexual, transgender, and intersexed individuals (LGBT Resource Center, 2013.).

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

Gay- term used to describe males who are attracted to males in a romantic, erotic, and/or an emotional sense. Not all men who engage in "homosexual behavior" identify as gay. This term is also used to describe the LGBTQ community as a whole, or as an individual identity label for anyone who does not identify as heterosexual (LGBT Resource Center, 2013).

Heterosexism- assuming every person to be heterosexual therefore marginalizing persons who do not identify as heterosexual (Gender Equity Resource Center, 2013).

Homosexual- A person primarily emotionally, physically, and/or sexually attracted to members of the same sex (LGBT Resource Center, 2004).

Homophobia- The irrational fear and intolerance of people who are homosexual or of homosexual feelings within one's self. This assumes that heterosexuality is superior (Gender Equity Resource Center, 2013).

Lesbian- term used to describe female-identified people attracted romantically, erotically, and/or emotionally to other female identified people (LGBT Resource Center, 2004).

Pansexual- A person who is sexually attracted to all or many gender expressions (LGBT Resource Center, 2004).

Queer- can be defined as a political statement, as well as a sexual orientation, which advocates for breaking the binary thinking both seeing sexual orientation and gender as fluid. A person who is attracted to multiple sexes or genders may identify as queer (Parents, Families, and Friends, of Lesbians and Gays, 2015).

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

The purpose of this project is to investigate LGBTQ siblings and their influence on each other's coming out process. The literature review in this chapter will cover four topic areas: 1) sibling aggregation of homosexuality, 2) the coming out process, 3) family response to coming out, and 4) relationships between gay siblings. The first topic, sibling aggregation, shall be investigated to review the prevalence of LGBTQ siblings and define the need for this study. A literature study regarding the coming out process will be explored to inform the question of why, when, and how LGBTQ people come out. The family response to the coming out of a family member will be researched in pertinent areas regarding the coming out process. The final section addresses gay sibling relationships - investigating the influence on one another's identity, comfortability with one's homosexuality, and impact on the sibling relationship.

Sibling Aggregation of Homosexuality

The occurrence of homosexuality in families is not a new question, but something that scientists and psychologists have questioned for many years. Researchers have long thought that biological, social, and psychological factors all play an important role in determining one's sexual orientation identity, however the debate continues as to which of these factors are most influential.

Several studies both large and small in scale, have reported that sexual orientation appears to be familial (Bailey & Benishay, 1993, Coghlan, 2014, Pillard, 1996, Pillard & Weinrich, 1985). In the past 120 years, this view was shared in a variety of ways by

distinguished sexologists von Krafft-Ebing (1901), Ellis (1922) Hirschfeld (1936) and Freud (1959) (as cited in Pillard, 1996). In a 1922 study, Ellis reported a positive family history in 24 of 62 cases. This report does not specify the number of relatives or degree of relationship, but the prevalence of gay relatives remains significant. Hirschfeld (1936) noted a concordance for homosexuality in six pairs of seven identical twins (Pillard, 1996).

In a 1985 study of the prevalence of familial homosexuality, Pillard and Weinrich interviewed 51 predominately homosexual and 50 predominately heterosexual males, it was found that the homosexual men identified 22% of their brothers to be homosexual. Comparatively, the heterosexual men in the study identified 4% of their brothers to be homosexual. At the time of this study, the majority of knowledge regarding overt homosexual behavior was derived from the national surveys of sexual behavior by Kinsey and his colleagues. Although the Kinsey study was large (20,000 participants), estimates of the extent of homosexual activity in men has been criticized as being skewed due to the substantial inclusion of prison inmates, who are thought to have more homosexual experiences than individuals who have never been incarcerated.

In an identical study on female homosexuality, Baily, Pillard, Neale, and Agyei (1993) found 25% of sisters of homosexual females to be homosexual or bisexual compared to 11% of sisters of heterosexual females. In a study of female aggregation of homosexuality (Bailey & Benishay, 1993) 12.1% sisters of homosexual females were rated homosexual, while only 2.4% of the sisters of heterosexual sisters were rated homosexual. Female homosexuality appears to be vastly understudied in comparison to male homosexuality; numerous studies declared difficulty in studying lesbian and bisexual-identified women due to the small percentage of female homosexuality cited as 1 to 3% and prevalence of women coming out later in life (Pillard &

Weinrich, 1985, Bailey, Pillard, Neale, & Agyei, 1993). Numerous studies on sibling aggregation of homosexuality expressed the need to further study female aggregation of homosexuality at a future date (Coghlan, 2014; Bailey, Pillard, Neale, & Agyei, 1993; Pillard, 1996; Pillard & Weinrich).

Interestingly, studies have found that gay male individuals tend to have an excess of gay and bisexual brothers, but no excess of lesbian sisters (Levey & Hammer, 1994, Pillard & Weinrich, 1985, Pillard, 1996). Likewise, female homosexuals have been found to have more homosexual and bisexual sisters, while having a non-significant trend toward male gay brothers (Bailey & Beneshay, 1993, Bailey, Pillard, Neale, & Agyei, 1993, Pillard, 1996). Possible explanations for the lack of finding a link between homosexual opposite-sex siblings could be that thus far, studies regarding this topic have been small in scale and may have not picked up a relatively less significant correlation. Additionally, research has found that female homosexuals disclose their sexual identity on average ten years later than male homosexuals (Bailey, Pillard, Neale, & Agyei, 1993; Pillard, 1996). Because of this, studies looking at siblings of the same age group may have overlooked female homosexual sisters.

The most recent and largest study on gay genetics reviewed 409 pairs of homosexual brothers, including twins (Coghlan, 2014). The study, led by Alan Sanders, involved collecting blood and saliva samples in the search for evidence of single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs), differences of a single letter in the genetic code and measuring to the extent of which each of the SNPs were shared by brothers in the study. The only trait unequivocally shared by the 818 men in the study was homosexuality. All other traits such as hair color, height, and intelligence varied amongst brother-to-brother and other men in the study. Therefore the only common SNPs could be correlated with sexual identity. Sanders and his team found the two most common

SNPs among the men: the Xq28 and the 8q12 regions on the X chromosome and chromosome 8. This does not yet mean that two “gay genes” have been discovered; each of these regions contains many genes. Therefore the next step in the study will be to narrow down the genes and compare them to heterosexual men.

Several researchers in the field expressed excitement about the findings of this study, stating that this proves that homosexuality is not just a “chosen lifestyle.” This study did not look at homosexual female twins, and cited the need for future research in this area.

While it is still debatable as to what is most influential in determining human sexuality: genetics, hormones, or environment, there is substantial evidence that homosexuality is familial. Gay/lesbian/bisexual/queer siblings exist, but have been vastly understudied in regards to developmental influence on one another.

The Coming Out Process -- why, when, how, and to whom LGBTQ people come out.

“Coming Out” as referenced in this paper is defined as the process of self-disclosure of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or queer individual’s disclosure of their sexual orientation to oneself and others. The notion of “coming out” reflects the idea that everyone is heterosexual until proven otherwise. Because sexual identity is not necessarily a visible characteristic, LGBTQ individuals are faced with the complex and difficult task of deciding how, when, and to whom to disclose their sexual identity. Currently the majority of research reflects issues of LGBTQ youth; while little research reflects people who come out later in life. This may be due to youth’s underdeveloped internal resources to manage a still homophobic world, as well as psychological and financial dependency on adults.

Recent research on same-sex attracted youth indicates that decreased social stigma has resulted in LGBTQ youth coming out at younger ages. A 2008 study by Drasin et. al. surveyed

national survey data and found that the average age of same-sex behavior, viewed as biologically/environmentally mediated, had not significantly changed over the past 50 years. However, Drasin et al. found that social disclosure (telling friends or family members of same-sex attraction) was reliably happening at younger ages (as cited in Dunlap, 2014).

Research has increasingly and consistently shed light on the various benefits of coming out. Studies have associated improvements in mental health with greater self-disclosure and a positive gay or lesbian identity (Cain, 1991; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003; Beals & Peplau, 2001; Bradford & Ryan, 1987). Savin-Williams and Ream (2003) highlighted various benefits and reasons for coming out including the desire to share one's life with others, ending concealment, gaining freedom, increasing intimacy, highlighting autonomy and individuality, asserting agency and accountability, and maintaining honesty and genuineness. Even with the option of some individuals to conceal their sexual orientation, the gay and lesbian community has discovered that their community benefits when individuals choose to disclose their sexual orientation (Corrigan & Matthews, 2003). Bradford and Ryan (1987) showed that the mere act of coming out to other homosexual men and women facilitated the development of social support networks in general and in lesbian and gay communities in particular.

Several studies have produced information regarding the negative effects of remaining closeted including low self-esteem, symptoms of anxiety and depression, awkwardness in interpersonal relationships and feelings of shame (Chekola, 1994; Gartrell, 1984; Savin-Williams and Ream, 2003). Reflecting on common reports of lesbian clients who are closeted, Gartrell (1984) reports several women remark on the intense anxiety felt when topics of boyfriends, children, or marriage come up. These clients expressed the pain and tremendous expenditure of energy it takes to keep their partners concealed and remain closeted.

The process of coming out – how, when, and to whom they come out

There are many factors that LGBQ people must consider when deciding how, when, and to who they disclose their sexual identity to. While several studies have shown that coming out is correlated to increased self-esteem and improvements of mental health, there are several factors that LGBQ people must consider before disclosing their sexuality to others. Some of the possible costs of coming out can include physical harm, social avoidance by others, social disapproval, self-consciousness, and self-fulfilling prophecies (Corrigan & Mathews, 2003). Savin-Williams and Ream (2003) also found that individuals commonly noted that the reason they choose not to disclose includes provocation of parental guilt and disappointment, deterioration of interpersonal relationships, and becoming a target for bigotry or even violence.

Other important factors include the possibility of job and housing discrimination. Interviews of gay and lesbian individuals have indicated a fear of a variety of negative repercussions of disclosure, including social isolation and ostracism, job loss, or career derailment (Friskopp & Silverstein 1996; Griffin, 1992, as cited in Ragins, Singh, & Cornwell 2007). Stigma theories propose that individuals face two independent experiences: (1) enacted stigmas in which direct discrimination is experienced, and (2) felt stigmas, in which one fears discrimination. It has been found that most often, direct discrimination is less often experienced, moreover, the fear of discrimination is more prevalent (Ragins, Singh, & Cornwell, 2007). This finding may be due to the fact that those who fear the discrimination are likely not out, and so it is not yet known if their fear is actualized.

Another possible barrier to coming out involves the role of internalized homophobia and homonegativity, in which a set of negative attitudes towards homosexuality are incorporated into the self-image of homosexual individuals, making the coming out process to others, much less

oneself, even more difficult. Hostility towards LGB people negatively shapes their self-perception, leading toward a weak self-esteem, feelings of social stigmatization, and shame (Thomas, Mience, Masson, & Bernousi, 2014). The feeling of stigmatization brought by homosexuality pushes homosexuals to have negative cognitions, reinforcing feelings of isolation and exclusion. This results in gay and lesbian individuals hiding their sexuality as a protective factor and due to feelings of shame.

Alternatively, access to gay affirming organizations, social supports, and positive media portrayal of gay, lesbian, or bisexual people, acts to encourage identity expression, as well as connect LGB individuals to others in the queer community. Waldner and Magruder (2008) found that perceiving social resources encouraged sexual identity expression within the family because the individual was not solely reliant on the family for social, emotional and monetary support. Additionally, these perceived resources could help the individual to overcome the effects of negative family and/or peer response.

Families are often not the first people LGB people choose to reveal their sexual identity to, but rather close friends or peers. Youth tend to assume that same age peers will better handle the disclosure and generally be more open-minded regarding gay, lesbian, and bisexual identities. Research has shown that same age peers are likely to be told first, followed by mothers, siblings, and lastly, fathers. Disclosure to family members has been shown to occur 3 months to over one year after the initial disclosure (Harvey, 2007).

A study by Roy Cain (1991) interviewed 38 gay men regarding decisions for coming out. Data from this study revealed six types of disclosures: (1) Disclosing the secret of being gay is correlated with psychological well-being, therefore, coming-out may serve a therapeutic purpose for an LGB individual. (2) Disclosing may increase closeness in a relationship that were

previously distant due to secrecy. (3) Individuals might come-out to solve interpersonal problems, for example, coming out to avoid constant questions about an opposite sex partner or whereabouts when involved in an LGB activity. (4) Coming out as a preventative measure, for example, if someone might accidentally find out that that person is gay. (5) Some people come out for political reasons, believing that the more people that come out, the more the homophobic majority will diminish their prejudice. (6) Finally, some people come out spontaneously, with an on-the-spot decision or slip of the tongue.

Family Response

Coming out, in particular to family members, can be described as one of the most difficult endeavors faced by a lesbian, gay, or bisexual identified person (Savin-Williams, 2003). D'Agelli, Hershberger, and Pilkington (1998) found that same-sex attracted youth (ages 14-21) still living at home who disclosed their sexual orientation to their parents or caregivers were more likely to experience suicidal ideation, particularly when parents were unsupportive. Several factors such as social and emotional isolation, educational issues, peer bullying, family disruption, interpersonal relationship struggles, violence and abuse are commonly cited problems related to LGB individuals (D'Augelli, A.R., Hershberger, S.L. & Pilkington, N.W., 1998, Hunter, Rosario, Schrimshaw, 2011, Reeves, et al 2010, Ryan, et. al. 2010). Weinburg (1972) and Jones (1978) found negative parental reactions to disclosure consisted of two responses: (1) negative misconceptions of homosexuality and (2) feelings of failure and guilt (as cited in Waldner & Magruder, 1999). The result of this reaction was to treat the child accordingly – as stigmatized and stereotyped, which often resulted in severed family ties. Additionally, there is a correlation between mental health problems and parental rejection, while a positive relationship

with parents who are aware of their child's sexual LGB sexual identity is related to fewer mental health problems (Ryan, Huebener, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2009).

Hetherington & 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. They found that gender plays a factor - father and brothers were more likely to be verbally abusive regarding the "outing" vs mothers and sisters. Family systems also played an important role in a family's ability to process the disclosure of and LBG family member. Families with rigid rules and boundaries had a more difficult time adjusting to an LGB family member than a family with more fluid rules and boundaries (p. 334). Hetherington & Lavner (2008) suggested a need for researchers to look into the intersections of one's various identities - for example, race, religion, and/or gender.

Alternatively, an Australian study by Gorman-Murray (2008) looked at homes in which LGBQ youth were supported by their families, adding much needed information to current literature in which the focus is primarily on the consequences of a heteronormative family structure.

A longitudinal, quantitative study by D'Augelli, Grossman, Starks, & Sinclair (2011) looked at the developmental and psychosocial factors over a two year period of 196 GLB youth, 15-19 years of age. They compared youth who were out to their parents vs. youth who came out over the time of the study vs. youth who remained closeted. They found that parent's lack of knowledge led to lack of GLB support. A variety of testing measures were used to assess self-esteem, personal mastery, internalized homophobia, and mental health. It was found that youths

in the study who were “out” had less internalized homophobia. Youth who remained closeted held high fears of parental rejection, which remained consistent over the two years of the study. These closeted youth were rated the highest scores in closeness to their parents, and also a higher fear of disappointing them (p. 193).

Families Acceptance of LGB member

As with heterosexual youth, the families of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer identified youth rely heavily on the support of their family of origin. Recent empirical studies have found that there is a correlation between healthy family functioning and LGB mental and physical health. A study by Reeves et. al. (2010) confirmed the relevance of adaptable and cohesive families to maintaining more contact with their LGB family member, and prevalence of more knowledge of LGB issues. Ryan, Russell, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez (2010) studied family acceptance in adolescents and the health of LGBT young adults and found that young adults who reported high levels of family acceptance scored higher on a measure of self-esteem, social support, and general health. Young adults who reported low levels of family acceptance had significantly worse scores in regards to depression, substance abuse, and suicidal ideation and attempts.

Reeves et al. (2010) and Ryan et. al (2010) both contribute valuable information to the importance of family acceptance, support, adaptability and cohesion, however they both have limitations with regards to representation of study subjects as representative to the general population of LGBT individuals. As found with several studies regarding LGB issues, the samples were found via support groups or were self-selected making them more likely to have some comfort level with LGB issues in order to fill out a survey.

Sibling Relationship

While research is clear about the importance of the parental relationship to the LGB child, there is a significant gap in research about the LGB relationship to siblings (D'Augelli, Grossman, & Stark, 2008). Eighty percent of children in the United States grow up with at least one sibling (Hilton & Szymanski, 2011). Research has shown that a positive sibling relationship results in higher self-esteem, fewer feelings of loneliness, and fewer behavior problems, while sibling rivalry is linked to depression, loneliness, and low self-esteem (Sanders 2004, as cited in Hilton & Szymanski, 2011). Gay and lesbian individuals may experiment with coming out by first telling their siblings and peers with the hope that they will be more open minded and accepting than their parents (Strommen, 1993). Disclosure of LGB sexual identity is not generally disclosed to the family system as a whole, but rather happens in incremental steps to selected family members. When coming out to a sibling, lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals often choose to tell the sibling with which they have the closest bond first (DeVine, 1984).

D'Augelli, Grossman, and Stark (2008) study looked at parents and siblings reaction to and awareness of youths' sexual orientation. They found that youth with a sibling who did not know expected more negative reactions from those siblings. More frequently female siblings knew in advance than male siblings, and female siblings were more likely to have positive reactions than male siblings. Youth who had come out to their siblings had lower internalized homophobia scores and having siblings makes a difference in the age of disclosure. D'Augelli, Grossman, and Stark (2008) also found that the more siblings a LGB person has, the more complicated the process of coming out can be due to the considerations of different people's reactions.

Hilton & Szymanski (2011) studied the change in relationship to siblings after sexual orientation disclosure. Using a qualitative approach, they interviewed 14 heterosexual biological siblings of LG persons after they learn that their sister or brother is LG. The study found that the heterosexual sibling typically processed the information initially with shock, followed by looking back and confirming the disclosure, and then experiencing feelings of protectiveness or concern for their sibling's future. The disclosure of sexual identity tended to make siblings rate their relationship closer if they considered themselves close before, or more distant if they were not close to begin with. These siblings also noted that they experienced anger and/or disappointment with their parents if they reacted negatively to the LG sibling's "outing."

While the Hilton and Szymanski (2011) and D'Augelli, Grossman, and Stark (2008) studies fills in gaps needed in research regarding sibling relationship and LGB sexual identity disclosure, they both have limitations due to its sample size and sampling method. The subjects in the Hilton & Szymanski study were recruited from LG support groups which may make the siblings more likely to be accepting of their sibling's sexual identity, while the D'Augelli, Grossman, & Stark (2008) study recruited at community based organizations.

Summary

This literature review was meant to explore the pertinent and current research relevant to the research question. Key points from this literature review are listed below:

- ❖ Although it is not clear what "causes" homosexuality, the most current literature points to genetic components as an explanation for homosexuality.
- ❖ Research predominately highlighted various benefits and reasons for coming out including: desire to share one's life with others, ending concealment, gaining freedom, and increasing intimacy. Additionally, several studies have produced information

regarding the negative effects of remaining closeted including low self-esteem, symptoms of anxiety and depression.

- ❖ Research has found that the majority of LGBQ individuals choose to come out to a peer before coming out to a family member because they believe that their peers can handle the disclosure better.
- ❖ Family response to a member's coming out was found to be critically important to the health of a LGBQ member. Numerous studies have found that unsupportive family members/parental rejection is correlated to mental health issues including depression and suicidal behavior, while having support from family was correlated to high self-esteem and overall general health.
- ❖ The disclosure of sexual identity tended to make siblings rate their relationship closer if they considered themselves close before, or more distant if they were not close to begin with.

Research regarding the relationship of LGBQ individuals to their LGBQ sibling is virtually non-existent. Due to this gap in literature, this study will examine the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or queer siblings, specifically looking at the coming out process.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

The purpose of this study is to explore families in which there are more than one Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, or Queer sibling, specifically looking at the coming out process as influenced by another LGBTQ sibling. While there has been empirical research regarding the coming out process of LGBTQ people, there is a lack of research regarding LGBTQ siblings. While research exists exploring how LGBTQ people affect the family system, this research has primarily focused on heterosexual members of the family. There is a lack of research of families in which there is more than one sibling who identifies as LGBTQ. Research has shown that sibling relationships are influential in the development of character, leadership, and other qualities, however there is a lack of research regarding families in which more than one sibling is LGBTQ. This study specifically explores the coming out process of sibling pairs. In order to better examine this topic this research focused on the following question: *In families in which there is more than one LGBTQ sibling, how do these siblings impact or influence each other in the coming out process?*

Research Method and Design

A qualitative exploratory design has been used to best explore in greater depth the experience of coming out. Qualitative research searches for answers regarding *how* and *what* rather than just *why*, such as in a quantitative approach. It allows participants to decide for themselves what is most important to share about their experience and helps to capture basic human emotions such as love, joy, pain, and despair. Lastly, using a qualitative approach brings life to a neglected subject. Because little research exists about gay, lesbian, bisexual, and/or

queer siblings within the same family, I thought it was important to hear from participants in their own words to breathe life and acknowledge the complexity of this phenomenon.

Sample

Participants were required to be over the age of eighteen to obtain consent to the study and must identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer and have a LGBTQ sibling who was also willing to participate in the study. Additionally, they needed to share a parent/guardian through blood relation and/or have been raised by the same parent/s. Both participants needed to be out either to friends or family or both. Finally, participants must have telephone or Internet access for the interview.

Recruitment

This study utilized non-probable methods of sampling called purposeful convenience and snowball sampling. This method involves asking for volunteers who meet the criteria involved to participate in this study. The snowball sample involved asking participants if they knew other individuals that meet the criteria and may be interested in participating. Some limitations of using convenience and snowball sampling methods are a lack of diversity of participants. Benefits of using this sampling method are a quick recruitment response.

Two advertising sources were used for recruitment purposes: (a) the social networking site Facebook, and (b) through and email advertisement to personal contacts (See Appendix A – Media Recruitment Materials). Once potential participants learned of the study, they were directed to contact the researcher directly via email with their name and preferred contact information. Once the participant's information was received, they were contacted via email or telephone and asked four screening questions (See Appendix B – Screening Questions) to ensure eligibility criteria for the study were met. Once eligibility was determined, participants were

asked to provide a mailing address so that they could be mailed the Informed Consent Agreement (See Appendix C – Informed Consent Agreement). The Informed Consent Agreement was emailed and mailed to each participant, as well as a self-addressed stamped envelope. Participants were informed that their agreement must be returned in order to participate in the study. Interviews were primarily arranged via email after determining eligibility.

Recruitment for this study occurred between the dates of February 17th 2015 and March 12th 2015. Due to the use of social media for recruitment, interested participants were located across the country. A total of eight potential individual contacted, after talking to their sibling, six qualified expressed interest in participating in the study, however, two of these participants were unable to participate due to their sibling's lack of interest.

Data Collection

Interviews occurred via Skype, except for 2 interviews that occurred in person. Two Interview Guides were used, one for the sib who came out first (See Appendix D - Interview Guide Sibling One), the other for the sib who came out second (See Appendix E – Interview Guide Sibling Two). Siblings who were the first to come out were asked 14 open-ended interview questions, while siblings who were second to come out were asked two additional questions about how their sibling did or did not influence them both while growing up and while coming out. The interview questions explored four main areas: (1) sibling aggregation of homosexuality, (2) the process of coming out, (3) family response, and (4) sibling relationship.

The interview process was designed to take no longer than 45-60 minutes. On average, interviews were completed in 40 minutes. Interviews were primarily conducted via Skype, however, two interviews were conducted in-person at a secure and private location near the

participant's residence. Individual siblings were interviewed as they were available; in some sibling pairs the second sibling to come out was interviewed before the first sibling to come out.

All participants signed an informed consent and agreed to have the interview recorded via a handheld recorder. The handheld recorder allowed easy playback and allowed for full transcription of the interviews.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data was fully transcribed by the researcher; each participant was given a pseudonym to protect confidentiality. Demographic data was analyzed according to race, age, gender, education, sexual orientation, religion, geographic location, and family make-up. The transcribed interviews were grouped by sibling pairs and condensed into vignettes (see Chapter IV). This allowed information from each sibling to be compared and contrasted, as well as paint a story of the sibling pair and coming out process. Next, transcripts were grouped into two sections: siblings who came out first and siblings who came out second. This data was evaluated for similarities and differences in responses and placed into categories based on themes related to each question asked. This allowed me to look at participants as a whole and compare responses to literature.

Confidentiality and Ethical considerations

Before beginning this study, a Human Subjects Review application was submitted and approved by the Smith College Human Subjects Review Board (See Appendix F – Human Subjects Review Board Approval Letter). Once the study was approved, recruitment and interviewing commenced. Before participating in the study, each participant was required to read and agree to the terms outlined in the Informed Consent Agreement. The interviews were recorded with a hand-held device with permission from the participant. Recorded data from the

interviews were uploaded and fully transcribed by the researcher onto a password-protected computer. Each participant was given a pseudonym and all identifying information was removed to protect confidentiality. All data and recordings will be kept secure for three years as required by Federal Regulations; after that time they will be destroyed.

Methodological and Personal Biases

I identify as queer and I am the first sibling to come out to my family. I have a gay brother and observed his coming out process. In fact, the experience of coming out and later observing my brother come out was the motivation for this study. I would be remiss to not acknowledge that my work during this research may have been colored by my own personal experiences with coming out.

Methodological biases include sample selection. Because the six pairs of siblings in this study were self-selected from a non-random sample, the data from this study cannot be generalized. Additionally, two interviews occurred in person, while the rest occurred via Skype. This could have influenced the length and desire to share information with this researcher.

Study Limitations

Finally, all participants in this study identified as White or Caucasian, likely a result of snowball, non-random sampling. The lack of participants who identify as a person of color is a major limitation to this study. Because of the homogeneity of the participants in this study, it cannot be generalized to the LGBTQ population at large in the United States.

CHAPTER IV

Findings

The purpose of this study is to explore the phenomenon of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and/or queer identified siblings, specifically looking at the coming out process and whether or not these siblings influenced each other. The overarching research question was: *In families in which there is more than one LGBQ sibling, how do these siblings impact or influence each other in the coming out process?*

Demographics

A total of six sibling pairs (twelve individuals) participated in this study. Eight of these participants identified as gay males, two as lesbian females, one as a pansexual female, and one as a queer female. Interviewees ranged in age from 26-42, with a median age of 34. All of the participants in this study identified their race as either White or Caucasian. The lack of participants who identify as a person of color is a major limitation to this study. Because of the lack of diversity in this study, its results cannot be generalized to the LGBQ population at large in the United States.

All of the participants in this study were raised by their biological parents, which consisted of a mother and father. The majority of participants (66%, n=8) in this study were raised Catholic, while one sibling pair were raised Episcopalian, and one sibling pair were raised Jewish. All but one pair of sibling participants has one additional sibling (for a total of three children in the family); one sibling pair has four other siblings (for a total of five children). Findings from these interviews are organized to reflect the literature review and are presented as

follows: 1) sibling aggregation of homosexuality, 2) coming out and family response, and 3) sibling relationship.

Sibling Pair 1: Tony and Kate

Tony, 42 and Kate, age 36 are the oldest and youngest siblings in a White, Catholic family. Tony identifies as a gay male and Kate self-identifies as a queer female. They grew up on the East coast and were raised by their mother and father. They have a middle sister, age 39 who identifies as heterosexual and is married with children. Tony and Kate both described their family as liberal and gay-friendly both before and after they came out. Their mother worked in AIDS prevention and had several gay friends. Regardless of this, Tony, the first sibling to come out, did not come out until he was in college. Both siblings came out to a close friend before coming out to the family.

Sibling aggregation of homosexuality

Kate and Tony are the only LGBTQ siblings in their immediate family. Additionally, Kate reported that she does not know of any LGBTQ individuals in their extended family. When asked what their thoughts were about their common sexual identity, Tony stated that he did not have an explanation and hadn't thought about it much before. Kate believes that there is likely a genetic component to being gay: "I feel like I have been gay forever, so I don't think the environment caused me to be gay, but it allowed me to come out."

Coming Out and Family Response

Tony reported that he knew he was gay from a very young age, about 10 years old. Due to fear of ostracism or possible physical danger at his school, Tony waited to come out until college. Tony attended a liberal college with a large LGBTQ community; because of this, he claims that his coming out was "not a big deal." When it came to coming out to his family, Tony

did not have a conversation with his parents, but rather had been bringing home queer literature and film. His mother picked up on the hints.

I don't remember if it was my first or second semester, but my mom wrote me a letter saying that you are probably gay, and that's alright with me. So that's how that happened; my mom came to me. I kind of never really came out to my dad. We never had an actual conversation where I told him I was gay. I kind of resented the idea that you have to tell your parents.

When Kate was 12 years old she learned that Tony was out as gay:

I remember kind of knowing he was gay. We would take trips to the city, and he would introduce me to his hairdresser. He was like my leader for fashion decisions. I knew my brother was different than other people's brothers, and I just sort of put two and two together. But I never wanted him to be anything other than who he was. He was fun. Whenever sexuality came up I felt like I had to stick up for others even though I didn't know he was gay.....I think my emotional response was that I always wanted to talk to him about it and for him to know that he has my support.

The family responded positively to his sexual identity, which was not a surprise to Tony:

I think they reacted how I thought they would. Like it was not a big deal. But I resented having to come out. We were never a family that talked about relationships and dating, and so it just felt like a made up event to have to do it. I guess it gave me some anxiety to bring it up, like talking about sex or feelings or whatever with your parents is just not something I was interested in doing.

Alternatively, Kate took much more time to come out, both to herself and to her peers/family. She had very intense friendships with female friends and in high school; her

mother and brother began to question her sexual identity. Despite her family's gay friendly stance, Kate struggled with internalized homophobia: "For me, my family identified me as gay before I did...and I only mean that in coming out. I think they were right all those times, but I just couldn't accept it internally yet."

After falling in love with a close friend in college, Kate realized that she was not heterosexual. Similar to her brother, she came out to her friends first. Next she came out to her mother, who was supportive and content that Kate had accepted this part of herself and was relieved to see her happy. When Tony learned of the news, he was pleased and excited.

I think its cool to have a gay sibling. It was exciting. We always got along really well. It made us closer. It's really easy short-hand, we both have experienced this phenomenon of being gay. It's not something the rest of our family has gone through or understands.

When reflecting on differences in their coming out process, gender was something that they both agreed was a salient factor. The fact that Tony is the only male in the family is something that both siblings acknowledged as something that made their experience of coming out very different. Kate also remarked that sibling order might have made a difference in how the family responded. Kate, being the third, and youngest child, felt as though her parents had already "seen it all" with the two older children. Kate also noticed that their mother was very concerned with how their father interacted with Tony, that she wanted it to be clear that he was loved and accepted. Kate stated that with her, this never came up.

Sibling relationship

Perceived Sibling Influence on Coming out. Both siblings agreed that Tony likely had had an impact or influence on Kate's sexual identity process, but neither could express exactly what that was. Tony stated that he had heard of siblings in which one sibling came out and the

second sibling then felt as though they couldn't come out. He wondered if his sister might have felt this way as well. Kate reported that it was likely that he influenced her coming out, but they have different personalities and therefore, different processes; "I feel like my brother and I are so different that it makes sense that our process and experiences were so different."

Easier or Harder to Come Out. Tony expressed that he believed his coming out first made it easier for his sister to come out:

I think it made it easier in the end. I mean the family already knew they had one gay child, and were completely fine with it by the time she came out, so maybe it made it easier for her in that way. And it was completely not traumatic my coming out. There wasn't like, any drama. Her seeing that, maybe, made it less anxiety producing.

Kate reported that in some ways, her brother's identifying her as queer before she identified herself as such, made it hard. But, she also noted that her admiration for her brother likely made her process easier. She stated:

He and my mom definitely influenced me the most. He didn't parent me, but I looked to him wanting to have parental guidance in a lot of ways, so if he hadn't been gay I think I might have been harsher on myself for being gay.

Effect on Sibling Relationship. Both Kate and Tony agreed that they were close before coming out, and their common sexual identity has brought them closer. Kate stated that she has always felt an affinity for her brother, but now additionally, they have both gone through a similar experience:

I think our relationship was stronger after (coming out) because there wasn't that level of not talking about something that was obviously there. There wasn't necessarily an immediate response- in the parts of my life that were hard, it was easier to talk to him and

I think it helped our relationship evolve to more peers. It evened our ability to be more friendly and less big brother little sister.

Sibling Pair 2: Alex and Paul

Alex, 34, and Paul, 32, are brothers who both identify as gay males. They were born in the south and raised in a devout Catholic family. Alex is the oldest sibling and Paul is the middle child; they have a younger heterosexual sister, age 27. Both siblings describe their family as very loving and close, but also opinionated and conservative. While their sister is very supportive of gay rights, their parents remain against gay marriage despite accepting their sons as gay.

Sibling Aggregation of Homosexuality

Both brothers reported that they believe that they are gay due to a genetic factor or some sort of biological explanation. Paul wondered if perhaps gay people exist to address the overpopulation of the planet. "I think its more nature. I've also had a theory that its maybe evolutionary, the human population is so over populated."

Coming Out and Family Response

Alex, the oldest sibling, came out before Paul, however there are some similarities in their coming out processes. Both brothers initially came out to a friend before telling a family member and they both came out around the same age - in their early twenties, while in college. They had similar reservations about telling their parents as well. They both reported having fears of being kicked out, rejected, or financially cut off (while in college) from their parents. Alex reports knowing he was gay when he was around the age of 16, while Paul knew as young as the age of eight.

While Alex told a friend first, he marks his true “coming out” as being the day that he told his mother at the age of 23, shortly after graduating from college.

I was starting a new job and one day I was getting ready for work and my mom and I got into an argument, and it was over something dumb. My mom said, what are you going to do when you get married, are you just going to act like that when you get married? And I said, what makes you think I want to get married? And she said: well do you? And I said I don't know. And she said, well do you even like girls? And I said I don't know, maybe one day, but I don't know. Then- do you even like girls, and it went back and forth like that for a long time. And finally my mom after going back and forth for a while, my mom said, ‘well, we'd love you no matter what.’ Then it was time for me to go to work and I said ‘OK mom, I'm gay.’ And I grabbed my lunch box and went off to work.

After the argument, Alex said that his mother was upset and told the rest of the family. Alex has never had a conversation with his father about it and says that his dad has never addressed it. For a long time, Alex said, the family didn't talk about it directly, even though he would bring partners home to family events. Alex stated that he gets the impression that his Dad has the mentality of “if you don't talk about it, it doesn't exist.”

Paul was away at college when he found out about Alex's coming out and had come to terms with his own sexuality. He recalls having mixed emotions at the news of his brother's coming out. On the one hand, he was happy that Alex was being honest and true to himself, but on the other hand, Paul felt even more nervous about telling his parents about his own sexuality and disappointing them further. He stated:

It's been a process. I waited for a while to tell my family because growing up my dad and my mom were very clear that they were not supportive of that lifestyle. Coming from a

Catholic background, we were taught that it was unacceptable. I remember my dad once saying something after watching something on TV with a gay character. And he said you guys better not be gay. I was just a kid, so I was like, 'Of course!' So that's why I waited a while. I actually tried to fight it. I thought it was a temptation from the devil and all that crazy stuff initially. I wanted a reason, like someone to present to my parents. To say hey, this is someone I love and care about.

When a serious relationship didn't happen, Paul decided in his mid-twenties before leaving on a two-year long trip out of the country, that he would come out to his parents by writing them a letter. In the letter, he disclosed that he had been in love with both men and women, and he wasn't sure what gender his life partner would end up being. Because Paul was going to an area without access to a telephone or email, he did not speak to his family about his disclosure until his return to the U.S. Alex remembers being surprised at Paul's coming out, but also having an "I knew it!" reaction. Alex stated that because Paul initially came out as bisexual, it felt like a "softer" coming out because their parents could still hope that maybe Paul would end up with a woman.

Sibling Relationship

Perceived Sibling Influence on Coming Out. Alex wasn't sure that he really influenced Paul's coming out process, but stated that because he had begun to bring his partner around to family gatherings, maybe Paul felt safe being out as gay, rather than bisexual. Paul reports that initially he was more nervous to tell his parents about being gay after his brother came out, because he knew it would be a double-blow, especially with regards to having grandchildren, or kids to pass on the family name. In recent years, Alex, a firefighter, has done a lot of public gay

advocacy (TV spots, radio, and newsprint) particularly in regards to gay marriage. Paul claims that he felt a lot of pride about this:

I stirred up different feelings when he came out to public. I had a lot of pride associated with that. Just being so proud of who he was and standing up for the community.

Almost wishing I could be in a position to do something similar. He was doing radio ads, TV spots..being vulnerable.

Easier or Harder to Come Out. Alex believes that he made it easier for Paul to come out, because he stood his ground in an opinionated family. However, Paul claims that it was somewhat harder because not only was he the second child to come out, he was the only other male in the family that could carry on the family name:

I think I was a little not upset, but like, Oh crap, now I have to break the news that they have another gay son?! Ok, the first one we can take that. One out of three ok, but now we have another? It's easier in some ways and harder in other ways as the second coming out person. Again, I was really happy for him, but also like, oh crap now I have to come out after him and be another disappointment or whatever you want to call it.

Effect on Sibling Relationship. Both Alex and Paul reported that they did not have a close relationship growing up. Now that they are both out as gay men, they are able to discuss topics such as gay rights issues. Paul remarked that coming out in general has made him closer to the people that he loves:

I don't know if that is a side effect of the challenges of being gay- having to open up yourself and struggle to open up and share that info with another is so much harder and it makes you stronger in doing that. It's like you have to put yourself out there or you feel like you have to put yourself out there. Especially if received unconditionally, you

become more sure of yourself and more confident and start to put yourself out there more and more. So I don't know, that could totally be a side effect of being gay and going through that. I'm not sure where the bleed in is, I'm sure others feel that as well.

Paul and Alex both reported that they feel closer to their family and friends now that they are out as openly gay. Their parents have come to terms with their son's sexuality, but they continue to remain conservative in their views regarding gay marriage. This does not stop Alex or Paul in bringing up the issue at family dinners. Both have remarked that they have a very opinionated family, and they will continue to discuss and debate the issue further.

Sibling Pair 3: Abby and Ryan

Abby, a 34 year old, self-identified pansexual and her brother Ryan, a 30-year old self-identified gay male, were born in a small Southern town, but raised in a more liberal city in the Northwest. They were brought up by their parents, and attended the Episcopalian church during childhood. They have a middle brother, age 32, who is heterosexual and married. They both described their family as loving, close, and fairly liberal.

Sibling Aggregation of Homosexuality

Ryan believes that there is a genetic explanation as to why both he and his sister are on the queer spectrum. Abby was less certain, but leans towards genetic factors and explained that they have gay and lesbian aunts and uncles in the family that lead her to believe this.

Coming Out and Family Response

Both Abby and Ryan came out to a close friend before coming out to their family. They also both came out to their mother before coming out to other family members. Abby, the oldest and first to come out, was in her early 20s and in college when she disclosed her sexual

orientation. She was taking a lot of classes on feminism and sexuality and began to realize that she did not fit into the heterosexual paradigm:

I was learning a lot about there being more than just heterosexual or homosexual-and I hadn't really considered that, you know, that people can like a variety of gender expressions and express gender differently. That was kind of mind blowing to me. And I started to really question myself-what am I attracted to and why am I attracted to them or that. And there were a lot of gay and queer movies coming out-and something kind of clicked in that moment. I was like "wait a second" I guess I kind of look at girls differently than other heterosexual girls do. So it was just a process of trying to figure out myself through my 20s.

Abby came out to her mother one evening while they were relaxing and watching movies. Abby noted that she has always been close with her mother and identified her as someone that would be her strongest ally. Her mother responded in a positive, curious and concerned manner. Her mother told Abby that she would let her father know to “soften the blow.” Abby stated that her biggest fear about coming out to her family was not so much a fear of being kicked out or rejected, but more about fearing their judgment or that they would challenge her. Instead, her family responded, as Abby described, “somewhat awkwardly,” but in a largely supportive way. Her father initially used humor, i.e. “well, at least you won’t get pregnant.” He also expressed concern and support, following up with questions about whether or not she was OK and how she was handling the coming out process. Abby’s middle brother initially had a “crass” response, saying something about how “lesbians are cool,” which Abby equates to his being in a fraternity at the time. After leaving the fraternity the following year, his attitude changed and he became supportive.

Abby had already suspected that Ryan might be gay and she had wanted him to know that she is an ally, and that he could come to her with anything. Ryan stated that when he learned of Abby's coming out, he was surprised, and happy about his parent's response, but at this point he was still struggling with his own sexual identity. He knew he was gay, but was hoping he could learn to like girls because he didn't want to be different:

I was 16, junior in HS. I told a close friend of mine first, who lived with us for a short bit of time. We were very emotionally close. Then after that I told a bunch of my friends. I didn't necessarily think to tell my family. It was her first, then more friends, then family, and then more friends. It was emotional but it wasn't bad. It was actually pretty good by most accounts. I've heard other stories that were worse. I was scared of rejection mostly. Because I was having such a hard time coming to terms with it myself, that I didn't know how others would react.

Ryan says that even though he saw his family react positively to his sister's coming out, he was nervous of how his parents might react. One day while in the car with his mother and best friend, the friend accidentally said something about Ryan being gay. After his friend got out of the car, his mother confirmed that he was gay. She said that she accepted his sexuality, but wished that he would have told her rather than having to find out from his friend.

I was of course worried that it would be much worse than it was. I didn't have a good reason for it; I think it was just being a teen and being paranoid. So it went better than I hoped that it might. My mom was accepting and cool. My Dad was a little more uncomfortable. He definitely questioned whether he did something wrong having two gay kids. And he was pretty upset the first time I brought a boyfriend home. He definitely just wasn't ready for that. He's totally cool with it now; 100% supportive.

Abby recalls being relieved when her brother came out. She had suspected that he was gay even when he was very young; it out in the open was a huge relief.

For the longest time in our family it felt like there was like a powder keg just waiting to go off. We knew he was upset and that something was going on. So when he did come out, we were glad that at least now we could talk about it. Not be so stuck where we couldn't show support. After he came out we were like 'OK, awesome. Let's support you.' My and my mom were like, this is awesome, what can we do?! We were all PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbian and Gays), with our little flags out.

Abby also reflected that her brother was in a different stage of life when he came out; he was still in high school, while she had had the opportunity to go off to college and self-reflect. The family had been pushing for him to tell them what was going on. They thought his distance and attitude/depression was likely connected to his sexual identity, but they weren't sure.

Sibling Relationship

Perceived Sibling Influence on Coming Out. Abby and Ryan both agreed that Abby had a positive influence on Ryan in terms of expressing that she would be supportive of Ryan with regards to his sexuality. Abby stated that she and Ryan had had a typical sibling relationship growing up; they often bickered and fought over average things:

I think I influenced his coming out by being the first to come out to the family and kind of get the conversation started. Kind of get them thinking. And when I emailed him I was hoping that that would make it more comfortable for him to talk to me, because at that point he had walled himself off from our parents, so I was hoping that I could provide him at least one person in the family that could understand, and be like an ally.

Ryan stated that by watching his sister come out and seeing that nothing drastic happened (she wasn't kicked out), it gave him some comfort that his parents might react similarly to him: "It definitely made me more comfortable with who I was in our family structure. And she influenced me in many other ways-musically, ect."

Easier or Harder to Come Out. When asked if Ryan found coming out to be easier due to his sister's coming out, he was certain that it had made it much smoother for him.

It was easier definitely. Just knowing that my parents were accepting. There was an adjustment period-but knowing they weren't going to tell me that I wasn't following God's plan was helpful. Because my Dad in particular was pretty religious when we were kids.

Abby expressed that she hoped that it had made it easier for him. She wasn't sure what it would have been like for him if she hadn't come out.

Effect on Sibling Relationship. Abby reflected that she thinks that she and Ryan are closer now, not only because of the common sexual identity, but also because of the natural progression of becoming mature adults that support each other.

I think it helped us become a little bit closer during that time. Before, we used to fight all the time, about trivial things. We had a pattern of taking things out on each other.

Throughout childhood we were not very close or loving and when I went off to college, I felt guilty about that. I wanted him to know me as someone as more than just the mean older sister. And I knew he was struggling. I wanted him to know that I was here for him no matter what. Gay or not. It helped because I could offer him support: 'You really aren't alone in this.' I hoped he would see that as I really want to know you as a human being.

Ryan similarly stated that he feels closer to his sister, but it might have nothing to do with his sexual identity: “I honestly don’t know if it mattered at all. She’s always been fairly cool and supportive of me besides normal sib stuff. I don’t think it mattered one way or another.”

When it comes to feeling closer to family, Ryan stated that he doesn’t necessarily feel closer, but that he is definitely more comfortable being himself. While reporting that she feels closer to her family, Abby also remarked that she thinks that her parents knew that if they didn’t accept their children’s partners, they wouldn’t be involved in their lives.

Sibling pair 4: Britt and Mindy

Britt, 31 and Mindy, 26 are sisters who both identify as lesbians. They have four other siblings, both younger and older than them both. They are from an intact, devout Catholic family, and were raised in the mid-West.

Sibling Aggregation of Homosexuality

Britt and Mindy are the only LGBTQ identified siblings in their immediate family. Britt stated that they also have a paternal gay uncle. Both Britt and Mindy stated that they believe there is some sort of genetic component that explains why they are both gay. Mindy stated: “I think its nature, genetic. 100 percent. I don’t think anything about my upbringing affected my sexual identity.”

Coming Out and Family Response

Both Britt and Mindy came out to a friend before coming out to any family members. Britt was the first to come out at age 16:

I came out to a group of lesbians when I was 16 because I was dating somebody. We had our little clique I guess. My parents only found out because they stumbled onto some emails and kind of trapped me in a corner. I was maybe 17 when that all happened. They

found out by accident. My parents were not cool with it. They were not happy about it. They sent me to counseling and gave me all sorts of bibles with highlighted verses in it. They flat out told me ‘keep your life to yourself.’ I think my parent’s thought it was a phase or if I went to enough counseling I would stop being gay.

After her parents’ reaction, which included telling her to keep her gay lifestyle out of the house, Britt did not tell any of her siblings about her sexual identity for nine more years. Britt stated that her sister, Mindy, knew because they lived together after college, but they never actually had a conversation about it. Britt said she had no idea at all that Mindy was also gay until Mindy came out about six years later.

I didn’t have a conversation with my siblings until about nine years after I had been dating women. I was going to bring my (now wife) home and I called them up and I was like, I have to, out of respect for them, I need to tell them. They of course were all very cool with it. Because they had probably been talking about it behind my back for years. They were excited about it and happy for me too.

Mindy claims that when Britt finally came out, Mindy was happy for Britt and relieved to not have to “dance around it anymore” at home. Mindy describes watching Mindy’s process of dating women, but not really coming out to anyone at home, as traumatic. Mindy saw how hard it was for their parents to accept Britt’s sexuality. Mindy said that observing the silence around Britt’s sexual identity, along with her parents disapproval, may have delayed the progression of her own sexual identity development. Mindy didn’t date much throughout high school and college; in fact, her friends used to tease her about it. It was around the age of 21 that Mindy began to have feelings for a woman:

I first came out to my best friend. I had gained a reputation of not dating at all - my friends would joke that I was bound to be a nun. It was after a non-sexual first experience with a woman. I was starting to feel things I had never felt before. My sister noticed also, I was living with her. She kind of called me out on it.

Mindy waited for over a year before telling her parents because she wanted to be sure about her sexual identity before telling them: "We never talked about relationships anyway, but I knew I wanted to tell them. I wanted it to be different than my sister. I individually told everybody to his or her face."

After telling Britt, Mindy told her mother, who was somewhat surprised, but also supportive. Next, Mindy told her Father, which she anticipated would be more difficult to do. Mindy's father wasn't surprised, but he was upset, and made her feel guilty for living a secret life. After telling her parents, Mindy told her other siblings, all of whom were supportive. Britt remembers being surprised, although now, looking back it seems obvious.

I was shocked, I don't know why. I guess for some reason I just saw right past that. We were both raised like the biggest tomboys in the world. She was always slightly more masculine- not that that makes you gay, but I just...My friends were always like "Your sister is so gay." And I would say, "No, she's not! She's just like that." It was so obvious after the fact. I just didn't see it coming.

Sibling Relationship

Perceived Sibling Influence on Coming Out. Mindy reports that because Britt had been in the closet for so long, or at least was not transparent with the family, it created a palpable discomfort in the family. It was because of this that Mindy decided to intentionally tell each

family member in person. Mindy stated that the fact that Britt was gay was not the problem, but that it was never out in the open. Britt acknowledges this as well:

I think that she saw my not coming out to her, and thought this is not that big of a deal, don't make it into a bigger deal. Just be confident in who you are. I think that she saw me struggle with that and decided to be completely opposite and needed to be opposite for her own sake.

Easier or Harder to Come Out

Britt stated that she thinks that her being the first to come out likely made Mindy more confident in herself and her decision to come out. While Britt believes that she made it easier in some ways for Mindy to come out, Mindy stated that having an older lesbian sister made it harder for her:

It made it harder definitely. I think my parents had just finally got over having a lesbian daughter, and having a second one, was actually harder. I think the idea of having a second one was harder, but my approach was much easier. Because I was pretty straightforward about it.

Effect on Sibling Relationship. Britt and Mindy both remarked that they have been very close throughout their lives, and now that they are both out, they have even more in common. Mindy stated that she thinks they probably have more friends in common now as well.

When it comes to family, both claim to feel closer to everyone after coming out. Mindy feels more open to sharing events in her life, in general. She stated:

I definitely feel closer because I can also share that part of my life. Before I came out, I kept other things in my life a secret because I just didn't feel close to them. There was a big elephant in the room. Now I make an effort to share more with them in general.

Although their parents initially had a really hard time with each daughter's coming out, they are now accepting and loving of their daughters and their daughters' partners. When Britt married her partner, her father walked her down the aisle.

Sibling pair 5: Nate and Gabe

Nate, 32, and Gabe, 29 both self-identify as gay males. They were raised by their parents on the East coast in a Jewish home. They have an older sister, age 38, who is married to a man, and has a son.

Sibling Aggregation of Homosexuality

Both Nate and Gabe reported that they believe that there is some sort of genetic component to being gay. Gabe was unsure whether it is hormonal or genetic, but stated that it is definitely nature, not nurture.

Coming out and Family Response

Although Gabe is the younger sibling, he was the first to come out at age 15. He was away at summer art camp and met some friends who were "out" as bisexual. Because the environment at the camp was gay-friendly, Gabe felt comfortable telling a few friends about his sexual identity. At the same time, Gabe had been depressed and was self-injuring. His friends were concerned about him and encouraged him to tell his parents.

I told my parents on the car ride home from camp. My coming out is complicated. I had been pretty depressed for the past couple of years, I had been self-injuring, and my friends at camp wanted me to tell my parents that I was self-injuring because of safety. But I decided that it would also be a good opportunity to tell them about my sexual identity. Because my parents never said anything homophobic, but I had heard some of the stories about telling your parents and then getting kicked out. So I told them in the car

that I was hurting myself and one of the reasons was because I was bisexual. My parent's response was concern for my safety, while the sexual identity stuff came second. If my friends hadn't pushed me to tell my parents about self-injury, I don't know how long it would have taken me to disclose. I might not even be alive today. I am very out now, I come out all the time.

Gabe came out to his brother and sister later that same year. He remembers his brother being "kind of impressed" and supportive. Gabe was aware that his brother had been looking at gay porn on the family computer, but he didn't know if Nate was gay. Gabe shared a memory about his sister and says he knew his sister would be supportive:

I was younger than 10, and my sister was babysitting me. My mom had said that I wasn't allowed to watch Ellen-and my sister said, 'when you grow up no matter who you love, I will always love you.' I always remembered that comment and that she was a safe person to tell. She reacted very well and I was never worried about her.

Gabe wasn't sure what kind of reaction to expect from his parents, but he was nervous that it would not be good:

I didn't know what to anticipate, but I was afraid that something bad would happen. I wasn't afraid of a physical reaction, but I was afraid that maybe I would be kicked out. I didn't think that they would necessarily be ok with it, but..because nothing was ever said in the house at all about gay people. They didn't say anything gay-positive. I think its important to say positive things, because otherwise kids will get public opinion, which could be negative. I didn't know what they thought, as far as I knew they thought what everyone else thought.

Nate, who knew he was gay since the age of nine, recalls feeling angry at the news that his brother was gay. As one of two boys in the family, he knew that he would be the last hope for their mother in having a traditional family and carrying on the family name.

Initially, I thought, well I am never coming out now. I didn't want to be the last hope for our family. My mother had a dream of us having beautiful wives and families or children. So, now my brother and I couldn't do that and I was pissed off. And since I wasn't out, I couldn't empathize or be there for him as my younger brother. He was a lost soul even more than I was. I wasn't able to guide him.

Nate first disclosed his sexuality to his therapist at the age of 13. It was the first time he had ever said it out loud. He didn't come out to anyone else until the age of 18 after his freshman year of college when he ended up telling his best friend. They had had an argument about a girl that his friend had a crush on, and Nate finally blurted out, "I'm gay!" He friend responded by giving him a big hug. They remain best friends to this day. Nate told his family about six months later.

My grandmother took me out to dinner one night, she is a savvy lady, she has worked all over the city in the arts. All of a sudden at dinner, she put her chopsticks down and she said "Nate, are you gay?" And then I said, "Are you kidding?" She said she wasn't kidding, so I asked her if I told her could she keep it from the rest of the family; and she said "absolutely not. And I cannot be more embarrassed and ashamed that you didn't share this with me and the family and celebrate this and this is something to be joyful about. Some of the best men and women I have known have been gay" ..She gave me a 20 minute lecture on the joys of being gay and made me promise to keep her filled in on my love life. I was living with my parents at the time and she called my parents when I

was on the train back home. When I got home they confronted me about it, I was really awkward about-I said, 'Yes I am, OK?' and ran off to my room. And that was that. I was a little angry at her for calling my parents, but after the fact, some days later, I felt better. My plan was once I was in a serious relationship with a person, that is when you tell them, so there is a chance that I might not have told them by now.

Although it turned out that Nate's coming out went predominately smooth fashion, he had been anticipating the possibility of a very different reaction. He shared:

I thought it was going to be a lot more dramatic. Mostly from stories, not even from directly reading my parents or anything. But just the stories you hear-what happens when you come out? You get kicked out, you get called names, access to money or education taken from you. So I had a certain education just from being in the world that that is what happens. I think it was tempered by the reality my parents a bit, I thought it would be somewhere in between. I was surprised, but I almost didn't let it be as easy as it could have been because I had such shame and I was expecting such a negative response, that I almost felt that I had a gun to my head when they were confirming what my grandmother had said. I was like-this is inquisition time. And I ran away with my hands in the air as soon as I could to get out of the uncomfortable situation because I wanted to get out of the potentially dangerous situation. It was a big unknown, and that is terrifying.

Gabe recalls being surprised and a little bit relieved at the news that his brother was gay. He was glad that he wasn't alone in the situation and now had someone with which to navigate the gay world.

Sibling Relationship

Perceived Sibling Influence on Coming Out. Gabe reports that he thinks he influenced Nate's coming out because Nate had seemed impressed with Gabe at his ability to come out to their parents so young. Nate stated that because his brother came out, he mostly felt more nervous about coming out himself, believing that he might have to remain in the closet.

Easier or Harder to Come Out. Gabe expressed that he thinks he made it easier for his brother to come out because he had "popped the seal" with their parents. Gabe also thought that since Nate was able to see that Gabe wasn't kicked out, that he probably wouldn't get kicked out either. Nate stated that coming out was harder for him due to Gabe's coming out first. This is largely because he knew that his mother had dreams and expectations about her children having families.

Effect on Sibling Relationship. Both Nate and Gabe agree that they are closer due to their shared sexual identity and ability to relate to one another about gay life and culture. Nate stated that he feels he can come to his brother for advice and guidance, which he really appreciates. Both siblings agreed that they are closer to the family now that they are out. Their mother quickly joined PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) and the whole family are now avid gay rights advocates.

Sibling pair 6: Nick and Tyler

Nick, 42, and Tyler 38, are two self-identified gay, male brothers. They were raised by their mother and father in a rural West Coast town. They have one married, heterosexual sister, age 40. Their mother was Episcopalian and their father is Catholic. They were raised predominately in the Catholic religion, and describe their upbringing as conservative and strict.

Both brothers remarked that because they grew up in such a rural town, they had no gay role models and did not know any gay people.

Sibling Aggregation of Homosexuality

Nick and Tyler are the only LGBTQ identified siblings in their immediate family; however, Tyler stated that they know of LGBTQ individuals on their mother's side of the family. Both Nick and Tyler stated that being gay is not a choice, and most likely has a genetic component. Tyler answered that "The choice is not to be gay or not, but to come out or not."

Coming out and Family Response

Tyler, the youngest child of the family, was the first to come out at the age of 16. He knew that he liked boys since the age of 12, but tried dating girls and initially came out as bisexual. Tyler came out to some friends and his sister first, but says that when he came out to his mother, he really felt like he had come out. At this point, his parents had divorced and he was living with his mother. He stated:

I would spend time at my boyfriend's house. After a few months of this, she asked more questions about him. She asked if he liked girls; does he have a girlfriend? Then it came out that he was gay. Then she asked if I was gay. And I said, Yes, I am-at the time I was more identified as bisexual. And she got really upset. She *never* curses, but she cursed.

Tyler and Nick both describe Tyler as a "momma's boy" and the favorite child of their mother. His mother's reaction was not what Tyler had expected. He waited for a few years before telling his father, whom he expected to react negatively. Much to his surprise, his father responded in a very positive and supportive manner, stating: "I don't care, I'll love and support you no matter what."

Tyler told his brother when he was around the age of 19, before a family Christmas gathering. Tyler was going to bring his boyfriend at the time and wanted to notify his brother ahead of time. Nick, who was dealing with his own internal turmoil, responded by telling him about his own sexual identity. Tyler was shocked.

I had no idea he was gay. We hated each other growing up. I always wanted him to want to hang out with me and include me in things. He had dated girls into college, so I really had no idea. I was just surprised and supportive and happy that we had something in common.

Nick, the firstborn, was known as the “golden child of the family.” He was an excellent student, had a job since the age of 13, obeyed his parents (didn’t get caught doing anything wrong), and went to college. Their parent often used Nick as an example to the other siblings. Nick states that he knew it bothered his siblings, and he didn’t necessarily like the dynamic, but that was the way it was. This dynamic put pressure on the younger siblings to be “perfect” like Nick, and it also made Nick feel trapped in the pressure to not disappoint his parents.

I came out to my brother first, because he was gay and knowing that gave me the confidence to know that I could come out to someone and not be judged. At the time I was in college, I was in a fraternity; I was dating a woman pretty seriously after college. It probably would have resulted in marriage and kids. I was so scared (to come out). I reached a point where I was so unhappy in life. I had lots of friends, but I was living a lie. I lived in fear that I would lose every single person that is important in my life. My friends - everyone. But I got to the point where I was so unhappy that I just had to come out. I had to risk losing my friends and family just so I could get this off my chest, release this burden. It was eating me up inside- I had severe acne, I know it was about me

keeping all my shit inside. I just couldn't take it anymore, I felt like I was dying inside. So, after my brother, I told my best friend in college, and I couldn't even say it. We were in his driveway drinking, and I literally tried for half an hour to say it, and I couldn't say the words "I'm gay." Finally he was like "I still love you." Yes, I lost a few people, but 98% were great. And those that I lost, I don't necessarily want to be around anyway. It was so freeing to come out after years of living a lie. I'm blown away by the young people today that are coming out at 12. Growing up, I saw no one who was gay. On TV it was always negative characters that were gay.

Nick emphasizes the freedom and release from pressure that he felt by coming out. After telling Tyler, he told his sister and then his mother. His mother told his father. Just like with Tyler, Nick's father reacted positively, and his mother had a hard time. He shared:

It was cathartic to release this pressure. My mom, I knew she would struggle. But it's not my responsibility. I love her and didn't want to hurt her, but I didn't want to live a lie. She took it really hard. It was hard for me as well. I was like "why can't you accept me for who I am?" But she still doesn't accept it. She still says that she prays every night that we will both be straight. She said, "since you were born, I had a dream for you to have a beautiful life with kids and a wife. I am having trouble letting go of that dream." That helped to hear that-because I can understand when you have hopes like that. But it hasn't been easy. She didn't attend my wedding to my partner, which she now regrets. We didn't talk for two years-it was really hard. We've come to a place, I had to really establish some things because I can't feel guilty for being who I am. My sister recently got married, and my mom was so excited about it. Honestly, I felt good for my sister, but it really hurt because she couldn't do that for me.

Sibling Relationship

Perceived Sibling Influence on Coming Out. When asked how he influenced his brother's coming out, Tyler stated that he thinks that he made it easier for his brother. Tyler had been out to the family for about three years by the time Nick came out. While Tyler said he "blazed the path" for Nick, he also acknowledged that being the second to come out made it more difficult particularly with regards to their mother. Nick says that he was influenced by Tyler's coming out and admired him for coming out at such a young age and in a small town.

It was inspiring. I give him a lot of credit for that. He was younger and he had the balls to do it. I respect that. At that point it had been 12 years of me knowing and trying to be different. And so it gave me some hope too- that we would have each other. Overall admiration.

Easier or Harder to Come Out. Tyler stated that he thinks he made it easier for his brother to come out because his mom and sister had already had three years to be more comfortable with the topic and to come to terms with having a homosexual brother/son. Nick says that while learning that Tyler was also gay helped him in his personal process, it made it harder to come out to the family. He shared:

For me, it was about ruining the golden child/perfect child. It felt like all the expectations my family had for me-I threw them all away. Even though my brother was my mom's baby, I think she kind of relied on me to do the right things. So I knew she would take it hard.

Effect on Sibling Relationship. Both Nick and Tyler stated that they feel closer to one another now that they are both out as gay men. While they have had periods of time in which

they were not close, they are currently living in the same city and often spend time together.

Tyler stated:

It has brought us closer over the years. It's nice we have a lot in common and are able to share it. We do things together, its fun and its nice having a brother to share this with. I feel like we have the relationship I always wanted with a brother.

Nick answered:

It is really great just to talk about life-it's cool to have a gay brother to joke and understand similar things. I feel like because we are both gay it just bonded us more. It added a deeper level to our relationship.

When it comes to the rest of the family, Nick says that he feels closer to everyone because he is no longer living a lie. On the other hand, when it comes to the family as a whole, Tyler stated that he only feels closer to his brother as a result of coming out. Each brother acknowledged that their mother continues to struggle with having two gay sons. Tyler remarked that his mother has begun to try in her own way; for example, she now hangs up a stocking at Christmas time for their partners. Nevertheless, Tyler believes that their mother blames herself for the brothers' homosexuality. Tyler struggles with her inability to accept him for who he is and he remarked that his relationship with his mother is superficial.

Summary

This chapter summarizes and presents the findings of the 12 interviews of six LGBTQ sibling pairs. Participants shared a range of experiences and emotional responses to being LGBTQ and coming out in a family with more than one LGBTQ member. The majority of participants reported that they believe that homosexuality is genetic. A few participants were

less certain of genetics, but believe their sexual identity is likely a result of something “nature” rather than “nurture” or a result of their environment.

When it came to coming out, 10 out of 12 told a close friend before telling any family members about their sexual orientation. When participants did decide, or were directly asked by a family member, half (six) of the participants told their mother first. Another four participants chose to tell a sibling. Family reaction to participants’ coming out was varied, however, every participant reported that they were not worried about their sibling’s response to the news of their coming out. While some parents initially had negative reactions (n=3) to their child coming out, the bulk of participants reported that their parents are now supportive of them.

Exploratory questions examining the relationships of the LGBQ siblings revealed that most participants (n=8) feel closer to their sibling since coming out. Two participants reported that they don’t necessarily feel closer to their sibling after coming out, but they are supportive of one another.

These interviews provided valuable information about the experience of coming out in a family in which more than one LGBQ sibling exists. The interviews also shed light on the sibling relationships of LGBQ siblings and how they do or do not influence one another in the coming out process. These findings and implications for social work are discussed further in the next chapter.

CHAPTER V

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the coming out process of individuals in families where there are more than one gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer sibling/child. The findings of this study and their implications for clinical social work will be analyzed within this final chapter. This discussion will begin with a presentation of themes found in the findings: 1) explanation of common homosexuality 2) coming out 3) family reaction 4) anticipation of family response 5) anticipation of coming out 6) sibling relationship. Results of this research will provide valuable information about a population that is often overlooked in both practice and research.

Explanation of common homosexuality

The topic of origins of one's sexual orientation was explored in the literature review to show that the incidence of LGBQ siblings is significant and define the need for this study. The majority of participants in this study believe that there is a genetic component to explain an individual's sexual orientation. 66% (N=8) stated that they believe genetics determine sexuality, while 25% (n=3) were unsure, but thought that hormones or genetics play a factor. One participant stated he was not sure. None of the sibling pairs had additional LGBQ siblings. However, three sibling pairs reported having LGBQ individuals in their extended family.

Coming out

The majority of participants in this study initially came out to a close friend (n=10) before coming out to a family member. This is consistent with extensive literature reviewed for

this investigation. In a study by Harvey (2007), it was found that youth tend to assume that same age peers will better handle the disclosure and generally be more open-minded regarding gay, lesbian, and bisexual identities.

When choosing to disclose to the family, 50% (n=6) of participants chose to tell their mother first, while 33% (n=4) chose to tell a sibling. This is also supported by literature reviewed. Research has shown that same age peers are likely to be told first, followed by mothers, siblings, and lastly, fathers (Harvey, 2007). One participant told his grandmother first, after being directly asked if he was gay. Another participant told both parents at the same time by writing a letter.

As found in a study by Heatherington & Lavner (2008), gender plays a factor when coming out. Fathers and brothers were more likely to be verbally abusive regarding the “outing” vs. mothers and sisters. LGBTQ people are more likely to come out to a female family member before coming out to males in the family. Eight participants (66%) in this study came out to a female family member first. However, although 66% (n=8) of participants reported either being unsure what to expect or were nervous of a negative reaction from their fathers, the majority of fathers in this study (91%, n=5) have ultimately been supportive and accepting of their LGBTQ children.

Family Reaction

The bulk of participants in this study found that their parents, in the end, have been supportive and accepting of them after coming out. Participants described a slight increase of observed support of the second sibling to come out (66%, n=4) verses the first sibling to come out (50%, n=3). One sibling set described parents who were initially rejecting/unaccepting of their sexual identity, but after several years, changed their perspective. Another sibling pair

found that their mother, who initially rejected both siblings sexual identity, has become supportive, but continues to be unaccepting of their sexual identity. Of the families in which parents continue to struggle to accept their children's sexual identity (n=2), religion often appeared to play a strong role. Although it cannot be determined from this study, literature has found that families with rigid rules and boundaries had a more difficult time adjusting to an LGBQ family member than a family with more fluid rules and boundaries (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008). All of the participants expressed that they were not nervous to tell their siblings, and all have found that their siblings are predominately supportive.

When interviewed, three participants (25%) stated that a second gay sibling coming out did not impact the family in deferring ways. Three participants (25%) thought that their parent's might feel like a failure or are embarrassed to have two gay children after the second sibling came out. This is reflected in the Weinburg (1972) and Jones (1978) literature, in which negative parental reactions to disclosure consisted of two responses: (1) negative misconceptions of homosexuality and (2) feelings of failure and guilt (as cited in Waldner & Magruder, 1999). Finally, two participants (16%) noted that the family had more gay pride overall, and another two (16%) felt that it affected the family system because the gay siblings were closer.

Anticipation of Family Response

Looking at the first siblings to come out, 50% (n=3) of participants expressed fear of rejection from their parents, possibly being kicked out, and/or financially cut off. 33% (n=2) said that they were anxious before revealing their sexual identity, but ultimately knew that they would be accepted. One participant expressed mixed feelings, anticipating that one parent would be supportive while the other would be rejecting. Savin-Williams and Ream (2003) also found that individuals commonly noted their reasons they choose not to disclose included provocation

of parental guilt and disappointment, deterioration of interpersonal relationships, and becoming a target for bigotry or even violence. Additionally, interviews of gay and lesbian individuals indicate they fear of a variety of negative repercussions from disclosure, including: social isolation, ostracism, job loss, or career derailment (Friskopp & Silverstein 1996; Griffin, 1992, as cited in Ragins, Singh, & Cornwell 2007).

For second siblings to come out, a common response in this study was fear and worry in anticipation that their parents would take it hard having not just one, but *two* gay identified children. This was particularly evident in male siblings who came out after a male sibling came out (n=3). It is important to note that these participants are the only other male child in their family. Each commented about the imposed parental expectation of producing grandchildren and carrying on the family name.

Interestingly, 100% of participants who came out first stated they believe they made it easier for the second sibling to come out. The majority of siblings who came out second (66%, n=4) claim that having a sibling who had already disclosed their LGBQ identity made it harder for them to come out themselves. One participant claimed that it was easier to come out because after watching his sister come out, he knew that his parents would not kick him out. Another participant had a mixed response, stating that in some ways it was hard for her, but at the same time, she believes that if she did not have a gay sibling, she may have been even harsher on herself for being queer.

Sibling Relationship

The majority of participants (66%, n=8) stated that they feel closer and more bonded with their LGBQ sibling after coming out. Another 16% (n=2) stated that they don't necessarily feel closer to their sibling after coming out, but they are supportive of one another and feel they are

on equal ground. One participant stated that it did not make a difference in their relationship. The participants that reported feeling closer to their sibling after coming out, also reported that they were close before coming out. This supports Hilton & Szymanski (2011) study which found that the disclosure of sexual identity tended to make siblings rate their relationship closer if they considered themselves close before, or more distant if they were not close to begin with.

Influence on Coming Out

Of the six siblings that came out first, four siblings (66%) felt that they made it easier and/or safer for their sibling to come out. One sibling stated that they believe that they impacted their sibling to make a different choice in how to come out. Most of the siblings that came out second reported mixed feelings about how their sibling influenced them. Three of these siblings (50%) reported feelings of hope and inspiration. Two (33%) reported not being influenced by their sibling's coming out. One (16%) reported being traumatized by her sibling's coming out, and thus decided to take a different choice in how she came out. Because no previous research exists regarding LGBQ sibling and coming out influence, we cannot compare these findings to any data.

Implications of this Study for Clinical Social Work

The results of this study both support previous LGBQ research as well as expand upon it. Results also begin to address gaps in literature, particularly the acknowledgement of LGBQ siblings and the experience of coming out. Social work clinicians can take the narratives and themes of this study to add to their knowledge of the complexity of coming out as well as the impact on families. To start, it is important that clinicians are aware of the existence of LGBQ siblings. While conducting this study, it was not uncommon for me to come across people that were surprised to hear about the frequency or even the existence of LGBQ siblings. It is

important for all social workers to be informed, open, and knowledgeable about LGBTQ families and the variety of responses, and support systems or lack thereof that they may face. Clinicians need to be aware of the potential conflict that may arise when an individual comes out.

The bulk of participants in this study were aware of their sexual identity by the time they were teenagers, but most of these same participants did not come out until they were in their twenties often due to fear of family rejection. This fear and the importance of family acceptance was a theme found in this study. Even within families that had accepted and supported a LGBTQ member, second siblings to come out reported feeling nervous and scared to tell family members about their sexual identity. Several participants in this study stated that they felt pressure to fulfill the dreams of their parents, involving marrying and carrying on the family name with a heterosexual partner. Clinicians can use this information in the clinical setting by exploring the depths of client feelings and the role of family expectations, dreams, and unique family system make-ups.

Lastly, clinicians can begin to acknowledge the uniqueness and importance of sibling relationships, as well as the role they play in the coming out process. It could be useful to explore the strength of the sibling bond with individuals. Several studies pointed to female family members as being “safe” people to disclose to within the family. The majority of participants in this study came out to female family members before male family members. However, several participants were also surprised to find that their fathers and brothers were largely supportive. It could be useful to explore the family roles, identifying bonds that exist and can be built upon.

Overall, social workers can learn from the varied narrative responses from participants in this study, recognizing that the coming out process is complex and unique to each individual.

Service providers need to detect and differentiate personal issues that may contribute and impair the coming out news.

Summary

The question I started with was: *In families in which there is more than one LGBQ sibling, how do these siblings impact or influence each other in the coming out process?* Going into this study, I had hypothesized that both first and second siblings would report that having a LGBQ sibling made it easier for the second sibling to come out. Instead, what I found was that siblings who came out first thought they made it easier for their second sibling to come out, while second siblings thought it was harder. Several of the first siblings to come out pointed out that they “broke the ice” or “paved the way,” which made family members examine and deal with their feelings about having an LGBQ child or sibling. Siblings who came out second noted that having a LGBQ family member increased the pressure for them to remain in the closet for fear of further disappointing their parents. Most participants stated that they feel closer to their family after coming out, in general.

Another salient finding of this study was the importance of family acceptance and messages from society about LGBQ people. Several participants reported that the coming out process was riddled with fear of rejection from parents, peers, and society in general. Some participants wondered if they would get kicked out, financially cut off, or possibly even physically harmed when coming out to their family. One participant remarked that because he never heard anything about gay people at all in the home, he didn’t know what to expect from his family when he came out:

I was afraid that maybe I would be kicked out. I didn’t think that they would necessarily be ok with it, but..because nothing was ever said in the house at all about gay people.

They didn't say anything gay-positive. I think its important to say positive things, because otherwise kids will get public opinion, which could be negative. I didn't know what they thought, as far as I knew they thought what everyone else thought.

Literature reviewed for this study clearly argues that parental acceptance is important to LGBQ individuals. When applying this to the amount of participants in this study who were fearful to reveal their sexuality to their parents/family, it is clear that gay-positive messages within the home as well as in the community, is important.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

The lack of participants who identify as a person of color is a major limitation to this study. Because of the homogeneity of the participants in this study, as well as the small sample size, it cannot be generalized to the LGBQ population at large in the United States. Additionally, this study was largely made up of male participants. Conducting further research with a larger sample size, and including individuals of various ages, family size, race, and cultural complexity would add depth to this work.

Another limitation of this study is the inconsistency of how the interviews were conducted. Two of the interviews took place in person; one took place over the phone, while the rest of the interviews were conducted via Skype. The different modes of communication may have impacted individuals' comfort level in sharing information with this researcher.

This study, although small in size, shed light onto a previously untouched topic. Future research may include gaining perspectives from other members of the family, such as parents and heterosexual siblings. Additionally, asking participants further questions regarding how they could have been further supported in coming out and/or if they would change anything in the way they came out would add depth to LGBQ research.

Conclusion

In summary, this study examined LGBQ siblings and their families, looking at the experience of coming out. As displayed in interviews from this study, the coming out process is complex and varied in emotion, circumstance, and response. A major finding of this study emphasizes that even in families in which a sibling was out, accepted, and supported as LGBQ, often the additional LGBQ sibling continued to fear rejection, and/or disappointing family members. This highlights that coming out is a deeply individual process that for many is riddled with anxiety and the desire for support and acceptance. The majority of participants in this study expressed feeling some relief as well as feeling closer to the people in their life after coming out. In particular, several participants spoke fondly of the unique relationship with their LGBQ sibling, remarking that the experience of coming out and sharing a common identity has brought them closer to their sibling. It is my hope that by providing space for participants in this study to share their lived experiences as LGBQ siblings, it will impact and further educate providers wishing to work more closely with LGBQ individuals and families.

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Appendix A

Media Recruitment Material

CALLING ALL LGBTQ SIBLING SETS!!

Do you identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, or Queer? AND: Do you have a sibling who also identifies as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, or Queer?

I am conducting a study for my Master's thesis at Smith College School of Social Work that explores non-heterosexual siblings and the coming out process. I am looking for individuals and their sibling to talk to me about their experiences coming out as non-heterosexual.

Participate in research and engage in a supportive conversation regarding disclosure of sexual orientation in a family with more than one gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer sibling.

- Participants must be: 18 and identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer *and* have a sibling that also identifies as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or non-heterosexual who would also like to participate in the study.
- Interested participants will be prescreened briefly over the phone for eligibility requirements. Chosen sibling pairs will participate in a 45-60 minute confidential interview. Interviews will occur over the phone, in person, or via Skype.
- Results will contribute to current research seeking to better understand lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer individuals and their families.

Please contact Kim Dasso at kdasso@smith.edu or facebook message me if interested in participating. If you know someone who might be interested, please share this post and/or my contact information. Thank you for reading and sharing!

Appendix B

Screening Questions

1. Are you over the age of 18?
2. Do you identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer and are you out?
3. Do you have a sibling that also identifies as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer and would like to participate in this study? Are they over 18 years of age? Is this sibling out?
4. Do you have access to a telephone or the internet for the 45-60 minute interview?

Appendix C

Informed Consent Agreement Form

Consent to Participate in a Research Study Smith College School for Social Work • Northampton, MA

.....

Title of Study: Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Siblings and the Coming Out Process

Investigator(s): Kimberly Dasso, Master's of Social Work Candidate, Smith College, XXX-XXX-XXXX

.....

Introduction

- You are being asked to be in a research study of non-heterosexual siblings and the coming out process.
- You were selected as a possible participant because you are over the age of 18 and identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer, you are out, and you have a sibling that is over the age of 18 and also identifies as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer, who is also out, and who will participate in the study.
- We ask that you read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Purpose of Study

- The purpose of the study is to investigate the emotional impact LGBTQ siblings have on each other's coming out experience.
- This study is being conducted as a research requirement for my master's in social work degree.
- Ultimately, this research may be published or presented at professional conferences. All results will be aggregated and your identity will not be revealed in any publications or presentations.

Description of the Study Procedures

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following things: Be interviewed individually by the researcher for 45-60 minutes in person, on the telephone, or via Skype call. The interview will include a short demographic questionnaire and 15 narrative interview questions. The interview will be audio recorded with your permission.

Risks/Discomforts of Being in this Study *[choose one of the following]*

The study has little foreseeable risk but I will be asking you to discuss your coming out story, which may bring painful memories. Feel free to decline to answer any question, or even end the interview early if the discussion causes you discomfort. I will assist in connecting you with free or affordable mental health services upon your request..

Benefits of Being in the Study

- The benefits of participation are to have the opportunity to share and reflect on your coming out experience and the possible impact you or your sibling have had on each other in regards to disclosing your sexual identity.
- The benefits to social work/society are: you will help further the understanding of coming out

in families in which more than one LGBTQ sibling exist. Therapists and social workers may better understand and serve members of the LGBTQ community, as well as their families and allies.

Confidentiality

- Your information will be kept confidential. The researcher will be the only person who will know about your participation. In person interview will take place at a library or at a quiet local coffee shop or another public place of your choice that provides privacy. Skype interviews will take place in the privacy of my own home and the location of your choosing. *In addition*, the records of this study will be kept strictly confidential. I will be the only one who will have access to the audio recording, with the exception of a potential transcriber, who will sign a confidentiality agreement. Recordings will be destroyed after the mandated three years. They will be permanently deleted from the recording device.
- All research materials including recordings, transcriptions, analyses and consent/assent documents will be stored in a secure location for three years according to federal regulations. In the event that materials are needed beyond this period, they will be kept secured until no longer needed, and then destroyed. All electronically stored data will be password protected during the storage period. We will not include any information in any report we may publish that would make it possible to identify you.

Payments/gift

- You will not receive any financial payment for your participation.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw

- The decision to participate in this study is entirely up to you. You may refuse to take part in the study *at any time*(up to the date noted below) without affecting your relationship with the researchers of this study or Smith College. Your decision to refuse will not result in any loss of benefits (including access to services) to which you are otherwise entitled. You have the right not to answer any single question, as well as to withdraw completely up to the point noted below. If you choose to withdraw, I will not use any of your information collected for this study. You must notify me of your decision to withdraw by email or phone by April 1st 2015. After that date, your information will be part of the thesis, dissertation or final report.

Right to Ask Questions and Report Concerns

- You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered by me before, during or after the research. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact me, Kimberly Dasso at kdasso@smith.edu or by telephone at 503-997-7365. If you would like a summary of the study results, one will be sent to you once the study is completed. If you have any other concerns about your rights as a research participant, or if you have any problems as a result of your participation, you may contact the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Committee at (413) 585-7974.

Consent

- Your signature below indicates that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for this study, and that you have read and understood the information provided above. You will be given a signed and dated copy of this form to keep. You will also be given a list of referrals and access information if you experience emotional issues related to your participation in this study

.....

Name of Participant (print): _____

Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Researcher(s): _____ Date: _____

.....

[if using audio or video recording, use next section for signatures:]

1. I agree to be [audio or video]taped for this interview:

Name of Participant (print): _____

Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Researcher(s): _____ Date: _____

2. I agree to be interviewed, but I do not want the interview to be taped:

Name of Participant (print): _____

Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Researcher(s): _____ Date: _____

Appendix D

Interview Guide -- Sibling #1 to come out

Sibling aggregation of Homosexuality

1. Can you tell me who is in your family of origin at this time?
 - a) Parents (ages, biological or not)
 - b) Sibs older than you (ages)
 - c) Sibs younger than you (ages)
 - d) And who identifies as LGBTQ?

2. What is your personal explanation for why you and your sibling are LGBTQ?

Coming Out process

3. Tell me your coming out story (how old were you? What made you decide to come out? Who did you come out to first? What influenced your choice of this person? What factors determined who you came out to?)
4. How and why did you or did you not come out to your family?
5. Were you aware of your sibling's LGB sexual identity at the time of your disclosure, even though this sib had not yet come out?
6. How was your sibling's coming out process different from your own? Can you give specifics?
7. Do you feel you influenced your sibling's coming out? If so, how?
8. Do you think that your coming out first made it easier or harder for your sibling?
9. What was your emotional reaction to your sibling's coming out? How old were you at the time?

Family response

10. How did each member of your family respond to your coming out?
11. How did you anticipate your family to respond to your coming out? Was their reaction different than you thought it would be?
12. Did your family respond differently to your sibling's coming out?
13. Has having 2 gay children in the family impacted the family differently than having only you as gay?

Sibling Relationship

14. How do you feel your common sexual identity has impacted your relationship with your LGBTQ sibling?

Demographics

1. Date of birth
2. Identified race
3. Identified gender
4. Identified sexual orientation

Appendix E

Interview Guide for Sibling #2 to Come Out

Sibling aggregation of Homosexuality

1. Can you tell me who is in your family of origin at this time?
 - a) Parents (ages, biological or not)
 - b) Sibs older than you (ages)
 - c) Sibs younger than you (ages)
 - d) And who identifies as LGB?
2. What is your personal explanation for why you and your sibling are LGBQ?
3. How do you think having a LGBQ sibling influenced you when you were growing up? Do you feel it had any influence on your sexual identity?

Coming Out process

4. Tell me your coming out story (how old were you? How old was your LGB sibling?) Who did you come out to first? What influenced your choice of this person? What factors determined who you came out to?
5. How and why did you or did you not come out to your family?
6. Were you aware of your own sexual identity at the time of your sibling's disclosure?
7. What was your emotional reaction to your sibling's coming out? (How old were you at the time?)
8. How was your sibling's coming out process different from your own? Can you give specifics?
9. How were you influenced by your sibling's coming out process?
10. Did having a LGB sibling make it easier or harder to come out? Why?

Family response

11. How did each member of your family respond to your coming out?
12. How did you anticipate your family to respond to your coming out? Was their reaction different than you thought it would be?
13. Did your family respond differently to your sibling's coming out?
14. How did you respond to your sibling coming out?
15. Has having 2 gay children in the family impacted the family differently than having only you as gay?

Sibling Relationship

16. How do you feel your common sexual identity has impacted your relationship with your LGBQ sibling?

Demographics

1. Date of birth
2. Identified race
3. Identified gender
4. Identified sexual orientation

Appendix F

Human Subjects Review Board Approval Letter



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

February 16, 2015

Kimberly Dasso

Dear Kimberly,

You did a very nice job on your revisions. Your project is now approved by the Human Subjects Review Committee.

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.

Congratulations and our best wishes on your interesting study.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Edwin'.

Elaine Kersten, Ed.D.
Co-Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Krishna Samantrai, Research Advisor